

Seaside Mergers Book Two

# Rules of Association

Adorabol  
Huckleby -Ordaz



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HUCKLEBY-ORDAZ

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# Content Warnings

*This book deals with varying emotional and physical topics that might be sensitive to certain audiences. Please be mindful of themes and instances of:*

- **Explicit language**
- **Violence/criminal violence** (not between main characters)
- **Explicit sexual content** (on page)
- **Personal Insecurity**
- **Family acceptance**
- **Familial pressure**

*This content is for individuals 18+*

# Theme Song(s).

**Friends Don't** – Maddie + Tae

**Anything She Says** – Mitchell Tenpenny ft.

Seaforth

*Remember to see the same light in yourself that you see in others, because it's there  
and it's bright.*



# Chapter One

## CECI

This place smelled like shit. Granted the place in question was a dark, cramped closet in the back of a motorcycle bar and I'm pretty sure my hand was broken. Still, would a little air freshener kill anyone?

Okay. Let me back up.

The reason I was currently getting better acquainted with the inside of a closet located in a room that was more than likely used for sex, passing out, and maybe even some shady backdoor deals could have something to do with the fact that a few minutes ago, I punched a biker in the mouth. Or at least I thought he was a biker, but I assumed everyone in motorcycle bars were bikers, so.

Why was I even at a motorcycle bar? Well, the bar that my old high school friends chose had gotten old pretty quick. Way quicker than I thought it would when I first agreed to meet them out for drinks. I hadn't seen Paige and Sarah much since we graduated. Only during the summers when we were all still in college visiting home. But since I was pretty scarce in the friend department nowadays and my only other unmarried friend was inconveniently out on a date, I thought it might be fun to reunite and catch up.

I thought wrong.

While in high school, these had been the girls I could count on not to suck up to me for being the youngest daughter of one of the biggest business empires in the country. But spending time with them for the first time after college was different. The talk around our wine glasses—because apparently a wine bar was now their equivalent of a night out like we were forty or something—had been strictly centered on their new lives as

full-time employees in corporate America. Which wouldn't have been a problem had they not asked me a myriad of questions about what *I* was doing now that we'd all graduated college and what my plans for my career were.

Essentially, the types of questions I *hated*.

When had it become customary to berate people about what they were doing with their lives anyway? In my book that was a pretty damn private thing. I guess that was only my book though, because the questions were constant as of late. Which made it incredibly annoying to deal with them on my night out.

Still, no matter how annoying, I had made the premeditated decision to be "Good Ceci" tonight. To take whatever they gave me in stride, because they now lived outside of Seaside and this random impromptu meeting would probably be the only time we would get to see each other like this for a long time. And for some reason I thought I cared.

Turns out, I didn't.

I didn't care about their corporate lives or their five-year plans. I didn't even care about their college memories, as mine were less than memorable. And when those bitches started asking me about my *connections*—Connections that, yeah sure, I had but I sure as hell didn't want to actually use. Connections that were made primarily through my family and *not* me. Connections that they *knew* I hated to be used for—Yeah, let's just say my toleration for the reunion ended way before the night did.

And was I *really* supposed to stick around for girls who didn't bat an eyelash at doing so many things I outwardly disliked? Girls who didn't even know me anymore?

No, no, and *hell* no.

The night wasn't what I expected, not even a good enough distraction to warrant agreeing to it. I had little tolerance for things I didn't agree with. So I slipped out on my old friends and made my way down the quiet streets of inner Seaside.

I didn't want to go home.

Large glass buildings—some new, some old—decorated the clean streets. I never spent much time in the city before moving here after college.

Just half an hour away were the stylish Rhode Island beaches I'd grown up on, but all my family's businesses were located here in town. As was one of my brothers, who lived not too far away, and both of my sisters too. But I didn't want to see any of them then either. They were also offenders of the dreaded '*what are you going to do now?*' questioning. Lately everyone was.

Everyone but him.

My mind drifted to a cozy cottage along the Seaside Beach, and I let it. That's where I wanted to be, or at least with who usually occupied that home.

*Hmm.* I guess I *could* call him to get me out of this mess. But I'm pretty sure I hadn't heard him wrong. He definitely said he had a date tonight. And I didn't want to mess *that* up...

Looking around myself, I sighed. Then I shifted so that I was sitting on my ass instead of crouching in front of the closet door. It was solid wood, not one of those shuddered doors that you could see out the openings, therefore I had no idea what was going on the other side of it. The guy I'd punched in the face could have already forgotten about me, or he could be on the hunt for me at this very second.

Risking scabies or maybe herpes of the face (if there was such a thing), I moved again to lay my front flat on the ground. Cautiously, the side of my cheek followed suit. I didn't want to, but I couldn't see underneath the bottom of the door without doing it—And yep, it was just as sticky as I thought it was going to be. *Yuck.*

On top of me wearing the stickiness of the floors, now that I was leaning weight onto my hand, I was a thousand percent sure something had broken in it. The pain that screamed through the limb was sharp enough that I felt my eyes water. Not in an '*I'm going to cry*' way. I almost never did. This hurt in more of a '*knock the breath out of you*' kind of way. The

kind of pain where you can't control the rest of your bodily reactions. Hence the eye moisture.

Biting back a hiss, I tried to ignore the pain and train my one available eye to the shadows moving underneath the door. There were definitely people back here. And judging by the way they were pacing back and forth they were looking for something.

Probably a five-foot something with tawny brown skin and reddish gold hair who decided it would be a good idea to not only walk into a motorcycle bar because she was bored, shark them at pool, and call the greasy guy that came onto her a '*Sons of Anarchy wannabe prick.*'—But also, punch him in the mouth two times and the nose three when he started to get handsy.

It was overkill, I know. But in my defense, he had been gripping me like he planned on taking me back here to this musty-ass closet anyway. As much as it was overkill, it was also self-defense, and he did deserve it. Plus, I'm pretty sure it was instant karma that the final punch had been the one to hurt my hand, sending reverberating pain shooting through the entire appendage and up my arm. So there, we were even. *He* didn't seem to think so, though.

Damn.

I turned over gingerly, careful not to use my hurt hand and careful not to make too much noise as I flipped over onto my back. I'd have to scrub my body top to bottom after I got out of here, but first I had to actually leave. And to do that I needed a getaway driver.

Reaching down, I pulled my cell phone out of my bra and brought up the text screen.

**Me:** Are you still in the city?

**Pancake:** Yeah.

**Me:** Can you come get me?

**Pancake:** Where?

I sent him the address and he immediately replied with:

**Pancake:** Ceci...

**Pancake:** I'll be there in ten.

**Me:** Text me when you're outside. Keep the car running. DON'T COME IN.

He sent a thumbs up emoji.

Alright. Either his date was that bad or I had been here a *long* time. Much longer than I'd wanted to be. Either way, I had ten minutes to figure out how the hell I was going to get out. Five of those minutes I bided my time, not wanting to wait outside in the cool Spring night and risk having one of those meaty guys grab me and pull me into an alley or something. Yet instead of taking the time to think about how I was going to make a run for it, I found my thoughts drifting to the man I'd just texted.

Nearly two years had gone by since my life had tangled with the second Ferguson kid to slip under my defenses, and in those almost two years I'd never even heard him *talk* about a girl let alone date one. Why had he waited this long to go out with someone? Had he even been out since we became friends? Or was this just the first time he decided to tell me about it?

It wasn't that he wasn't tall or broad or good looking as hell. He was definitely all those things. He just wasn't really the date around kind of guy. It was strange to imagine he'd met someone so great that he *had* to take her out right away. I wasn't jealous or anything. It was just—no one got close to him that easily. No one but *me*. Or so I thought.

I found myself grinding my molars at the thought of it but was yanked out of the bad habit when the blaring sound of my phone ringing gave me a minor heart attack.

“Shit!” I hissed, fumbling with the device over my head as I laid on the ground. The combination of my clumsy fingers and my lame hand caused the phone to be unstable in my grasp. Before I knew it, it was barreling down at my face. The edge of it hitting me in the bridge of my nose and causing my eyes to water again. With a strangled whine I groaned, “*Shit.*”

“Hey! You hear that?” Someone said from outside the door. “I think she’s in the closet.”

Scrambling to my knees, I worked to get the phone to *shut up* as I mumbled angrily under my breath to the person on the other side of that call. “Really? Five minutes early? Learn to tell time, would you?”

Good news: He was here. Bad news: So were my new friends. I could hear them outside the closet door. Big boots coming closer and closer, ready to yank me out of there. To do what? I had no idea. At the very least they would pay me back for hitting their buddy.

I felt my chest go tight with dread as the booted footsteps got closer. For one stupid, helpless, *wasteful* second, I let myself imagine that instead of the ugly biker guys on the other side of the door, it would be him. That he had gotten out of the car to come get me and now we could go get some food and find some ice for my hand and watch TV all night like we tended to do.

But that was dumb, and I wasn’t the type of girl to be dumb and helpless when shit hit the fan. When shit hit the fan, *I* hit the dumbass fan for spraying shit everywhere in the first place.

So I squeezed my eyes shut tight and let myself take three quick breaths that matched the rapid pace of my heartbeat, centering myself. All I needed was three minutes. Three minutes and I could be out of there. Three minutes and I could be in a car on my way home. Three minutes and I would be safe.

When I opened my eyes again, it was to the dingy light of the room beyond the closet door. Standing in front of me was the biker I had punched swinging the door open wide, and behind him were two other bikers who looked less angry and more amused.

“Hey—” Mean Biker barely got the rest of his sentence out as I charged upward from kneeling at his feet and rammed a hard knee into his groin. He doubled over with a groan that made him sound like some kind of animal, eventually sinking to the floor as he clutched his family heirlooms.

On my feet now, I hopped over the fallen man and looked to either side of me. I surveyed the room, which was the size of a coat room and was decorated with a dusty black desk, a wine-colored couch that had seen better days, and a black filing cabinet that looked stolen straight out of a 1970s bank office.

On one side of the room there was an open window. It was one of those small basement type windows and it was open because I had pried it open when I first ran in here, hoping they would think I squirmed my way through it already. On the other side there was the open door that led into the bar.

I blinked between the window and the door once, then twice, and then bolted for the window.

“Get that fuckin’ bitch!” Marshmallow Balls groaned to his boys.

The lackies followed me, albeit not all that urgently. But they were big and covered a lot of ground, meaning they didn’t really need much effort to catch me at the window. What they lacked however, were brains. An idiot could tell I didn’t really think I could pull myself through that tiny-ass window. As soon as the guys got close enough to the wall, I slipped underneath them, putting my short girl perks to good use, and sprinted toward the door.

Slamming the wooden door shut after me, I wished that God would just give me a fucking break and materialize a lock on the damn thing. He didn’t. But the universe had some mercy, at least.

The room was located at the end of a longish hallway, each side lined with doors. As I ran through it, I opened every single one of them, leaving them ajar and tangled behind me. Two broom closets, one occupied bathroom and a utility closet later, and I had myself a labyrinth.

I had no idea if it actually looked as elaborate as it sounded; I was too busy trying to get the hell out of there. But behind me, I heard the loud crash of one door banging into another. If the two other guys weren’t mad before, they definitely

sounded mad now as curses floated from the direction of the crashing. As usual, I was creating a mess.

*I swear to God if he's not outside.*

I ran through the bar, dodging trays and pool sticks and even bigger bikers with bigger scowls on their faces. I ducked around waitresses and pretended like I didn't see the quizzically suspicious stares I was getting from people behind the bar. The getaway was all very movie montage. If there was a soundtrack to my escape, it would probably be the circus song because that's what this felt like.

But it was almost over. Thankfully I could see the exit up ahead.

It took three more seconds before I was finally pushing through the front doors, gulping sweet, crisp air and darting my eyes around the street in search of his car.

For a second I thought he actually wasn't here and I was going to have to run for it. And for that entire second I was irrationally angry, thinking maybe he'd chosen his date over me. That was until I spotted the sleek black SUV parked just a few steps past the bar, idling quietly. I ran to it, yanking the door open, and collapsing into the dark leather seats.

“What the—”

“Drive,” I cut him off before whipping my head around and looking out the back window. The men had *just* made it out of the bar and were now looking both ways to try to find me. I ducked down lower into my seat and peeked up to find a dark face frowning at me. Quizzical black eyebrows raised in question. Temper as short as I was snapped, “*Today* please.”

With a frown, he put the car in gear and took off from the curb. I didn't have to tell him where to go. As if on autopilot, he started in the direction of my apartment which was thankfully miles away from my siblings' apartments, lest they tried to pop in unannounced for any reason. I couldn't have that. Not when my time was split between either sleeping over this guy's place near the beach or him sleeping in my spare



bedroom in the city. Definitely not when our families had no idea we were even friends.

As he drove, I tossed my head back against the headrest and panted, trying to catch my breath. I could feel beads of sweat trickling down my back and the tingling rush of danger ticking at my senses. But I also felt this special kind of safety I only got when I was right here next to this guy. My guy. My best friend.

With a whooshing breath I tried to distract myself. “So, how was your date?”

His answer was a startled cough. After clearing his throat he slid a glance over to me and answered in that deep, quiet voice, “Uh, good.”

“Had to be,” I said, flicking my eyes to the rearview mirror and then back at him. “If you’re out this late at least.”

“I’m out way later with you all the time,” he protested.

“Being in my apartment and being *out* are two entirely different things,” I said. Another glance in the mirror.

This time he followed my eyes and took a long quiet look through the mirror himself before peering over at me. “Are you gonna explain any of this?”

“Um,” I thought about it for a second. We weren’t too far from the bar. Plenty of time for him to become angry enough to turn the car around and pay Mick’s Motorcycle Club a visit. We didn’t want that. “In a little bit, let’s just drive for a while, yeah?”

He said nothing else, but I knew he agreed when he passed the turn we needed to get to my apartment.

I spent five minutes of the drive watching the rearview mirror, both terrified that those crazy guys would follow me and sort of insulted when they didn’t. I guess I wasn’t worth a high-speed chase. That was really disappointing considering I’d risked my ass for that getaway. I probably would have cared a lot more if my sudden spike of adrenaline hadn’t faded and the pain in my hand hadn’t begun to intensify right at that very moment.

I hissed at the sharpness of it and used my good hand to click on the light. Quietly, I held it up for inspection. It was starting to bruise already, a nasty purple and blue color running its way up my wrist, midway through my hand, and down to my two middle fingers. Red bloomed around the bruises, and apart from the injury, color had begun to seep from the hand like it was running down a drain.

Tires screeched as the car yanked across the road and pulled to the side of the curb. With a jolt, the car was thrown into park and my body was thrown with it. I'd forgotten to put my seatbelt on.

But before I could go soaring face first into the dash, a strong arm slid across my torso, banding right there across my boobs like it was totally normal. He didn't think twice about the contact. He was too busy unbuckling his own seatbelt and turning toward me with his big shoulders and even bigger hands as they took mine in his and pulled my injury toward him.

Russet brown skin contrasted starkly against my yellowish-brown complexion. Big, long fingers contrasted even more with my small ones. I tried not to wince as he used those fingers to press gently around my hand, applying pressure in different areas along my fingers and down to my wrist.

I failed.

"Ow, Ferguson! That hurts like a bitch!" I wailed.

"What'd you do?"

"I didn't do anything," I tried. This just earned me a look. "I fell, okay? Stop pressing like that—Ow!"

"We're going to the emergency room," he said.

"Can't you just set it or something?"

A thick, dark eyebrow lifted up at me, "Do I *look* like a doctor to you?"

"You don't look like much of a getaway driver, but you really grew into that role," I said, reaching out and patting his hand encouragingly.

I only got another look in return. Granted that look clearly said, ‘*shut the fuck up*’, his silence still put worry in my stomach. Especially remembering tomorrow’s plans.

“You’re not gonna tell, are you?” I asked, suddenly feeling not scared but...okay maybe a little scared. I didn’t have to elaborate on who I didn’t want him to tell. There was only one group of people I wouldn’t want him to divulge that he’d picked me up half broken from a seedy bar.

He cut me another glance. “Do I ever?”

No. No he did not.

\* \* \*

“It looks like you have a hairline fracture in your wrist, a pretty deep bone bruise, and a couple of fingers that are knocked out of place, Ms. Fernandez,” the nice doctor at Seaside Private General Hospital said as he looked at the X-rays displayed on the blue monitors.

“Okay,” I said, looking the doctor straight in the eye, my own eyes feeling bleary and heavy as a result of waiting for hours in the waiting room. “So?”

Seaside Private General wasn’t the kind of hospital that took just anyone off the street. The “private” was in the name for a reason. It was a privately funded hospital allocated to the most affluent of Seaside, Rhode Island. It was small and shelled out obscene amounts of money to house some of the best doctors on the east coast.

One perk of it being so small and expensive was *supposed* to be fast service. But I guess every rich kid decided to get a runny nose or break their arm on the same night, because when we walked into the brown wooden waiting room, we were greeted by tons of people littering the lobby area. Each with various pains and ailments that ranged from far worse to far less extreme than mine.

It was at least two hours before the doctor got around to seeing me, but I'm pretty sure I lost track of the exact time once the pain had gotten so bad, I could do little more than sit with my head in my lap. My hurt hand resting on the muscled thigh beside me as we waited.

The last time either of us had spent this much time in a hospital, it was under less than ideal circumstances, and I don't think it was my imagination that we were both a little apprehensive of it. So when they had finally called me back, it wasn't just me who was visibly relieved.

Now, after examinations, X-rays, and enough poking around my injury to make me squeak in pain, the doctor was finally diagnosing the issue. Meaning we were that much closer to getting the hell out.

"So, Ms. Fernandez, it is really difficult to obtain an injury like this from," he paused and looked at his chart, "simply falling."

I looked across the room to where my getaway driver was sitting in the extra chair. He had been staring at the x-rays just as intently as the doctor was, but upon hearing this his light brown eyes slid slowly over to me. I could read his expression like he was speaking out loud. *'Oh really?'* it said, in a challenging and unsurprised way. He'd probably had me figured out from the very beginning.

Sliding my eyes up to the doctor, I pursed my lips and swallowed my desire to call him a snitching weasel for ratting me out. Instead, I smiled as sweetly as I could while insisting, "*I. Fell.*"

They continued to press me with accusatory looks and after an entire minute I sighed and blinked away. "*Fine. I fell onto some guy's face when I punched him.*"

Those familiar hazel eyes sharpened on me, this time saying, *'interesting'*.

The doctor's reaction was to raise his eyebrows and huff out an astonished laugh. When he looked back at the guest seat and got absolutely nothing from the stone face occupying it, he

turned back to me with a shake of his head. “Well, I hope not *this* guy.”

“No, this guy’s fine. The other guy’s probably got a broken nose.” Should I be proud of that? Because I was.

“Well, you’ve got a broken hand, missy,” the doctor said. “It’s nothing too crazy, but I am going to have to set it before we brace you up. You’ve got two fingers that need to go back into their lanes.”

I winced. “Will it hurt?”

“It will, I’m sorry,” he said with a wince of his own. “Only for a moment, though. Then we’ll have you in a brace and on your way in no time.”

Beyond my control, I shot panicked eyes toward safety only to find that he’d already moved from his seat. My uninjured hand laid on the cool surface of the hospital exam bed, the other laying gingerly in my lap. A soft, warm palm slid down the wrist of my okay hand and laced our fingers together. My fingers closed around his reflexively. The heel of my hand not quite reaching the bottom of his, but I held onto him as tight as I could anyway. He squeezed back and I felt him leaning into my back, his muscular chest coming down to hover near my shoulders.

In my ear he said, “I can’t *believe* this is what you were doing all night.”

“You can’t?” I asked. He couldn’t have meant that. He *knew* I was going out. Still, my voice came out in a squeak as I watched the doctor move over to the sink to wash his hands. What did he plan on doing with freshly cleaned hands?

A big shaven head ducked into my line of sight, catching my eyes with brown orbs that held a mixture of amusement and sympathy. He slid his eyes from one side of my face to the other before looking at me head on. And then he graced me with one of those half smiles, leaning in with a low conspiratorial voice, “Know what else I can’t believe?”

“What?” I asked, enraptured by him like I’ve always been.

He smirked. “That you *still* don’t know how to throw a punch.”

“I do—Ah!” I whipped my head around to find Dr. Handsy now at my side, yanking my fingers so hard it felt like he was trying to pull them off.

Taken off guard, I looked over my shoulder to complain about the sneak attack. But instead of finding a sympathetic to rally on my side, I found him flicking his eyes up at the doctor and giving him a short nod of permission. My head cocked in confusion, ready to ask him what the hell he was looking at when I felt another yank.

*Crack!*

“Ow!” I snatched my hand away from the doctor who was obviously assaulting me. Pain shot through what felt like my entire arm as an immediate result of the sudden movement and my voice went up about twelve octaves as I couldn’t help repeating my suffering whine. “Ow!”

Looking over my shoulder again, I glared at the face that was now contorting in further amusement. My eyes narrowed on his, “You’re a traitor.”

“It’s not betrayal if it’s to help you.”

“That hurt.”

“And now it’s done.”

As if to solidify that fact, he dislodged his hand from mine and moved to return to his seat across the room. When he sat, his body barely fitting in the tiny chair, he leaned his cheek against his fist and closed his eyes for five whole seconds before opening them again.

He was tired.

Seeing the wear the night was putting on him suddenly gave me a rush of urgency. He’d gone out of his way to come get me when I asked, just like he always did. On top of that, he still found it in him to try to distract me while a stranger pulled my bones out of their sockets. The least I could do was get him out of here so he could sleep.

Straightening in my seat, I brought my eyes up to the doctor, leveling him with a look, “Thanks, doc. Can we go now?”

His eyebrows raised yet again, a look of shock registering in his features. I didn’t care anymore. I was suddenly in a rush to get out of there. He could probably tell by the way he snapped his chart closed. “I’ll get the brace and a few prescriptions for pain. It’ll only be for a few days, but don’t take them with any alcohol. After two weeks, I’ll see you back at my regular offices for a checkup and then we can get you scheduled for some physical therapy. Sound good?”

I risked another glance at the guest chair, wondering if I’d catch him with his eyes closed again. I didn’t. He was staring at me. Focused and waiting. Quiet and sure. Like he always was. Still, I didn’t want him getting tired of me, so I tried to convey as much communication into my gaze as he often did with his.

‘*Almost done*’, I wanted it to say. To *promise*.

To the doctor, I gave a decisive nod. “Sounds great.”

\* \* \*

It was another hour before we got home. Home tonight was my place although it tended to switch back and forth between mine and his whenever we hung out a little too late and needed to crash. We would both be driving toward the beach the next day, so technically his place would be closer; but since I’d left my car parked near the wine bar from earlier and we would need to go get it in the morning, mine made more sense. Mr. Buff-and-Healthy usually liked to run in the mornings anyway, he’d probably go get it while he was out doing that.

As soon as we crossed the threshold into my apartment, I felt like collapsing. I wasn’t allowed to, though. Instead, I was ordered into the shower, into pajamas, and then into bed. A tall glass of water sat on my bedside counter and the first of the

prescription pills sat right beside it, one for daytime and one for night. By the time this was all settled and he was doing God knows what in the kitchen, it felt like another millennia had passed.

Sleep threatened to take me out as I waited for him to come say goodnight. He was taking *forever* in there, and here I had been rushing to get home because I thought he was sleepy.

It took him ten minutes of clanging around in the kitchen, opening and shutting cabinets, clattering plates, and shuffling boxes for me to get fed up. He'd probably gotten distracted by my messy kitchen and started tidying up before he could stop himself. I let a long groan out into the apartment air to let him know I was still waiting on him to hurry up.

Not a whole minute later, a shadow appeared above me. I could barely lift my head to see him, though. The pain medicine was kicking in, making me feel heavier than normal.

“What were you doing in there?” I asked.

Quietly, he crouched at my bedside bringing his elbows to his spread knees and holding something on a plate my way. Sitting up slowly with effort, I blinked my bleary drugged eyes at his hands, and that's when I saw what he was holding.

A vanilla cupcake with pretty blue icing and a singular candle sticking out the top. Flame licked the tip of it, lazy and slow.

I felt a gradual grin pull over my face at the same speed one pulled over his. Reaching out, I grabbed the cupcake and leaned over it. I didn't need to make a wish before blowing it out. I was pretty damn happy already, even with a broken hand.

I think he could tell just that as he simply shook his head and watched me. “Happy Birthday, Cee.”





# Chapter Two

## CONNOR

“Why the hell are we here?” my older brother, Clay, asked as we walked the familiar trek up the long driveway of the Fernandez homestead. Our sister’s in-laws’ place. Our close family business partners. My best friend’s parents, (not that anyone else knew anything about *that*).

When Ceci and I became friends—a coincidence after I’d walked into my sister’s room expecting to see her and instead found the youngest daughter of my family’s long-standing business partners instead—it had been her crazy idea to keep it all a secret. But that was just Ceci. *Every* idea she had was crazy.

I think she thought hiding our friendship would be fun because at some point she expected everyone to find out and for it to cause a big fuss. When they didn’t find out—not even a little bit—we just continued on with it like it was another one of our ongoing shenanigans.

Which is why I had to play dumb as I answered my brother’s question.

“A party, I think,” I responded, but I damn well *knew* it was a party. A birthday party to be precise.

“I think he means, why are we in attendance? Actually, why is it that we seem to be at everything this family does?” Clint, my oldest brother asked. There was a bite of annoyance in his voice that was rare. He was usually cold and indifferent but didn’t get his feathers ruffled by the small things. Today he seemed irritated.

Normally, I’d ask him about it, but today I had other priorities. So with a long glance I just said, “We’re here because Tiney asked us to come.”

Lie. I was here because if the little terror named Celestia Fernandez found out I didn't come to her birthday party, even though she knew it would be a tough setting to keep our friendship hidden in, she would have my balls. The fact that Tine, my younger sister and Ceci's sister-in-law, had invited my brothers and I was just a convenient coincidence. Without it, I would have had to come up with some other random reason to show up.

At times I found it just as fun as Ceci to keep us a secret. To sneak around while we did fun things and never had to answer assuming questions about our relationship? We never had to do the song and dance of explaining our connection. We never had to explain *us*, which was nice because if someone were to ask me to try, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be able to articulate the strange way we connected so perfectly.

Ceci was abrasive and rash and impulsive at her best, while I took things slow I kept my thoughts to myself until they were fully formulated and I made decisions based on analysis. We were different at our cores, but we fit in the way that some people just clicked. From the very beginning we could laugh with each other, joke, and speak freely. Like we'd known each other for years.

Everything important that I'd learned about her—like how she was loyal, protective, and fiercely herself—I'd learned straight off. Everything else, like her goofy, silly, and often bratty sides, had been sprinkled in the more I got to know her.

Which is how I knew if I didn't get in there quick, there would be hell to pay.

Pulling up short of the door, I turned on my brothers. Clint—tall, dark, with a muscled thin frame that was bordering concerning these days stopped first. Clay, with his golden brown skin, curled dark hair, and permanent scowl tried to move past me and barrel through the front door. I stepped into his path. They were both being so sour. I didn't want that at Cee's party, even if she didn't give two shits about these two—and she didn't—I would still run interference to protect her special day.

“If you guys don’t want to come, don’t. I’ll show for all of us and let Tine know you couldn’t make it,” I said easily, meaning it.

Clay made a face, squinting up the house behind me. “I’ve already been spotted. I can’t leave now.”

I peeked over my shoulder at one of the large windows of the front foyer. The thick embroidered curtains there were swinging as if someone had just looked out of them. Whether it was our sister or someone else, I didn’t know.

“Make an excuse,” I said.

He frowned, “It’s not just that man. We haven’t seen you in forever and the first thing you want to do is go to Pip-squeak’s party?”

I frowned, mainly at the use of “Pip-squeak”, my brother’s *creative* nickname for Ceci. “I see you two *every day* at work. Am I missing something here?”

Grunts.

I frowned even more. I knew every combination of words those grunts could mean. From Clay they simply meant, we never see you locked away in that tech room all day. From Clint they meant, *‘you could be doing so much more than putting up firewalls and fixing computer systems with all those equations in your head’*. Both annoyed me because I’d heard both many times before.

I tried not to take it out on them. I knew Clay was coming from a genuine place of concern. He was the first person to notice when I started spending more of my free time with Ceci because that meant I was spending less of it with him. I could tell he missed some of that time we used to share.

Clint, however, was just judging again. I suppose he got it from our mother. He got everything from her, which meant he followed her lead on what to think about my chosen profession—when he wasn’t totally ignoring it that is. Sometimes his indifference to everything but the family business was refreshing, it meant not having to answer to him often. But sometimes it was just exhausting.

I know I exhausted him too. It would be easy to let Clinton Ferguson walk all over me. He was strong and willful and demanding when he needed to be. But he wasn't the only one who'd picked up a trait or two from our parents. While he was the epitome of cold like our mother, I was both strong-willed like her yet empathetic like our Pa. I had no qualms about letting my brother know how his cold shoulder made me feel. And if there was one thing about Clinton, he *hated* feelings. He would do anything to avoid talking about them or God forbid *feeling* them. So now instead of chastising me, he resorted to grunting his displeasure just like Clay.

I flicked my eyes over to Clint, waiting for *his* explanation. He cleared his throat and looked away from my assessing gaze. "She seemed excited about it. I couldn't say no."

*She* was Tine. And he couldn't say no to her because he could *never* say no to her. Not anymore. Not with the debilitating guilt he'd been carrying around with him ever since we reunited with her a couple of years ago, finding her broken and abused by the husband we thought she would be safe with. He hadn't really forgiven himself for letting her go, and he's been both punishing himself and trying like hell to make it up to her ever since. He never wanted to let her down again, even if it meant going to a party he really didn't want to go to.

I had thoughts about this, but they were thoughts Clint wasn't ready to hear and ones that could wait until *after* I showed my face at Ceci's party.

"So what then? We're just complaining about nothing here?" I asked, leveling them with a look.

Clay twisted his mouth to the side and looked me over, then he huffed. "*No*. Just... Let's hang sometime soon, alright?"

I nodded and then turned to the door. Enough talk, it was time to go find the birthday girl.

The party was in the backyard, just like a kid's would be. Also, like a kid's party, there were stations set up all around the outdoor area with games, activities, food and even a gift table. Most of the guests in attendance were the extended Fernandez family. And while Ceci's circle of friends didn't run

super wide, there was still the occasional straggler or two present as well.

“Why do I feel like we’re at a five year old’s birthday party instead of a twenty-five year old’s?” Clay asked.

“Twenty-four,” I corrected as I moved my eyes along the area.

“Probably the balloon arch,” Clint suggested, disdain dripping from his tone. “Or the face paint.”

I didn’t disagree, but I also didn’t discount it. This was exactly what she wanted. A “*backyard carne asada on steroids*” is what she called it two months ago when she randomly decided she wanted a birthday party.

Randomly, drunkenly, same difference, right?

However the idea came about, her family had given her exactly what she asked for. Just like always.

It was probably all Martina, Ceci’s mother. She spoiled her children, even if she’d found a way to do it with an iron fist. And speaking of the doting woman, her face was the first familiar one we saw as we slid out of the wide indoor, outdoor entry to the back patio.

“Fergusons! Hola niños, como están?” Martina said as she pulled us into cordial hugs.

She only got her small arms around me and Clay. Clint stood just outside of her reach but bent toward her and wrapped a quick arm around her shoulders in a much stiffer greeting. It didn’t faze her a bit. She just smiled politely at him and then smiled wider as she turned to me and Clay.

“Clayton, my boy, thank you for coming. I know you and my Celestia are like fuego y fuega,” she tsked but turned to me next. “And Connor, thank you for coming sweet, quiet boy! I swear you get bigger and bigger every time I see you, niño.”

She punctuated this by blatantly grabbing my arms and squeezing them. No shame in Martina’s game. Probably where Ceci got it from. Kissing both Clay and I on the cheeks she

waved toward the party and urged, “Entren. Coman. Diviertanse.”

And then she was off, heading in the direction of the rest of her guests. Her family. That easily, we were welcomed, simply because her children loved us. Sometimes I tried not to be jealous around the Fernandez’s, but they made it so easy with the simple way they loved. They made me wish that my complicated family wasn’t such a harsh environment to exist in.

But we didn’t get to choose our family, I guess. We got who we got and we either found a way to love them or left them. And I’ve always had a hard time leaving the things I loved.

The further we moved into the party, the more we broke apart. Clay moved immediately to find any of the few people he would actually talk to at this party. Clint found himself drifting toward the old men rather than other people our age. And I scanned the backyard.

My eyes moved over the paved back patio, deep cemented fire pit, and large outdoor bar. Large stone pillars held up an A-frame wooden structure that canopied the outdoor living space. I squinted out past the covered area to the large square pool deck that was skirted with grills. I could see Mr. Fernandez down there with some of the other older men, talking as he prodded steaks over a flame.

Up and down I searched the familiar backyard. The Fernandez’s had one of those rare ones that looked like a regular backyard compared to the rest of our beach adjacent homes. Color snagged my gaze as I found the balloon arch Clint mentioned tucked away to the side of the patio. It wasn’t until my eyes landed on the set up that I noticed the girl dressed in all blue.

She wore one of those little dresses she liked to sport when she wasn’t wearing her uniform of casual jeans and a shirt, (or my clothes when we were at home). It was tight in the top, coming down to scoop low on her chest, the rest flowing around her body loosely. It was also her favorite color blue.

That one in between powder blue and baby blue that always seemed to look good against her perpetually glowing skin.

You would think the brightness of it would contrast with her audacious hair that was between the lightest of browns and burning red, akin to some kind of melting gold. Or her unusual eyes that changed color between golden brown and just plain gold with the time of day. But it didn't. The extra color only made her look better, more like herself in her kaleidoscope of traits and features.

The dress made her look deceptively innocent. Nothing like her—but as she stood, turning one way to talk to someone before throwing her head back laughing, I saw that throughout her skirt there were little blue feathers woven in at various places. And I shook my head.

There she was.

Celestia Fernandez. Wild and simple. Complex and yet so damn easy, at least for me she was. She only wanted what she wanted and didn't want to have to deal with anything else. She only spoke her mind. She was only ever true to herself. Even if that got her into trouble or made things harder for not just her but everyone around her.

There was a refreshing sort of appeal to her simplicity. One that I admired.

Now that I'd spotted her, I wanted her attention on me. So I started to edge around the party. Not going directly toward her but hoping to get in her line of sight. As she talked—and as those damn feathers blew in the wind—I noticed her peek up and around herself at least twice, searching for something.

I saw the exact moment she noticed my brothers. Her nose scrunching up and her eyebrows turning in at the sight of them and not me. In result, she searched the party more fervently, her eyes scanning the groups of people lining her family's backyard. I stopped near the back entrance of the house waiting for her to spot me, and after a few more passes, she finally did. Her face breaking out into a wide grin, her shoulders relaxing as she seemed to vibrate in her spot.



My mouth twitched at her transparent response. She'd been waiting for me, and now I was here.

Tilting my head toward the house, I gestured for her to follow me inside. There was no need to wait for confirmation that she would follow. I knew she'd have to find a way to excuse herself before she could catch up with me. Instead, I made my way into the familiar home and tucked myself away in the kitchen. The room was far enough away from the back doors that we wouldn't be seen or heard here, but it also had these bay windows along the sink that looked out over the backyard at an angle, giving me a visual of the party beyond.

Tucking myself behind the large windows, I settled against the wall just in time for the storm of Ceci to come barreling into the kitchen and right toward me. I had to catch her shoulders to stop her from breezing straight into my chest. She stood an entire foot shorter than I did and had to cock her head back to her shoulders to look up at me.

But I only glanced briefly at her goofy smile and rosy face. Now that she was in front of me, I was too busy inspecting her birthday ensemble up close.

On top of the feather dress, she was glittered. Every inch of her skin was shiny in the thin streak of light that found us in the corner of the kitchen. She hadn't opted for the face paint but did have these little splashes of blue holographic makeup stuff on the side of her eyes, framing them like a mask. On top of her skin, her hair didn't usually sparkle, but today it sure was. Glitter to be exact, the red gold strands tied up into this bizarre style with two balls on top of her head and the rest cascading down her back in its usual long fashion.

"Who dressed you?" I laughed, unable to help myself as I looked her up and down.

She grinned. "I did! You like it?"

"I'm pretty sure if you shake hard enough, a cloud of glitter would puff up and choke me."

"You haven't even seen the best part," her grin turned serpentine, and that's how I knew she was *really* having fun.

Turning, she pointed out the window past the various relatives littered around the food and other festivities to three girls sitting where Ceci had just been. One, fair-skinned and round faced, was wearing a green feathered tube top and matching green mini skirt. The second, who had the trademark Fernandez dark hair, dark eyes, and deep olive skin, wore feathers too. Although she wore the least, her black feathers were still visible tacked onto the ends of the sensible black sleeves of her dress. Finally, the third girl—the one that looked like me with her dark skin, light brown eyes, and curling hair, wore a pale pink dress with short sleeves and a regular feather free neckline. It wasn't until she rose to her feet to reach for something across the table that I saw the feathers along the bottom hem of her dress. I scoffed.

“How did you get them to agree to that?”

“They offered,” she shrugged, looking at me with mischief in her gaze. I called bullshit, staring down at her with accusing eyes. It only took her a few seconds to break. She laughed; the sound full of infectious happiness. “I told them if they didn't dress up with me, their favorite stuff would start to go missing.”

Of course she did. Shaking my head I peeked out at the Bird-feather Squad again and chuckled. They looked ridiculous, and like me, they'd gone along with it to make Ceci happy. “Who broke first?”

“Who do you think?” she chuffed. “Your sister almost started swinging when I told her I would take that weird cow toy she keeps by their bed.”

My mouth wobbled, “You better watch out with her. She'll actually do it.”

“I know she will!” Turning suddenly, she broke away from my grasp, her back facing me as she flipped her hair to one side while simultaneously pulling her ear forward. “See this mark? She clocked me on the side of the head with a rubber spatula not too long ago.”

“And what did you do to her first?”

“*All* I said was that she was being a scared-ass punk for not going for her cookbook when we all *knew* that’s what she really wanted to do, and if she was going to be a pussy about it then I had no time to listen to that crap,” she said, a little harumph edging her voice. It had been at least a year since Tine got her first cookbook picked up by a publisher, which meant this squabble had to be at least that old if not older.

I scoffed again. I scoffed a lot around this girl.

“Oh, well if *that’s* all you said.” Nodding thoughtfully, I pretended that I was agreeing with her. When I got her attention, her gaze flipping over her shoulder at me expectantly, I smiled with mock sweetness, adding, “*Then you deserved it.*”

Her mouth dropped open, a gasp escaping her like she couldn’t believe what I just said. The reaction pulled at the corners of my mouth. Seeing this, she smiled too, and as if the entitlement of her argument just floated away, she waved a hand through the air. “Anyway, what’s up? Why did you signal me in here?”

“I can’t just want to wish you a happy birthday?”

She pursed her lips like she really needed to think about it. “You could...but my last happy birthday came with cake. If you can’t top that, then I don’t want it.”

I huffed, reaching into my back pocket and pulling out a long wrapped box, “Well it’s a good thing I have something for you then.”

Straightening, she looked from me to my hands and back to me, like she hadn’t expected that as my answer.

“But you already got me something. I found it on my pillow this morning,” she said, but her eyes grew wide with excitement as they tracked the box wrapped in blue wrapping paper. When I held it out to her, she peeked up to me as if she needed to confirm that I remembered leaving a different little blue box on her pillow before leaving her apartment this morning.

I did. I remembered it all vividly. Waking up in her guest bedroom after taking her annoying ass to the emergency room and staying with her until they strapped her into a thick black brace the length of half her forearm. Walking into her room the next morning, I remember seeing it against her blue sheets and blue pajamas and thinking how much it would clash with her theme today. I also remember leaving before I could watch her open her first present to have enough time to get her a second.

I already knew the little blue butterflies dangling on a white gold hoop would look good on her. And I could see how much she liked them now as they dangled from her dainty ears. She didn't need to worry about it. I'd gotten them because they reminded me of her. This blue box was of a different price range. Just something to lighten her spirits on her birthday... not that anything could really dampen this girl's spirits to begin with.

"I remember, Cee." Reaching forward, I fingered the little earrings, watching them move as they swung on the hoop. "They look good on you."

She beamed, her smile unapologetic at the compliment. Nodding to the box in my hands she bounced excitedly. "Then what's this?"

"Last minute addition," I said, nudging it forward for her to take.

As I thought, she needed no further coercing. She tore into the wrapping paper and then the box without a second protest. Seconds later, she was pulling out a small cylinder shaped garment made with tough poly fabric that laced down the front. It was almost identical to the one she wore on her wrist now, but instead of the ugly black it was her trademark blue. The same blue as all her favorite things. Her car, her clothes, even some of her furniture, taking on the same hue.

It hadn't escaped me that even at one in the morning as she fought sleep and exhaustion Ceci still managed to ask the doctor if the brace came in different colors. I knew she was hoping for that same blue. As predicted, they didn't have it for

her. But it was her birthday, so I didn't mind waking up a little early to go get it. I just hoped it paid off.

The excited look that overtook her eyes immediately told me it did.

"Hell yeah," she whispered under her breath, doing a little bounce as she started pulling at the laces of her current brace.

"Woah, hey," I said, my small bubble of happiness from seeing her so excited popping acutely as I watched her destabilizing the wrist I worked damn hard to get stable last night. "Don't change it *now*."

"But I want to wear it now," she said, continuing to undress her injuries. "This thing is *so* ugly, Con. I almost didn't wear it today."

"Tell me you aren't serious," I deadpanned, moving toward her and batting her rough hands away from her injury. Taking over, I began unlacing the brace, getting it as loose as possible before carefully pulling it off her arm.

"No, I'm not serious," she snorted. I motioned for her to step aside while I removed the metal stability bars from the old brace and placed them in the new one. "I knew *you* would be here. I would never do that with the Dr. Fun Police on the loose."

"You just mixed two very unrelated professions," I pointed out, beckoning her back my way.

"They could be related," she said. Sidling up to me with distracted eyes as she watched me slip the new blue brace around her wrist. Her bruise was even bluer now than yesterday, bordering on black with red circling the deepest part of it. I'd have to remind her to soak it when all the excitement of her birthday died down. Luckily, the inside of this brace should not only look better but feel better too, since it was lined with a softer fabric than the default brace the doctors handed out. Without even a wince of pain as I handled her injury, she went on. "You know the whole horrible accident, police showing up, ambulance ride, doctors saving a life cycle. It's textbook."

I scoffed, “That is not *textbook*, that’s just the plot of every one of those hospital dramas you watch.”

“You watch them too!”

“It’s purely for survival, Ceci. If I don’t stay in and watch bad TV with you at least some of the time, I’ll be forced to be your getaway driver from mayhem like last night even more than I already have to.” With the brace secure on her arm I moved to tying the laces. “I’m really looking out for both of us here.”

“Yeah sure. That’s why you ask me *every Monday night* if we’re on for General ER? *For our survival.*”

“Correct—you know, I’m impressed you’re listening so well on your birthday,” I said, flicking her an amused gaze. “I thought you were going to be a hardheaded terror like last year.”

She guffawed, no doubt remembering last year. It had been the rainy season during her birthday and after having an *almost* successful night of calm indoor activities, she’d broken down and insisted on running out on the beach and plunging into the water. The Atlantic Ocean in May was cold as shit, even on the last day of it. She called it her “Arctic Baptism” and had almost fucking drowned in the high tide.

“Yeah well,” she shrugged and attempted to hide her wince when it swayed her wrist too hard. I gentled my hands. “The good behavior’s only for you. Since you bailed me out last night.”

“Hmm,” I hummed.

She continued to peek up at me, “Thanks for staying with me, by the way.”

Sliding the last of the laces into place, I tied the knot into a bow and let go of her wrist only to reach up to grab her cheek between my fingers, pinching. “Yeah well, somebody had to do it. How’s the party? Are you having fun?”

“Ow, Con!” Batting me away with her good hand, she smiled up at me. Laughing, she wrapped her fingers around mine, holding on absently as she kept me away from her

cheeks. I gripped her right back. “Yes, I’m having fun. You know I love being the center of attention.”

I rolled my eyes. “I know.”

“But I’ve been waiting forever for you to get your ass here already.”

From the corner of my eye, I gave her a longer look. Cee was never really all that emotional. She teetered on a constant seesaw between happy and angry. It’s like you had two sides of a coin with her. She wasn’t fake and she never sugar-coated anything. She was incapable of easing into any emotion. She either felt something or she didn’t and that’s what made her so easy for me. I knew she’d be either one or the other ninety-nine percent of the time.

Still, I sometimes found myself checking in just to be sure I hadn’t hurt her feelings or burned her in some unknown way.

Thankfully, when I looked at her now, she was smiling softly as she looked out the kitchen window onto her party. She seemed okay. Still happy. Nothing out of order. Which meant my heart remained easy, knowing she was good.

Catching me watching her, she flipped her gaze up her shoulder to peer at my face. “What?”

“Sorry you had to wait for me,” I said

“I’m always waiting for you, Con. You make everything more fun,” she said. Turning my way she put her hands on her hips and cocked her head like she had something other than her next words on her mind. “I need to get back to the party soon. My guests are probably dying of boredom without me.”

I held back my snort because even though she was joking, she was probably right. In the short time I’d known Ceci, I’d picked up on her special energy. The way she gave sparks of herself to everyone she came across. It was electric in a biased sort of way. If you were on her good side, you could bask in her surge forever. And on the wrong side of it, prepare to get burned.

“Don’t tell me you don’t have some kind of scheme for me,” I said, giving her a flat assessing look right back. “No

birthday games this year?”

Her grin made me feel like I was being tested. I think the fact that I passed was the only reason I wasn't offended. Like I'd ever forget this.

Ceci liked to play games. Moreover, Ceci didn't like being bored. I was convinced she was a bird in another life. Flitting around from place to place, idea to idea at a hundred miles an hour. Another thing that made her easy for me. She was never boring. I never felt the urge to forsake her for my own interests, namely technology. While computers and cyberspace seemed more interesting than most anything, most anything was less interesting than Ceci.

Example being the way she perked up at the sound of my words. Probably already having thought of how she was going to torture me today since it was her birthday and she knew she'd get anything she wanted.

“I'm glad you asked,” she said in a way that told me she *knew* I was going to ask. “Okay so, *I* was thinking, whoever can use the phrase ‘*oh yeah, what was their name again*’ the most and get away with it, wins,” she said.

Before I could even comment, she piped back up. “And no cheating this time! It only counts if it's about each other.”

I looked at her with lowered brows, “Cee, I'm at *your* birthday party. It'd be pretty shitty if I didn't know your name.”

She shrugged as if to say, ‘*tough shit.*’

“We've known each other for *years*,” I went on. “Even if we were just acquaintances, we would at least know each other's *names*. It's not going to work.”

She smiled wickedly, just giving me another shrug. “It wouldn't be much of a game if it wasn't a challenge, Connor.”

I sighed. “*Alright*. I didn't want to have to beat you on your own birthday, but...I guess it can't be helped.”

Her eyes lit with something mischievous and light and *all* Ceci. “Game on, Con.”



In a flash she was outside, barreling her way back into the party. Within minutes, she was turning her gaze toward the window where she probably knew I'd be watching. Concealed close to her body, she mimed two numbers along her hands.

One, zero Ceci.

She was already in the lead, and with me, where it counted, she'd always win.



# Chapter Three

## CECI

I lost.

According to Connor he somehow managed to look eight people in the eye yesterday and ask them to remind him the name of the girl's party he was at. Eight was a lot, I only managed three times without laughing or someone else calling bullshit. So I couldn't believe he'd gotten away with eight successful attempts without cracking. I actually *wouldn't* have believed it if I hadn't witnessed one instance with my own eyes.

I was conveniently walking by him and my tía Diana when I noticed him talking to her and slowed down, intent on eavesdropping and hopefully catching some of his embarrassment firsthand. That's not what I got. What I saw was Connor turning to my aunt, who had just thanked him for coming to her *'little sobrina's'* party, with the straightest of faces and saying, "Of course. Remind me her name again."

Tía Di, who was never one to hold her tongue, gave him a funny look and placed her hands on her hips. "You come to her home and eat her food, but you don't even know her *name?*"

Con's eye twitched, the only indication that he found this just as amusing as I did, as he shrugged his shoulders, seemingly indifferent. "I know it starts with an 'S', the rest just isn't coming to me."

He even snapped his fingers and tilted his head to the sky, really getting into the role. I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing at his bullshit. Most people wouldn't think Connor Ferguson was a funny guy, but that was because he

didn't show that side to most people. To me though, he let his smartass flag fly.

In response to his ignorance, Tía Diana looked about ready to hit him. I think she was gearing up to do it too when I quickly eased up to her side and inserted myself into the situation.

“Hey Tía!” I said in a chipper voice as I came up beside her. “What are you doing hitting on all the young boys again? I can't take my eyes off you for a second, can I?”

She didn't bite. Wrapping a protective arm around my waist, she pulled me against her side and continued to glare up at Con. “Mija, we were just looking for you. The Ferguson boy wanted to wish you a happy birthday.”

It was my turn to hold in my laugh as both me and my aunt looked up at Con expectantly. He was for sure going to lose now. He couldn't wish me a happy birthday without blowing his cover. He also couldn't *not* wish me happy birthday in front of my feisty aunt.

I had him, or so I thought. But I guess I underestimated the audacity of Connor Ferguson, because with that same serious face he turned his eyes on me. Eyes that only I would know were *dancing* with amusement. “Happy birthday, *Celine*.”

My smile broke loose at the horror we were creating on my poor aunt's face and I had to eat it quickly before she caught sight of it. Putting on my best acting shoes, I gave him a scowl, “*Celestia*. My name is Celestia, dipshit.”

But I messed up there too, and it was a big enough mistake to pull a triumphant smile from Connor's mouth.

I'd done two things wrong. First, I had just given Connor ammunition to end the game early, because if I supposedly just told him my name (especially with a witness present) there was no reason for him to go around the party acting like he didn't know it anymore. Secondly, I never told anyone my name was *Celestia*. I mean, it was, but the use of my full name was reserved for very few people, Connor being one of them.

Tía Diana didn't know that, though. No one did. And now she was looking at *me* like I was the crazy one. *Dammit.*

“Well then happy birthday, *Celestia,*” Connor said in his deep rumbling voice before he slipped away sporting a smirk on his face.

I couldn't even sulk at being beat. I was too busy fighting off the zinging feeling his words had given me. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, the way Connor rumbled my name always leaving me feeling weird. Hot and a little jittery. *Charged.* He didn't use it often, but when he did it almost always gave me this strange feeling.

So I'd lost, and customary to any of our ridiculous shenanigans, loser paid for whatever we were doing together next. We didn't have any plans set, but I wanted to get him coffee anyway for saving me from that bar, and taking me to the emergency room, and buying me two birthday presents that I loved. So hopping out of the childhood bed I'd stayed in last night at my family home, I rushed through showering, scrubbing the glitter off myself, and saying goodbye to my parents in order to make it over to Connor's favorite coffee place and then to his house before he left for work.

Tearing through my family's massive home with my overnight bag slung across my shoulders and wrist throbbing because I'd left those pain meds from the doctor at my apartment before the party yesterday, I made for the front door whilst calling over my shoulder. “Bueno Mami, Apá! Hasta luego, te amo!”

“*Celestia,*” a deep voice called, low, calm, and unhurried. I halted, a frown slipping over me. It was my dad, and it was coming from the direction of his office.

“I'm late Apá, but I'll be back on Friday for dinner,” I called back. I didn't move though, not daring to leave before I was dismissed.

“Un momento, mija. Ven aqui,” he said. Patient, but firm. That's how he usually was, but something in his tone or maybe his timing had my stomach twisting.

Using my good hand, I stripped my bags from around my body and turned my trajectory toward my father's office, obeying his command. It *was* a command, even if he'd used the softest of voices. We always knew how to tell the difference.

It only took a moment for me to pass through the kitchen down the hall and appear at the wide doorway of my father's office.

Large French doors carved the entryway to the dark wooded space. Books lined the back wall that served as the backdrop to his deep oak wooden desk. Dark leathers stretched over every seat in the room and a big jewel toned rug that looked like it was found in an estate sale hundreds of years ago carpeted the otherwise wooden floor.

Aside from the dread that was currently icing the back of my neck, I generally loved my father's office. It was so warm and inviting and it always smelled faintly of cigar smoke and my dad. I used to come in here while he was away on business to sleep against the cool leather couch, pretending he was there. I also used to sit in here for hours with him when I was being punished for being one form of too much or another. My punishments were always a form of keeping me still because for me, especially when I was that young, not moving was almost like dying. The worst punishment imaginable.

Now, instead of seeing Apá behind his desk filtering through papers or shushing me because he was on an important call, I found him in the large leather chair across from the couch with a book in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. He was a lot less involved in the business nowadays, now that my older brother Oaxaca had taken things over. Ox had been a star hitter out the gate when it came to heading the family business, which had allowed Apá to retire much earlier than anyone initially expected.

Retirement looked good on him. It showed in the healthy glow of his cinnamon brown skin and the rested set of his dark brown eyes. Eyes that always used to look tired and unfulfilled. Eyes that now turned on me and grew wrinkles of concern when they fell upon my wrist.

Setting his book and coffee aside, he reached a hand out to me and said, “Will you tell me the truth, mija? What happened to my girl?”

Going straight up to him I placed my uninjured hand in his and leaned down to kiss his cheek.

“Apá, you wouldn’t like the answer,” I said. The only amount of truth I was willing to offer.

He grimaced. “Fighting again I see.”

I neither confirmed nor denied his claim even though I knew he wasn’t really asking. Instead, I turned my back to him and sauntered over to the large leather couch, plopping down as if the dramatic gesture could hide the dread in my gut.

“What is it, Apá? You don’t have to worry about this, you know I’m okay,” I said.

“Are you?”

“Yes. I am,” I said tightly. “I always am. You know that.”

“I *thought* I did,” he corrected. The look he gave me, all slitted eyes and uncertain expressions, pinched at my nerves. His next words stabbed at them. “I’m not so sure anymore.”

“What are you getting at?” I asked hastily, my spine straightening and my urgency spiking up. Hackles rising.

“You don’t know?”

“If you have something to say to me, say it straight Papa,” I said through my teeth.

“Do not take that tone with me, Celestia, and don’t be so upset. We’re just talking,” he said, knowing me like the back of his hand. I only added the “P” to the front of what I usually called him when I got frustrated and this conversation was blowing my fuse quickly.

I bit the inside of my mouth, fighting the urge to say what I really wanted to say. Which went something like ‘*it sounds like you’re doing all the talking old man*’. That wouldn’t bode well for me.

So instead I took the much different approach of fidgeting in my seat and sighing deeply with anxiety, “Please just say it plainly, Apá. You know I don’t like riddles.”

He sighed too.

“You’re twenty-four now, *mija*. You need to think about your future,” he said. “You’re the only one of my children I still worry about.”

“Oh?” I asked, swallowing what felt like sand.

“Yes. Alta is stepping up and making investments, Lis is stronger and stronger every day in her role at the company, Mateo has always been passionate about his businesses, and Oaxaca is—”

“Perfect, yes, we all fucking know Apá,” I grumbled.

“Hey,” he said, giving me a stern look. “Basta, *mija*. You know we don’t do that here, we—”

“*Celebrate each other*, yes, I know Apá. But I don’t feel very celebrated with you breathing down my neck like this,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest. I tried not to wince at the pain this brought to my wrist, but that move really fucking hurt. I refused to remove it right away. It would just be more ammunition for my father who seemed to be on a shooting spree right now. Especially as he scoffed and shook his head at me. I glowered, adding, “And I don’t appreciate you laughing at me either.”

Movement from beside me caused me to look up my shoulder.

“He’s laughing because we *just* had a giant party for you, and yet you say you don’t feel appreciated,” my mom said, appearing out of absolutely nowhere. She’d entered the room and materialized above my head like a spirit. Planting a kiss on the top of my head, she reached down and untangled my arms, as if she knew I was hurting myself. Then in a teasing voice she added, “*Pinche chiqueara*.”

I couldn’t help the smile that pulled across my face, however fleeting it was. Some people might find it offensive for their own mother to call her daughter a *‘fucking spoiled*



*brat*’, but I found it increasingly amusing how comfortable she was getting with us girls as we got older.

Even though my sisters cringed at some of the looser talks about sex and men and anything else they didn’t want to picture our mother once doing, it felt like I could finally relate to her a little better now. Being able to talk to her on the same level rather than being the little troublemaking daughter she always had to keep in line.

“Hi, Mami,” I said. “Did you come here to attack me too?”

“No one is attacking you, mija,” she replied in a tone that radiated patience. Sauntering over to my dad’s side, she took a seat on the arm of his chair. I watched as he snaked an arm around her waist, pulling her into him and holding her to his hip. My eyes narrowed. Looks like she just chose her side. “We’re just worried about you.”

“And I’m saying you don’t *have* to. I’m fine.”

“Oh, yes? And getting into fights and wandering around with no purpose is *fine* now? Is that what the kids are calling it these days?” she asked.

“I didn’t get into a fight Mami, I fell.” I wasn’t usually a liar, but to save my own ass, there needed to be some level of self-preservation. “And I don’t understand what the point of this conversation is other than rubbing my face in the dirt and reminding me that I don’t know what I want to do. Trust me, *I know*.”

And I did. Boy, did I know that I was still the only Fernandez heir who didn’t have their shit together. How humiliating it was that the one who had always been too much for everyone to handle was now too little in collation to her siblings. My parents didn’t have to remind me. I couldn’t possibly forget it.

“No one is rubbing it in, Celestia. We’re just saying that maybe you need some urgency,” Amá said.

“Is it a race?”

“No, but you at least need to get on the starting line, mija,” Apá interjected. “What are you interested in? Do you know?”

We can at least start there.”

I thought about my siblings and all the things they were doing. Ox, my happily married uber successful businessman of an older brother paving the way for the rest of us to be what and whoever we wanted to be. Alta, my shy sister, taking her passions for marketing and branding into her own hands, on top of contributing to the family business in her own way. Lis, who had always been a knockout with numbers and finances, had just been promoted to CFO at the young age of twenty-seven and was hitting new thresholds of perfection with every passing day. And Mateo had his whole mogul thing going on. Business ventures seemed to just fall out of him like leaves falling from a tree. They all had their thing, and they were all great at their things.

*I had nothing.*

I had gone to school for general studies for as long as possible, and when it came time to choose a field of study, I chose business administration and struggled through the boring classes because that’s what I thought I *should* do. When I graduated, no one immediately pushed me to do anything with my degree because there was really no rush. We had money and we had time. But as more and more of that time went on with me not showing an interest for anything, save for my little game of secret friends with Connor, that’s when the questions started rolling in. “*Up to anything good these days, Ceci?*” “*Apply for any jobs lately, Ceci?*” “*Anything new these days, Ceci?*”. And the answers had all been the same.

No, no, and even more no.

It’s not that I didn’t do anything. Most days I rotated my time between visiting my brothers and sisters and finding other random tasks to occupy myself. I usually reserved one sibling for each day so I had enough visits to fill my week, including a day with my sister-in-law Clementine, or ‘Fergy’ to me. I never missed a week of paying Fergy a visit especially since she spent most of her days at home, working hard amongst her recipe trials and cookbook drafts.

And it was because of her that I found another one of my weekly activities.

Visiting the local women's shelter wasn't something I ever told anyone about, but it was something I'd stumbled into doing after making a donation (of stolen revenge money) and having a claims operator contact me when it was flagged and returned for fraudulent activity. When it all happened, I'd felt so bad about the failed donation that I wrote a check out myself and marched it down to the small shelter at the edge of town.

I was only supposed to drop off the check and leave, but I was reeled in almost instantaneously by a guest speaker who had taken the floor of the small dusty common area and was both rendering a story about perseverance and overcoming and floating around the room gathering up all the children and babies. Along with her team, she created a makeshift daycare circle in the middle of the room so the mothers and guardians living in the shelter could have a break while they listened or slept or simply stepped away for a moment.

"What's going on there?" I had asked the faculty member who I'd just given the check to.

"Oh," the woman chirped. "Once a week we try to have some sort of community engagement for the women sheltering here. It's always something educational, direct board orders, you know? Apparently, it's supposed to boost morale and inspire the women, but to be honest that's something those stuffy men on the committee came up with. Anyone who's here day in and day out knows what these women really need. A break, some laughs, a change. The board doesn't seem to agree. So as a compromise, we try to mix the two as best as we can."

I wasn't the volunteering type. My family donated money to various charities regularly, but I'd never had the urge to go out and insert myself into any of them. The women's shelter was different. Something about it caught me like a net. Reeling me in and not allowing me to leave. Not that day at least, and I had been going back religiously ever since.

As schedules went, mine was pretty weak. When I laid it out like that, I guess it really was nothing. Especially compared to my perfect siblings and their perfect aspirations. I guess I'd gotten away with it for so long because no one seemed to know what to do with me.

From a young age I'd trained myself to be headstrong. Seeing the way they treated my softie of an older sister Alta, babying her and hanging on her every breath, I'd never wanted to be like that. So I was as loud and self-sufficient as possible, forcing my family to quickly learn that I didn't want to be coddled. That if I faltered, I'd grit my teeth and grind through it until I eventually figured it out on my own. Just like when I learned to read, write, ride a bike and more. They were probably waiting for the same thing when it came to my "purpose", only it hadn't come yet.

They weren't the only ones waiting, and I probably wasn't the only one embarrassed because it wasn't happening for me. Compared to my siblings, I was a disappointment.

I turned my gaze away from my parents to hide that embarrassment, mumbling, "I still don't know."

"Well, mija, it's time to figure it out," my dad said and something in his tone had me looking over to him in worry. That ball I'd felt in my stomach earlier rearing its ugly head.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means we're giving you the rest of the year to have your life figured out, Celestia, or we'll be taking matters into our own hands," he clarified.

Like flashing red emergency lights, I felt anger rise in a sudden wave. I bristled, and I could feel tingling warmth prickle at the surface of my skin. "So you guys just think I'm some kind of bum, then?"

"Aren't you? You live off money you haven't worked for, and you do nothing but laze around all day," Apá said, noticing the reaction he was getting out of me and pressing into it like a salty rock in a wound. He was good at that, and I

suspected he'd used that tactic in his business dealings in the past. Something our grandfather taught him before he passed.

I felt my nostrils flare, but...I couldn't really say anything in rebuttal. Even if my dad was purposely trying to rile me, he was also right. Like throat closing, nose stinging, frustrated tears in the backs of my eyes right. Like hit a nerve so head on, I was afraid it would burst right. I *was* a bum. A freeloading one at that. And I was his only child who had yet to figure it out.

Amá smacked my dad across the shoulder and detached herself from his side to slide up in front of me. She was bending low, because apparently I had dropped my eyes to the floor and didn't hear her calling for me through the roaring in my ears. With her in my line of sight, I reminded myself to breathe, to relax my jaw, and to swallow. When she noticed me doing the tricks she taught me as a young girl who tended to get angry and let her temper got the best of her, she relaxed too. Reaching out both hands she tucked my hair behind my ears.

"He didn't mean that like it sounds, mama," she said, her voice soft and quiet.

I peeked up past her head at my father, but his expression didn't give anything away. He just watched us calmly, his coffee mug grazing his mouth.

"No?" I croaked.

"No," she insisted. "Celestia you have a world of opportunity available to you. Much more than many, many people in this life. Much more than I had when I was your age."

I nodded, but I continued to look at my father, wondering now if he really thought I was a disappointment too. Amá noticed and used her hands to hold my cheeks and bring my gaze back to her. "You are by far my most passionate baby, yes? You just need to find where that passion belongs. Okay?"

"And if I don't?" I asked, genuinely afraid that I never could or would.

“Then you’ll work at the company until you eventually do,”  
Apá spoke up, voice stern, word final. “You have six months  
until then.”



# Chapter Four

## CECI

“I’m here!” I yelled through the quiet dark of the gray wooden kitchen. It didn’t belong to me, though I had become very familiar with it in the past couple of years, sort of like a second home.

I tossed my keys into the bowl that sat on the console table against the wall. They clanged loudly against the metal, the sound reverberating through the air like a gong. I winced at the noise, my eyes snapping to it as if it was assaulting my ears on purpose.

Really, it was just me who’d been on edge ever since leaving my parent’s house. Ever since the ultimatum they’d slapped on me.

Flipping on the light, I watched as it illuminated the space and brought the clean surfaces and tidy fixtures around me into view. Sniffing, I got a familiar whiff of the lemon scented surface cleaner diluted just right with the perfect amount of water and topped off with a spritz of lemon freshener after cleaning. I didn’t have to smell the zesty scent to know the place had been cleaned. I knew it would be, like clockwork, every damn day.

Making sure to pull out two coasters from the center dolly of the charcoal countertopped island, I lowered the two cups to the coasters instead of the pristinely cleaned counters. Why I did this instead of just setting the *paper cups* on the counters when I knew they wouldn’t stain? Because I valued my sanity. And my best friend.

He was probably the only one who still found any value in me, though.



As if he had some sort of sixth sense and knew I was thinking about him, Connor chose that moment to materialize at the end of the far hallway that led away from the kitchen toward his nerd lair. His computer room. Built specifically for the use of enough computer power it rivaled a full-scale corporate office network. Con peeked his head around the corner of the wall, but he didn't come out, instead just letting it hover there.

"Hi," he said before immediately leaving again, returning to his beloved computers. It was a greeting we had worked on for a long time. Now that he was comfortable with me, rather than simply nodding in greeting, he was better at speaking freely. Still, in the mornings he sometimes slipped into old habits. I couldn't exactly fault him for it, but I still would.

"Don't trip over yourself with excitement, Con," I called after him. It was more of a grumble, my bad mood from my unexpected morning already slipping out.

In a huff, I moved to his fridge. It was tucked away into the dark cabinets and camouflaged into the wood. I only knew it was there because I'd been here a million times. Before I could even pull out the yogurt, fruit and prepared smoothie that waited inside, I heard the thunderous steps of one Connor Ferguson coming my way.

I always knew when he was coming. Despite being quiet most of the time (when he wasn't with me), his powerful legs and massive feet generally gave his entrance away. That and the fact that he charged *everywhere*, like he always had a specific purpose. Like he only ever went where he wanted to go; where he was *meant* to, and he didn't have a minute to lose getting there.

I loved that about him. I especially loved it when those charging steps were coming for me, which they were now. It made me feel like I was in the right place with him. Like I was where I was meant to be too.

Closing the fridge, I moved over to grab one of the coffee cups and cradled the warm drink in my hands. Leaning a hip against the kitchen island, I watched and waited.

Speed walking toward me like a man on a mission, was Con. My Con. My very best friend. Tall, dark milk coffee brown skin, strong defined jaw that came down to a more defined chin, and eyes so light brown you could see swirls of gold and green mixed in under certain light. I assumed his head of hair would be curly like his brothers' or sister's, but he kept it shaved short to his head, which just let everyone see every single chiseled line of his face. His inherently lean frame had been built up by his religious exercise routine and his height spanned upwards to six-four. He was *big*.

And that's probably why when he reached me he slid the coffee cup I held toward him out of my hands and crouched slightly at the waist so we were eye to eye. Carefully, he slid his bright hazel gaze from one side of my face to the other. Checking me for disease is what I called it when he looked at me like that. Really, I think he was gauging which Ceci he'd get that day, using some kind of internal 'Ceci-meter' to get it right. A smart man always had a plan I suppose.

Satisfied, he gave a small nod and said another short, "Hi."

This time holding my eyes and leaning in just slightly. Showing me he saw me and he was here before straightening up and walking away.

Why that small gesture of assurance cooled my burning thoughts into something less tumultuous, I didn't know. But I wasn't surprised. Con could cool me off just by being near me. Just by choosing me, which he did every day he let me into his quiet little life.

Turning back to the fridge, I resumed my gathering. Pulling down all the ingredients for a yogurt and granola bowl. I did my foraging in a random order in hopes that Con would return by the time I had to get the bowls down. They were too high for my short ass to reach. But, of course, when I got to that part Con was nowhere to be seen.

"*Connor!*" I called, refraining myself from screeching, but just barely. He could usually deal with me whining and bitching and grumbling, but when it came to screeching, he

got this disgusted look on his face that said it all. That is where he drew the line of his supreme patience.

But I was hungry and irritated and never really one to skirt around what I wanted. So even though I knew the line, I sometimes toyed with it a little.

A *ding* noise sounded from my phone complimented by it buzzing in my pocket. Whipping it out, I immediately saw a text from Connor.

**Pancake:** Bowls are in the short-people drawer. Be out in a minute.

Even though he had premeditated this, I felt a little rush of triumph go through me. “The Short-people Drawer” was a little drawer that Connor started keeping at the bottom of his kitchen island when we first became friends. But since no one in his family was short, I had come to think of it as “The Ceci Drawer.” After all, it was only designed because he got sick of catching me trying to climb the counters instead of just asking him to get things for me. And from what I could tell, I was the only one he stocked the drawer for.

In a familiar shuffle, I started on breakfast while trying to keep my mind off this morning. But as I scooped yogurt into our bowls, one of my hands now much weaker than I was used to, I couldn’t help my thoughts drifting back to my parents. To my papa. To his eyes, so heavy with worry. And his voice, so thick with resolution. Even though remembering his disappointment for having me as a daughter hurt, and I wanted nothing more than to give him what he wanted and pick something so he could stop looking at me like that...I still couldn’t land my brain on a single damn lead as to what I wanted to do with my life. Not even a direction.

Reemerging into the kitchen just as I was drizzling the finishing touches of honey into our yogurt bowls, Connor sipped at his coffee before looking at me over the rim of his cup. I watched the movement of his expression, little tidbits of awareness bubbling to life when I noticed the mirth in his gaze. He didn’t even have to say what he was thinking, but he still riveted me with the pleasure of his thoughts anyway.

“Is this all I win? I put in hard work for that victory,” he said, raising his coffee cup in question.

With as sweet as a smile I could produce, I held up his bowl of yogurt, smoothie, and granola as if to say, *‘here’s your real prize’*.

He snorted. “Oh great. My own food. *You shouldn’t have.*”

The sarcasm didn’t stop the smartass from accepting the bowl from my hands and walking it over to the other side of the island where tall bar stools lined the counter. Setting it and his coffee down, he reached a hand out just as I was handing over a spoon and plunked it into his bowl.

We ate silently for a while. Connor thoroughly enjoying his meal and me just mixing up the contents of mine and seeing if I could make a new color by mixing the white yogurt and the purple smoothie. I’d come over with a plan for coffee and breakfast, but I didn’t feel like eating anymore. I was now alternating between wanting to curl up somewhere and hide away from the world or wanting to run out and hit something. The only thing stopping me from the latter was the memory that hitting something recently got me put into a brace for six weeks.

“What’s up?” Con asked after a while.

Knowing his tone, I recognized that it wasn’t like a *‘what’s going on’* what’s up. More like a *‘what’s wrong’* what’s up.

I blinked up at him, my bowl now more of a light purple than dark. “What do you mean?”

“You’re quiet and you’re not eating. Something’s up.”

“I’m quiet sometimes,” I argued.

“Maybe in your sleep,” he scoffed. “But usually not even then.”

I glared. “I’m tired.”

Another scoff as he leaned back in his seat, surveying me. “It’s the day after your birthday and you somehow convinced your entire family to do all sorts of embarrassing things for

you. You are *not* tired, you're probably recharged from all the havoc you wreaked."

I couldn't help my smile. It *had* been fun, having everyone together to play games and eat outside like we used to when we were younger. I appreciated them all coming out to celebrate with me, but I quickly lost all fuzzy feelings as I stared at my food and pushed it around, also remembering my conversation with my parents this morning.

"Hey, eat that," Connor instructed, his face giving off a slight accusation as his eyes zeroed in on my hands.

"Or what?" I challenged, giving him an irritated look right back.

"Or you're buying me more, *miss attitude*," he grumbled, but looking me over again, he enacted a new Ceci-meter. Apparently having been wrong in his first inspection, he was following up. Coming to some sort of conclusion, he narrowed eyes on me but gentled his already low voice. "No use in snapping at me. What's on your mind? Maybe I can help."

I hesitated only a second before remembering that this was Connor. I could tell him almost anything. "Apá told me I need to figure out what I want to do."

"With...?"

"My life, I guess," I shrugged then scooped up a spoonful of yogurt just to distract myself. "He said it's past time I know what my purpose is."

"Well, isn't it?"

I gave him silence, just sharpening an annoyed look at him and thinking how inconvenient it was that his head was shaved so low already, or else I could shave it for him. He noticed and frowned. "Don't give me that look, Ceci. Isn't it past time you start figuring out what you want to be doing? You've graduated, you've had a year off and now you're twenty-four."

"You sound like my dad," I grumbled, my stomach closing into a little ball as I revolted against the lecture I didn't want to hear, especially from this person in particular. Grabbing my bowl, I moved to the small circular sitting table behind him

that broke up the space between the kitchen and the living room. Far away from his assessing eyes.

Following, he sat across from me and then he did what he did best. He stared quietly. When I continued to ignore him, even after long minutes he started again. More carefully this time. “I know you’re sensitive about this...”

“Yet somehow I know you’re going to keep talking about it,” I said, refusing to look up from my bowl.

He blew out a breath. “You’re the only one who ever tells me to talk less, you know that?”

“Shame,” I said, sarcasm dripping from my tone. What everyone else *didn’t* know about him was that a talkative Connor meant an open and sometimes painfully honest one.

He snorted. “And for some strange reason, I’m the only one who ever tells you to get over yourself.”

I looked at him then, mad, and ready to let him know it, but he continued before I could start. “You have the world at your fingertips, Ceci. *Opportunity*. And you have a family that wants to support you in *whatever* you choose to do. You don’t have to know what it is right away, but you have to at least try something. You can’t be afraid to fail.”

“Says the boy genius,” I grumbled again, feeling both deflated and guilty by his little speech. I knew his family didn’t care much for his interests and me complaining about my family’s encouragement had to feel pretty shitty for him.

Rapping his knuckles on the counter he got my attention and when I looked into his eyes, he held mine with quiet, calm intensity. But a comfortable smile laid across his lips, like nothing I’d said had hurt him. Nothing I said ever really did. “Says someone who doesn’t mind picking you up if you fall a few times along the way.”

I swallowed.

He held my gaze for several seconds before shrugging, allowing the easy casualness to slip back into his shoulders. A trademark of our friendship, comfort and ease. “I mean, I

already do it every time I wipe the floor with your ass in your little games.”

I barked out a laugh, and for some reason I felt a lightness wash over me that hadn't been there before. Connor was right. I needed to try. And even if I failed, even if I hated it, I'd always have a place here to come back to where I didn't feel quite so outmatched.

\* \* \*

It was after dark when Connor arrived back home. I heard him come in through the back door and immediately start rummaging around his mudroom. The bump of shoes, jangle of keys, and rustling of bags all announcing his return.

He'd probably just come from the gym. It was Monday. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays were gym days with weights. Tuesdays, Fridays, and the weekends were training days which just consisted of any classes he felt like attending. Every day was a run day.

I knew this because he kept a calendar back there along with his running shoes, gym bag, and spare workout equipment. He liked to enter through the back after he worked out so he could set his used gear in the mudroom and avoid tracking dirt throughout the rest of the house.

He was a little bit of a neat freak. Not the kind that would freak out on you for not being one too, but the kind that would obsessively clean up after you, making you feel a little bad about the rings you left on the coffee table with your mug. I didn't mind it though. It just meant the ten mini donut wrappers I had on the coffee table in front of me as I sat bundled up on the couch would disappear without my lifting a finger. Case in point, the large hands I spied scooping up the wrappers long minutes after Con finally emerged from the back of the house. I didn't look at him and he didn't greet me. That was mostly normal coming from him, but for me, I was

usually the chatterbox. Bouncing off the walls and begging him to entertain me.

Tonight, I had entertainment. Or *torture*. I was sitting on the couch in the living room off the side of the open kitchen. Deep wooden floors led into the various grays and charcoals of the living space. A light gray rug carpeted the floor and padded the deep gray couch. Dark charcoal shelves reached from floor to ceiling along the far wall. And across from my seat sat two large chairs backed up beside the biggest fireplace I'd ever seen.

Con's place was so cozy. That's probably why I'd decided to stay here all day and use the one and only computer he'd granted me permission to use instead of going home to my own empty apartment. That and the fact that he always had the best snacks.

More long minutes of listening to Connor rummaging through his cabinets, barreling through the halls, and the distinct sound of food sizzling on the stove went by before he emerged in front of me again. "Hey."

I blinked a look up at him before returning my attention back to my scrolling. I heard him grunt and then return to the kitchen to do some more loud cooking.

Maybe five minutes later he added, "I didn't know you were staying."

"Was I not allowed to?" I asked, voice coming out harsher than it needed to. I didn't amend it though. Instead, I continued my power scrolling, each stroke of my finger becoming more and more frustrated. I had already thrown the laptop across the couch countless times throughout the day, getting more frustrated than I have in a long time. Since school, really.

"I didn't say that," Connor said slowly. If his eyes had a "Ceci-meter", his tone was its twin. He sounded like he was easing himself into a tub of water that was way too hot to jump into headfirst. He powered through though, never one to shy away from me even when I was being inhabitable. "I just



didn't see you on the security cameras. I would've come home earlier if I knew."

"Okay," I said. I could have told him the reason he didn't see me on his security cameras was because I had barely left this spot all day, but that seemed kind of pathetic, even for me.

Another grunt and then longer minutes of him cooking. He was stirring something and boiling something else and after a while it sounded like he rummaged through his cabinets before producing lids that he plopped on the pans with a *thunk*.

Not even the smell of food was enough to rouse me out of my little turtle shell, though. I'd wrapped a blanket around my shoulders hours ago, sucking the laptop into my little cocoon and allowing my fingers and face to be the only things to see the outside world.

This is probably what finally set off the alarm bells in Connor's brain. Because he was suddenly hovering over me from the back of the couch. Large hands moving to remove the makeshift blanket-hood from around my head.

"Mad at me?" he asked.

Tipping my head backward, I looked at him upside down. He looked gigantic from this angle. Larger than life. "What for?"

"For telling you things you don't want to hear."

I contemplated this for a second, nodding my head thoughtfully, "You *know* that was outlawed in our friendship ages ago."

A corner of his mouth rose and if I wasn't mistaken, his shoulders relaxed a bit. "Tracherous, I know. What do you have there?"

I frowned, then lifted the computer up so he could see what I was looking at. Taking it, he walked around the side of the couch and sat down in the far corner, studying the screen with a lowering brow.

Horried he read my tabs out loud. "Find yourself with these simple steps...How to get a job in ten days...What color

is your parachute...Cee? What is all this?"

"Research."

"Seriously?"

"Do I look like I'm joking?" This time the annoyance in my voice was alright with me. I was sick of everyone coming at me today. "You know what? If you're going to judge, give it back."

I stood on the couch and moved over to him, reaching for the laptop. He leaned away and batted my hands to the sides.

"Hey, *hey!* Calm down. I'm just *talking* to you. No need to get defensive." He looked at me with a '*what the hell is wrong with you*' kind of expression that stayed my advances. When he saw me settle down into the couch cushions again, he brought the computer back to his face, scanning through the rest of my tabs quietly.

I tried to be still and wait for his reaction but found myself peeking over every two seconds to see if I could gauge it from his expression. It didn't take long for me to cave. "You think I'm directionless too?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't *not* say it."

"Don't put words in my mouth, Cee."

"Well I don't want to have to guess, Con. You either think I'm as flighty as my family does or not."

"You don't usually care one way or the other."

I felt a layer of disappointment line my chest. He wasn't wrong, I didn't usually care what was thought of me because I knew what *I* thought of me. But with this, an area I was so ungrounded in, I found I was caring what *everyone* thought of me, him most of all.

Watching him as he continued to study my research, I tried not to let on to this as I murmured, "I care what you think of me, Connor."

He flickered his eyes up to me but didn't say a word. Those eyes could mean anything, but if I had to guess they most likely meant, *'what is wrong with you tonight?'*

What he actually said around passing me back the laptop was, "I don't think you're flighty, Cee. I'm going to make some dinner. Want some?"

I straightened in my seat, suddenly feeling less at home as I sat next to Connor, remembering that he didn't have this problem. He knew what he wanted to do; he always had. It was one of the first things I'd learned about him, even before we became friends.

Before I actually knew Connor I'd only really known *of* him. More specifically, of his family. I'd known them only as the family across the city who we did business with. The one with a young daughter who married my grandfather when she was only twenty. And at the time, that had been enough information for me. Enough for me to want nothing to do with any of them, especially the daughter. But shortly after my grandfather died, and his wife was then forced to marry my oldest brother for our inheritances, I started to learn there was more to the Fergusons than I originally judged there to be.

I really had Fergy to thank for that. When I was in trouble and had come to my brother for help, Ferg had been the one to both help me and put me in my place when it came to the assumptions I'd made.

I respected her for that. I was also grateful to her too. She didn't have to help me get revenge on the guy who both used me and stole from me after only a short time dating. But she did by using "tricks" she'd learned from her computer savvy older brother to hack said ex-boyfriend's bank account and steal right back. As luck may have it, the next day is when I met that very same computer savvy brother in fate aligning circumstances.

I had been sleeping peacefully in Ferg's bed the morning after a surprisingly fun night of goofing around with her. She had run off to my brother's room in the middle of the night to do God knows what, leaving me all on my own. It was

morning when the sound of big footsteps woke me up. I'd only just been opening my groggy eyes when the shadow of a big hand started coming toward me. Reflex took over immediately and on instinct I slapped the hand away before it could touch my shoulder, from the looks of its trajectory.

“What the hell?” I scooted up against the headboard while pushing blankets away from my face. Looking up, my eyes connected the hand to a muscular arm, toned bicep, all the way up to a handsome and familiar face. The sight of the youngest Ferguson boy had only made me feel just slightly less freaked out that he was leaning in to grab me while I was sleeping. The fact that I knew who he was making it no less creepy. But the way he pulled his hand back toward himself, his face scrunched up in confusion as he looked at me made my apprehension dissipate further. Enough that I didn't immediately start screaming for my brother and ringing the stranger danger alarm. “Were you about to touch me?”

He didn't say anything, just skirting his eyes around the room like he was searching for something that definitely was not me. The look made me snort. “Did you think I was your sister?”

Settling his eyes back on me he moved his gaze across my face and then grimaced. “Sorry.”

“You should be. You can't just go reaching into girls' beds. And anyway, I'm like six inches shorter than her, you couldn't tell it wasn't her?” I tsked. “Aren't you supposed to be the smart brother?”

This brought a slow tilt to the corner of his mouth, the gleam in his eyes morphing just slightly. He rocked a gentle step backward but lingered there as he looked me over. Coming to some sort of conclusion he scoffed, shook his head, and started turning his shoulders to leave. I don't know what it was about that reaction that threw me off, maybe the fact that I'd insulted him and he'd *smiled*, but it had me perking up.

“Wait!”

He obeyed, stopping in his retreat and turning back to me. He was silent as he waited for me to continue and I

remembered then that he wasn't much of a talker.

“What's so funny?” I asked, filling the silence.

He shook his head as if to say, *'you don't want to know'*.

Like an insane person, I answered his unspoken words as if he'd actually spoken them aloud. “I want to know why you're laughing at me.”

Thick eyebrows shot up his forehead and the next gaze he cast about me was more appreciative. More discerning. When he met my eyes again he shrugged and said, “It's just interesting to see that all this isn't a front. You genuinely just wake up offensive.”

I smiled. I couldn't help it. Wasn't he supposed to be nice? But then again I don't know why I'd expected that. None of the Fergusons were what I'd call “nice.” Clementine wasn't even fully sunshine and rainbows. Still, I guess I'd expected him, the quiet one, to be sweeter—maybe more docile than the rest of them.

And why was it so intriguing that I was wrong?

Shaking hair that was wild from sleep out of my face, I said, “Well, I'm usually a sweetheart in the morning. You just happened to catch me before I've had any food.”

He snorted. *Snorted!* And that intrigue I had turned to triumph in my gut. I wondered then if I could get him to smile. But it looked like his face was doing the opposite as he took a closer look at me. “What happened to your face?”

My hand floated to my lip which was busted from the hard knock I'd caught to my face when my ex-boyfriend-douche-bag-thief, tried to shut his apartment door on me. I'd launched myself into the small opening in a rage and it wasn't pretty from there. Let's just say, I would rather tell my dad about the motorcycle bar than what happened that day after I found Peter Knoll.

“I ran into a door.”

His eyes tracked over every movement I made as he gradually edged back into the room. “Did your fingers run into

it too?”

“They may have run into the jaw of an ex who deserved it.”

His eye twitched, but that’s the only reaction visible on his face. For a second I thought he was going to ask me if he hit me back or if I was seriously hurt. All that alpha male protective boy shit that my brothers and dad did when it came to us girls. Instead, he sauntered in closer to me, standing over the bedside and peering down. Reaching out a hand, he raised an expectant eyebrow as he waited. After a long moment I realized he was waiting for me to show him my hand. And, taken a little off guard, I did. Laying my bandaged hand in his big paw and watching as he turned it over for inspection.

When he was finished, he tucked the hand back to my abdomen, leaning his shoulders back to put distance between us again. Looking up at his face I expected to find anything other than what I saw there. He was smirking again! He was also leaning away like he was going to leave and the prickle at my neck told me I didn’t want him to.

So, opening my big mouth *again*, I asked, “What?”

“You can’t throw a punch. That’s why your thumb’s all jacked up,” he said.

My jaw dropped.

“I can too—” I started but shook my head. “Hold up. Shouldn’t you be asking me what happened? Am I okay? That kind of stuff?”

“You’re okay,” he declared, flicking eyes up and down my person.

I narrowed my eyes. “You don’t even know what happened.”

“Do I need to know?”

“If you’re going to throw accusations around then yeah,” I said.

“Weren’t you the one who called my sister a gold digger?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, that sounds like an accusation to me,” he said, pinning me with a mean stare.

I waved a hand. “Old news, me and Fergy are friends now. She gave me treats.”

“Like a dog?” he asked, a smirk on his face. I looked at him with a warning glare and this time both sides of his mouth rose in a tiny, amused smile. I was right. The satisfaction of pulling that from him was almost celebration worthy. I kept my cool though, and he went on instead of moving to leave again. “So what happened, then?”

Like cold water raining over me, I suddenly sobered, feeling a rush of uncharacteristic apprehension shower me. This was going well enough. Better than any other conversation with any of the Ferguson boys. Did I really want to sabotage that by divulging the very things about myself that often led to people’s conclusion that I was *too much to handle*? Too much attitude, too much energy, too much everything. Did I really want to out myself so quickly?

I wrinkled my nose trying my best to shake away those weird thoughts. I didn’t usually implore the art of caution. Maybe I was just feeling vulnerable after the events of the day before, and it was causing me to falter. And I wasn’t about to let *that* shit show define me.

With temporarily manufactured conviction, I turned toward Connor Ferguson—congenial acquaintance at best, near stranger at worst—to tell him all about my ex. How we’d met at a bar near middle Seaside and he’d charmed me with his shaggy bad boy style. How we spent several months dating and getting closer to each other. How, even though I didn’t think it was some great love or anything, I’d grown feelings for the guy over our time together. All this just to have him turn around and not only disappear but also *steal* from me.

And then I told him how I got my payback. With my anger, my bat, and the help of his sister.

Connor stayed and listened to the whole story. Face moving in just about all the expressions I thought they would as he listened to my recount of events and bad decisions. Once I

finished, instead of gushing over me and asking if I was okay, or even recoiling away from me and acting like I was some kind of catching disease, he just blinked at me and nodded.

Finally, with a whooshing sigh, he said, “That all sounds about right.”

“Excuse me?”

“All that,” he waved in my general direction and shrugged like it summed up everything I’d just said, “It seems fitting.”

“*Excuse me!*” I repeated slower, not believing that this was his reaction to my story. If it had been any one of my brothers or sisters, they would have blown their top. But this guy was just shrugging like this was a normal day in the sun.

When he shrugged *again*, I was probably ready to explode. He noticed, apparently able to read me like a book, and narrowed his eyes as he crossed big arms over a bigger chest. “Don’t get mad at *me*. *You* knew exactly what could happen in that situation. You knew that your family wouldn’t approve, so you kept it a secret. You probably knew it wouldn’t last, so you kept your last name *and* your tax bracket hidden from him as a failsafe. You aren’t stupid. Far from it. And you’re not new to this life. You knew the risk and you decided to take it anyway. Deal with the consequences.”

*Um... Okay.*

That was not what I was expecting from him. Maybe a wide-eyed look of horror and a swift goodbye, but not an unimpressed lecture. I found myself grappling to keep up with the off-putting reaction. The only thing I could come up with was, “Damn, you’re tough.”

This seemed to pull a grumble out of him, and he sighed. “Yeah, sorry. I’m not much of a sugar-coater.”

“Me either,” I said slowly, still giving him an unintentional stink eye. “But even I have some fucking decorum.”

He snickered, “The words *‘fucking’* and *‘decorum’* do not belong in like pairs.”



Another smile and even a laugh pulled free from my mouth, and I ducked to hide them in my fist.

Huh. Connor Ferguson. Who knew?

He seemed to watch me then and for some reason I got the feeling he was thinking the same thing. That he wasn't hating this conversation and that it was actually kind of fun talking with someone who could give shit just as much as they could take it.

Shoving his hands deep into his pockets he kicked his foot a few times as he asked, "So does it work with just anybody, or was my sister a special case?"

"Does what work?"

"Food."

Food? Did he mean—was he bringing up food because of what I said earlier? Was this his way of saying he wanted to be my friend? I narrowed my gaze on him. "What are you proposing?"

"To eat. I have it on good authority that you like treats," he said.

"You want to eat with me?"

"I want to eat, and your schedule seems pretty free right now," he clarified.

"Didn't you, like, run here or something?" I asked, taking in his athletic shorts, shirt, and running shoes.

"I did. But I can drive your car if your fingers hurt too much from all your bad punches."

My smile was like a loose marble on a staircase. Impossible to catch. "You're kind of a little shit."

"You're definitely a little shit," he retorted.

"And you still want to eat with me?" I asked. But my own eyebrows pulled low at my question. What was wrong with me? Asking such an open question like that? I may as well have asked if he really thought I wasn't stupid, like he said earlier. Both were terribly revealing questions.

Thankfully, he didn't pick up on the vulnerability, or at the very least he didn't comment on it. He was instead already turning toward the door and calling over his shoulder, "C'mon. I'm thinking pancakes."

"Cee?"

I jolted out of my daze, jerking at the sound of my current Connor rather than the memory of that more reserved version of himself I'd gotten to know when we first went out to eat pancakes at a dinky beach diner. When I blinked my eyes back into focus, I noticed the laptop had been sat back on my lap and Connor had disappeared from beside me.

"Did you hear me?" a deep voice called from the kitchen.

"No."

"Were you even listening?"

"No."

"Are you hungry?" he asked patiently.

"No."

"*Cee...*" he sighed.

I guess that was a red flag. I was *always* hungry.

Sighing myself, I said, "Okay, maybe a little. What are you making?"

"Here," his voice made me jump again as he appeared next to me and then in front of me, leaning over to set down a plate.

My face contorted in confusion as I studied it. "Pancakes?"

"Yup."

Sitting up straighter, I looked at the little round flapjacks with a re-inspired appetite. "But I thought I smelled meat earlier."

"I packed it up. This seems better tonight," he said as he rounded the coffee table and plopped down onto the ground next to it. My heart pounded, painful and yet the best kind of pain. The emotional kind. I had to swallow it down to stop myself from overflowing with it.

*Pancakes were our thing.* He'd stopped making his probably protein rich, in-shape person meal so that he could serve me pancakes instead.

Scooting forward, I let my knees hit the coffee table as I prepared to dig in but paused at the strangeness of these pancakes. Curiously, I fluttered a gaze at him. "Do you want to explain why they're blue?"

"You like blue," is all he said. Like it was as simple as that.

I felt my stomach warm from the inside out, giving me this sense of belonging and rightness that only Connor could. A feeling he'd been causing to stir within me since that very first smile. I never allowed myself to look too much into it, and I wasn't going to start today. Pushing the tingling, buzzing in my gut aside, I narrowed my eyes.

"Aren't you forgetting the eggs and ham?" I asked.

He flicked an amused gaze up at me before continuing his organization of the table. Plates on place mats, forks on the left, knives on the right, water in front. To me he tsked. "Those would be *green* eggs and ham, Ceci. You really should've paid more attention in school."

"In what, kindergarten?" I laughed. He shrugged, but I could see the ghost of a smile on his face too.

Always feeling more stable in my emotions after joking around, I picked up my fork and tried to dig into the pancakes without using my knife. It was already hard enough eating with my non-dominant hand, cutting with it was not looking that much better

Seeing this, Connor set his own fork and knife down and reached over to swipe mine away from me so he could cut up my stack. I watched as he cut the blue cakes into small, even squares, rotating the plate every so often to adjust his cutting angle. The action sent an unexpected wave of gratitude through my chest, making me stare at him silently as he worked.

When he leaned back over to set my plate in front of me, he caught my expression and sighed heavily. Leaning his thick

forearms against the table he said, “Okay. What do I have to do to wipe that look off your face?”

*Stop being perfect.* I thought immediately but stopped myself.

I *had* to stop myself. Any further down this line of thinking would lead me to breaking my one and only rule for this friendship. Don’t fall in love with Connor Ferguson. Even though it would be so easy. Even though he made it so simple to do, it was off limits. Not impossible, just off the table. Because I valued this relationship without sex and feelings more than I valued anything else right now, and if I could somehow not complicate it—If I could keep things just the way they were, maybe I could end up keeping *him* forever.

Pushing the thoughts of Connor being too sweet aside, I leaned into the other things occupying my mind. I knew I was being sour and edgy and probably too sore about the subject, but I couldn’t help it. What my father said to me this morning stuck with me. *Everything* about the morning had stuck, landing on my heart with the heaviest of wings.

*Aren’t you? You live off money you haven’t worked for...*

*You at least need to get on the starting line...*

*What are you interested in. Do you know?*

I chewed at my lip, my gaze turning angry as I stared at my plate. “I understand where they’re coming from, I just *hate* having my hand forced. It’s not like I wasn’t trying to figure myself out, I just—”

“You just haven’t yet,” he finished for me, and it wasn’t the normal hardass Connor talking, but a softer, more understanding one. *The one me and my heart had to watch out for.*

“Right,” I said. “And now there’s this pressure to have things figured out when I don’t even know where to start.”

“Well, have you tried anything at all?” he asked.

“No.”

“Then that’s where you start, Ceci.” Taking matters into his own hands he picked up my fork and physically pressed it into my hand, willing me to eat. “No one cares if you fail, they just want to see that you’re headed somewhere. That you’re not lost, and you’re trying. And it’s not because they want to control you, but because they care. We all do.”

One word perked my ears and finally gave me the strength to let it go, at least for the night.

*We.*

That word soothed me, letting me know that everything would be alright. Because he had a knack for making me think we were in this together.

Always.



# Chapter Five

## CONNOR

“Why are you looking at me like that, Clay?” my oldest brother asked my next as we sat around his office at the big hour of seven in the morning.

Leaning back in his chair, Clay spread his legs out wide but crossed his arms tight over his chest, making himself comfortable. “Because I smell a rat, and my nose is never off.”

“You might want to keep that quiet,” I said, my attention on the open laptop on my lap as I worked on what I hoped to be the finishing touches for my newest project. Though I was busy, I still made time to razz my older brothers. Leaning in, I lowered my voice, “They say you can smell yourself the most.”

Knocking a hand against my shoulder, Clay smacked his lips. “Man, shut up. Aren’t you the least bit suspicious that he called us in here *together*?”

“Seeing as I grew up with the two of you and we have been in many rooms together, no,” I said. But that’s only what I *said*. What I was thinking was entirely different.

The truth was, it *was* strange to be called into my brother’s office first thing in the morning with Clay or even Clint when we all worked in different departments. Unless we were dealing with executive decisions or strict family business, there was almost no reason for him and I to be in the same meeting. So where Clay smelled a rat, I smelled Marsha Ferguson. This had her name written all over it. I just didn’t have the time or mental energy to be putting into worrying about it right now. Not when my secret projects were finally coming to the kind of breakthrough that led to me making moves.

The project was a simple one. I'd been developing code for my own cyber security scanners and apps for about a year now. It was something I'd done for my own computers forever, but this project was special because I was building it with the potential to go...public.

The "moves" is where things got sticky.

*Moves* meant going out on my own and starting something entirely new.

*Moves* meant doing something out of my comfort zone and far out of the realm of preferred routes in my family's eyes.

*Moves* meant betting on myself and following a dream I've had for a long time. My own business. My own path, diverted from the one my family expected of me and designed selfishly for my wants and needs alone.

I'm not going to lie, it was a scary thought, breaking away from my family. One that I hadn't fully come to terms with. Which is why I hadn't jumped into anything. I had more than enough capital for a startup. I had the groundwork for it too. The only thing that was holding me back was... Well, she was probably on her way here right now.

On cue, a knock on the door sounded before immediately opening. Sweeping in with the confidence of a woman who single-handedly revolutionized one of the biggest companies in the country to being one of the biggest companies in all of North America. She was that very same woman.

Marsha Ferguson.

Put together in her crisp cream slacks like she came in with the intention of working the day in the office, yet casual (for her) in a navy blue half zip sweater. Her hair was pulled tight in a low ponytail at her nape, not a hair out of place. Big designer sunglasses covered her slender face hiding her deep brown eyes. Still, the weight of them as they settled on us, peering from one son to another, was felt even if it wasn't seen.

"Boys, don't go blaming your brother for merely doing what I asked," she said as she stopped in front of the door and



placed her hands on her hips.

Leaning back in my seat, I couldn't help but flick my eyes over to Clay and say in a hushed tone, "Doing what she asked him to."

Clay immediately shook his head, like he'd already thought the same thing. Out loud he just repeated, "*Like she fucking asked him to.*"

Because of course he did exactly what she asked him to do. Clint has always done what Mom asked of him to the detriment of him and anyone else who got caught in the crossfire too. Most extremely, our sister having to marry that prick of an old man and Clint standing by and not doing a damn thing about it. But that almost felt like another lifetime ago. And while Clint was still just as loyal to Mom, he no longer gave her that loyalty untried. If he didn't like something, he spoke up about it. The problem with that was, Clint didn't care much about much.

Today, his job was obviously just to get us in here. The true organizer was this tall slender woman standing in front of us. Which is why sitting across from us, Clint barely flicked his eyes up except to land them on our mom in an acknowledging nod before continuing to tap along his keyboard. Mom strutted her way further into the room, pushing her sunglasses up to the top of her head as she dropped a kiss on Clay's, leaving me with a little pat on my shoulder.

While her gestures were loving enough, her words were stern. "You two stop it. At least he has the decency to pick up the phone when I call. I don't have to trap him to talk to his mother."

"Sorry, Mom," I said at the same time Clay said, "Sorry, Ma."

She didn't accept our apology, just walking deeper into the room, moving to stand in front of Clay and me. The next look I shared with Clay was one that communicated warning signs. It wasn't just her general presence that was sounding the alarm bells. It was the simple fact that she was here.

Mom had retired in name mostly, but she was still fairly active on the back end of the business. While she trusted Clint with most, if not all, the business decisions, she couldn't seem to fully step away. She'd been in control over this immense responsibility for essentially all of her life. And unlike us, she had to do it all on her own. No siblings around to help shoulder the heavy burden of a thriving legacy. A lonely empire that she was left in charge of. So it was safe to say it was hard for her to let go.

"Save your sorries, I didn't come here for that," she said, and on a sharp pivot she clasped her hands in front of herself and let them fall into her lap. "I came here to check on my boys since they don't check in with me."

"I thought that's what your little helper was for," Clay said.

"Bigger than you," the little helper in question grumbled from behind his desk, not looking up from his computer.

"By like an inch," Clay retorted.

"Children, please," I said, mostly because the two of them could go back and forth for hours if someone let them. "You're both small, can we move on?"

"Shut up, Baby Giant," they grumbled together, using the nickname they gave me back in middle school when I'd grown an entire foot in one summer.

I smiled but couldn't fully commit to it. Not when the woman in front of me was standing there quietly with her arms crossed over her middle as she watched us, the strangest look on her face. Unconsciously, my head lulled to the side. I wasn't sure if I'd ever seen that look before. It looked like a mix between content and perturbed.

"Something wrong, Mom?" I asked.

Around me, my brothers continued their bickering, but at the sound of my question, their attention snapped up to our mother. With the laser attention of all of her sons the woman didn't balk or cower, just smiled another weird looking smile and shook her head. "Just happy you boys still haven't changed."

Dark eyes caught light ones as my brothers and I shared confused looks. It wasn't just me. They thought she was being weird too.

"You're scaring us, Ma," Clay said. "Is Papa okay?"

"Nothing has to be wrong for me to come see you. Stop acting like that," she said. "Matter of fact, come here."

We did, rising from our seats, we went to stand with her. She was tall, just shy of Tiney who was above average height for a girl, and just as thin as her. Reaching out with both her hands, she snagged either one of ours and held them tight in her grasp. Then looking from me to Clay she sighed.

"When are the two of you going to start getting more serious about your careers, hmm?" she asked, and it wasn't my imagination that we both bristled on the spot. Mom noticed it too, and she just held on tighter. Alternating hard looks between the both of us through her chocolate brown eyes. "It's high time that you two stepped up. I'm an old woman now. I don't have the strength to chase you kids around with a wagging fist anymore, and since everything happened with your sister, I... I just want to make sure all my children are going to be okay."

"If you're worried about your kids, you should start with the robot behind you. I'm not sure he's blinked in five years, Ma. It's concerning," Clay said, and although he was joking, he wasn't necessarily wrong. Apart from Tiney and her hurdles, Clint should be the most worrisome of all of us. I'm pretty sure he didn't have one friend, woman, or hobby outside of work.

Mom just waved that off though, saying, "Your brother is focused on his career, which is perfectly fine. As none of you are married or even entertaining the thought, I don't see what else there is to be focused on anyway."

"How about a life, Ma? Some of us have one and don't want it to end just to get hitched or get another high-rise downtown," Clay said.

She tsked, giving him a side eye. “Always so dramatic. I don’t know who you get that from.”

I swallowed my snort. But, as mothers do, she noticed it and turned her assessing gaze over to me. “Something to say, Connor?”

I shook my head and she gave me a tired look as she sighed, “But I do know where you get *that* from, though. Just like your father. Quiet but opinionated.”

I swallowed my immediate response. Because while I was like my father, inheriting his ability to have thoughts about a situation without feeling the need to voice them whenever the opportunity presented itself, I had really learned the behavior from my mom. From this family. It was hard to deny that things were changing. After Tiney’s whole situation and especially after her accident and subsequent health scare last winter, the dynamics in our family were shifting like gears in a clock. But from the very beginning I’d learned that even when I used my voice and spoke my mind, nothing ever changed. It never mattered in the eyes of the family. The only thing that mattered was the family business and the caveats that came with it.

Which is why, in a way, I couldn’t wait to get away from it. To start out on my own and to make a way for myself doing what I actually wanted to do. In other ways I felt stupid for even thinking about it. Thinking I could start my own company when I lived in the shadow of this generational success of a business. One my mom would love nothing more than to shove down my throat.

Mom’s intuition zeroed in on me. She always did this, always knew when there was more on my mind than I was letting on. It was the same now as she narrowed eyes on me and squared her shoulders with mine. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

I shook my head, “I’d like to know what you have to say first.”

She made a face. “I shouldn’t have to say more. It should be ‘*yes ma’am*’ and that’s it.”

Clay scoffed, and I narrowed my eyes. “But you do have more to say, don’t you?”

“I do,” she sniffed. Leaning back against Clint’s desk she crossed her arms over her chest and sighed dramatically. “I didn’t want to have to intervene boys, but it seems I’m going to. The bottom line is, you’ve had your fun, now it’s time to start thinking about your futures. The future of your careers, this company, and your lives.”

“Our futures are fine, mom.”

“They’re not, Clayton,” she said. “I did not labor over fifty-two hours with your stubborn behind for you to just lay over and accept things the way they are. It’s time you stepped into your rightful position here. No more lollygagging around.”

“That’s going to be a fuck no for me, Ma,” Clay said borderline snarling as he huffed and tightened his arms over his chest.

“Clayton Ferguson you better watch your mouth before I watch it for you.” Mom scowled, but quickly turned back to me. “And you. We let you play with your little toys for long enough. We even let you head a department in it, but it’s time you let someone else handle that and come upstairs with your brothers.”

“Computers mom. They aren’t toys, they’re just the groundwork of every streamlined operation in the company,” I said. “And they’re much more complicated than anything you have in mind for me *‘upstairs.’*”

She waved a hand, “They are *tools*, Connor. Tools are things to be used. You are an asset, not something to be used and forgotten to get from one point to another.”

*Funny you can suddenly tell the difference*, I thought but dared not say.

“Hmm,” I said, my face screwing up beside myself. Because there went that. Any hope of my family accepting my aspirations gone before they were even put out into the world. “Clint’s already CEO, Clay will be Vice President one of these days, what is even left for me to do, Mom?”

“CFO.”

“You’d rather me push money in different directions than secure it all because of a title?”

“You aren’t some kind of security guard, Connor. You went to Oxford for Christ’s sake. Use your brain for something useful.”

“I guarantee without a security system on the technology here, you’d see very quickly just how useful it can be, Mom.”

She pressed her lips together, taking a deep breath “That’s not what I meant. It’s useful, Connor, it’s just not you.”

“No, it just isn’t *you*,” I corrected, arms folding over my chest as this ball of helplessness started to form there.

Years. It had been years of this, and still I had no confidence to speak up about what I wanted, yet no intention of letting it go.

Mom had no intention of letting her side of it go either, judging by the way she huffed in angry irritation at my answer. “Do the two of you have to be so goddamn difficult?”

“Do you have to control everything?” Clay asked. “So Connor wants to work with the nerds. Let him. CFO’s fine being Bill. We like Bill, right?”

Bill was our current CFO, and he was fine, if not a little bland.

“I hate when you all talk about my profession like it’s some kind of weekend pastime,” I added.

“Isn’t it?” Mom asked, her venom starting to leak the more she failed to get her way.

“No,” I said, jaw tight enough to ache. This rush of unsureness spilling over me all of a sudden. I could tell them all right now. Tell them how pointless this conversation (if you could even call it that) was when I didn’t plan on being here forever. I could come clean right then and nip this debate in the bud. But that would mean me opening myself up for judgment and it was obviously no secret what they thought of

the things I loved. So, could I tell them? I wasn't sure. But I could try. "I—"

"You are young, but you won't be young forever. It's time for the two of you to settle into serious roles. We've let you fool around enough," Mom started, but a muffled buzzing interrupted her from somewhere we couldn't see. We watched in irritated silence as she dug through her bag to retrieve her phone. Reading the screen, she pressed a few buttons before bringing the phone toward her face. Stopping halfway she peeked up at us, and the look she gave us was not one of her *'playing around'* looks. The look she gave us was one that officially said she meant business. And I guess that's all she really had to relay as she started turning toward the office door. But not before she added a stern message of parting.

"Figure your shit out, boys. You won't like it if I have to figure it out for you."

\* \* \*

I'm genuinely convinced that growing up on the beach, you are psychologically hardwired to process things better the closer you are to the water. No science could discount the countless times this has worked for me. It was just one of those crazy facts of life. The cool waves of the Atlantic brought peace and clarity to my brain. Or at least it usually did. But as I sat down at the edge of the shore, letting the water lick my feet as it pushed up and back with the tides, I still hadn't found the clarity I was looking for.

I sat and watched the waves as they crashed over themselves, but I wasn't really seeing anything. My vision was too blurred with the memories of the morning plaguing my brain. My mother's words, careless yet...true? Were the things I wanted really anything special? Or were they just dreams of a child I hadn't been able to let go?

I was probably nine when I took apart my first computer. I was nine and three months when I was grounded for taking

apart that brand-new computer when I wasn't able to put it back together successfully. But by nine and *five* months (using all that time locked up on punishment), I built it back. And thus my fascination with all things computers began.

I was almost just as young when the comments started. '*Put those toys away, Connor.*' '*Get it out of your system now, Connor.*' '*Focus on something actually important, Connor.*' And on and on they went. In our house it wasn't about the business or seen as something that would eventually benefit the business, it wasn't heard. And if it couldn't make money, it wasn't valued. So I'd set out to make my interests more valuable by attaching a fancy degree to it, and still, they found a way to discount that too.

"Guess who."

Small hands covered my eyes from behind me, the palms familiar enough that I didn't reach to dislodge them right away. Instead, I leaned back, cocking my head and murmuring, "Don't tell me, don't tell me. It's got ten toes and ten fingers that *mostly* work."

A soft giggle filled my ears, making my heart move and my chest instantly lighter. I didn't hear her come up behind me, but it wasn't hard to decipher who it was, especially after that laugh. The one she used with only me.

"Okay, now guess *what*," she said. Behind me, I felt her sliding down to the sand, presumably on her knees at my back, her hands still covering my eyes.

"Definitely alcohol," I said without even hesitating.

She smacked her lips, huffing. "Damn, I need to work on my sneak attack, huh?"

Reaching up, I wrapped my hands around her smaller ones and pulled them away from my eyes. Turning slightly, I took in the form behind me. It wasn't so late that the sun had disappeared just yet. So, looking at the girl at my back with her color changing hair looking extra red in the burning glow of the sun and those eyes doing the same, she glowed.



“Hi,” I said, my mouth only able to form a half-smile even though I was always happy to see her. She zeroed in on it, her smile faltering and her eyes lowering as they surveyed my face.

“Hi,” she said, frown still intact. Shuffling around me she pulled out something from beside her and started messing with it. Before I knew it, she was holding a full shot glass out to me. I lifted an eyebrow, but she merely extended the offering further in my direction.

I took it, my large fingers wrapping around her smaller ones momentarily as I did. “I don’t really want this.”

“You need it.”

“Why’s that?”

“You seemed down today,” she shrugged. Landing those burning irises on me, she nodded toward the shot demanding me to take it with that look alone.

I let my eyes fixate on that frown. So contradictory from her actions. I would never tell her this, but she could be so sweet sometimes. Caring and gentle and sweet in the most natural of ways. Never fake or manufactured, just sugar in a pure form. Just like honey. Created from a species that could sting, but who also made sweet things. Sweeter and sweeter the more you had of her. My own honey. And I loved it.

Unimpressed with my staring, Cee narrowed her eyes. “*Drink.*”

Reaching around her I picked up the bottle and extended it toward her. “Drink with me.”

Her eyebrows shot up, but she wrapped her hands around the neck of the bottle anyway, scooting herself around to her butt as she plopped down next to me. “Feeling needy, Con?”

I shrugged, simply holding my shot toward her for a toast. Softly, she clinked her handle to my tiny shot and in unison we both drank. Quiet surrounded us as we just sat there, listening to the waves and letting the alcohol sink in. As much as I could argue Ceci was sweeter than she came off, she was not

patient. Tossing a look around her shoulder, she whipped her head toward me with a frustrated grunt.

“What happened?”

“How do you know something happened?” I asked, holding my tiny glass out for another hit.

“Do you mean *other* than me finding you out on the beach looking this close to jumping in?” She asked, mimicking just how close she thought I was to dunking myself in the Atlantic by pinching her thumb and index finger less than an inch apart. “Your little fitness tracker shares your activity with me. When I saw you were at it for *four hours*, I figured you were either toning up for some kind of Speedo contest I don’t know about, or something had to have happened.”

I felt my laugh more than I heard it. “Hate to break it to you, Cee, but it’s the Speedo contest. Think I have a chance?”

She clicked her tongue, “I’d have to see the whole package to say for sure.”

My mouth quirked. Setting the shot glass down, I leaned back against my hands as I glanced over at her. “Trying to get me naked, Fernandez?”

“Always,” she said, her smile going goofy which had me snagging the bottle from her hands and nudging the smaller glass her way. That smile meant trouble. A few more swigs and it would be *her* stripping for a self-inflicted bikini contest instead. She made no protests, just holding up her shot glass and waiting for me to fill it. “So, *I’m* drinking while the sun is still out because my parents are giving me an ultimatum. What’s your excuse?”

“Same shit basically,” I said. When she gave me a confused look, I sighed. “My mom visited the office today.”

“And she what? Stomped out your favorite computer? You look miserable, Con,” she said.

I looked away from her, feeling a little stupid that I was moping so much, even though I knew she didn’t mind. She’d seen me from broken down to lifted up, and she’d been my friend through every stage in between. Still, I hated this

feeling. And Cee hated waiting, hence why five seconds after her question was left unanswered, I felt an elbow digging into my side. There went that patience again.

I looked at her, my mouth twisting to the side. Clearing my throat I added, “And I didn’t get to say all I wanted to. That’s all.”

Her eyebrows pulled downward, her expression immediately angry. “I don’t like that.”

“Me either.”

“You should have spoken up.”

“I know,” I sighed. “But I felt like it wouldn’t have mattered either way.”

Her anger got deeper, her face gaining a layer of color underneath. “I *really* don’t like that.”

“You don’t like anything my mom does.”

“True, but I especially don’t like when she doesn’t let you speak,” she grumbled busying herself with raising up to her knees and shuffling along the sand so she was maneuvering in front of me. She was struggling, though. Huffing and grumbling as she tried to fight her way through the sand. Turning my forearms over on my knees I offered her my hands, palms up. She barely looked at me as she took them, gripping me familiarly and leaning her weight on my strength as she righted herself. When she was upright and in front of me, she tossed her hair over her shoulders and dropped her hands to her hips. “She’s the only one you can’t seem to get words out around. I mean, when you’re with me I can’t get you to shut up.”

It was a joke. But when she saw I didn’t laugh, not really reacting at all, she sighed. “What were you going to say to her?”

“Nothing important,” I lied.

She huffed, blowing hair away from her face again. “You don’t really go out on a limb to say things that *aren’t*

*important*, Con. And if you still haven't gotten a chance to say it, I want to hear."

I puffed out air. "It was just something about a business idea."

"Your tech company?" she asked.

I narrowed my eyes, trying hard to find the *'gotcha'* in her tone. There was none.

"How did you know about that?" I asked. I know we talked about a lot, but I'm pretty sure I would remember telling her about this. That would make her the first person I'd ever told.

Sort of.

"Am I wrong?" she asked.

"No. You're scary right, actually."

"Give me credit here, I do know you pretty well, Con."

I nodded. "You do."

"Will you tell me about it, then?" she asked.

"You know the virus software I installed on your laptop last month?" I asked. She nodded. "That's one that I've been working on lately."

Her eyes grew slightly wider. "You made the scanny-thingy that runs when I boot it up?"

"I built the troubleshooter, yeah. And wrote the code for the system. The firewall I put in a while ago," I confirmed.

"Wow," she said. "I never knew I was so protected."

"More like, you never knew you were my guinea pig," I said. "You're very easy to test on."

Her chest puffed out slightly, bravado always preceding sense with this girl. With another one of her loopy smiles she asked, "Because I'm the perfect test subject?"

Leaning in, I lowered my voice to a whisper, "Because of all the porn, Cee."

Her face blanched. "You found that, huh?"

“Ceci!”

This had her bursting out laughing. “I’m kidding! I’m kidding! Serves you right for being such a smartass, though.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, reaching up to pinch her face. “But that’s really that. I’ve been

perfecting my own proprietary software in hopes that I can maybe someday, you know?”

She shook her head.

“So I might someday start up my own thing. Cyber security, data analytics, that kind of stuff.” More insecurity filled me as I peeked over at her. But instead of finding her making a face of judgment, she was nodding her head. Listening as if she was ready to hear more.

“What would you name it?”

“What?”

“Your company, what would you name it?”

“Hmm.” I looked out past Ceci’s shoulders toward the moving sea, a memory surfacing. “I’ve always thought I’d name it after the cliff on the edge of North Seaside. Not the high one, the low one. Everyone hated it there because you couldn’t go too close to the edge without constantly getting sprayed. It was also really loud. Sometimes rocks would fall from the edge of the cliff too. It’s known for being the most temperamental ledge in the city.”

“And that’s what you want to name it after?” she asked, her brow furrowing.

“Well yeah,” I said. “Everyone else hated it, but I loved it anyway. No one else saw the beauty in it like I did. I used to go there all the time to read up on computers and code before I grew the balls to just do what I loved at home. I learned a lot of what I know today getting drenched out there. It’s a good memory even though it’s a pretty shitty cliff.”

Her mouth was smiling softly, but her eyes held a tip of trepidation. Shaking her head she said, “Then do it, Connor. Tell your family to fuck off and do what you want.”

I shook my head. “I’m not you, Cee. I’m not capable of just telling my family to fuck off.”

Letting out a long sigh, she slapped her palms over her thighs and said, “You’ll get there one day grasshopper. But until then, let’s do something more fun than moping around the beach, yeah?”

“Like what?” I asked, caution lacing my tone.

You had to watch out with Ceci. Her whims were vast and could consist of anything from laying on the couch all night, to flying to the Bahamas. You just never knew. Luckily, she read the apprehension in my eyes and reassured me with a nod toward something behind me.

“Don’t worry, I swore off my crazy when I broke this remember?” She asked, holding up her wrapped wrist.

I snorted, holding out my hand. “I doubt that. How’s it feeling?”

Easily, she offered me her injured wrist to inspect. “Feeling better, I think. It’s done throbbing at least.”

“Good,” I said. “So, what are we doing?”

Tossing her chin to something behind me, she waited impatiently for me to get the hint and look. When I did, I saw two short boards stuck in the sand.

“No way,” I said, turning around to meet her eyes. They were smiling happily in contrast to her know-it-all smirk. Probably because she’d somehow figured out that I loved skim boarding and secretly thought it might be fun for the two of us to do it together. “When did you get these?”

“Today,” she said.

“For me?”

“Who else?”

I looked away as my heart squeezed.

And I noticed something weird.

“Cee?”

“Yes?”

Turning to look at her again, I caught sight of her eyes. Her serpentine smile told me she was already onto exactly what I was thinking. “What’s the rope for?”

A grin the size of Texas broke across her face. “Well. Since I’ve never done it before, and I have a bit of a handicap, I thought you wouldn’t mind pulling me along.”

“Like a sled dog, Ceci?” I asked.

She barked out a laugh. “Well, you *are* my number one companion.”

“And you thought it was a good idea to get drunk before we do this?” I asked, remembering the shots.

“I’m not drunk, speak for yourself, Ferguson,” she said. “Plus, tequila makes everything better.”

Wrong. *She* made everything better. Case in point, the clarity I had been searching for in the waves was suddenly coming in Ceci’s eyes. I knew she was right. I knew I would have to tell my family to “fuck off” in not so many words sooner rather than later. But I also knew that until I was ready to do that, I had someone else who (if I asked) wouldn’t hesitate to do it for me.

And when I didn’t ask, she would show up with alcohol and activities to take my mind off of it.

Sun setting and casting the world in a glow that did nothing but set the girl in front of me on fire, I looked up to see Ceci, my best friend, my person, holding her good hand out to me and saying, “C’mon. If you do a good job, I’ll give you a turn too.”

Snorting, I grabbed her offered hand and let her think she was helping me to my feet. Physically, at least. Because the ways she lifted me had little to do with the size of her arms and more to do with that of her heart.

The thing was huge.





# Chapter Six

## CECI

Try.

That's what Connor said to do. So here I was at seven-thirty in the morning trying to knock on my brother's door. I was feeling uncharacteristically apprehensive about the whole idea, but on Connor's recommendation, this was the only way I was going to begin figuring out what I wanted. Or at the very least what I didn't.

So I banged on the door.

My brother Mateo was the second oldest in the family, but you would never think so just by looking at him. He had this boyish mischievousness about him that made him seem almost as young as me. His black hair was just slightly overgrown, curling up over his ears. His dark eyes almost always held a smile in them. And his pink mouth was wide, looking as if it was permanently drawn into a smirk. He wore loose-fitting clothes that didn't portray the typical look of a businessman, and he had a tendency to laugh when things were *and* weren't funny, always finding the humor in everything.

It probably would have been smarter to go to my other brother, Ox, for help first. He was the oldest and somewhat of the family manager. But I didn't quite feel like experiencing the stern perfection of our first brother. Plus, he oversaw the family company which meant he'd just set me up in the very place I was trying to avoid. So here I was at Mateo's doorstep. And leave it to me to be the only person to make him look apprehensive in, like, the history of ever.

"Mattí, your sister just came to see you. *Look happier,*" I grumbled.

“I noticed. And I’m skeptical,” he said, but stepped aside to let me into his large apartment, glancing down at his watch as I passed. “Isn’t it a little early for you, Ceci?”

I glanced around too.

Mattí and Lis lived in the same building, so their layouts were almost identical. Gray wooden floors, white kitchen, multiple bedrooms, and large floor to ceiling windows overlooking the city. But walking into their homes you would think they were in totally different buildings just by the way they decorated them. While Mateo had a propensity for large street art pieces and leaned more into color with his decorating, Lis’s place looked like it was copy-and-pasted out of a magazine. One that was named “*Taupe*” and took their theme way too seriously.

The latter is who I was on the lookout for now.

“Is Melissa home?” I whispered as I entered his kitchen and went straight for his fridge. He always kept iced cold brew in there and every time I came over I got the craving for some.

“I dunno,” he said, coming in after me and plucking the stolen coffee straight out of my hands. When I tried to grab it back from him he fended me off and went over to the cabinet to pull down a glass. “We don’t, like, wave each other goodbye every morning you know?”

“Oh,” I said watching as he put ice into a cup and poured creamer and the cold brew over it before handing it back to me with a straw. I smiled and drank happily as he returned all the ingredients back to their spots in the kitchen.

When he turned back to me, there was a split second where he resembled Ox or even our father. His eyes skating up and down my person, cataloging every detail for irregularities or something out of place. But just as quickly as he found nothing was wrong, he replaced that look with a playful one, his eyes narrowing dramatically with skepticism.

“To what do I owe the pleasure, dear sister? Or did you just need a caffeine fix?” Mattí asked, leaning an elbow against the table beside him.

Chewing my lip, I took a glance around just to make sure no one else was here to see me beg. Then leaning in, I whispered, “I need a job, Mattí.”

I watched as his eyebrows rose and I didn’t quite appreciate the look of concern that crossed his face. Standing up straighter, he asked, “Why? What’s wrong?”

I glared, “Does something really have to be wrong for me to ask for some work?”

“Yes.”

“You’re an asshole,” I mumbled into my coffee.

He smiled. “Not the way you want to be talking to the guy you just asked for a job.”

“You’re even more of an asshole if you’re thinking about milking this,” I said. “C’mon Mattí, I only want to get my feet wet. I want to see what you do, set me up with one of your things.”

“*Things?* Do you even know what I do, Ceci?” He reached forward to steal a sip from my coffee cup but recoiled after one taste and promptly returned it to me. Forgetting he’d made it extra sweet like I like it, he moved to pour his own cup with no sugar instead.

Nodding enthusiastically, I answered, “Of course I know! Everyone knows you’re like a pimp! But for businesses and shit.”

He spit coffee out in a laugh.

“Ceci,” he chuckled. “Don’t do that when I’m drinking.”

“What, talk?”

“*Be ridiculous,*” he clarified.

I grinned and moved to grab him a napkin. Truthfully, I didn’t know what he did *exactly*. I knew he liked investments and I knew he was passionate about the hospitality business. Other than that, I was stumped.

“I know you do a lot,” I said seriously. “And I do nothing. I thought we could strike a good balance. So put me to work,

*please.*”

He looked at me skeptically but took the offered napkin and wiped his face. “And you expect me to find you something to do, why? To entertain yourself?”

“No, to *help me*, Mateo. I know you’ve talked to mom and dad lately,” I said, my gut rolling over when I thought about them all talking about me. Discussing me like I was some kind of *other* to be handled. The way he averted his eyes confirmed it.

“So what’s the big deal?” He shrugged. “You work at the company for a few years and then you do something else. We all do it. It’ll be fine.”

“No,” I said definitively. “I may not know much, but what I do know is that I *really* don’t want to work at the company. The thought of it makes me itch.”

He scoffed, “The thought of any responsibility makes you itch.”

Contrary to what my family thought of me, this wasn’t true. In middle school when we had a class Iguana, I had no issue being named “ranger” and taking on the primary responsibility of making sure the giant lizard didn’t kick the bucket. In high school when my mom’s dad had gotten sick, I had no problem taking responsibility for running the house while she was gone and Ox was away at school. And in college when that horrible sorority my sisters made me join finally decided to do something interesting like volunteering for an animal shelter, dare I say I was the most responsible of those prissy little stuck ups. Keeping everyone on schedule and engaged even when morale was way down after they learned they have to clean the cages.

The problem wasn’t the responsibility, although I could see why my family thought so. Being the youngest of five I was only ever responsible for what I *made* myself responsible for. They’d all become so accustomed to taking care of me as we grew up that they never really stopped, and neither did I. For me, the problem was interest. If I liked it, I did it and if I didn’t, I’d always have someone else to do it for me.

*Spoiled brat.* My mom had muttered. Playful as she'd been, I guess she was right.

“So, are you going to help me?” I asked. And what did Mateo, my fun loving, up-for-anything brother do? He looked at me with a grimace on his face. Was I really *that* untrustworthy? “Please, please, please Mattí?”

“Alright, alright,” he said. I could tell by the little smile playing on his lips he wasn't too hard-pressed about the idea. “Any preferences on what you want to do?”

I shook my head animatedly, just excited he was conceding. Even if this turned out to be a bust, it brought me one step closer to knowing what I wanted. In front of me, Mattí's smile widened. “You'll do *anything*? Really?”

Holding an arm up I displayed my covered wrist, “Just as long as it doesn't damage the real estate any more. This actually hurts a surprising amount.”

“Yeah, I bet, when you're not hopped up on drugs,” he laughed.

“*You could tell?*”

“You were bouncing around your party like a blue Big Bird Ceci, we *all* could tell.” I laughed, finding the thought of my parents knowing I was high on pain meds hilarious. Mateo laughed too and reached out an arm to me, grasping my shoulder and tucking me into his side. “C'mon then. We have to get going for your first day of work.”

\* \* \*

“I'm not going to go easy on her just because she's your sister, Signore Fernandez. If you say she's here to help, I want her to help,” said the wiry man with a thick Italian accent. Paulo, I think his name was.

Talk about a character. He wore black from head to toe. His neatly pressed slacks straight and tighter than my jeans. His equally tight turtleneck reached so high on his jaw I'm pretty

sure the rim of it touched his earlobes. The most alarming was dark brown hair with tips so blonde they were almost white, despite him having to be at least forty. And not to mention he had a serious attitude problem.

Ever since Mattí stepped aside and revealed me as the *'extra set of hands'* he was offering to Paulo, the man had looked at me like I was some sort of virus.

“When you messaged me to ask if I needed any help, I was under the impression it would be from you, Signore, not your little ant friend.” The man was barely suppressing a sneer as he peered down his shoulder at me, both his arms wrapped around himself as if he was trying to keep from catching something.

*Did he just call me an ant?*

I sputtered, and Mattí smiled big. The little shit. He must have known how ridiculous this man was and chose him for me to work with just to torture me. Of all of us Fernandez's Alta was the nice one by landslides, but Mattí took up the runner-up position easily. Even so, he wasn't all hugs and kisses. The boy had a devilish streak all in the name of “good fun” and it was amateur of me not to take that into consideration the second he'd asked me if I was willing to do “anything” for work.

Rookie mistake.

But when he spoke again, his voice didn't let onto any trickery as he addressed his client.

Impressive.

“Now Paulo, this is my *baby sister*. I'm not asking that you go easy on her and she's not going to be here every day, she's just here to lend a helping hand and maybe learn a thing or two from you. Is that okay? Can I trust you with her?” My brother asked the man.

“She has but one hand to offer anyway,” Paulo spat, looking at my brace in disgust. “She is obviously clumsy if she has injured herself so. And you expect me to trust her around all this fine glass?”

“I can offer you something *real nice* with just one finger if you keep—” Mateo stepped in front of me before I could continue my sentence.

“She’ll be careful, Paulo,” Mattí promised, this strange, responsible tone overtaking his previously jesting one. “I promise, I wouldn’t leave you with untrustworthy help.”

*Aww.*

“You are not staying?” Paulo asked, looking shocked.

Wait? *What?*

I stood up a little straighter. The surprise that he wasn’t staying immediately erasing the fuzzy feeling my older brother calling me trustworthy had given me. It was replaced with raw panic. “You’re going to leave me here?”

“I’ve got a few meetings today, so I can’t stick around,” he said, and the more he used *that* voice, the more it sounded like he was placating children. With Paulo, he remained calm and assuring. With me, he supplied an ugly face that only got uglier until he successfully made me chuckle. Turning back to Paulo, Mattí grasped the man on either shoulder and looked down into his eyes as he repeated, “Can I trust you with her, Pau?”

Paulo’s eyes nearly rolled in the back of his head. “*Yes, yes.* I will make sure your little itty-bitty sister does not break her other hand before the day is up. *Go.*”

\* \* \*

What a fucking liar.

Contrary to what he promised my brother, I’m pretty sure Paulo Mizotti was *trying* to break more than my other hand.

We started the day off in the cellars. Paulo was the owner of a small wine shop in the market district of the Seaside beach areas. He’d attracted my brother as an investor by his great location, extensive knowledge of wine, and his roots back to

Italy where most of his stock was imported from. The wine shop, which didn't officially open for another week or so, was Paulo's passion project. He wasn't forty, but sixty and he'd retired to Seaside with his husband. A whirlwind romance that brought him to America rather than the other way around. Now he was seeking to bring a little bit of Italy to our front doors.

Even though he was a stuck-up son of a bitch, I appreciated his story. Passion so wild it struck like lightning. It hadn't happened for me yet, but I assumed when it did, I wouldn't be able to help going for it with everything in me, either.

We worked on rotating the wine in the cellar first. Injured hand shaking, I pulled free old wooden crate after old wooden crate. Cracking them open using only my good hand, an old, rusted crowbar Paulo had given me, and borrowed patience that was teetering often with frustration.

This frustration had been met with the many unsolicited lessons of one Paulo Mizotti and his shaking head. "You young people do not appreciate the payoff of *patience*. You have to have everything now, now, now. Work with it, little Ant Girl, and it'll work with you in return."

After de-crating a boatload of already bottled wine, the next task was bottling the aged wine. Apparently it had sat in these huge, spouted barrels making up most of the back wall of the cellar long enough. Now they were ready to be bottled so they could sit some more.

I thought I appreciated a good glass of wine, but I was quickly learning it was nowhere near the level Paulo did. I don't even think it was *possible* to appreciate wine as much as he did. And it was painfully obvious I was beyond my depth here.

Was that why my every breath seemed to offend him? Maybe that or the fact that I was shit at everything we'd done so far. Bottling the wine was no different.

Having a hard time holding the bottle steady under the spout with my shaky limb was just the beginning of it. After



*finally* settling into a groove, it was confusing having to keep the dark bottles organized by wine type.

At one point I started stockpiling two groups, one for whites and one for reds. I thought I'd done a really great job, only to have Paulo come in and wail like I ran over his cat. "You sloppy girl. Do you even know which is which?"

I'd wanted nothing more than to come back at him for calling me 'sloppy', but that was only before I realized that, damn. I, in fact, *didn't* know which group of bottles were reds and which were whites. I had been trying to go fast and make up for the time I lost from my hurting hand.

*Shit.*

He made me pour each group out into different buckets and rebottle them by hand and funnel this time all while preaching to me why "*attention to detail matters*" in the thick accented Italian sort of way.

And even after all this, we still didn't move out of the cellar of doom.

Next came the corking. Which was now officially a sore subject. I promise I'd been watching carefully, meticulously even, as Paulo demonstrated how to use the (very un-injury-friendly) corking device. That didn't seem to matter much though when I'd somehow managed to shatter not one, not two, but *four* bottles in the process, cutting my hand at least once and sending Paulo into a dramatic dizzy spell no more than thrice.

When he called Mattí like he was some sort of mediator, my brother had calmly told him to sort it out, which resulted in Pau angrily reteaching me the corking routine at an agonizingly slow pace.

The whole thing went something like this:

"Patience, girl. I swear you have zero—"

"No, watch me again."

"You *must* pay attention. Every single bottle is individual. It requires an individual piece of your attention—"

“Yes!”

“No!”

“*Gentle*, girl! You have the hands of a boorish brute!”

The tongue lashings continuing on until even the rush of air before he started talking made me wince.

And finally, after labeling the bottles wrong, cutting myself on at least one more glass shard, and possibly earning an enemy for life by asking Paulo if he thought French wine is better, I was out of the cellar. I was sweaty, my arms throbbed, and I don't think I'd ever appreciated the salty smell of the Seaside air quite so much then after being cooped up in that stale cellar all day.

Until I was told my next task.

“Your brother calls them ‘*early incentives*’ or something. I call it giving away perfectly good stock, but pssh.” Paulo often liked to trail off his sentences with sounds instead of words, I was learning. I imagined “Pssh” *this time* meant something like ‘*but he's paying for all my startup costs, so I'll listen to him even if I think he's young and crazy*’.

I had to say, it was truly interesting to see people having so much faith in Mattí. If nothing else came of this horrible wine-covered day, at the very least I'd garnered a newfound appreciation for the respect my brother earned from others just by believing in people... And giving them huge influxes of cash of course, but that came with the territory. Still, he held their *dreams* in his hands. And they trusted with them. Screw the elementary school Iguana, *that* was real responsibility.

“Think you can handle it?” A voice said, cutting through my thoughts.

I blinked my attention back to Paulo. “What?”

A pop to the back of the head is what that slip in attention earned me. “What did I *just* tell you about attention, huh? I said we must deliver gift boxes to those who have pre-purchased—or something or other. We have twenty-two. The rest have been shipped before you descended into my store.”

At least he said *descended* and not the other way around, like I'd crawled my way up from Hell or something.

Nodding, I wiped my sweaty hands on my jeans. "Deliveries, yeah I can—"

I stopped, pausing as I realized something. Mattí had dropped me off earlier. Meaning, I was waiting for him to pick me up. *Meaning*, I didn't have a car to make deliveries in. I told Paulo as much and he just shrugged, saying that was okay. Wondering why that was *suddenly* okay when absolutely *nothing* I'd done all day had been okay, I stuck close behind him as he walked out the store. My curiosity was quickly put to bed when Paulo came around the front carting a little green moped with a helmet hanging off the handlebars.

My eyes narrowed.

For the most part, I enjoyed fast things. I enjoyed racing things. I enjoyed fun. But something told me that carting gift boxes back and forth around a town that wasn't big but also wasn't that damn small either with a broken hand was not going to be all shits and giggles. That coupled with the fact that the little moped could only hold one twelfth of the deliveries I needed to make, and I officially wished I was back in the dusty cellar.

With great effort (and twelve separate back-and-forth trips later), I was pulling back into the store just in time to see my brother had returned. *Thank God.*

As interesting as it had been to learn about wine all day, (not actually that interesting), and inspiring as being around Paulo's passion for his craft was (actually a little inspiring), I was ready to leave this place and never come back. I'm pretty sure I hated this Paulo guy and while we were at it, I hated the hospitality business, too. I didn't know how Mattí did it.

That's what I was thinking up until I noticed my brother on the side of the road in a throng of workers helping to unload something from a large truck outside the wine shop.

He had his sleeves rolled up to his elbows and a little clipboard in his hand. He looked so focused as he crossed

things off a list and spoke to both the men handing down large crates and Paulo who was now joined by a bigger man with a balding head and happy eyes. Not for the first time I noticed something in my brother that I hadn't before. A focus, a diligence, and a passion that I'd never seen in him.

He didn't talk about his ventures much at home. He told Apá and Ox about his investments because the boys always loved to talk business. He always let us girls know when he was working with a cute restaurant or bar he thought we would like in town, since we liked to go out. But he never talked about how happy this all made him. How truly invested into each venture he was. It wasn't just a check to a random business owner he saw potential in. It was a true commitment. A relationship with each business, whether it was his own or simply one he funded. It was a passion, *his* passion.

I don't think I would have ever understood this until I saw it for myself. And it was then that I realized I had nothing in my life that even came close to what Mattí had here. Nothing that could become anything anyway.

Rainbow walls and the smiling faces of two girls filled my brain, but I pushed the thoughts away.

Three things happened as I realized there may not be any hope for me after all. Disaster always seeming like it happened in slow motion.

One: I saw my brother, his commanding presence distracting me.

Two: I squeezed the moped breaks too late.

Three: I ended up in the bush beside the shop.

And *that* was the first time Paulo laughed that day.



# Chapter Seven

## CECI

The next few days after the wine shop didn't go any better. I tried to stick with Mattí for a week and, *Jesus*. If you would have told me that it got worse than Paulo, I wouldn't have believed you. But one boat restaurant, one dive bar renovation, and a terrible place where you “catch your crab and cook it too” later, and I was more than convinced that Mateo only did business with horrible personalities. He probably did it to keep himself entertained. Whatever the hell the reason, I couldn't take it anymore. Not after the crab guy tried to convince me a pinch from a crab (in which I got multiple) was good luck.

Nope. I drew the line there and had instead tried my hand with my other siblings. First paying a visit to my sister-in-law at the rented studio kitchen she frequented downtown to help her with her latest and apparently hardest recipe sequence yet.

She was tea obsessed. You could always find her with a cup of the stuff. So after two successful dessert books she was challenging herself to move onto uncharted territory. Tea blends. She apparently has never attempted making her own tea blends before this project and has had to do a lot of research as well as learning a lot by trial and error.

Baking with Fergy before had always been fun because she was already keen on the process. She had a good enough knowledge about desserts that whenever she baked with me she was either able to teach me along with doing the actual cooking or was able to hold other conversations while working.

With this new project there wasn't a whole lot of teaching or talking. Really, most of what we did was read from the enormous stack of books on herbology as we scooped

teaspoon mixtures of various leaves into their respective bowls.

Needless to say, even in the company of my second favorite Ferguson, it was so boring.

What was interesting though, was that same tingle of inspiration I'd felt niggling in the pit of my stomach watching Mattí and his clients as they worked toward their passions surfaced again while helping Fergy in the kitchen organizing leaves. I think it was safe to say I had zero interest in what the properties of dried dandelion root did when mixed with Rosemary, but the look in Ferg's eye as she sampled completed batches of her own concoctions was something I wanted even while not truly understanding why.

Working with Melissa had to be the worst. Not because as soon as she heard I was going around asking people for "jobs," she promptly inserted herself into the mix. Not because her position of CFO at the company was the professional equivalent of watching paint dry. Not even because she worked the closest with Ox who was the sibling I was trying to avoid with this at all costs (because he was too perfect at everything, and for some reason I wasn't ready to meet that perfection with my rough opposite just yet).

No, working with Melissa was the worst because of one reason and one reason alone.

The mailroom.

I don't know what 90s tough love movie she watched before she planned our day together, but for some reason she got it in her head to start me in the mail room. Bitch had never stepped foot in the goddamn room herself but there she went giving lectures on "*strong foundations*" and "*building character*". The number of envelopes I licked that day was one hundred too many, firmly solidifying my suspicion that I never wanted to step foot in my older sister's office again.

This just left Alta.

My phone had broken during my flight through the air the other day. My big ass landed on it when it broke my fall along

with the bush. So instead of calling ahead, here I was unannounced at Al's doorstep hoping she would break the spell of failed attempts at "trying".

Al worked mostly in admin for the family business but also did some client work for marketing on the side.

Doing the same song and dance I'd done to get Mattí to let me work with him, it took significantly less convincing to get Al to say yes.

"Oh my gosh! We're going to have such a fun day together! Let me just tell Ox I'll be in the office late today!" she said, excited as she bounced around her apartment.

Al was the softest of us all, the nicest of us all, and the most surprising of us all.

When she graduated school, my parents and brother were prepared to give her a supporting role at the company and call it a day. But unbeknownst to them, Al had been taking clients outside of work. Working with businesses to grow their social media, marketing, and outreach. I'm not sure how much my family knows of it, but from what she told me, it is something she works really hard at. Something way more challenging than the throw away busy work our family thought she should be doing.

It was surprising to see her like that. I never expected her to be so ambitious, and I don't know if my family had yet to notice the full extent of it but if and when they did, I imagine they'd be just as stunned as me.

When I was little, I remember seeing how they treated Alta. Seeing all the things they told her she *couldn't do* because "she would hurt herself" or because "that's too rough for you Alta, go play with the flowers instead" and I remember making the conscious three year old decision that I wouldn't be treated like that. I hated being told I couldn't do something back then just like I hated it now.

Then and there, I decided I'd be as rough as possible. That I wouldn't care if I fell, even if it hurt. That I wouldn't cry if I was sad, I'd make them even sadder. That I wouldn't be



something that was controlled by what others thought I should be.

That early stand of independence was probably what I had to thank for who I was today.

It was also probably what was digging my current grave. Because here I was still with my righteous independence but nothing else to show for it. Meanwhile, there Al was, just as independent and even more than that, she was the badass that I'd always wanted to be, at least when it came to taking control of her life, and she'd done it in a way of less turbulence. It was admirable and enviable. *Everyone* was further than I was it seems.

We spent the day zipping around town to Al's clients. A cupcake company that swore by our sister-in-law's cookbooks, a tattoo parlor that revealed my sweet sister had a tattoo courtesy of the large, tattooed owner named Gus, and a cotton candy cart located on the tourist beaches that sold massive head-sized cones of cotton candy with funky flavors.

We talked with each client about marketing strategy, what's been working for them lately and what trends they wanted to experiment with next and taking photos.

It was all very boring and yet...Alta was amazing.

She was normally adorable with her half up half down hairstyles and frilly blouses. But even as she looked like a schoolteacher or something, she acted like an executive. Telling people where to go, what to do, what will work and what they should forego all with complete and undeniable confidence.

Alta smiles at everyone, but when she smiled at her clients there was something else in her eyes. Respect, I assume for their craft. Protectiveness for what she promised she'd do for them. Just like I had never seen Mattí so serious the other day, I think it was safe to say I had never seen my sister like this either.

And while witnessing it gave me this rising sense of pride, I could feel something else rising in me as well. It was ugly, and

it was not gracious to myself, and it wanted nothing more than to send me home to wallow in myself doubts.

It was also the truth.

That truth being, I was playing at something I had no chance at. I was playing, period. Sure, I had worked a few days and sure I was playing along with my parents' request to try to figure myself out, but the truth of it was, I had no place here. Not with Mattí and his ventures, not with Lis and her hard work philosophy, and not with Al in her soft determination. And I knew there would be no place with Ox and his effortless perfection when I was so...me.

So what was I even doing here? Pretending like this was me? Like I belonged anywhere near business investments or clients or any of the dozens of uninteresting concepts my siblings seemed to be obsessed with.

Try. Connor's voice said from the corner of my mind.

A happy corner where I was warm and safe and I wouldn't care if I failed because at least there would be a friend there to make fun of me when I was down. All while being the first to help me back up.

*Someone who doesn't mind picking you up if you fall...* I think were his words.

I heaved a deep breath.

Okay. I could do this. I wasn't a quitter, and I told him I would give trying a shot. So I would give it a fair one.

"Ceci, are you alright? You've been pretty quiet today," Al asked as we pulled up to our final destination for the day.

We would have already been done, but Al had insisted on visiting one of her newest clients that were opening in a few weeks. This apparently meant a ramp up in marketing and advertising. I had wanted to complain until she agreed to take pity on me and take me home, but there was something about the puppy dog look in her eye that had me reluctantly telling her to "let's just get this over with". That was until we got to our next destination.

I almost growled. Because the place we just pulled up to was the last place I expected to be back so soon.

The fucking wine shop.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I mumbled. Like a bad movie, I smushed my face against the glass and peered up to the little brick store.

The Seaside market district was on a cobblestoned street located near enough to the tourist beaches to be considered a site seeing destination, but close enough to the wealthy edges of Seaside to be considered upscale. Quaint private restaurants and specialty boutiques lined the pretty old world streets. Flowers hung in high baskets along the street poles and around stone walls giving the feeling that we were in a different place altogether. Like Paulo’s Italian shoppe didn’t seem so out of place.

I hadn’t noticed before, but Paulo’s shop was beautiful. Stone lined street, huge glass front window that was framed with long vines and the deepest red flowers. Wine stacked artistically on crates and in a weird sort of hay grass stuff that made the shop window look both rustic and luxurious all at the same time. You could feel the passion from the sidewalk.

I glared out Al’s car window. So much so that I hardly noticed her get out and round the car to my side until my door was opening and she was reaching in to take my hand. “Come on little sister, let me show you my newest client! Mattí introduced us and he is the nicest man.”

I must have looked at her like she was crazy because she laughed as she dragged me toward the store. “Do we really have to go in here, Al?”

“Yes!” She laughed again as if me digging my heels into the ground was all a part of some crazy game we were playing. “What is up with you? It’s not like you to be so shy, Ceci.”

“Trust me, I’m not playing coy,” I grumbled, trying to double back.

“Ceci!” She laughed again, but her face was starting to turn concerned. “Come on. This is so exciting for me, having you

here! I wanted to show you the window I designed.”

I stopped struggling, lifting my eyes to the large window display above us. “You designed the window?”

“She sure did!” A chipper voice sounded from the door of the shop. I winced at the prospect of seeing that man again but was surprised to see someone completely different taking up the doorway. “Can I get you girls a cool drink out of the sun by chance? Looks like the June heat has come a little early this year.”

“Hmm,” I said, looking up to the tall man with tree trunk limbs and grizzly height. He was almost as big as Connor, only this guy was had pale skin, blonde hair, ocean colored eyes, and he looked to be in his fifties or sixties. He had calm, gentle eyes and a warm wide smile. Somehow, I immediately knew this was Paulo’s husband.

“Where’s Paulo?” I asked, my eyes bouncing behind the big man to peek into the shop. Even though I’d only been there once, it already felt strange without Paulo around. Like the shop was missing its soul.

“Pau has the day off. I handle more of the business side of things. He doesn’t really understand the appeal to marketing and revenue strategy is an urban myth in his eyes. He’s only got eyes for the wine,” he said.

“It was your idea to deliver the wine boxes, then?” I asked, only prickling a little bit as I remembered the moped excursion.

“It was your sister’s idea, actually. Mr. Fernandez is just the one who proposed it to Pau and I with a plan. I just had to convince Paulo it was a good idea. He can be a little onerous sometimes about his wine,” he said.

I scoffed, because that was an understatement, but my attention fluttered back to my sister. She’d given up her nervous chirping once Victor and I shook hands and was now sitting there with a resting smile on her face as she surveyed the shop and the window, while keeping one eye on the conversation.

When she noticed me looking at her, she took a step forward and touched a gentle hand to my shoulder as she slid up to my side. “Ready?”

I just nodded, thrown by the realization of how far behind I really was.

Work here was slightly better than work with the other vendors. Instead of all the picture taking and tedious product staging that took up all the time with the last businesses, my sister and Paulo’s husband worked through marketing strategy options, growth strategies, and other business.

Since I wasn’t really needed there with the two of them, I basically just sat and listened. I tried to busy myself by doing some of the menial tasks I’d learned with Pau the other day. Stuff I knew I couldn’t mess up. But all the while I listened, for the most part it was all just muted white noise compared to the increasing volume of my own thoughts.

“Do not think too hard, Ant Girl, or your brain will begin to pain.” The voice sounded from behind my shoulder, which freaked the fuck out of me because I thought the only other people in the store were sitting right there in front of me.

I jolted forward at the sound of the new voice, starting to the side as a long skinny arm whipped around me and swiped the little price stamper out of my hand. I had been using it to stamp the ridiculous brown paper tags Paulo wanted to tie onto each bottle while my sister talked with Victor about brand management.

Jerking my head over my shoulder, I cringed at the sight of the man himself. “Could you be any creepier?”

“I am not *creepy*, I do not understand this accusation. Pssh.” He waved a hand. “Whatever, what are you doing back in my store?”

“I came with my sister this time.”

“You are related to that one too?” he asked

“That’s kind of how siblings work.”

“Of course, I get it—it’s just,” he paused, looking over at Al. “It is just hard to believe, no? You are not like them. Not even a little.”

Well, that stung like a motherfucker.

Sure, I was *just* mulling over the same thing, but it was sort of gut-wrenching to have it pointed out by someone else. Someone who didn’t even know us. But apparently it was that obvious. I was a wanderer, while they were trailblazers. *Got it.*

For a second, a tiny fleeting moment in time, it felt like there was no air left in the universe. Like all the bad things I’d ever imagined about myself were true. Like I should just stop trying to be something I wasn’t, stop trying to be anything at all. But then the second passed and I could breathe again, and instead of breaking down or getting angry or even becoming too curious about what I was just feeling, I balled up the way that tiny little sentence could make me feel such huge things and I swallowed it. Tucking it away for a time when I was ready to examine it further. Which really meant shutting it away forever.

Instead of asking him why, I turned my face up to look at him and gave him a not so genuine smile. “I like your husband much better than I like you.”

“Yes well, I like your sister more.”

“I’m pretty used to that.” I turned back to my work on the stamps, having swiped the stamper back from him while he wasn’t watching.

“You seem like you have a question, Ant.”

“I’m sorry, did I ask something...” My voice came out clipped and it wasn’t like I was trying to sound like a bitch, it just sort of came naturally to me.

Paulo didn’t mind. In fact, it didn’t even slow him down.

“In your eyes, Ceci. Keep up. You are such a slow girl.” He swiped the stamp thing back again.

“Oh my God! All you do is tell me what I am and aren’t, like you know me or something.” I growled, swiping it back

again. “Since you know so much about me, can you tell me what you think I *should* be doing, because it sure as hell isn’t standing here with you.”

“Is that your question?” Swipe.

“I’m still not asking you anything.” Swipe.

“You seem to be asking me everything. What you should do, who you should be, why? It is leaking all over the place through your eyes and yet you sit here with me and your sorella and I can tell you do not care about this. Shouldn’t you be figuring out what you care about?” Swipe.

“Doesn’t it look like I’m trying?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself, girl. I am too old for that”

“You’re too old for that earring too, just saying.”

He glared. “If you are not ready to see it, then you are not ready to see it. I can’t help you there. But if you are going to work in my shop, for the day, for the hour, even for the minute, you are going to do it correctly. Now stop with the stamping girl. I told you yesterday the way I wanted them and you are ruining everything.”

“It was days ago,” I grumbled, and he glared. So I added. “And I was doing it just like you told me to!”

“No! If you were looking with your eyes you would see that you have them facing to the right. I need them to the left. Do it right or get out.”

“It’s only a centimeter off.”

“If it’s off, it’s off. Do it right or get out,” he repeated.

And I couldn’t get mad at him. Because wasn’t that how I’d been feeling this entire week?

*If it was off it was off.*

And if one thing was becoming abundantly clear, *I* was off.

So fucking off.





# Chapter Eight

## CONNOR

“Dude, I know you want to, like, marry a robot one day, but can you stop checking your phone for maybe one minute?” Clay asked as he sat across the room from me looking absolutely ridiculous.

He was standing in the middle of the kitchen, holding a bright light over the countertop as our little sister positioned a slice of cake in various poses and snapped photos of it. The scene may have been at least semi-normal if his eyes weren't covered with dark sunglasses *indoors*.

“A robot could be doing that for you right now, but instead you just look like an idiot,” I said.

“Excuse me for pointing out how much you've been ignoring us,” he grumbled, nodding toward my phone curled in my hand. “You haven't put that thing down in hours.”

I sighed at his pouting. Honestly, you would think I was the older brother sometimes. Tipping my own chin across the room, I said, “Clint's on his tablet.”

“Clint's *working*. You're supposed to be picking out a restaurant.”

“It's Clint's turn—” I started, and as I raised my eyes up to my brother and sister, I caught them silently shaking their heads in wide-eyed horror at my words. I winced, slipping my eyes over to Clint just in time to see him cut an annoyed glance our way.

“Nice try, it's my turn,” he said. “It'll be good this time.”

This was doubtful. Clint had strange tastes in food and aside from maybe one or two outliers in the last couple years, nothing he chose was ever good. Ever. I decided to hold my

tongue on the matter, though, since fair was fair and it *was* his turn. But Clay didn't know what a high road was.

“Man, your taste in food is crap. I'd rather not eat.”

Clint didn't even look up from his screen. “Then don't.”

Tiney sighed and did a little grunt in frustration. “Boys! Stop it now. Connor, put the phone away and spend some time with your family. Clay, stop being such a menace. And Clint...”

She just sighed and shook her head before going back to what she was doing.

“What?” Clint's eyes popped up defensively and slid around the room. “At least say *something*.”

“I don't even know where to start with you,” she said. “Can we just order a pizza or something? Not everything needs to be a fusion concept.”

He huffed and turned his head away. Then his eyes seemed to zero in on Clay who was still holding the light up as high as it could go. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Where have you been all night, dipshit? I'm helping Tiney with her pictures,” Clay shot back, but we had no idea where he was looking because he had those stupid glasses on.

“You look like an idiot,” Clint said, repeating my sentiments from earlier.

Tine giggled, and I felt laughter bubble up in my chest too. I wished I could fully enjoy this. I loved spending time with my brothers and sister, but there was something clawing at the back of my mind. *Worrying* me.

Quickly, I shot off one last text before clicking my phone lock on and set it down on the table. I needed to stop obsessing over this and just relax.

“Connor.” The deep unhurried sound of my oldest brother's voice rang from my right. Glancing over I noticed Clint glowering at his tablet screen. “Can you come here for a second?”

Perfect. Something else to distract me.

I crossed the room to come up behind Clint at the table. Leaning down I peered over his shoulder at the screen and questioning him with a simple, “Hmm?”

Blinking a quick look over his shoulder he glared to the screen. “I’m trying to see these files but I can’t get access. It’s driving me crazy.”

I gave the screen a quick scan. “You need to access the server for these.”

“I’m logged in.”

Frowning, I leaned down again, taking a longer look. He was right, he was logged into the company’s network server and his access was correctly verified. Reaching around him I did a quick command prompt to pull up the browser code but immediately confirmed that everything looked fine.

Clicking around, I moved to the server code and confirmed that it looked good too. It was hard to truly tell what was stopping his progression with such a small screen and limited permissions. And to top it off, from the corner of my eye I could see my phone had just lit up and I was instantly distracted by wondering who it could be.

To Clint I said, “I can’t backtrack the blocks without proper tools. I told you we needed better security ages ago.”

“Nothing should be blocking me at all,” he huffed. “I should have full access.”

“Hmm,” I hummed as I blinked away from my phone. I couldn’t even read it from here, I was worrying about nothing. Focusing on Clint I said, “It could be your equipment. This tablet really shouldn’t be what you work on. Its CPU is shit.”

“You’re speaking another language again,” he sighed frustrated. “I just need to see one thing and I didn’t want to have to go all the way back to the office to get it.”

“Alright,” I said. “Send me the location and I’ll see if I can look into it at home.”

“Okay, thanks,” he said, already tapping furiously on the thin little tablet keyboard again. I shook my head. I hated when he tried to use that thing as an actual work-computer. It just didn’t work like it was supposed to. I was about to make my way back over to my seat when I heard his steady voice murmur, “Connor?”

“Yeah?” I blinked down at him with a chill. I hadn’t moved yet, but I was just about to when he caught me.

He had a weird knack for knowing people’s moves before they made them. His eerie, dark eyes seemed like they were able to see the future. Like right now, it was as if he didn’t even have to be looking at you to figure you out. “Are you seeing someone?”

I blinked. *Several times.* Across the room Clay almost dropped the light stick onto Tine’s head. And Tiney fumbled her camera in her hands. Stunned, we all looked at Clint in confusion. Me most of all.

“No, why?” I answered, genuinely confused.

Clint finished his message and hit ‘*send*’ without even rereading a word. Then, done with work I guess, he snapped the tablet closed and peered up his shoulder at me. “Then why have you sent ‘*how are you*’ to a person named ‘C’ six times in a row?”

*Well, fuck.*

I lifted my eyes to my phone laying basically on the other side of the table from us before looking at him. “How can you see that far away?”

Tine and Clay were now looking at each other with wide eyes, stupid goofy smiles playing at their lips.

“Why are you avoiding the question?” he asked mildly.

“Six times, Connor?” Clay whistled. “Damn man, *ease up.*”

*Literally just, fuck.*

“It was on different days,” I grumbled, stalking over to my phone and swiping it away from view. I peeked at the message screen again. Still nothing.

Usually I wasn't so needy, but the messages really *had* been sent on different days. Six different days to be exact. Six days of radio silence from Cee. Basically ever since I'd given her the advice to "try". And nothing. Not even a text.

That night she came over to cheer me up, we'd played around with the skim boards on the shore until it was pitch black outside. Falling on our asses, getting up and doing it all over again. Cee came over all the time. Letting herself in, sleeping over, and helping herself to my food or my clothes. So it hadn't seemed monumental at all when she slept over that night and slinked her way out the front door the next morning after breakfast. I thought nothing of it, I especially didn't think it would be my last time seeing her for an entire week.

So yeah, I texted her a few times. Sue me. *I was worried*. She could hardly keep a thought to herself on most days, not to mention the way she barged into my house like it was her own. Not hearing from her for so long was doing bad things to my anxiety.

I didn't want to just show up on her unannounced. Usually I wouldn't really care, we didn't really have a boundary when it came to each other's living spaces, but she had seemed really down about the whole thing with her parents, lately. I thought maybe some space would do her some good.

Now I was thinking fuck space. I almost *needed* her to answer me at this point. What the hell was she doing anyway?

Across the room, I guess Tiney couldn't keep in her excitement any longer. Squealing, she abandoned Clay at the counter to rush me. I took a large step away, trying to avoid her, but she pounced on me anyway reaching little grabby hands toward my phone. "Let me see her!"

"Not a chance," I said, fighting off her advances with an elbow.

"What's her name?" she went on.

"None of your business."

"What's she like?"

*Like your sister-in-law*, I thought. What I actually said was, “*None of your business.*”

“How long has it been?” she continued.

“Tiney *please*,” I groaned. “I’m not seeing anyone, okay? This is just a friend.”

Tine’s excited movements stopped, and she looked at me like I was some horrific thing she found on the street. I looked back at her quizzically, she just shook her head. “I didn’t know you were like that, Con. I thought for sure Clay would be the player but turns out it’s *you!*”

“Oh for fucks sake,” I grumbled turning back to Clint. “See what you’ve done?”

“*Six times?*” Clay repeated in a mumble to himself in the kitchen as he set the light down and stripped his sunglasses off.

Clint sat indifferently in his same seat, shrugging at my accusation. “It was just a question. You’re the one being weird about it.”

“I’m not being—” I started but cut myself off. I *was* being weird. Overly defensive and not at all cool about this. I just never got so close to having to explain this thing between me and Ceci yet. *I* was okay with coming clean but I wasn’t okay with outing us without her agreement. So still, I was letting my anxiety from her silent treatment fry my brain and take control. I needed to chill. I took a breath. “I’m not seeing anyone, alright?”

Lately, I wasn’t even “*seeing*” the person I always wanted to see. And if she hadn’t put this stupid secret rule into place about our friendship then I could just ask if they’d seen her lately.

But Ceci did things the way Ceci wanted on Ceci’s time, and right now she didn’t want to talk to me. And for some reason that was throwing me way off kilter.

Without my noticing Clay had ventured over to Clint’s side, Tine close to them and they were all staring at me like I’d

grown feet from my head. Then, in a fake whisper, Clay said, “You know Clint, I don’t think we ever gave him *the talk*.”

Clint looked up to Clay thoughtfully for a second before nodding. “You’re right.”

Tiney snickered and my older brothers turned to me with purpose in their eyes. I almost lost my breath I was so exasperated.

“I’m *twenty-eight*,” I gritted.

Clay shrugged, “It’s never too late to learn about the—”

I left the room before he could even finish.

\* \* \*

I only felt a little bad for bailing on my siblings, but I’d truth was, I didn’t want dinner. I wanted to hear from Ceci and if that wasn’t happening I wanted to go home. Not because I was waiting around in case she decided to show up or anything. Just...because.

It worked out well anyway.

Immediately after getting home and working off some steam by running the beach, I showered the day away and headed into my computer room to work on the file Clint sent me.

The room was one of my most prized possessions. Small, compared to most rooms in the house, it was actually a large storage closet and a small office room merged together to make my own personal computer lab. One wall was dedicated for the various servers I’d programmed for my systems. The other wall was for the computers and monitors. I had several, mainly to aid in my inability to just work on one thing at a time but also simply because it looked cool. Having an entire wall of computers was much more impressive than having

three, even if that meant I had to pay an arm and a leg to keep this room alone heavily air-conditioned.

The file Clint was trying to access was supposed to be a simple catch and retrieve. Like I told him, he really couldn't get all the functionality he needed on a day-to-day basis with a tablet, but he insisted on keeping it with him when he needed to work on the fly. Which was fine, just limiting.

I scratched at my head as I moved around the computer room with a cup of warm tea and only my pajama pants on. Tiney had talked me into drinking chamomile before bed and now I was hooked on the stuff. It soothed me, oftentimes helping me relax my ever-cycling mind before going to sleep, and I wasn't planning on doing much after I figured this file thing out, so I might as well get ready for bed.

*Geez, it was only ten-thirty.* It's like I didn't know what to do with myself without a certain bright eyed troublemaker beating down my door.

Using the specific system I allocated for work only, I logged into the Ferguson Enterprises server. Then, pulling up the same command codes as before, I tried to access what my brother couldn't on his puny little tablet earlier and...I got nothing.

I grunted.

That was strange, I had to admit. Our company's system was simple, bordering on outdated, which meant my commands usually worked on the first try. Not being able to get in now, with my superior network and materials, gave me the tiniest feeling of anxiety. So I tried another one. And nothing. I tried manually accessing the location through search and finally the file came up, only, it had a large red bar across it. A box for a password glaring up at me.

I froze.

The hair on the back of my neck prickled with alert attention as I looked at the screen. I had master access for the entire company's logs and data. If something was locked,



hidden, or encrypted in a way that wasn't protocol, it went through me. *Always*. And I had *not* locked this down.

Which meant someone else had.

"What?" Clint answered my call on the second ring.

"What's in this file you've been trying to access?" I asked, all the while I tried logging the usual passwords in. They all failed.

"Just a financial log from a few years ago. Why?" He answered. I couldn't tell where he was, but he wasn't at a crowded restaurant and he wasn't with our siblings. I would have heard them both chastising and giggling like they always were. Instead, I heard dead quiet aside from the click of Clint's keyboard always typing. My guess was he'd gone back to the office to work late.

"It's encrypted, Clint." My voice sounded irritated to my own ears as I tried the sixth password combination with no luck. "And it's behind a protection log. I can't get in."

"You—"

"I didn't do it. Did you?" I asked, but I knew the answer and the feeling of dread washing over me confirmed it.

"No," he said slowly. "Connor, what does this mean exactly?"

"I dunno," I said. "But if someone is locking files away and hiding them in *our* system, my guess is it can't be anything good."

"Can you be here first thing in the morning to figure it out?" He asked, a sliver of urgency breaking through his usual even keel.

Call me on edge, but his question irritated me. "Clint I don't have the tools there to do anything."

"We have all the same tools any other company of this size has. What else could you need?" he grumbled.

"I *told you* what we need," I grumbled right back. Because this was the issue. With him, with my mom, with my whole

goddamn family. They didn't take what I said seriously. They thought just because we'd skated by on whatever worked fine for years that we didn't need updates, upgrades, innovations. And they didn't take my opinion as professional guidance. Because how could you be a professional at something that wasn't valuable? Or at least that's what they thought.

Clint confirmed this by the incredulous scoff he huffed into the phone receiver.

"Connor, I don't have the time or patience for this argument right now. Can you just figure it out?" he asked.

I sighed. "Yeah, fine. But I'll have to do it from home. And I'll keep you posted on the details."

I hung up before I could get any angrier with my brother's dismissal. We might fuck around with each other a lot, but there was a part of me that looked to my brothers for a certain support system that our parents weren't able to give us.

We'd always been in it together. In a family that half raised us and forced us to half raise ourselves. In a life that was unforgiving—abundant in money but ruthless in the other things it took. In a nightmarish five years where our sister was taken from us and hidden away like a hostage. Having to learn a life with one of us ripped away with no explanation why.

But really it wasn't all his fault. Clint listened to our mother first and foremost, he always had. There were at least four formative years in between when Clint entered this family and when his first sibling did. In which, we had no idea what kind of life he'd lived. All we knew is that this stoic, almost stiff brother we had, had always been this way. Unyielding always, except when it came to Mom.

I also knew, while he didn't fully understand all that I preached, he trusted me enough to listen. Mom was the one that found it useless. Sometimes it felt like she was doing her best to find *me* useless unless I started to consider doing the things she asked of me. It wouldn't be far off from the way she'd always seen me.

Clay was at least vocal about his rebellion. You knew exactly what he was thinking because he told you so, and if he didn't say it out loud; it was almost impossible for him to keep his emotions off his face.

Something about that emotion my mom found hope in. Maybe because, for all his talk, Clay loved the family business. He loved working close to us and he loved keeping up with Clint in competition whenever he could.

Me, on the other hand, I was a stubborn kid. I did what I wanted and what I wanted had nothing to do with what the Fergusons *should* want. When I chose something, I backed it one hundred percent. Immovable almost. And for a woman who had done a lot of moving with the cards of her family, I could only imagine how frustrating it was to have a child like me.

Which held testimony to why I was even still here toughing it out at a company I didn't want to be at. Defending a career I didn't even want while also not going for what I did want. Because I stood by my own. No matter how hard or unforgiving, I'd always stood by them because in a pathetic but almost desperate way, I also wanted to be seen as something by them. *By her*. And even if I was in a dumb tech room running even dumber systems I had no interest in I'd do at least that to keep myself relevant to them. Because even if I wasn't exactly what she wanted, I wasn't ready to be nothing at all to her.

I didn't *want* to be the stubborn one, I just wanted to be enough. But if I couldn't be that then at least, with this job, I could be something.

Still, it frustrated me to no end to be ignored about these things. Only ever serving to bring up deeper shit, like now.

Enough.

I wanted to be enough. For my mom. For my family. *For someone*.

Looking at my phone, which was still devoid of messages from a certain person, I sighed. I shook the maddening

thoughts from my head as I and sauntered back into the kitchen to dump my tea.

From the looks of the shit-show that just dropped into my lap, I was going to be needing coffee tonight instead.



# Chapter Nine

## CECI

It's amazing how laughter can be both infectious and infuriating depending on whether people were laughing with you, or at you.

I was being laughed at. Ruthlessly.

"I kid you not, it was like she was flying in slow motion," Mateo said as he passed around a basket of tortillas at our family dinner table. "It was like a movie."

"Keep talking Mattí, and the last scene will be your funeral," I threatened. But I wasn't feeling it. I wasn't feeling it at all. This was now the *twelfth straight* comment about my week of working, and what I thought would calm down after a few teasing lines was only ramping up. My siblings going on and on about the *hilarious* comedy show that was my genuine effort.

Annoyed, I just stared straight ahead, my eyes holding nothing as I listened.

Around the dinner table sat my brothers and sisters. Weekly dinner was something my family had done since we were kids, inviting over our grandparents or other relatives on the weekend. Now with all of us kids out of the house, we kept up the tradition by getting together once a week for a meal. Not everyone made it every time, but we made it a point to keep up with the tradition more after our abuelo died a couple of years back, having needed the support of family through that emotional time.

Now I was feeling the opposite of supported. Actually, I was feeling quite singled out as each of my siblings took turns recalling something that was *oh so funny* about this week.

And to make matters worse (or better, I couldn't decide yet) I was met with a surprise at tonight dinner.

"Your sister is right Mateo. You shouldn't be laughing at her accident. She could have been badly hurt," Amá said, looking as if she was pleading for me to take the olive branch she offered.

I fucking hated olives, and I made it a point not to acknowledge her.

Matteo scoffed, "She's more hurt from whatever idiotic thing she did to her wrist than falling off a nearly parked moped, Amá."

The table laughed again, and he went on, "What did you do? Label too many bottles wrong, Ceci?"

I kept my mouth shut.

"No, I think she dropped Al's camera one too many times," Melissa said with a quiet smile on her face. I settled deeper into my chair, suddenly feeling less and less hungry. "Al, texted me halfway through and asked if it was possible for a camera lens to break on sand."

*Okay, ouch.* Glad to know I was that bad at *everything*.

I didn't know my eyes had slid to my other sister until I was met by her frantic, guilty look. Quickly she turned her red-cheeked face to Lis. "No I didn't! I didn't mean it like that!"

"Yes, you did," Lis snorted. "Don't try to back out now."

*Just great.* I sat back, my arms finding my chest and twisting in a knot, my eyes traveling upward.

"Well, *you* said she's never mailed a letter in her life because she licked all the invoice envelopes instead of using the sealing tool!" Alta snitched.

"It's true! She has paper cuts all over her tongue!" The last word broke under the sound of Melissa's laughter. Looking at me she shook her head. "I'm sorry Ceci, but that's just too good."

I shrugged and waved a hand through the air flippantly. “No, by all means, laugh it up.”

And they did. Again, and again, and again.

Apparently, it was all *super* funny; me messing things up. And apparently it didn't matter that I was sitting right the fuck here—they had to recount it all right now. In front of me, where I was supposed to, *apparently*, be okay with being teased and ridiculed.

And maybe if it was about something else, I would have been. I mean, I don't bat an eye when they constantly retell the story of when I first learned how to ride a bike and kept breaking with one wheel instead of both. I somehow ended up coming home with a skinned forehead from eating pavement multiple times and had to wear a baseball cap to cover up the scab for the rest of the summer. I don't even care when they make fun of current me, saying I don't have a domestic bone in my body every time Amá tries to teach us girls some of her mom's old recipes and mine come out burned black.

I usually didn't care what they said about me. Teasing didn't sting me as much as Lis who was super sensitive or Al who just wanted to please everyone. But it was stinging right now.

Maybe if it was at any other time or about anything else, it wouldn't be getting to me so much. But for some inexplicable reason, this hurt. And instead of crying or screaming or making threats, all I could do was sit there seething. Swallowing the massive ball weighing on my throat until it was a heavy weight in my stomach instead.

Down the table, a deep voice rumbled out a laugh. It was less chafing than the others, but amused, nonetheless.

“Sounds like you had a busy week. You should have come to me, instead,” Ox—who hadn't said much of anything due to Clementine sitting beside him, alternating between shooting daggers every time he so much as cracked a smile and giving me sympathetic looks—spoke up.



I could tell Fergy wanted to say something, to take up for me in some way, but I just continued to shake my head at her. I didn't want *anyone* taking up for me. I could do that myself, and I would've if... If they all weren't so right.

As for Ox and his not so subtle pouting about not getting a turn, I didn't even want to entertain him with the concept of me working with him. I already stretched my limits by cooperating with Melissa, but there was one line in this family I would not cross and that was the one into Oaxaca Fernandez's control. We wouldn't mix.

He was way too right and me wrong. Him perfect and me the worst kind of imperfect. Don't get me wrong, I loved my older brother. I loved all my siblings, but just like I couldn't stand letting Apá down, I couldn't stand disappointing my too good brother either. So I would steer clear of him, if only to avoid that outcome.

Apá seemed to agree, because finally he spoke, his deep voice being heard even through the commotion of laughter and jokes. "Let her figure things out on her own, Oaxaca."

I felt my insides boil as my eyes moved along the table, skipping over the menacing presence burning holes into my face, and landing on my dad. He was sitting there relaxed in his spot at the table. Looking so goddamn indifferent about the fact that *I* was struggling with what *he* wanted me to do.

That indifference churned the already rocking turbulence in my gut. And I didn't know what to do with it. I didn't know what to do here at all. This feeling was new.

Growing up, Apá had always been the one to have my back. While my hyperactivity and rambunctious behavior had always been something that was scolded or restrained, Apá always said to just '*let me be*'. To '*let me figure myself out on my own*'. And while those words had been my salvation when I was younger, they felt like a weapon now. Like he of all people was finally turning on me. Like he had had enough of "letting me figure it out on my own" because while he was saying the words, him pushing the fast-forward button on my life was not *letting me figure it out*, it was the opposite. And I

couldn't help but think that maybe the one person who had never really acted like I was so much to handle, was actually starting to get enough of me.

*Well, maybe not the only person.* My eyes flicked across from me again and were met with a swirling hazel that burned into me with angry heat. I looked away immediately.

Damn this feeling. This is exactly why I didn't want to struggle in public. Even if it didn't look like it to them, I had been handling it. I had been figuring it out. I loved the shelter and while I didn't think my family would ever find it acceptable to work there, I had explored the possibility of finding something related. What exactly, I had no idea. But that was the thing, I would have gotten there. Now here I was, a fucking joke all of a sudden because I was scrambling and more confused than ever. Rushing to catch up because I was so far behind.

I was a live wire. My head pounding and my throat burning, courtesy of my father and those other watchful eyes.

Too many thoughts were swirling in my mind. Defeat at an entire week of failure. Irritation at the idiots laughing around me. Hopelessness at the possibility that I could ever get this right, especially after getting it so fucking wrong right off the bat.

My skin was growing hot and I knew I had to be wearing my irritation. I wished nothing more than to be like I always was. To appear cool with this. But there was just something about it that was grating on the most sensitive of my nerves. I didn't think there was much more weight I could take before my threads snapped.

"I think we're embarrassing her," someone said. I couldn't tell who anymore, my vision having gone red, but I could hear everyone laughing again.

"You're right," somebody else chortled. "She's all red now."

More snickering.

A fork hit the table hard enough to snap silence around the group.

“And this is all funny how?” a deep, deep voice asked in a not so amused tone.

Hearing it was like feeling both the quenching relief of cold water on the hottest of days and like the tiniest pin popping an over inflated balloon.

My bubble of anger exploded. If there was red paint inside, splatter would be everywhere. And in the middle, clear as day, I would see Connor across the table from me. Staring my family down like he was both disgusted and angry. *For me.*

And while I was grateful there was still someone on my side, he couldn't do that. It was bad enough that he'd shown up at this dinner out of the blue. Using his little sister as a guise to being '*coincidentally invited*', when really I could tell by the way he'd been staring me down from the moment he got here that he had somehow orchestrated himself here for me.

Of course my family didn't mind, but I found that I minded. For the first time I minded, because I wasn't feeling like myself and if I knew he was going to be here, I would have had time to get it together before I saw him. Instead, I was caught dumbfounded as I opened the door for him and Fergy standing there, learning that he was staying for dinner.

And now he was standing up for me at a table with my family?

*He couldn't do that.* And not just because of this confusing feeling of safety he gave me, soothing the burning that had spread through my chest with his smooth, even voice. But because this was my family. It was funny to them because they knew me. They teased me because they knew I could take a joke, and now they were all looking at me expectantly because they knew I would never just *let* him take up for me.

My chair screeched as I moved it away from the table. Without looking at Connor I spat out a quick, “None of your

business, Ferguson,” before tossing my napkin onto my full plate and sweeping it out of the room.

It took me dumping my uneaten dinner, rinsing my plate and putting it away in the dishwasher for Connor to show up. When I saw him appear, I silently padded out of the room into the hallway, as far away from the dining room as we could be without being suspicious. In case someone came for me. As soon as we were safely tucked away, I whirled on him.

“Don’t do that,” I said as I met his eyes. Angry. I was angry at him for sure, but when I looked at him, this strange sense of homecoming overtook me instead. It was like the hustle of this past week had masked the fact that I missed him, and now that he was standing here in front of me without the barrier of my family around us, the longing was hitting me front and center. We rarely spent multiple days let alone an entire week without contacting each other. So the past week or so, with my phone broken and my schedule packed with failure after failure, was strange.

“What?” Connor asked. “Take up for you?”

“Feel sorry for me,” I corrected. “I can handle myself.”

“I’m well aware you can take care of yourself. *But you weren’t*, so I did,” he said, his face frowning as he looked me over. “I don’t mind handling a thing or two every once in a while, Cee.”

I bit my cheek. I was still irritated that he felt the need to speak for me but...but what was I supposed to say to that? *No, don’t be sweet and get mad on my behalf?*

Yeah, no. I couldn’t say that. So instead I just huffed, crossing my arms over my chest and looking away from him. He took a step toward me.

“You know, you’ve been such a little shit lately,” he said, sounding like he was just realizing this for himself.

My head whipped toward him so fast my neck hurt.

“*Me?* What’d I do!” I asked, genuinely surprised. Usually, I knew and agreed when I was being a little shit. But this was

coming off of not seeing each other for a week. What could I have possibly done to deserve that?

He crossed big arms over his chest. “You seem to have lost your phone or my number, I’m not sure which.”

“Oh.”

“*Oh?*” He raised a thick eyebrow and for a second I thought he was pissed, but then he sighed. “Look, I get it. You were busy, but I was worried.”

“Sorry.”

“You should be. I had to weasel my way in here today just to see if you were alright.”

Holding my arms out at my sides, I gestured to myself with a little flourish. “You see me. I’m alright. Can we drop it?”

“Not quite alright,” he grumbled, looking me over. But when I gave him a questioning look he dismissed it and stepped forward, still frowning. “You know how antsy I get when you stop answering out of the blue.”

I did know. It was a side effect of his sister going silent on him for five years and it was something he told me quickly after we started hanging out. He had said something about liking my text back speed and I had scoffed, telling him not to flatter himself, that I was just free and it wasn’t like I was waiting around for him. Going serious, he told me that it had nothing to do with him or me being available to him, but just that you never knew when someone would stop answering for good, so he just appreciated that I kept him in the loop.

Now, even knowing this, I still couldn’t stop myself from pouting as I yanked my gaze away from him again. “So?”

“*So?*” he echoed, incredulous.

I leaned into it, needing to blow off some steam and being an absolute brat being one of my favorite ways to do it. “Yeah, *so?* I broke my phone. *So what?*”

“Did you break your laptop too? *And* your fucking eyeballs, ‘cause I know you’ve seen my messages,” he grumbled.

“My *ears* are going to break if I have to listen to another minute of this,” I grumbled right back.

“*Ceci*,” he gritted out, his fed up tone causing me to peek his way. His nostrils were slightly flaring, his jaw set tight, and for the first time I realized how frustrated he was. He was right, I was being a little shit. Part of it *had* stemmed from the fact that I broke my phone, but most of it stemmed from the fact that I was not really much fun lately, and I would hate for him to stop wanting to be around me because I all of a sudden decided to become a Debbie Downer.

Just that fast, I felt guilty for being a brat. Dropping my whole act, I turned back to him in a huff. “Look, I’m sorry, okay? But you saw that in there. Heard what they were saying.”

He shook his head. “Yeah, they were teasing you, so what? You guys do it to each other all the time.”

“So it’s just... *I’ve* just—” I cut myself off staring hard at the ground trying to gather my thoughts. Taking a long breath, I shook hair out of my face as I tipped my chin up to look at him. “I’ve been needing a lot of help lately. I didn’t want to bother you.”

He frowned. And then he took another step toward me.

“Well you disappeared on me, so I’ve been needing a lot of *you* lately. That’s the only thing bothering me.”

I frowned too and his eyes clocked every movement of it. Reaching forward he used a couple of fingers to move a piece of hair I’d missed from the center of my face, his fingers running the length of the strands before returning to his side. I tried to contain my shiver, but the reaction from his light touch was hard to mask. He leaned forward just slightly, his voice lowering as he added, “Been missing my best friend, you know?”

My body just kept on reacting to him, warming at his words. Melting really. “You never call me that.”

He shrugged. “You know what you are to me. I don’t have to remind you every second.”

“Sometimes it’s nice to be reminded,” I said. What I left out was, *that you’re wanted*.

His grim expression didn’t let up. In fact it hadn’t let up since I first let him in the front door. Leaning further at the waist, he brought his face down level with my own. He was still a comfortable distance away but being able to see every part of his face so clearly reminded me just how much I’d been missing it. His eyes slid left then right over my gaze, his Ceci-meter calculating. Focusing on me, he spoke slowly, “*Best. Friend.*”

For whatever reason that made me glow inside, and suddenly I was tired. The kind of tired when you don’t want to be alone but you only want to be with certain people. Right then, I only wanted to be with Connor.

“Can we go back in *now*?” I asked.

Connor straightened, patting his pockets like he was making sure he had everything. “I told everyone I was leaving.”

“Can I come over then?”

“What if I said no?”

“I’d come anyway.” I shrugged

He nodded, a whisper of a smile tipping his lips. “*That’s my little shit.*”

My grin broke free. I *had* missed him and if he was leaving, I suddenly wanted to leave too. And since we weren’t coming from the city for once, an idea suddenly popped into my head. “Can we race?”

Admittedly, this wasn’t a brand new idea. Occasionally, we did stuff like racing back home solely for the chance to gloat in the one another’s face. But it was easier to do when we were closer to the coast at night, all the cars having ventured back to the city by the time we were returning to the water.

Looking down, Con checked his watch. While he liked racing too, he only agreed to it when it was late enough for there to be virtually *no one* on the roads. It was only about

nine now, so I could tell he wanted to say no. But something in the way he glanced up at me, surveying my face for a long time like it would tell him more than that watch did cause a small, resigned sigh to slip out. “We start in three minutes. If you’re not in your car by then, consider it my head start.”

“And *I’m* the shithead?” I hissed, but I was smiling as I whirled around and practically raced back to my family to grab my stuff and say goodbye.

Three minutes? With the Fernandez’s? That was basically impossible. But they hadn’t really treated me nice today, so I wasn’t opposed to blowing them off a little.

Back in the dining room, I bypassed my seat and rounded the table to my parents. Laying a kiss on my mom’s head I said, “Bye Mami, thanks for dinner.”

“You’re leaving, mija? But you barely ate,” Amá said, looking up at me with concern. I shrugged, and she cast a dark look over to my father that I didn’t understand. I went there next.

“Bye, Apá,” I said and unbeknownst to me, my voice decided to come out stony and gruff. Laying a soft hand on his shoulder, I squeezed but I couldn’t look at him directly. He didn’t like that. His hand shot out to grab mine, twining our palms closely together. He called my name, his voice sounding a little hurt, a little sorrowful, but I still couldn’t look at him. But I squeezed his hand back, trying to reassure him as I leaned down to kiss his cheek. “Te amo, Papi.”

“Wait, you’re going?” Alta piped up, surprised and horrified. She was out of her chair before I even let my dad go. The chorus of my other siblings disagreeing with my departure followed.

I glared. And with a damning finger, I pointed to each and every one of them, chanting, “Cabróna, cabrón, cabróna, cabrón...” when I got to Clementine I paused, ignoring my family’s wide-eyed surprise. To Ferg, I circled her chair and gave her a swift one arm hug, whispering a quick, “Thanks.”



It wasn't for anything in particular. Just for being there for me in whatever way she knew how. Her cool hands circled my forearm and squeezed in response. No further explanations needed. In her pretty, sweet voice she said, "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

I huffed a little laugh as I dislodged from her and headed toward the door. As I left I heard the apologetic calls from my siblings behind me saying things like, "You're really leaving?" "Ceci, don't be like that!" And my favorite, "Ceci, we can watch your favorite movie!"

Yeah, right.

Those assholes could fuck off.



# Chapter Ten

## CONNOR

I gave her three minutes just like I promised. But I didn't go too far too fast because one, the Fernandez's lived about twenty-five minutes away from my house. If we raced that entire time, we'd die. And two, it was more fun when we started in the same place.

Instead of speeding ahead I coasted just fast enough to get us down the highway and onto the exit for the four-lane parkway that paralleled the beach. Five miles out is when I finally let her speed up to me, her blue SUV coming mirror to mirror with mine. I chanced a glance over at her and through the window I got a glimpse of a Ceci I loved.

Her windows were down, even though it was damn cold at night by the beach. But I swear she did it just so that her hair could whip around her in those long, unruly tendrils.

She wore a leather jacket. An old thing I think she'd found at a thrift store or something. It definitely used to be a man's because when she stood up, it came down past her butt, almost reaching mid-thigh. She wore that thing from Fall to Spring, only giving it up when the hot stickiness of summer forced her to. It was hanging off her shoulders now as she wore this overly big band T-shirt underneath.

Hair whipping, I could see the twinkle of her earrings in the radio light, her right hand decorated with six or seven little rings that she wore every day. They were always in a different formation, sometimes on her left hand, sometimes on the right, sometimes spread across both and sometimes they were even on a chain around her neck. Always changing, always fluid.

So Ceci.

It made me wonder what I'd missed in this week of not hearing from her. If she was alright. If dinner was any indication, it seemed like she wasn't much herself lately. And for the first time since the day after her birthday, it was like I was looking at the real Ceci again. The one I knew, if only for a glimpse through the car window.

Just then a call came through on my radio.

"Eyes on the road, Ferguson," she said, and I could hear the smile on her voice.

"Just checking to see if you're ready for another ass whooping."

She laughed out loud, the sound filling me up. She didn't laugh once at dinner. "In your fucking dreams, Con."

"I didn't know you still did that."

"Did what?"

"Dreamt about me."

"Shut the fuck up!" she cackled, her voice being overtaken with laughter.

I couldn't not grin. "But seriously, you haven't beaten me once, Ceci."

"And there's a first time for everything." She barely finished her statement before her car jerked forward in a burst of speed, passing me by an entire car length.

"You fucking cheat," I grumbled as I matched her pace and she burst out laughing again.

Slowing at the same time I caught up, she spoke through her obvious shit-eating grin. "I was just kidding. I won't cheat, *promise.*"

"Funny how I don't believe you."

"*Con, come on!* We'll be home before we even get to race at this rate," she whined. I couldn't keep watching her through the window, but I could just imagine her bouncing in her seat over there. Itching to pass *Go*.

“Alright, alright. Calm down,” I said. “Are you ready?”

“What do I get if I win?”

“You never win, Ceci,” I scoffed.

“*What do I get?*” She let a giggle slip through, and I swear it was one of my favorite sounds.

It was drugging, and that was probably the reason I answered, “Anything you want.”

“Dangerous promises, Connor,” she mused, sounding like she was warning me. It pulled an amused sound from my throat.

“I can handle you, Cee.”

“Whatever. Now you go. What do you want if you win?” she asked.

“*When I win.*”

Another laugh, this time taunting. “*Sure.* What do you want?”

“I’ll take anything you give me. Now c’mon.”

Petal to the floor, I picked up speed. I could hear the quiet whir of my car’s engine as I accelerated. This time it was me who pulled ahead, but instead of slowing down or letting her catch up like she had for me, I kept building up speed. There weren’t very many people out, so we were free to openly speed along the parkway. I tried not to push it too far though, not wanting to get up to anything too dangerous.

“Oh my god!” Cee squealed as she pushed her car to keep up with mine. “What a hypocrite, you’re the real cheat!”

I laughed. “Eye for an eye.”

“I was *joking!*”

“No jokes in war—”

I saw her coming from the corner of my eye, her car moving into my lane. I eased off the gas and moved away from her incoming vehicle. Cee took advantage of this, and when she successfully overtook me, she returned to her lane. I

could *hear* gloating in her silence. Shaking my head, I changed lanes so I was now behind her.

“What are you—”

I sped up suddenly, just enough so that I was riding her bumper.

“Connor!”

“What? I thought you liked games so much, Cee,” I teased. I couldn’t help but crack up at her incredulous tone. Her octave *and* volume jumping up levels.

“You’re fucking crazy!” She said, yet I’m not really sure who the crazy one actually was, because there was absolute glee in her voice.

“Takes crazy to know crazy.”

“Dent my car, and you’re going to have a *crazy concussion* when I’m done with you,” she said.

Satisfied, I switched back into my lane and cruised next to her as we raced down the highway. A couple minutes passed before something caught my eye in the distance.

“Slow down,” I warned. “Cars up ahead.”

We were getting close to home. Soon we would have to return to the speed limit, which usually meant whoever could navigate better and make the best decisions would win. The precise reason it was always me.

Ceci wasn’t patient, and she tended to make moves that looked great but ultimately bit her in the ass. Like switching into the left lane too soon or getting caught behind last minute breakers.

Seeing the traffic too, Ceci slowed beside me, and for a second I contemplated letting her win this time. But as we neared the exit that would take us to the last road home, I noticed a last-minute opening and gunned it. Speeding up and swinging in front of her with about two car lengths of room.

She *squawked* in disbelief and I let out a laugh I couldn’t keep in. Hysterical, she huffed, “Am I that much of a threat

that you have to cheat *twice!*”

I grinned. “Don’t blame me ‘cause you can’t hang. One mile ‘til home. Looks like you’re not gonna make it.”

“The fuck I won’t,” she spat.

There was something about the change in her voice that should have put me on high alert. But we were merging off of the highway and onto the quiet two-lane road leading up to my neighborhood. She really had nowhere to go unless she swerved around me by looping into the opposite direction of traffic... And she wouldn’t do that... Would she?

My stomach dropped

“Ceci, don’t you fucking dare,” I warned, my voice suddenly becoming serious.

Her laugh was menacing this time. “It’s clear, and I’m going for it.”

“No,” I said. *Ordered*. Her silence pricked at the back of my senses. “*No, Ceci, you’re* not doing it.”

Her voice was so calm, *too calm*, as she repeated, “The fuck I won’t.”

She was fucking serious. She was going to swing into oncoming traffic just to prove a point. Just to win a stupid race. And I’d forgotten something vital. Something crucial when dealing with Celestia Fernandez.

Ceci saw reason and took instruction if and when she was ready. *Not before*. No matter the issue, big or small, Ceci was going to do what Ceci was willing and ready to do. And knowing this, as a rule I tried not to tell her what to do. I tried not to push her, because kind of like a petulant child, if you told Ceci what to do, there was always the possibility that she’d do the exact opposite.

And my dumbass had basically just-triple-dog dared her into racing headfirst into oncoming traffic.

“*Fuck.*”

Predictably, but no less nerve-racking, she swerved, switching into the opposite lane and gunning it. Ceci's car was this huge hunk of gas guzzling steel that was fast but not as fast as my car. So even as she pushed it, she still didn't quite overtake me right away, and up ahead there were cars coming right for her. They were far enough in the distance...*for now*. But she wasn't bluffing. She was going to ride this out until she either passed me or I slowed down. Either way, she had made up her mind. She wouldn't be falling back behind me.

"Ceci," I said, teeth clamped together, jaw aching from being locked so hard.

She chuckled in a taunting little lilt. "Slow down, Con, if you want a best friend after this."

Up ahead, the cars were getting closer, their lights coming into view.

"Ceci, *get over!*" I insisted, because I *had* slowed down. Of course I did, but she was *still* in the other lane. I'm convinced she just wanted to torture me at this point.

"Hold on, I just need a little more room," she said, sounding like she was focusing. That sound making me feel sick.

Up ahead, the cars were still far, but close enough to see Ceci and understand. Honks filled the air, urgent and panicked.

"*Ceci!*" I just groaned this time. Through the scene in front of me, I felt like I was seeing my life—no, *her* life—flash before my eyes. It was full of red gold hair and mischievous laughs and rowdy pranks and the deepest love for those around her even if she showed it in unconventional ways.

Her life was like a flap of a butterfly's wings, beautiful and chaotic and so damn impactful to those around her. Like the gathering of a tidal wave. Fierce and powerful, leaving everything stunned and changed in her wake. It was like that sliver of honey, sweet and raw and real. *And important*. And she was toying with that life.

"*Cee,*" I croaked, feeling itchy and unwell.



Sadist. That's what she was. Because a second later she let out a cackling, triumphant laugh as she moved her car into the right lane, swerving in front of me and away from danger.

I was breathless. Long seconds passed before I could feel the sweet seep of air filling my lungs, helping me to feel less... Whatever the fuck I was feeling.

It was such a thin line. Being okay and not okay. Being safe and being in total fucking danger. I suppose this *all* was a thin line. Me and Ceci. *Us*. The us that made us friends and us that made us...more. In that moment, when she could have been in danger, I saw that line blur. Just a flicker. And then her laugh was bringing me back to the other side.

We pulled into my driveway a few minutes later. I had silently forfeited, not wanting to test her. She was obviously in a hell of a mood.

Her car slammed into park, and almost in the same motion she hopped down and immediately threw her hands in the air. I winced at her continued recklessness. My chest bubbling as I stepped out of my own car with unsteady limbs. Ceci didn't seem to notice.

"You talked so much shit, and now you owe me," she gloated. Buzzing like she always did, but it suddenly felt so much less invigorating and more incinerating.

"You're crazy," I shook my head.

"Stop it, you're gonna make me blush," she said sarcastically, grinning from ear to ear as she pressed palms to her cheeks.

My voice was not playful or sarcastic or anything but genuine as I stared at her, "No really, Ceci. You can't be that crazy. You'll get hurt if you keep—"

"*Don't worry*. It looked way worse from where you were. I was nowhere near the other cars. I was just messing with you." I looked at her. She didn't seem phased. But she did notice my apprehension and continued to coo reassuringly. "*I swear*. It was just like passing on a two-lane road. Super safe. I checked all my spots."

I sighed. What could I say to that? What could I do? Not talk to her? I had come looking for her because I was worried about her. And now as she stood under me, bouncing with excitement as her yellow eyes glowed dark gold in the light of my driveway, I could see that at least right now, she was okay.

But was I?

Heart pounding in my ears, I expelled a breath. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“Aw, you really do care,” she batted her eyelashes dramatically. I chuckled, but I had to force it out.

*Jesus, she’s okay Connor.* I tried to convince myself, pleading with my body to calm my racing heart. But I was doing a shit job at it. I could tell by the way her smile sobered, her head cocking in question as she watched me.

Clearing my throat I settled for distraction rather than control, asking, “Well, what do you want then?”

“What?”

“For your prize. You won. You get anything you want, remember?” I pushed out, finally finding enough strength to move toward my front door.

“Oh.” She had the nerve to shrug as she followed me inside. “I’ll let you know when I know.”

I wouldn’t tell her, but I needed a minute after that. So while she settled into the couch turning on the TV and flipping through streaming options, I booked it to the shower in my bedroom. Using the warm spray as some kind of coping mechanism, I tried to regulate my thoughts, my breathing, my everything. But no matter what I tried, the accelerator on my heartbeat wouldn’t let up.

I didn’t know what the hell was wrong with me.

Ceci was always like this. She was always impulsive, airing on the side of dangerous way too much of the time. Hell, I picked her up from a bar fight only a week ago. So why was this... fear that I was going to lose her suddenly taking over my

senses? More than just a fear that she'd do something stupid to get herself hurt, but this anxiousness to show her *something*.

You know that feeling of sudden urgency that is almost overwhelming in the sense that time is running out. Like, even though you have a clear picture of what the future will eventually be, you need it to happen right this very second, to confirm it's really true. When I closed my eyes and thought of Ceci, that's how I felt.

Damn. I needed to get a fucking grip. Luckily, I had my siblings to help me with that.

**Clint:** We need to figure this out fast.

**Clay:** It's like a spy movie. *You've Been Hacked!*

**Clint:** Is this somehow funny to you?

**Clay:** Kinda. Con told you about the security. Guess who didn't listen.

**Clint:** How many times do I have to say it?

**Clay:** We know, we know. You're incapable of standing up to your mother. WE GET IT.

**Me:** Either call each other or stop bickering in the group chat. I have like 63 new messages every time I look at my phone.

**Me:** I've been doing all I can from home, Clint. I'll keep working on it, but not tonight.

**Clint:** ?

**Clay:** ??

**Me:** I'm off tonight.

**Clint:** It's the girl you're seeing, isn't it?

**Clay:** My god, it was true!?

**Clint:** I told you.

**Tiney:** I'm late! What did I miss? Con, did you get home okay?

**Me:** Yes

**Clint:** Connor's on a date.

**Tiney:** After you ate already?!

**Me:** I only came because you asked, remember? Didn't want to be rude.

Lie. I knew she would end up inviting me inside if I offered to drop her off at her in-laws' place. I needed a way to see Ceci and my unsuspecting sister was the best option.

**Tiney:** Oh yeah! Thanks for dropping in! Martina loves you! I hope Ceci is alright though.

**Clay:** What the hell are you two talking about?

**Tiney:** Con helped me pick up a few large appliances I ordered special for my new recipes. Afterward, he stopped in with me for the Fernandez dinner.

**Clay:** Riveting Tiney, really. But anyway...

**Clay:** Why won't you just tell us about her man? Is she fugly or something?

**Me:** No.

**Clint:** No she's not ugly or no you won't tell us about her?

**Me:** No she doesn't exist. Will you guys leave it alone?

**Clay:** Sure.

**Clint:** Sure.

**Tiney:** Suuuure!

**Clay:** Well if I WASN'T giving Connor dating advice, I definitely wouldn't tell him to ditch that flannel he loves and wear something new for a change.

**Clint:** If I wasn't giving Connor advice, I wouldn't tell him to speak instead of staring. His "not date" can't read his mind.

**Tiney:** I wouldn't tell him that smiling isn't illegal. Since he seems to think it is.

**Me:** Is it too late to emancipate myself from this family?

"What are you smiling at over there?" My head lifted and my eyes met Ceci's. She was leaning over the back of the couch, peering down the hall at me. Easing my way back into the living room, I realized I was feeling a little better than when we first got home. If it was because of the shower or my siblings, I didn't know. Either way, I could once again look at Ceci and not feel so suffocated by a "what if" I couldn't even place.

**Me:** Gotta go. See you guys soon.

**Clint:** Tomorrow morning.

**Me:** Got it.

**Clint:** Have fun on your date.

**Clay:** Pics or it didn't happen!

**Tiney:** Be a gentleman!

**Me:** Goodbye.

Clicking away from the chat, I silenced it before I was flooded with even more teasing messages. But one more message fought its way through, lighting up my screen as I entered the living room to find Ceci also showered and in my clothes. *Flannel*.

The rogue message was from Tiney, and it wasn't part of the group chat.

**Tiney:** Connor, you know we're only kidding, right? We think it's great you found a girl you're finally letting in! I worry about you, so I'm glad you're finding some happiness.

**Tiney:** Also, if I WERE to give you some dating advice, I would tell you that with the right girl, it doesn't matter what you are, as long as what you are is right for her. Love you! Be good!

**Me:** Thanks Tine.

Locking my phone again, I looked at the girl who was now kneeling right under me. Knees on the cushions and elbows resting on the back, she rested her chin in her hands like she was bored. When I reached her I poked her forehead.

“Hungry?”

“We just came from dinner,” she scoffed.

I scoffed right back. “You didn't take a goddamn bite. Here.” Rotating my phone around I handed it to her. “Order something, I'll make you a drink.”

“Ooo! What did I do to deserve this?” She perked up, taking my phone in hand. Turning, she plopped her butt down on the cushions and immediately started searching our favorite take out menus. At the same time I moved into the kitchen and started pulling down ingredients for a drink to mix while trying to not answer her question in the weirdest way possible.

Because what my brain wanted me to say was, *'you exist'* or *'you came back'* or *'you smile at me every single day and I fucking like that shit'*. But that all sounded weird considering the strange feelings I was suddenly having whenever I looked at her.

In the end what came out was, "You answered to someone other than yourself for an entire week and don't have a mugshot. I'm beyond impressed."

She laughed. One of her loud, unpretty, carefree Ceci laughs that was almost akin to a maniacal cackle. I loved that laugh. It was her real laugh. The one that ripped free when she wasn't apprehensive or on the offensive. When she was comfortable. She'd been showing me this laugh since we first met.

The thought filled me up and calmed me down.

She was here, and she wasn't going anywhere. She had put on my clothes like they were pajamas and turned on our favorite medical drama and as she unlocked my phone I could hear her chirping, "I'm getting sushi. I'll order what you like".

This was all normal. We were still okay.

She was here, and nothing was changing between us. Not yet anyway.

Whether that was good or bad was yet to be seen.



# Chapter Eleven

## CECI

Connor had a girlfriend. I had a job. Things were pretty weird.

Okay, one thing at a time, right? The big one then.

*Connor had a girlfriend.*

A fucking girlfriend!

How did I know? That night after the race—after Con stopped acting so weird—I saw a text on his phone. I wasn't looking for messages or anything, but as I opened up a food delivery app a message came through on the top of the screen.

**Tiney:** And thanks again for standing up for Ceci earlier. She wasn't acting like herself.

I only opened it up with the intention of replying something ridiculous, but instead I got a glimpse of their previous conversation. And that's how I found out that Connor was seeing a girl. A girlfriend! What?

I didn't do any snooping after that. Just closed out his messages and ordered us food like I originally intended. But in the back of my mind, that message lived.

Con had a *girlfriend*. How did I feel about that?

I wondered what she looked like. Probably tall. Lean too. Connor kept himself in really good shape, he probably liked girls who did the same. She probably had undeniable beauty—like I'm talking supermodel beautiful to be with him. Nothing like me...

Had he told her about me? No, why would he? That didn't make any sense, he didn't tell anyone about me. If this girl



was important to him though, *shouldn't* he tell her about me? Something else that was important to him.

Would I still be important to him when they started getting more serious?

How did they even meet in the first place? Con didn't give me details about his date the night before my birthday, but it all seemed kind of sudden if you asked me. One night everything was normal and the next I was asking if he wanted to hang out and he was saying he couldn't because he had a date. Actually, I think the entire conversation went something like:

“Want to hang out after dinner? I don't think Paige and Sarah are going to be knockout company.”

“I can't tonight,” he'd said. I remember waiting for more details, but none came.

With a snort I asked, “What? Got a hot date or something?”

With his own snort he said, “Yeah, sure.”

And that was that. Nothing else. No information about her. No story of how they met. Not even a name. And he definitely didn't ask my advice on the matter, yet he was asking his sister's? I mean yeah she was his sister, but I was supposed to be his best friend. Wasn't I supposed to be the first one he told about this stuff? Shouldn't I know?

Whatever. Bottom line was, Connor had a girlfriend. And for some reason it was irritating the hell out of me

Connor having a girl definitely wasn't the most important of the two phenomena, but one did explain the other.

Since he was *apparently* so busy with Daisy Doolittle or whatever her actual name was—I just bet she was sickeningly sweet and called him shit like ‘*Conny*’ and brought him lunch to work and doted on his every move—there was really no need for me to be hanging around so much. Right? I certainly shouldn't be showing up out of the blue like I usually did. And since regardless of my week from hell, I still needed to at least try to figure my own shit out, I needed to work.

Over the weekend, I hoped to arrive at some sort of conclusion on what job to take, at least until I found something more permanent. But as my life was so determined to show me lately, I didn't have a clue on where to start.

Which is probably how I ended up in the doorway of Paulo's wine shop. Again.

When he saw me, he simply raised an eyebrow and said, "What? You haven't had enough getting everything wrong?"

"Guess not," I said from the threshold.

I fidgeted around with a loose string on my jean shorts as I waited for him to respond. I wanted to barrel right in and just start working, but something was holding me at the door. I messed a lot of things up last week. And like Paulo said, I wasn't passionate about the wine or even the shop, I just needed a place to direct my feelings, and this seemed the most available.

Of everything I did last week, there was just something about Paulo's shop that both grinded my gears but made me want. Want something of my own that made me feel the way Paulo looked around his wine.

"How much longer in that horrible restraint?" Pau asked, jerking his chin to my wrist.

"Another week, then I have physical therapy for another three."

He wrinkled his nose but still nodded. "We open soon, do you think you can handle it? This is a very important time."

I nodded.

"Can you control your attitude?" he asked

"Can you control yours?" I placed a hand on my hip.

He may have smiled at that, but I couldn't see because he blocked it with his shoulder as he turned to busy himself with something behind the counter.

"What days can you come in?" he continued.

"Every day but Thursday."

“And how much do you want to be paid?”

“Nothing,” his gaze popped up to find mine and I could tell he was going to protest, but I shook my head. “You would be helping me. Not the other way around.”

He was quiet as he looked at me for a few extra seconds. Then he turned around and leaned elbows against the front counter. “Alright then, Ant Girl. What are you still doing standing there? We have much to do. You’re just in time for more deliveries.”

I halted after stepping just one step inside, “No more fucking deliveries Paulo, I swear to—”

He surprised me by bursting out in buoyant laughter. A laugh I expected to hear from anyone else. I guess my torture just brought it out of him.

I grumbled as I continued into the store, shaking out of my jacket and coming around the counter to Paulo’s side. “Sure, laugh it up old man. Just keep lining my case file for employee abuse.”

“Sure, sure Ant,” he said, still laughing. “Come. We are going to the cellar.”

And so I worked. Enduring Paulo yelling at me about patience and precision and how my attitude was going to get me in trouble one day.

I graduated from my brace to a gauzy hand tape that I had to administer myself every day. Not to mention the twice a week physical therapy sessions that may have hurt more than the actual punch did.

We opened the shop to a flood of people on opening day and the weeks to follow. Which was good because the busyness of the days kept me preoccupied and away from thinking too much. Or having to answer my phone. Which had been ringing off the hook with messages and calls from my family just “checking in.” I swear they’d never checked in this much in their life. They had even come around a few times in search of me. Each time I begged Paulo to give me something to do in the cellar. I wasn’t ready to see them. Not when I still

had nothing figured out and had basically just settled for something I knew was available.

Nope. I'd already come too close to snapping that night at dinner. Distance and time had done nothing but ramp up my irritation, not tamp it down.

Irritation that took the shape of a nameless, faceless girl who was trying to steal my best friend. Ugh.

I told Connor I had a job now so he wouldn't worry when he called and for some reason I found I didn't want to answer. A feeling I'd never had before learning he had another girl he spent time with.

Ironically, he hadn't contacted me that much. Usually we talked every day, but he was missing days and I was missing days and I guess this is how it all started, right? Him replacing days with me for days with her. Me replacing that with him for...hanging out alone. Pretty soon all his free time would be spent with her, and I would be left at square one. No best friend. No passion. Nothing.

And that was fine...I guess.

Days blurred in a swirl of wine, grip strengthening exercises, and this fleeting sense of ungroundedness. It put me in a funk that wasn't so much self-loathing but self-reflecting.

It was a weird feeling, being on the outside of something. I had always been on the inside. Inside this elite family. Inside this warm circle of brothers and sisters. And even inside this whirlwind friendship with Connor, who was probably one of the best friends I'd ever had. But now suddenly I was on the outside of it all.

It was a lonely feeling.

\* \* \*

On Thursday I went into the shop. I know I said I couldn't work Thursdays, but as soon as the shop had opened for

regular hours I quickly picked that day up too, working a partial day instead of a full.

I had nothing else to do. I didn't *know* what to do. That was my entire song lately.

*I don't know, I don't know, I don't know.*

I was getting fucking tired of it. Uncertainty made me feel icky, this insecurity something I'd never battled before. Indecisiveness weighing on me, begging me to just choose something and be happy.

But my brain didn't work like that. I couldn't just choose, I had to know. It had to be a feeling so right that I could justify going for it with my all and never have to look back.

Humming along to Paulo's bad dance music, I stood behind the store counter pouring samples of chilled Pinot Grigio into the little shot sized glass jars that we kept on ice for customers. It was a nice little touch of refreshment they could pick up and drink as they looked around the store.

It was early for wine, but Thursday was one of our busier days.

Anticipating a lunch rush soon, I was filling the samples ahead of time. Still I didn't expect customers to walk in at eleven in the morning. But a few minutes after I started pouring, I heard the telltale creaking of Pau's shop floors.

I wasn't much of a greeter. I hated having to sound chipper and intensely happy just to see *every* single person who walked through the door, but Paulo told me that I needed to work on being approachable or else he would throw me out on the street. I'd wanted to throw it right back in his unapproachable face, but he had a way with getting people's attention in other ways. I think he mesmerized them with his knowledge and excitement about the wine rather than about them as customers.

All this to say, I was working on it.

"I'll be with you all in a minute!" I called in my fake happy voice, but I didn't look up from my focus on the jars. Paulo

also said that if I spilled any more wine in the ice bucket, he would throw me out on the street.

He threatened to throw me out on the street pretty often.

“*Please*, don’t get too excited on our account,” a deeply sarcastic voice said. I froze. I knew that voice. *Fuck*.

Pausing my pouring I looked up and adopted my best customer-friendly smile. It bordered on a grimace. *I was still working on it*. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“*Ceci*,” he said. “C’mon, enough with the cold shoulder.”

Dropping the smile, I sighed exasperatedly. “What do you want?”

“We’re sorry.”

I rolled my lips into my mouth and swallowed as I looked at them. In front of me stood all four of my siblings looking like someone had kicked their dog. Alta and Mattí were standing side by side with their heads bowed like they were ashamed of something. Lis was standing off to the side with her arms crossed staring quietly. And Ox was behind them all, in the center, rounding them up like he was a teacher making classmates apologize to each other.

I felt my teeth click together and lock. This was annoying.

“Did you hear me?” Ox asked, narrowing eyes on me. His strong features were hard as he held my gaze, not wavering for a second as he searched my face.

A face that was starting to get hot.

I loved Ox. I looked up to him, and this was one of the reasons why. No doubt he had rounded them all up and lectured them down here on how he thought they needed to apologize to me. I loved him for it, but it didn’t mean I wasn’t annoyed.

“What are you guys doing here?” I asked.

“We’ve barely seen you in weeks. We just wanted to say hi,” Al hesitantly said.

“I was at dinner last week. I’ll be at dinner tomorrow.” I shrugged, not knowing what else to say. “There was no need to come here.”

Lis narrowed her eyes. “You came to say hi and left.”

“I was busy.”

Mattí spoke next, “You usually come by to have lunch or talk or hang out during the week.”

“I’ve been busy,” I iterated again.

“Please don’t be mad at us Ceci!” Alta piped up as if she couldn’t contain her plea for another second.

I gritted my teeth, but that didn’t help. I was already snapping, never one to hold my anger well. “I’m not fucking mad at anyone. I’m just fucking busy.”

“Now, now. Be nice to customers, Poca. We talked about this.” I jumped as Paulo appeared behind me out of the back storage room. Hissing, I gave him a look over my shoulder. He did that silent cat shit on purpose, I swear. He liked scaring the shit out of me. When he caught my eye he raised an eyebrow as if to say *‘well?’*

With a tight smile I turned toward my siblings and said, “Feel free to help yourselves to some wine samples while you browse. This *is* a wine store after all, so if you’re not here to *buy wine*, then get out.”

Turning to Pau, I returned a look that said, *‘how was that?’* His mouth ticked up at one side and I found myself smiling in triumph. He thought I was funny sometimes, I could tell, even though he tried to hide it.

Moving under the counter, I grabbed the bread and cheese we kept in the little mini fridge, setting them out next to the wine samples. Noticing, Mattí stepped forward. “I like these samples, Pau. Who thought of these?”

Paulo shrugged and looked at me, so I answered as I reached over the counter to hand each of my siblings a tiny jar of wine. “Al did.”

“I did?” Al asked as she took her jar and unscrewed the top. I hummed, and she looked up as if she was trying to recall a memory. “Oh.”

“Lie. It was the ant girl,” Paulo piped up. “I think she said something like—ahem—you’re crazy if you think I would buy shit this expensive without tasting it first. And I said, okay I see your point. And she said, finally you grew some brains. And I said—”

“Okay! That’s enough of that!” I interjected, giving Pau a look. Turning back to my siblings I shook my head in confusion. “Are we done here?”

“That was a really great idea Ceci—”

I slammed my hands down on the table, “Please don’t start.”

“What? We just—” Alta started

“Don’t say another fucking word.”

“Ceci—” Lis tried.

“What? What? *What?*” I groaned. “I don’t want your apologies and I don’t want your half-ass compliments for my participation prize. Is that okay? Am I allowed to have that? Please?”

Okay, maybe I was being sensitive. But maybe they were being overbearing, too. This wasn’t about them teasing me, I could take that. This was about the glaring truth. While we could debate whether I was clumsy or just inexperienced in that first week, what was undeniable was that I wasn’t anything special. Not like them. Nothing at all like them. And I didn’t need them trying to placate me and act otherwise.

If it walked like a duck, and quacked like a duck, it was probably a motherfucking duck. And I was the ugly-black-sheep-duckling of the family (ha, Con would like that one). *If he even still wanted me around.*

Ugh!

I hated this feeling. I had been hating it all week. Feeling helpless and useless and unfit. And them all showing up here



trying to convince me that I wasn't when I hadn't earned a thing wasn't making it any better.

Everyone was quiet for a moment before Ox cleared his throat and stepped forward. "Ceci, we were wrong. We shouldn't have laughed at you for trying. I know you don't want apologies and I know you don't like to be babied, but we aren't here to make things worse. We came to say sorry because we *are* sorry. And we want to make it clear that even though we poked fun at you, we're still here. And we don't want to stop being the people you come to for help."

Fuck him.

I turned away from his eyes, the black pupils overtaking my light ones in their intensity. I turned my entire back on them, just staring at the wooden floorboards for a few seconds.

One, two, three, four, five seconds actually.

I swallowed. That still wasn't enough time. There was a lump in my throat, but I was *not* letting it rise.

Six, seven, eight, nine, ten... *Damn*. It wouldn't go away.

"Why don't you go pull the new stock out of the cellars, Ant?" Paulo stepped forward, putting a hand on my shoulder. "I can help the customers. You are still terrible at it anyway."

With rushing relief I nodded and exited the counter, rounding it and heading toward the door. To my siblings I said a quick, "I'll see you guys tomorrow," before disappearing below ground.

Maybe an hour later I heard Paulo's approach before I saw him. The rickety stairs that came with the cellar could give even the stealthiest walker away.

"So that is all of you, yes? I don't think I can handle meeting any more young people that are richer than me."

I snorted, "Yeah, that's everyone."

"What did they do to make you so unagreeable?"

"You said I'm always unagreeable."

“Yes, but in a maddening way. Not this depressing way,” he said, waving his hand in my general direction.

I frowned. “They didn’t do anything I wouldn’t have done.”

He eased further into the space. “Yes, but you are upset, no?”

I shrugged.

“You are a fine family all together like that,” he said.

I peeked up at him. “So?”

He looked at me, “But you are still nothing like them. It’s strange.”

*Ouch.*

Hit number two for the simplest words known to man. They stung just as bad as the first time. Hitting me right in the gut again and again.

*Nothing like them,* he’d said. And he wasn’t wrong. *I never have been, not even when I wanted to be.*

“Hey, Pau,” I said, choosing to ignore those words once again. Sucking in a long breath, I let it out in controlled streams. “You remember I have to leave early today?”

“Yes.”

“I think I’m going to head out then, alright?”

He hummed. “Rehabilitation again?”

“Something like that.”



# Chapter Twelve

## CECI

“Selena!”

I didn’t even bat an eyelash at the use of that name anymore. It was the name I had given to the shelter as an alias years ago. Now it was like Selena was actually Ceci.

“Oh thank God you’re here. We need your help!” This was Christine, the on-site director here at Seaside Waterways Woman Shelter. She was an amazing social worker, and I swear she kept this place going with every atom that she was made up with. But God, she was loud.

“Why, what happened?” I asked.

Walking into the front of the shelter, I dropped my jacket behind the seafoam green check-in desk that paralleled the front of the entryway. I always kept my bag and wallet in my car when I came here and tied my hair up in a bun or braid. While I trusted most of the women here, the honest truth was, not all humans—especially humans who were as desperate and afraid as a lot of the women in this shelter—reacted the same way to stress. Being a part of someone’s recovery in any capacity made you a part of their healing journey. It was best to leave my credit cards and hair out of that journey.

“We have a new Temporary. She was displaced with her daughter in the middle of the night. Domestic disturbance case. Apparently she was fine overnight, because she takes sleeping pills for the arthritis, but since she woke up this morning she’s been inconsolable and wants her daughter I think she’s saying, but her daughter is in the hospital *and* we haven’t heard word back so we don’t know what to say *and* she won’t eat anything *and* we think she’s on diabetes

medication but we can't tell which ones or if there's insulin *and* we're afraid she's going to pass out *and*—”

“Chris!” I turned and grabbed her shoulders, halting us both and looking straight into her eyes. “Shut up and tell me what you need.”

Winded from not taking a single goddamn breath, Christine took a shaggy inhale, her dark features looking like they needed more than one. “She only speaks Spanish!”

“Okay,” I said and continued toward the bunk rooms. “Lead with that next time.”

“Thank *God* you're here!” She squeaked again as she followed at my heels.

“Where's Nina?”

“She's not in yet, you're early, and thank—”

“—God. Yeah, I got it,” I finished for her.

Stopping at the door of the “A-Bunk” where older women were housed, I peeked in just past the door frame. Everything looked in order. The A-C bunks were all floor-bed rooms, meaning there were no bunked beds located here. Generally, they were reserved for elderly or women with disabilities. Every bed in the room was painted a different color from the rainbow and they tried to space out the rows enough to allow for just enough room for solitude and personal space. *As much personal space as you could get living in a room with ten or more other women you didn't know.*

Having been coming to the shelter weekly for over a year, this room was familiar to me. But somehow the energy always seemed to change with the turn of the tide. The air was so transient here. Sometimes sad, sometimes hopeful, always heartbreaking in one way or another. I hated it in the sense that I knew there was always going to be a need for it. But if there was one thing I appreciated was action. Things happening. And something about this place forced things to never remain the same for long. Which meant I had to adapt with it if I was going to stay useful.

The air today was thick with melancholy. A quiet sense of despair coating the walls and making it tougher to breathe normally.

Toward the back of the room, sitting on a wire bed painted a bright blue, there was a little woman wrapped up in several blankets in what looked to be her night gown. My heart gave a pang as I watched her watching the window and from here I could hear her repeating a prayer in Spanish.

Leaning back out the room, I chewed my cheek and looked up at Christine. “What can I tell her?”

“Well, first we just need you to let her know where she is. What the date is. And who we are,” Christine started. “If she takes that well, then we can tell her the rest.”

I chewed even more. “And we can’t wait for Nina?”

Nina was the only bilingual social worker on staff. She spoke like seven different languages and was nicer than nice. In the back of my mind I wondered if Connor’s new girlfriend was anything like her. Nice, sweet, special.

Thankfully my bitter thoughts were interrupted by Christine almost as soon as they began. “Nin won’t be here for another three hours. Don’t worry, I’ll be telling you exactly what to say, you just get her attention first. Show her you understand.”

“Okay,” I said, aware that I probably sounded much more in control than I felt.

Even though I’d been coming around for quite some time, this kind of stuff didn’t happen often. Of course they knew I spoke Spanish because I had jumped in to help one time or another when they clearly needed it. But most of the time I showed my support for the women by showing my support for the staff.

I ran out and got supplies, hopped behind the desk sometimes, helped with clean up or flipping bunks when someone left and so on. I talked with the women, especially the women who I saw week after week. I played with the kids, or held babies when their moms needed to pee, but I almost

never did anything *official*. Truthfully, there had only been one other time and it went poorly.

Christine was looking at me like she could somehow read my mind. Leaning in, she gave my arm a squeeze. “Don’t think about before, think of now. It’ll be fine. C’mon.”

“Okay,” I said again and followed her into the rainbow room. I wished so badly that they had a bigger place. That there was room to move around, spread out. That so many women didn’t have to stay in one cramped area. But the truth of it all was, Seaside only had one shelter, so they fit as many women as they could in the little space they had.

Approaching the bed where the woman was seated, I watched Christine’s body language as she eased up to her and leaned down close, lowering her voice and speaking as if we were in a library. “Señora—”

“No!” The woman wailed. “No más chicas fingiendo hablar conmigo. Dónde está mi nieta. Dime!”

*Her granddaughter.* She wanted to know where her granddaughter was, because she had gone to sleep knowing and woken up *here*, without her.

God.

Christine looked at me with a pleading expression and I nodded. Who I was nodding to, I didn’t know. Shuffling around the bed I moved in front of the woman, putting myself in her line of sight. Then with a voice not nearly as calm or sweet as Christine’s, I said, “Senora. Escúchame, por favor.”

“No!”

“Si,” I insisted. Moving closer, I bent to take a knee before her. “Cómo te llamas?”

“Manuela,” she answered.

Sticking my hand out, I said, “Soy Ce—Selena. Mucho Gusto.”

“Dónde está mi nieta, Selena?” she asked again.

I didn't answer. I didn't *know* the answer. Instead, I began reciting the things Christine told me to say.

“My name is Selena, this is Christine. We're here to help you in any way that we can. Your granddaughter was taken to the hospital last night. She has not been released to come get you. You're at the Seaside women's shelter near Claireview. Do you know where you are? Do you know the date? Do you understand what we're telling you?”

Manuela took the news one nod at a time and for a second I thought, *'that was easy, I could do this in my sleep'*, but then Christine kept going. Rambling off quiet sentences for me to repeat in Spanish.

“Last night, at midnight, your granddaughter's fiancé pushed her down the stairs. You were asleep in your room when it happened. Charges can't be pressed until she is conscious again. You were removed from the scene in case of any further retaliation. Do you have anyone you can call?”

I faltered, my eyes flickering to Christine's for just a second before I swallowed and repeated it all back to the woman. I had to restart three times. Twice because of her emotions and once because of my own. But we got through it and by the end I was clutching onto her hands, near begging her to tell me who to call for her. “A quién podemos llamar?”

She was silently crying, her brown skin looking more faded and sunken from even the start of our conversation. Holy shit, Christine hadn't prepared me for this. I felt a tremor rack through me ending at our clasped hands. My next words shaking as I repeated, “Por favor? Con quién puedes hablar?”

She pushed out a ragged sigh, her voice trembling as she said, “Mi hermana.”

*Thank God.* I was beginning to have this sinking feeling she was going to say the only person she had was her granddaughter. And what would happen to her if...if her granddaughter didn't make it?

I had to put it out of my mind in order to stay strong enough to thank Manuela for speaking to me. Strong enough



to take her phone and call her sister and fill her in on the situation. Strong enough to sit with Manuela while she waited for her family to arrive. It was important not to let my own feelings of her situation impede on what *she* was actually going through. Because that's just it. I could feel empathy and I could feel pain for what she was experiencing, but I couldn't fully relate. All I could do was stay in my own lane and help her as much as I could.

We sent Manuela off with her family just as Nina was coming in to start her shift. I was glad to see her go. Not because she was difficult (which she was). She did in fact have diabetes and was on the verge of passing out without her pills or at the very least some food. But the only thing she agreed to eat were the sugar free Jell-O cups that were in *low* reserve in the kitchen.

After it was settled that her sister would be coming to retrieve her, she didn't want to do anything other than play some boring board game, and she didn't want to play it with anyone but me. Whenever she was left alone, she would just cry. Cry and cry and cry, asking where her "*Princesa*" was and how could this happen to them and a ton of other heartbreaking questions that had me thinking one of those heartbreaking pleas would be the one to send me over the edge.

Still, I was glad to see her go. Because so many women came to shelter here, but the most heartbreaking was when they stayed. Not because they wanted to but because they had to. Because on the other end of that question for them, "*who can I call for you*", for a lot of these women the answer was "*no one*".

Cool moisture hit my forehead, bringing instant relief to the flushed area. I groaned and closed my eyes as I leaned into it.

"Take five, babe," Christine said as she held a cold water bottle to my face. "We need to start setting up for the night soon, and you're not getting away with cutting out early

"But I've been here all day," I pouted.

We all knew I didn't mean it. Yes, I was tired, but I had been coming to help on Thursdays for years for a reason. Thursdays were event nights and event nights were my absolute favorite. I loved seeing the women turn into more than just their circumstances on nights like tonight. I loved watching them get to cook, or crochet, or paint, or even just hang out like things were normal for one night a week. It opened up hope. It showed everyone that there was more around the corner than just this shitty storm they were going through and there's more to look forward to than the rain. Event night is what hooked me to this place. That, and Christine's loudmouth. If it was happening, I would be here.

"You did a great job with her," Nina said, coming up behind Christine. "You have a talent for making people calm."

I spit out my water. "Don't make me laugh when I'm drinking."

She gave me a sly look. "I wasn't being funny, Selena. You did exactly what I do here every day, and you did it *well*. You should be proud. Not everyone has the nerve to be both patient and kind when dealing with tough situations like these."

"Kind?" I asked like the word was foreign to me. Not that I thought I wasn't capable of it or anything just—no one had ever called me that before.

"Yes, *kind*," she said. "You should know you don't fool us with your Chihuahua act. You've got a lot of bark, but—"

I held up my injured hand now wrapped in blue gauze and wiggled my fingers, a motion that had just stopped hurting me a few days ago. "Ladies, I hate to break it to you, but I bark *and* bite."

They both laughed, "Okay, I can't say we'll ever forget how you sent that one guy who was making trouble packing last year."

"Or the time you told the board of directors they needed to get their heads out of their asses when they wanted to cut the sanitization budget," Christine went on.

“Geez, it sounds like I should be banned from this place by now,” I said, not quite remembering the board of directors thing, but believing it.

“No!” Nina said, “What you should be is one of us! What do you do for work Selena?”

“Nina! Stop!” Christine exclaimed.

“No, it’s okay,” I said. “I just work at a store.”

“Do you like it?”

“I like the people.” I pushed out.

“Well, we know you like coming here. You’ve stayed here longer than some of the actual employees. You should consider it.”

“I don’t think I can work here after telling the board of directors what I did Nina,” I said, smiling when her eyes lit up with humor. “And even if they did hire me, I could never set them straight like that again.”

“But—”

“But nothing, Nin. Now leave her alone before she decides to leave and never come back.”

Nina gave me a defeated look. I tried to give her a smile that said ‘*it’s okay, really*’ as I squeezed her shoulder. “Thanks anyway though, Nin.”

I checked my phone for the time. Almost event time. Clapping my hands together loudly, I rubbed them up and down like I was getting ready for a feast. “Now. What are we doing this week?”

# Chapter Thirteen

## CECI

They weren't able to find an organization to come into the shelter this week, so we did movie night instead.

Sometimes, that happened. Sometimes the board didn't approve what Christine and Nina wanted to do for the women, or there wasn't an appropriate organization willing to come in for that date and they ended up having to improvise.

Movie night was one of those easy ones. The shelter had this old projector that was set up in the main room for the occasion. Some people would push the old couches together to make a bigger one and some would squirrel off the sides of the room to sit alone. The shelter provided approved snacks, and since I wasn't an employee of the shelter, I provided unapproved snacks. Nothing inappropriate. Just enough popcorn that no one had to share.

They already had to share so much, I can't imagine not even being able to have your own bag of popcorn.

Movie night was fine. We watched a couple, keeping the themes light and palatable. But gathering and eating popcorn in the dark while laughing at a screen for a few hours made me think of my family. We usually did movies after dinner. And with Connor, we did TV shows on slow nights like tonight. Being around all these people usually filled me up, but tonight it was making me feel emptier. Making me miss *my* people.

This weighed on me, slowing down my usual pace here at the shelter. Usually I would stay until the girls left, but tonight I had to get out. As soon as everything was cleaned up, Christine and Nina promising they didn't need any more help, I said my goodbyes and headed outside.

It was cold tonight, the cool sea air traveling far into the city. I liked nights like these. Don't get me wrong, I loved the heat as much as the next girl. The summer wasn't the same without at least a little of the burning sun, but there was something about the coolness of a Rhode Island summer night that calmed me. Cradling my turbulent soul in the memories of cold beach nights and my mom yanking sweaters over our heads in the middle of July. Nothing like salt air and the bite of an Atlantic breeze to make you feel at home.

Earlier, I had walked to the shelter from Paulo's having needed some air and time to think. It was dark out now, and I knew I probably shouldn't be walking all the way back there for my car, but it was only a handful of miles away and every step in the nostalgic night air was feeling more and more like medicine as I strolled.

Walking, I tried to reconcile this aching feeling in my chest. It wasn't new. I felt it almost every time I left the shelter. I used to think it was sadness or on hard days, devastation. But now, as I made myself more aware of others around me, I was starting to believe it was something else. Like I was aching because I didn't want to leave.

I sighed.

I couldn't work at the shelter. Nina was nice to say something like that, and to be honest it did make me feel good to be deemed capable at something. But it would be a liability to work there. For them to know me. The feeling had been nice, though. So nice I wanted to tell someone. But who would even understand?

No one thought of me like Nina and Christine did. No one saw me as kind or patient or calming. They wouldn't understand my willingness to fight for women I didn't know just because. They wouldn't understand. And I couldn't do any more than volunteer once or twice a week anyway, so what was the point of explaining it to them?

There wasn't one. So I wouldn't.

Minutes blended together as I walked and walked, the bright city streets turned darker as I made it closer to the

beach. I didn't realize how far I actually parked, but it was still okay. When I got tired of my own voice in my head, I popped a headphone in and listened to music as I made the rest of the trek down to my car, being sure to leave one ear open just in case.

I was finally turning onto the cobblestone street of the market district when it occurred to me that my car might not be there anymore. I had been gone for hours and the parking register was only meant for two. Quickly, I fished out my keys and double pressed the lock button almost whimpering in relief as the car beeped its response.

*Thank God.* A tow was the last thing I wanted to deal with tonight.

“Hey!”

I jumped at the sound of the deep voice coming from behind me. Turning one way and then the other I looked for someone but didn't see anything. So I kept walking, a little faster this time.

“Hey, I'm fucking talking to you,” the voice came closer now.

*Well shit.* What do I do? Turn around and confront this person or rush to my car and risk him getting in with me? I didn't know, and I didn't have time to decide because the next thing I knew an unfamiliar hand was gripping my shoulder and turning me around.

Suddenly I was face to face with an average height man with shaggy blonde hair, tattered old clothes, and no visible weapon. One look at his expression told me all I needed to know. Shoving him, I tried to move away. With quicker reflexes than I gave him credit for, he grabbed hold of one of my arms and yanked me back to him.

Without my permission, I let out a squeak of pain. He was holding my hurt wrist. *Damn.* I tried to jerk it back, but it didn't budge.

*Damn, damn, damn.*

“Just give me your money, bitch, and I’ll be on my way,” the guy said.

“Fuck off,” I spat as I continued trying to free myself.

He yanked me closer, his clammy hand squeezing around my wrist so hard it felt like it could pop. In my face he said again, “*Give me your fucking money.* You don’t have to make this hard.”

“I don’t have any money,” I said. Which was true. My wallet was in my car.

He scoffed, “Yeah, right. This is a thirteen hundred dollar watch you have on, easy. Matter of fact, give me that too.”

“Take it,” I said, hoping he’d let go of me long enough for me to break loose.

He laughed, “No, no. *You* take it off.”

I tried to move again. Move back, move up, kick my legs, *something*. But I was sluggish, my heart rate starting to spike and fear starting to kick in. I hadn’t been ready for this. He’d sprung out of nowhere and I was at a loss on what to do. I was trapped, my only reaction to fight. But this guy had inches on me and strength, and the fighting just wasn’t working.

“You’re not going anywhere, bitch. Not until you give me this watch and all your goddamn money. And then maybe your pretty little ass can come with me afterward,” he sneered, ugly crooked teeth visible underneath his dirty smile.

“*Fuck. You.*” I grit out, but my voice was husky and I could hear a wavering ripple course through it.

*This is not the time to go soft, Ceci.*

“Maybe later, now *take it off!*” he yelled, using his grip on my wrist to twist my hands in front of me, allowing me access to the clasp of my watch.

Having no other choice, I obeyed. My heart was racing out of control and my hands were starting to shake even in the restraint of this asshole’s grasp. But I did what he said. Moving to unclasp the watch *slowly*. Slow enough to buy myself time to think of a next move.

My body was telling me to kick, thrash, fight. But my brain was clearly saying that we were not going to win. He had my arms, so I couldn't reach my phone. My keys were crushed in one of my palms, digging deep into the skin as I tried to conceal them. The street was dark, no one else visible in the dim light of the moon and this guy seemed like he was going to see this whole robbery thing out to the end.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

“Take the damn watch off *today*,” he said, looking around himself agitatedly, like he was realizing he could get caught at any moment.

I did as he said. I unclasped the watch and jiggled my wrist enough that it dropped to the ground, hitting my shoe and then his before rolling to the cobblestone.

“Bitch,” he hissed. If he wanted to get the watch from the ground, he'd have to let me go. The obstacle didn't deter him, he just continued with his plan. “Now the money.”

“It's in my car.”

“Where's that?”

“Close.”

“Give me the keys”

“I can't dipshit. Just let me—”

“I'm in charge here!” he barked, shaking me painfully. I felt sick as he took full control of my body and moved me at his will. “Give me the damn keys!”

“I. Can't. Reach. Them.” My teeth were clamped so hard at this point my jaw was aching and I don't even know how I got the words out. Fear had officially landed, causing my heart to race in my ears and my throat.

“Fuck,” he spat, looking around himself again. “Okay, I'm letting you go, but don't try anything funny. I have a gun.”

I didn't think he had a gun. If he'd had a gun he would have led with it rather than his own strength, but still I couldn't be sure.



Sweat formed on the back of my neck as I waited for him to release me. The wheels in my brain turned over and over. Tracking how far I was to my car, how long it would take me to run, what if I dropped my keys, what if I fell, goddamn my wrist hurt. Thought after thought flooded my mind, trying to formulate some kind of plan.

I wasn't doing a great job at hiding my plotting, because he still wasn't letting go. Instead, he shook me hard enough that I shuddered out a ragged breath, fear leaking out of me for the first time for him to see.

"I know you work at that bitch shelter. Try something funny and I'll just come back for you," he warned.

I growled and bucked at him but he just shook me again, making me dizzy this time. When I stopped struggling, he smiled nastily at me. "Good. Now give me those keys."

Then he let go.

I didn't take a step back immediately like I wanted to. Instead, I reached behind my back and pretended I was pulling the keys I had tucked away in my fist from my back pocket. My heart pounded as I ran through my possibilities at a mile a millisecond. So many things I could do in that very moment. But I needed it to be the *right* thing.

Moving my arm back around to my front at the last possible second, I lanced it out hard and fast, catching him with a hard knock under his chin and sending him stumbling a few steps back. Taking the open opportunity, I put a greater distance between us.

"You bitch!" he called, pain and panic coursing through his words.

He started toward me, and I had to make a decision. Me or my car. Definitely me. This guy had me under his complete control and didn't try to cop a feel once. He was definitely after money over anything. If I gave him the keys to a hundred thousand dollar vehicle that also had my wallet in it, he might just choose that over trying to prove a point.

Cocking my arm back, I threw the keys over his head and they went soaring through the air, landing with a jangling thud behind him. He stopped. Looking at me, then back at the keys, he doubled back in a run for the keys. As soon as he turned, I was running too.

I didn't take off down the street. I didn't have a car to go to anymore, and if he had gotten into mine he could catch me on foot. I only knew one other place to go.

The cellar.

It was only about a ten-foot sprint to Paulo's cellar doors, but with every step I took, my heart pounded in my feet. My injured hand shook as I worked the latch open and my legs shook even harder as I moved myself down the steps. Clicking the inside latch shut, I ran the rest of the way into the cold, dark space, finding the darkest corner underneath one of the elevated barrels of wine to crawl into and curl up.

My phone fumbled out of my pocket, my hands too unsteady to keep it still. Tremors caused me to drop the damn thing twice in a row.

"Fuck," I spat, scolding myself. I was safe in the dark for now, but if he followed me in here somehow, I would be cornered. I needed to open my phone and I needed to do it now. "*Focus, Celestia.*"

I did. Apparently clenching my fingers around the device so hard that I could feel my bad hand pulsing was all I had to do to get it to stop shaking. At least for long enough to open my phone and pull up my app central.

A loud bang sounded on the other side of the cellar doors and I jumped, almost losing the phone again. By now, I could hear thundering in my ears and it wasn't just the sound of the guy slamming against the doors. It was the sound of my heartbeat. The mixture of the two noises created an uproar of crashing sound around me. My jaw hurt as I clamped it shut, stress taking over as he banged and banged and banged.

My head swam. My entire face burning from the pressure of blood rushing through it. This was just my fucking luck.

Leave it to me to be followed for miles just to get mugged by the one psychopath in the city who wanted souvenirs.

Finding purchase, I opened the alarm app on my phone and found the external alarm system for my car. Without hesitating, I pressed the panic button. Four seconds later, a blaring horn started outside the cellar doors. Two seconds after that, the banging stopped. Five seconds after that a pop-up on my phone read:

***We see that you have alerted Command Central. Would you like to call the police?***

*Did* I want to call the police? On one hand I really, really didn't want this to become a scene. If I called the police they would show up with their lights and radios and all this other shit. Paulo would find out and then he would tell my family and my family would make it a thing. But on the other hand, how was I ever going to get out of this cellar without knowing if it was safe out there? Making a split second decision, I pressed the 'no' button and waited for another pop up to confirm that the police had not been notified.

Minor relief flooded me but not before *another* pop-up shot to the screen, this time from Paulo's alarm system. It read:

***Alert! Breach detected! The authorities will be notified. Set off alarm now?***

"Fuck no," I hissed as I fumbled around with the settings, trying to stop it before it detonated. My shaking had returned, making fumbling around with this alarm's more complicated settings difficult, but finally after what seemed like hours, I got it to turn off.

And then there was silence.

Well, there was still the blaring of the external car alarm Con had put on my car last year and I think there was some kind of ticking going on from somewhere in the cellar, but I might as well have been sitting in a library because I couldn't hear anything aside from the sound of my own breath.

It was ragged and uneven and sporadic, my mind unable to catch onto any coherent thoughts. Now that I was free, I didn't

know what to do next. It had been minutes since that last bang and I could still hear my car blaring from outside. Maybe the guy had turned tail and run.

*I should get up.*

I should get up and go to the doors and let myself out and drive myself home. I should get in the shower and wash this rollercoaster of a day off and vow to myself to never walk from the shop to the shelter again. I should put one foot in front of the other and *get the fuck up*.

But every time I tried to lift myself out of that corner, my knees buckled and sat me back down. I cursed at myself for being so unsteady. I shamed myself for being so stupid. I pleaded with myself to just get the fuck up and go home. If I could make it home, I would be okay. I just had to *get up*.

But I couldn't.

How could I when I didn't even know if I would *make it* home? That woman today, she didn't know if her granddaughter would make it home. So many people had no idea if they would live or die at any moment. No clue what was waiting on the other side of their own cellar doors.

I couldn't get up, so with shaking hands I did the next right thing my brain would allow.

I called someone who would get up for me.



# Chapter Fourteen

## CONNOR

“Please release us,” Clay groaned as he laid his head on the table in one of Ferguson Enterprises’ many conference rooms.

Clint, the initiator of this meeting and the reason we hadn’t already given it a rest, ignored our brother. Instead he just continued thumbing through the mountainous pile of files he’d been working at on his side of the room. “Less talking, more looking.”

“We are never going home are we?” Clay grumbled but picked up another file folder, nonetheless.

We were currently hand-cycling every piece of information that was supposed to have been recorded in the years leading up to Clint’s take over as CEO. Why? Because we still couldn’t get into the goddamn file.

Okay. Maybe I was being a little dramatic. The original file Clint sent over, I cracked into only a few hours after I hung up with him. The problem was once I did, I noticed something weird about it. So weird, that I went digging deeper into the rest of the server before even running my suspicions by my brother.

It was the right move.

Turns out things were just as bad as I thought. Someone was indeed hacking into old files at Ferguson and changing them. From the looks of it, they have been for a while. And they were doing it in a way that was almost identical to how I secure our files. The only reason I even noticed it is because of this random file Clint needed access to. He still hadn’t told me why, but with the newfound knowledge that there was someone somewhere fucking with us, I had a feeling that it wasn’t just for shits and giggles.

And now, half in the dark but half aware that something was up, Clint was telling us that we needed to know exactly what was being changed.

It was almost insulting that behind all of this, I still hadn't been able to trace the changes back to a source yet. Whoever was messing with us was covering their tracks well, making me look like a dipshit in the process.

Especially when it came to my mother.

You could only imagine how certain someones took the news that an unknown source was hacking into the Ferguson network and changing the integrity of old financial documents.

Documents *I* was supposed to be guarding.

Spoiler, the first someone (Clint) was furious. He blamed me and the “*stupid*” computers, before he ultimately blamed himself. Always the martyr.

Second spoiler, the other someone (my fucking mother) was livid.

“Connor,” Mom had said through teeth that were so smashed together, I was afraid they'd break. “You insisted on doing this job. What is the point of you doing it, if it's not done right?”

“Mother,” I had said through my own teeth. The video call we were on bolstering my confidence as it served as a barrier between me and the real woman. “It's impossible for me to catch everything. It's even harder for me to catch *anything* when you refuse to actually listen to my advice.”

“Oh?” Throwing her hands in front of her she gestured wildly at me. “Well please, advise us son.”

I glared, my irritation ratcheting up to an umpteenth degree at her condescension. “What's done is done, Mom. I'm working on backtracking where the file changes came from, but we're probably better off keeping the changes and analyzing the files as I unlock them. That way we can see what the hell this person wants.”

“Okay,” she started, clasping her hands together. “So, while your brother is under fire for a possible data integrity leak, you want to play internet spy to fix something that’s not supposed to be broken in the first place? I don’t remember raising you to be so irresponsible, Connor.”

I almost lost it right there. She always pulled this shit. The “*I don’t remember raising you this way*” card. The poor her card. Like it was her who had to deal with her wants and needs being ridiculed and cast aside for something more favorable all the time. Like it was *her* that felt like they were hovering just on the outskirts of their family, because they simply wanted a different path. All for just wanting to be who she is.

It was all bullshit, and I was getting sick and tired of being made to feel bad for her unchanging, unwarranted judgment of me and my interests. I was getting sick of even trying.

Ceci was so right. I should just tell them all to fuck off. To figure it out on their own. I had tried to tell them the right way to do things. I tried and tried, but I was still being treated like an invalid child and maybe I should finally start acting like one.

Clint was stepping in before I got any Ceci Fernandez-like notions, though. Having been in the same room with me, he stood and came to my side. A large hand laying over my shoulder before I even knew I was rising. He pushed down with force but only addressed the large projecting screen that showcased our mother.

“Mom,” Clint said. “You raised us to think critically when it comes to business, not emotionally. If there’s blame, it’s with all of us.”

“You can’t always bail your brothers out—”

“I’m not, Mom. I’m just saying, right now until we know what they want, we have more pressing issues than whose fault it is. We’ll see if we can find the original files. Connor will try to trace it back to a source. You and Papa try to remember if there’s anyone you know who could or would do something like this, and why.”



“What should I do?” Clay asked from beside us, sounding eager and ready. I couldn’t help but narrow my eyes at him, the fucking idiot. He had been humming spy tunes and making stupid comments since this all started. He was having too much fun with all of this.

Clint pursed his lips, noticing this ridiculousness too, but apparently pulling his punches today. “Clay you...sit tight.”

The eager look on Clay’s face disappeared as fast as it surfaced as he sat back in his chair mumbling, “Man, I never get to do anything fun.”

So here we were. Still no idea who’s been hacking into the files and continuing on our plan to find all the paper copies, if there were even still any to find. We’d been at it for days, coming into this conference room with stacks of files to sort and not leaving until we physically couldn’t go any longer. It was clear we were all reaching our limit.

Against my thigh, I felt my phone begin to vibrate, buzzing a stiffness through me along with it. I should be happy for any distraction from the hell of having to *hand sort* files, (I mean, that is why computers were invented), but I found myself stiffening at any call lately. Afraid that it was my mother calling to chew me out yet again.

I’m not sure I felt much better about the name that actually flashed across the screen. Ceci, or more accurately the little blueberry emoji she’d changed her name to when she had my phone last had been contacting me less lately. So I was a little taken off guard by her sudden call so late in the night, conflicting emotions rushed me at the sight of it.

It was late, well past eleven at night, and she was usually more of a texter. For the last couple of weeks she’d been acting sort of weird. Ducking and dodging around certain subjects. Refusing to stay over even when it was really late. Even knocking on the door, when she had a key. She’d stopped asking me to meet her for lunch and started questioning if I was free. Before recently she wouldn’t even bother asking, she’d just show up and join in on whatever I was doing whether I was free or not.

It felt like she was putting up some sort of boundary between us. Pulling away from me for some reason, and after almost two years of having no such boundaries, it felt like a rejection in a way.

After the constant rejection from my mother, I guess I was taking it a little more personally than usual right now.

Still, I wanted to talk to her about it. I knew she was going through a hard time, but I wanted to make it clear to her that she didn't have to go through it alone. I understood that she was going through something, but what had I done to make her believe that I couldn't go through it with her? Help her through it. I had been there for her all the other times, hadn't I?

I still wanted to be there for her now. Lord knew she was always there for me.

Only, this thing with my brother had taken up much more of my time than I expected and I didn't want to talk to her about it over the phone. I also couldn't just leave in the middle of my family responsibilities, either.

So I let the phone ring, promising myself I would call her back later. But just a couple minutes after the call went to voicemail, guilt had me sending her a text.

**Me:** You okay?

Her response was immediate. A dropped pin of her location. *Weird*. Opening it up I saw that she was at her job. I guess she was working late hours tonight. Or maybe she finally wanted to show me where she worked? Whatever. I'd call her back after Clint finally let us go home.

But before I could settle back into thumbing through the stack of documents in front of me, my phone rang again, buzzing face down on the table this time. I picked it up not expecting it to be Ceci twice in a row. But there it was, her name showing up on my screen with the little blue emojis again.

I frowned. That wasn't like her. If I was busy, she had no problem texting me nonstop until I returned her phone call, but

she never called back to back.

Hair prickled on the back of my neck, and the room seemed to expand in size, keeping me in the center and pushing my brothers away to the far corners of my awareness. Worry twisted my gut but as soon as I moved my hand to accept the call, Clint was talking.

“Did you find anything?”

“Uh,” I frowned down at the phone and then tucked it away. I would call her back *right* after this. “Uh, no. Still looking. Have you?”

“No,” he frowned at his stack. “I know it seems crazy, making you do this, I just have this feeling that—”

My heart sank as my phone lit up again, Ceci’s contact taking up the screen. It went from zero to racing out of my chest. All other noise muted around me, and I was on my feet so fast, my head swam.

Three calls? Something wasn’t right.

Answering the phone I pressed it to my ear. I didn’t even have time to inhale a breath to speak before I heard her shaking, hitching, *terrified* voice say, “Con?”

I was a shattered piece of glass in that moment. That voice the hammer that broke me.

I may have stumbled a step, the chair behind me shooting backward on its wheels as I bumped it. I didn’t care. The only thing I cared about was what the fuck could have possibly happened to make Ceci, my fucking Ceci, sound like *that*.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, already patting my pockets for my keys. They were across the room. I moved to grab them, but Clay slid them across the table to me, picking up on my urgency. “What happened?”

“He...” her voice shook. Swallowing so loud I could hear it on my side of the line, she cleared her throat and when she spoke again her voice was clearer but just barely. “Someone followed... Ran away... Come get me. *Please?*”

What?

Was someone following her? Was she hiding? What the fuck was happening?

“Stay right there, I’m coming to you right now,” I said, already moving toward the door. Out of the corner of my eye I saw both of my brothers rise as if they were going to follow me. I held a staying hand out to them. I could call them if I needed them, but until then I’d go to her myself. They lowered back to their seats slowly, and I gave a nod of acknowledgment before turning toward the door. Back with Ceci I said, “Don’t fight, don’t move, don’t say anything. Stay put, do you understand me?”

“Con,” she whimpered and my heart continued to break. “I can’t get up.”

I started to run.

\* \* \*

I really, *really* wanted to stop seeing my—Ceci’s life flash before my eyes. But she just kept getting into these situations, and sadly I couldn’t see this being the last time.

When I arrived at the dropped pin, I vaguely registered the fact that we were in upper seaside, near the beach and way out of the range of any usual crime hotspots. I hardly even registered that the quaint little shop that read ‘*Mizotti Wine Co*’ had to be Ceci’s job. The only thing I noticed when I arrived was her car blaring bloody murder as the alarm went off.

*Shit.* Did she get mugged or something? Did someone try to snatch her? They could probably fit her little ass in one burlap sack if they really wanted to. I had to find her.

Sheer panic had only ever been an expression to me before that moment. When my sister was sold off into marriage and again when she was hospitalized, the bad parts had already happened. What’s done had already been done, I only had to deal with the consequences. Now, as I kneeled beside her car

feeling around for the extra key box, I couldn't help the gut wrenching anxiety that was threatening to overhaul my senses. Ceci was *currently* in trouble. And I needed to find her to get her out of it.

Putting in the combination, the key box unlatched and deposited an extra fob to the ground. I scooped it up and popped the locks three times to stop the alarm, but nothing happened. *She must have set it off from her phone then.*

Backtracking, I went back to the front of the store and looked around. Nothing was there. No lights were on, no sign of Ceci in sight.

Fuck.

Scrubbing my face I speared my eyes in every direction where they eventually caught the glare of the streetlamp on something shiny in the distance. Far from the front of the store but visible as it glimmered in the light.

In my hand, I recognized the object to be Ceci's keys by the little blue 'C' that hung on a string.

*Fuck.*

I opened the location pin again, frantically trying to match the digital indicator to my location. My head whipped back and forth, my body spinning one way and then the other as I tried to scan every possible surface for her. How hard was it to find a little fire headed woman on an empty goddamn street anyway? Apparently very hard, because no matter how hard I looked I couldn't spot her.

**Me:** Are you safe to call me?

**C:** Just come get me.

**Me:** I'm trying to find you but I can't. I'm close. I have your keys.

**C:** In the cellar.

Cellar. Cellar. Where is a damn cellar?

My feet were moving before I consciously registered where I was running to. Not until I pulled to a stop in front of the little steel cellar doors, yanking on them to try to get in. They didn't move.

Knocking hard I said, “Ceci it’s me!”

Nothing.

I can’t get up. Those were her words earlier. They choked me just as much now in my head as they had coming out of her mouth.

“Celestia! Open up, honey. It’s Connor,” I tried again.

Nothing.

I resisted the urge to yell or curse or lash out in frustration. I knew I was just scared. Scared to find her in a state that I wasn’t ready to reconcile. Scared to find her hurt.

Could she be hurt? If she was, how was I going to get into a locked cellar?

My chest started to feel like a cage, my oxygen the prisoner. How was I going to get to her? But forcing myself to calm down I tried to think.

If she can’t open the door we had other options. The fire department, the police, her boss. We had options. I just needed to get her out of there.

I tried calling her but it went to voicemail. I tried again. Voicemail. My mind circled, panic starting to outweigh sense. Was he in there with her? Is that why she wasn’t answering? Was she hiding for her life in a dark, cold cellar? Was she fighting?

Fuck.

“Celestia!” I called, banging again. Against my usual calm I banged on that door repeatedly as I pleaded, “If you can’t walk, crawl. Do something, just come unlock the door so I can get you out of there.”

Still. Nothing.

No phone call. No text. No indication that she was okay.

Minutes passed, all of which I talked. Yelled. What I said, I had no clue. All sounds were starting to blur together, the only surety being that none of those sounds were her voice. She wasn’t talking, wasn’t answering, I hardly even knew if she

was still in there. And I was starting to waver on what the hell I should do.

I could call the authorities, or the fire department, or I could

—

The noise of metal knocking against metal pulled me out of my spiraling thoughts. The distinctive sound of a latch releasing slicing through my senses.

I had the door open in seconds and was plowing down the old creaking steps of the cellar with one purpose.

Find her.

I didn't have to look far, because there she was. Red hair everywhere, the remnants of what used to be a braid spilling over her shoulder. Those very same shoulders bunched so high they covered her ears, and her amber eyes so wide, so dilated they looked black. In front of her, her shaking hands were holding a crowbar that looked so rusted she probably needed a tetanus shot.

When I entered, she staggered fast steps backward, cowering toward these large wooden barrels near the back of the room. I had no idea what else was back there. The light stopped about halfway in before it turned pure black.

"It's me," I said, wasting no time before charging for her.

Bad move. She took a swing at me before I could even get in range. I ducked back hissing.

What the hell?

"Hey," I said placatingly. Slowly this time, I eased my way closer to her. "Celestia, it's me."

This caught her attention. Her eyes clamoring into mine and seeing me for the first time. "Con?"

"I'm right here, honey," I said, easing another step in. Her eyes racked around her and then behind me frantically but her face remained wrapped in steel. Tight and strained as she surveyed around us for her assailant. I took another cautious step, pointing at myself as I did. "Look right here. Nobody else is around. Look at me."

She did. For once in her fucking life, she listened, and I could tell the moment she came back. Wherever the hell she was, she came back. Her chest heaving in and out like she had just ran a marathon. Her eyes going from deer in headlights to murderous, and I didn't know if I was relieved or worried to see that look, but I was just glad to have her here with me.

“Drop the crowbar, Ceci.”

She shook her head.

“Drop it, Cee,” I said more sternly.

“I c-can't,” she croaked, and when I looked down at her hands, they were white as she gripped the tool, the whole thing shaking wildly in front of her.

I nodded, sliding another inch closer. “Alright. I'm coming in to help, okay? Do. Not. Swing, Ceci. Don't swing.”

She didn't say anything, this time letting me get close. Close enough to wrap my hands around her shaking ones. Close enough to let me work her grip free finger by finger.

“Come on,” I coaxed, “Just let it go—no. Look at me. Good. Now, let it go.”

The sound of metal hitting the concrete might as well have been a symphony ringing victory. As soon as it was loose, I gathered her up to my chest and held onto her tight.

My every breath was her, my every fear was her, my every fucking relief was her.

“Fuck,” I croaked as I scooped her in close and wrapped my arms around her. She trembled and I wrapped her up tighter, trying to stop the rumbling shakes. I hated this. I hated every fucking second of it. And I needed to get her out. “Let's go.”

We didn't even make it a step. I tried to pull her along with me as I rushed the door, but as I moved she did not. Her attention was instead focused down on her feet. She was lifting one of them at a snail's pace only to set the shaking thing back down on the ground with a defeated, grunting curse.



I can't get up. That's what she had said; that she couldn't get up. And finally, I realized what she meant. At first glance her body seemed unharmed, but for some reason (fear most likely) Ceci was stunned into immobility.

"Fuck," I grunted again. The word was becoming my anthem now. I didn't have any others to contribute.

Gone was the girl who bounced on every step. Gone was the girl that charged into every movement. Gone was the sure, confident, fearless girl that was all Ceci. And here was a fractured shell of her, stunned and paralyzed and yet still chastising herself for not being perfect.

I didn't wait another second. I lifted her into my arms and moved us toward the cellar doors. Like ice on hot concrete, she melted into me. Her arms going around my neck, her face going into my shoulder.

She didn't cry. My girl never cried, but she shook the entire way home.





# Chapter Fifteen

## CONNOR

I realized with some level of apprehension that the shaking transformed from fear to anger about halfway through the drive home.

One shower, a cup of untouched tea, and two hyperventilation attacks later and we were sitting quietly at the dining room table in silence. We had been in silence for almost an hour. I was trying to be patient, but it was driving me absolutely insane.

Finally, I set a hand down on the table, careful not to make her jump. “You have to tell me what happened, Cee.”

Her head didn’t even move to look at me. She had been staring into the pool of tea ever since I set it in front of her. Now, as it became apparent she wasn’t going to say anything, I moved the cup away. Using her chair, I turned her toward me, my own chair facing hers and my knees spread wide enough that she fit between them.

Her hands were resting in her lap, balled up so tight I’m pretty sure her nails were digging divots into the soft skin by now.

I started there.

Slipping my fingers underneath her clenched ones, I worked to pry her fist open. It took some doing, but slowly, I got her hands to relax. And then I took them into my own, cradling the backs of her small hands as I ran my thumbs across the markings she made in her palms.

Peeking up at her, I swallowed roughly and I said—*pleaded*, “Please?”

For the first time since we got home, she looked up at me. Just a short peek, before she returned her gaze to her hands. Her eyes were set so still you would think she was frozen that way. Her jaw locked tighter than the cellar door.

Without thinking, I reached toward her, cupping that jaw and moving her face so that she *had* to look at me. “And *stop clenching these*, alright?”

She trembled once but seemed to melt into my touch, her eyes closing and her breath seeping out just before she sucked it in hard. Shuddering again before she began to speak.

“I tried to fight him.”

“I know, Ceci. It’s okay, you did the right thing.”

“No. I didn’t.” She shook her head. “I didn’t do anything right. He grabbed me and he told me to give him my money and when I told him I didn’t have any with me, he twisted my wrist and it *hurt*.”

The urge to get up and thrash someone at the sound of that word was visceral.

*Hurt.*

She was hurt and her voice was shaking again like she wanted to cry but her body wouldn’t let her. I pinched the bridge of my nose. The only thing that was helping to alleviate my urge to run out of this house and scour the streets until there was a head on a spit.

“Why were you alone so late at night? Where did he follow you from?” I asked.

“I was just walking to my car. I was going to go home,” she said.

“*From where, Cee?*” I asked again. “Was he hanging around the store? If this guy is hanging around waiting for you, I need to know.”

“No.” She shook her head. “No. I was walking back from the Claireview area and I—”

I jerked back, looking at her in full view. Was she serious? “*Claireview*? What the hell were you doing in that part of town?”

She opened her mouth but seemed to hesitate and closed it again before averting her eyes. “I didn’t realize how late I stayed until after I was walking back to my car.”

“Your car was miles away from *Claireview*, Ceci. What were you doing there?”

“I didn’t ask for this, Con,” she said in a breathy way that momentarily distracted me from my questioning.

I shook my head, my eyebrows pulling inward. “What are you talking about? Of course you didn’t.”

“No,” she said. Lifting her eyes, she met mine. They seemed fully present for the first time all night. No more zombie Ceci. “Sometimes—when I’m looking for trouble, you know—sometimes I think, if something were to happen to me, it would sort of be my fault, right? I pick fights, I rile people up, and sometimes I deserve the consequences. But I didn’t *do* anything this time. I promise I didn’t.”

I swallowed. I didn’t know who she was trying to convince. I didn’t care if she set the damn city on fire and laughed while doing it, whoever fucking touched her would have a hard time walking if I ever found them.

“*Celestia*, why were you in *Claireview*?” I repeated rather than tell her this.

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” she grit back.

“I know you didn’t, but you shouldn’t have been there at all let alone walking around that area at night by yourself!” I seethed. The patience I had was thinning, and fast.

“I had something to do,” she said, turning her chin away from me.

“*What?*” I was pleading now, begging her to tell me anything.

“Just something okay?”

“No, not okay!” I snapped, gripping her chin and bringing her gaze back to mine. “Absolutely, not fucking okay, Cee. Look at you. You did something dangerous, somewhere dangerous and you could have gotten so badly hurt or even worse! You shouldn’t have been there, and I want to know why you were.”

“I’m *sorry!*” She croaked. Her voice broke on the last word, her body crumbling in on itself. “I’m sorry, I know it was stupid and I did everything wrong. I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry.”

Woah.

“Okay,” I said, backtracking in a calmer voice. I was pushing too far. Slowly, I slid out of my chair and crouched in front of her, my hands sliding up into her hair and beginning to massage. The soft strands tangled around my fingers, her warm body reminding me that this was Ceci. She would tell me when she was ready. She was upset right now. Scared. And she didn’t need me making it worse. “Hey now. Don’t do that —*I’m* sorry. Are you tired?”

Slowly she nodded, her expression looking miserable.

“Let’s go to bed then.” Without asking, I scooped her against my front and she wrapped her arms around my neck, her legs going around my middle. She was so close to me, every part of her seeking something from my body and whatever it was, I wanted to give her. Another tremor racked through her causing us both to shake, and I felt rage bubble up inside me. So much that I wanted to scream. But to her, I kept my voice low. “No more shaking.”

“I can’t stop,” she whispered.

I cradled her closer, if it was even possible. Massaging fingers onto the back of her neck and into her warm head, “I’m right here, don’t be scared anymore.”

“I’m not, I’m *pissed.*”

“Don’t be that either,” I murmured into her, unable to help my face from nuzzling her warm neck.

“Then what should I be?” she asked.

Squeezing her tightly, I bypassed the guest room she usually stayed in and went straight into mine. “Just be okay.”





# Chapter Sixteen

## CECI

Connor's bed smelled so good. Like sandalwood, body wash, and that cocoa butter pomade I swear he used *everywhere*. Once, I made him give me a bottle of it, but I'd stopped using it after I caught him rubbing it up and down his defined abdomen in a way my mind wouldn't let me unsee. I still hadn't forgotten the way the muscled ridges glistened. After that, I couldn't look at the stuff the same.

Now, I snuggled into the scent of it and the warmth of his deep green sheets.

Connor's house I was no stranger to, but Connor's bed was new. I'd sat in it before, of course. Had laid in it even while we watched movies or just talked. But I had never *slept* in it. Not in the intentional way that he had laid me down last night and tucked me under the very same warm cloth as him. And now, as I came awake slowly and began to blink my eyes open, I realized that half of the warmth I was feeling was due to the large chest snuggled up close to my back.

Last night was tough. I hadn't been able to sleep. Every time I closed my eyes the darkness would start to feel like the cellar and I would have to open them again, changing my position to retry. It was way later when Connor finally wrapped an arm around my middle and dragged me into his body. Tucking me in closely, he dropped his full lips to the shell of my ear, speaking in such a clear voice I couldn't imagine he had gotten much sleep, either.

"Sleep, baby," he'd said. And suddenly I couldn't sleep for a different reason.

Apparently, the situation had loosened Connor's tongue. And his hands. He was never really shy with touching or

contact in general. But he had never been so handsy either. Now, as I laid tucked up under him, the hand that had rested flat across my abdomen last night had drifted upward in his sleep and was now holding onto my ribcage.

I didn't even want to believe that was his thumb grazing the underside of my boob, but I think it was time to face reality and call a spade a spade.

Con was feeling me up in his sleep.

Okay maybe that was a little drastic. His hands had yet to venture anywhere untoward, but for some reason the *almost* placement of them seemed even more suggestive than the real thing. And let's not even get into the rock-solid form that was pressed up against my back.

He was like brick. A warm kind of brick that molded into me like a protective shield and breathed heavily onto my neck every so often and moaned sometimes in his sleep and HOLY HARD! I think he was waking up! Whatever was pressing into my ass told me he or his body was coming alive to the morning.

It was time for me to get the hell out of here.

My first attempt to dislodge myself from Connor's iron grasp was unsuccessful. As soon as I moved even a little bit, that roaming hand moved to circle my side even more, his dangerously boob adjacent thumb going into a red zone that made me squirm and caused his morning salute to grow more prominent against me.

What even was that thing? A fucking pipe?

Oh no. I was not doing this with him. Not when every new terrain of his body was making me fucking burn in places Connor Ferguson was not supposed to make me burn. Not when the memory of his soft, attentive, *loving* hands from the night before were burned into the back of my consciousness already.

Actually, I was actively trying to forget it. I wasn't ready to unpack the weird feelings those hands produced in the bottom

of my belly. Or the way his voice had been the only thing to get my stupid legs to move out of that damn cellar last night.

I know all of that resulted from our friendship. Our trust in each other was one of my most valued treasures. It's why he was the one I called when I knew good and well any one of my brothers and sisters would have done the same for me. They would have beat down that cellar door for me just as Connor had been on the verge of doing. But the difference was, Connor was the one I wanted.

But now it was time to go. I didn't want to overstay my welcome. He had been so nice to me. So sweet with me. So gentle even when I know he knew I didn't need gentle. I appreciated it, but I didn't want him regretting it or growing tired of me.

Ceci fatigue was real, and Connor was the last person I wanted getting it.

I needed to get up.

Using both of my hands to wrap around his thick wrist, I pushed to dislodge myself from his body. His hand moved but not off of me, instead it moved down.

*Down, down, down.* Toward the only place that could possibly be worse than my boobs. I squeaked in sheer terror that my best friend was about to get a handful and jerked my hips the other direction in a desperate move to avoid that kind of touching.

In a twist, my butt went flat on the bed and suddenly I was looking at the ceiling, breathing heavily and letting my mind wander to thoughts like, what if I just let him...

*Time to go, Ceci!*

Con was holding onto my hip now, his band of an arm slightly looser as it slung across my lap. But it was heavy as fuck. And he was grumbling like *I* had inconvenienced *him* in some way.

“Hands off you big fucking bear!” Huffing and puffing, I finally batted his arm away, freeing myself.

Swinging my legs over the side of his bed, I quickly hopped out before Grabby could get his ahold of me again. Padding out of his dark room and into the guest room I liked best. I peed, brushed my teeth, and dug out some clothes I left here from one sleepover or another. One glass of water and a stolen banana later and I was out the front door.

I was still so fucking mad. I had finally stopped shaking, thank God, but every time I thought about how hard I'd tried to get away from that prick and physically just couldn't, the anger started up again.

I was so, *so* mad. And I didn't even know at what anymore. At the asshole that tried to mug me, yes. That watch was a birthday present from my sister years ago. We all had matching ones and now I was going to have to buy a new one to replace it.

But that couldn't be the real reason I felt this aching feeling to get out and do something. To go out and do anything that made me feel like myself again. Was it because someone had preyed on me, or was it because I had been stupid enough to let myself become prey?

I mean, I had never been in a situation I couldn't get out of. I had never been so cornered or out of options or *helpless*. I felt ridiculous even thinking back on it. I felt stupid. I felt...I just *felt*. And there were way too many emotions swirling around at the same time to make sense of them all. I didn't know what to do with any of it.

It was still dark outside when my shoes began crunching on the sandy front driveway of Connor's beach adjacent property. I didn't check the time before leaving, and I didn't have a fucking watch to look at now but judging by the way the sun was breaking up the sky in a line of dim gold just underneath the sea of dark, I'd guess it was dawn.

"Where the hell are you going?" A voice called from so close behind me I jumped. How had I not heard his footsteps? Was I really so careless *all* the time?

"Home," I grit, feeling stupid once again for letting a man sneak up on me. I didn't feel threatened though. Not with

Connor who seemed to be chasing after me barefoot and shirtless. Thin gray pajama pants being the only thing keeping him from being naked in his front drive.

“It’s six in the morning.”

“Didn’t know there was a time restriction on when I could go to my own apartment,” I muttered and continued walking.

“There isn’t.” He walked briskly, catching up much quicker than I thought he would barefoot.

“Great, then get off my ass.”

“How are you getting home? You gonna walk?” he asked.

My steps faltered a second. Had I really not thought of that either? *What was wrong with me?*

“I’m getting an Uber to my car,” I recovered, trying not to let it show that had *not* been my intention. I had been intent to walk.

He read me like a book, jogging up and blocking my path. With serious eyes he stared down at my face, searching.

“You’re not going back to your car alone. In fact, you’re not fucking leaving here at six in the damn morning to do anything. Ceci, *take a break*. Did you even sleep last night?” he asked.

I did, but only when I was curled up against him. I didn’t tell him that though, instead I just clipped, “I slept enough.”

“You didn’t. Come back in and sleep until eight at least. Then I’ll go take care of the car and the police and—”

“Police!”

He looked at me weirdly. “Yes, police. I don’t want you or anyone else being targeted again.”

“Con—” I shook my head, wanting nothing to do with the police.

“I’ll take care of it, okay? Just come inside,” he said, completely reading my mind. Taking a cautious step toward

me he tried to reassure me with gestures since I wasn't reacting well to his words.

"No. I'm going home," I said, breaking free of him and pushing on down the driveway.

"Ceci," he said, walking right there with me. Making sure I wasn't alone.

"What?"

"Look at me."

I didn't even turn my head.

"Fine."

He sounded normal. His deep voice the same as it always was. Casual. But unlike normal, I was on the ground one moment and the next I was being swept into the air with the ease of someone grabbing a cardboard box off the ground.

Circling an arm around my legs, Con lifted me high against his chest. In a second flat, he was pivoting and walking back toward the house. I had to prop my hands up along his tight shoulder muscles to avoid doubling over him like a sack of potatoes.

"Con!" I screeched.

"What?"

"Put me down!"

"No," he said matter-of-factly. "And be quiet. I have neighbors, you know?"

"You sure as fuck didn't care about the *neighbors* when you decided to come out here *naked!*" I hissed.

"*Someone* didn't give me much of a choice. Where the hell were you going to go on foot, huh? Are you even thinking, Celestia?" he scolded.

Heat rushed my face, anger clogging my throat at his chastising words.

I wanted to be out of his grasp. Out of this weird zone where he was being so kind to me. He was always kind but—I

don't know. He was being too much. He was crowding me. Crowding my senses with his intoxicating smells and inviting squeezes and hands that I never realized could be both gentle and capable.

He was fucking me up, and I was already feeling pretty fucked up from whatever the hell kind of karma rained down on me last night. I needed out.

With a pinch to his neck, I tried to escape. He jerked, but just batted my hands away like I was more of an annoying bug than a threat.

Grunting, I tried to use my knee to dig into his side. That didn't work either. Just causing him to hold on to me tighter, his hands sliding along the backs of my thighs as he gripped me.

Frustrated, I started kicking my feet, each knock of my shoe landing on his sturdy thigh. Still, he kept walking, and even worse, he was getting agitated too.

"Ceci," he warned, voice deceptively normal. "You got one more time to put your hands on me, and then I'm getting you back."

So, I did what any girl would do. I called his bluff. Using my elbow, I dug into his shoulder blades. Leaning partly over his shoulder to get a better angle. Only, he wasn't bluffing.

*Damn, was he not bluffing.*

In a quick jerk, he hiked me the rest of the way over his shoulder, my torso doubling over him and my ass rising high into the air. Then he took his hand—his big-ass, warm, *best friend* hand—and swatted me on the butt. It was quick, and it didn't hurt so much as it surprised me, because it was his full palm.

Connor had a *full palm* of my ass. A palm that was now cradling it as if that was the only thing he could *possibly* hold on to as he continued to carry me.

The yip I let out had to be the most embarrassing part. I was a grown woman. I didn't fucking yip like a goddamn dog. But the sharp electricity that shot through me at the little slap-and-



grab from Mr. Handsy was enough to startle the sound out of me.

Assuring myself the relentless burning in my face was because I was upside down with the blood rushing to my head, and *not* because my backside was still tingling from Connor's touch, I twisted my torso to look at him. "Why'd you do that?"

"Because sometimes Ceci, if I don't play hardball with you, you'll take me for all I'm fucking worth," he grumbled. "Now, are you gonna try me again?"

"No..." I pouted. "That just hurt."

"You can take it. You got a lot of cushion back here," he said. And was it my imagination, or did his voice get deeper? More rumbly than before.

Like I said, loose tongue.

The closer we got to the house, the more the palm shaped imprint on my ass seemed to sting. It might as well have been copied on my heart too, because that was also ablaze.

Nope. It was official, I couldn't go back to sleep. It wouldn't work. I don't think I could close my eyes anytime soon now that I knew what Connor's hand felt like on my—

"We either go back to bed or you start talking," Connor said, cutting off my thoughts as we made it back into the house. He was still charging ahead like he was annoyed, but his caveman grip had loosened to a soft hold at the back of my thighs. His voice back to yesterday's murmuring rumble.

"Put me down, Con." I squirmed again and finally as we entered the kitchen, he set me down on the countertop, standing before me in all his half-naked glory.

This was so strange for so many reasons. One of the biggest was that Connor hated mess. Yet, not only had he charged out after me *barefoot* on his sandy driveway, but he hadn't stopped to wipe his feet clean when we returned to the house. And now I was sitting on the countertop with my sand covered shoe propped up against his thigh as he untied the laces and yanked them off.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Limiting means of escape,” he answered. His focus on my shoes.

“Am I your hostage or something?”

“As fun as *that* sounds, no. You just don’t seem to know when to quit,” he continued. “And I need a few things from you right now.”

He was already on the second foot, the other shoe having fallen to the ground in a thud so hard I knew there had to be a mess on the clean wooden floors. But all I could focus on was what the hell he could’ve meant by that sounding “*fun*”.

“You want to know what I need?” I asked.

“Yeah, what?”

“For you to put some clothes on. You’re blinding me.”

His mouth did something sexy then. It ticked up high on one side in a smoldering smirk that he tried to hide but couldn’t quite catch. He ran his eyes over my face as he dragged the last shoelace loose on my platform leather boots, letting it drop to the floor next to its twin. Then in a low, sarcastic voice he said, “Yeah, you seem really torn up about it.”

My eyes snapped to his, and that’s when I realized I was staring. His abs were like a hypnotizing kaleidoscope of muscle and ridges and perfect symmetrical definition. It was hard not to become lost in—

“Hey, eyes up here,” he snapped twice, pointing to his face.

Damn! *I did it again.*

He was leaning into me now. Not touching me anymore, but he had his hands splayed on the countertop on either side of my legs. His shoulders hitched up slightly as he leaned in, looming over me like a cage.

As he peered down at me, it was like his gaze switched. Turning intentional all of a sudden. It made my stomach flip in a way it never had before. With anyone.

“Now,” Connor said. “I’m going to ask you a few questions and you’re *going* to answer them, alright?”

I said nothing.

“*Alright Cee?*” His voice was this low smooth rumble that didn’t need to be loud, or hard to tell me he meant business.

I nodded.

His eyes didn’t leave mine, his Ceci-meter working overtime. And when he opened his mouth to speak, I felt this rush of panic at having to relive the night before. Having to feel that shame and embarrassment and annoyance with myself just to answer his questions.

But his words were not what I was expecting. Not chastising or judgmental or harsh in any way. The first thing he asked me as he stared into my eyes was, “Are you okay?”

I blinked. And blinked again.

With a tilt of my head and a voice that was smaller than any I think I’d used in years, I said, “Yeah.”

He blew out a deep, deep breath that seemed to both take the weight of the world off his shoulders and still leave on a few pounds. When he started to shake his head, I dropped my hands down to cover his on the counter.

“What?” I asked, searching his troubled expression. “Don’t I look okay?”

“Yes, but you—but you were *not* okay last night,” he said, his voice going raw.

“I was scared,” I whispered, a weight settling heavy on my chest.

He didn’t say anything for a while, so I continued. “But thank you for coming. And for staying when I didn’t answer your calls. I just couldn’t...let go, you know?”

“Yeah,” he nodded, probably picturing the way I had held onto that crowbar like it was life or death. “I know.”

We stared at each other for what seemed like long, long minutes, and when I closed my fingers around the sides of his

hands, he gripped onto them and held them tight. So tight like he was scared I would slip away.

It seemed like forever before he sucked in a big, shaking breath. But when he let it out, he was level again. Squaring his shoulders and preparing to talk.

“So you were mugged?” he asked.

“Basically,” I nodded.

“Did he take anything?”

“My watch.”

At least I was pretty sure he took it. I hadn't really looked around to check. As soon as Connor carried me out of that cellar he put me into his car and drove me home.

“Tell me how it went down,” he said now, all stone faced.

“Why—”

“*Tell me,*” he insisted, but it was more of a plea than anything. I could tell by the way his voice cracked a little.

A deep breath left me. But I didn't feel that same pressuring weight I had just a few minutes ago. I was okay. Connor was here and we were home. I could do this. I could talk about it.

“Like I said last night, I was walking back to my car from Claireview. He followed me from there. I was kind of in my own world, so I didn't notice him behind me. As soon as I realized he was following me I tried to get to my car fast. I didn't engage until he grabbed me, Con.”

“He grabbed you where?”

I shuddered, causing him to run a warm hand up my arm, squeezing my bicep in a comforting motion. I leaned into the touch, letting my eyes close for just a second longer than normal as I soaked in his presence. His support.

“He grabbed my wrist. It hurt really bad and sort of stunned me. When I tried to get away...I couldn't.”

He looked down at my wrist. “How does it feel now?”

“It's okay,” I said in a smaller voice.

He eyed me. “Is it really okay or is it Ceci okay?”

My guess was that “*Ceci okay*” meant not okay at all. But I was tired of pretending. I was always strong, but right then I just wanted to soak in Connor being strong for me. So, I told the truth. “A little sore, but okay.”

He held my eyes. Ceci-meter calculating for one, two, three seconds before he nodded. “What next?”

“He asked for money and I told him I didn’t have any. He said he wanted the watch and my car keys and I dropped them on the ground so he’d have to let me go to reach them.”

“Smart girl,” he said and rubbed my arm in a praising motion.

“After that I hit him and ran. You know the rest. I called you when I couldn’t do anything else.”

“You outran a man that was, what, at least six inches taller than you?” He raised a skeptical brow.

I raised my own brow. “How would you know how tall he was?”

“*Everyone* is at least six inches taller than you, Ceci.”

I glared. “No. Detective Dick, if you must know every detail, I dropped the watch and tricked him into letting my arm go so I could throw the car keys. I figured he’d choose me or my shit, and he didn’t really seem that interested in me if you know what I’m saying. The only reason I think he didn’t take the car is because it was so fucking loud. He probably assumed the cops would be there at any second.”

“Why *weren’t* the police there?” he asked, eyes narrowing.

“I didn’t call them,” I shrugged. He stiffened, and I moved my gaze so I was staring right at him. Eye to eye, I silently dared him to question me.

Connor picked his battles and he picked wisely. I was not about to become some dumbass news story headlined something stupid like ‘*Heiress in Distress*’. No way, no how. And he knew it too, judging by the way he just sighed. I could tell by the look on his face, he was letting it go.

All of a sudden, I was being curled up in Connor's arms. Big tree trunks that wrapped around my shoulders and back, pulling me in close to his chest. I had to spread my legs wide to accommodate him this close.

Like little snakes, my own arms wrapped snugly around his waist. Locking onto each other like a seatbelt behind his back. Against my ear I could hear his heartbeat. I could feel it knocking on my cheek. It was fast and steady, like a pounding drum.

"Your heart is racing," I whispered.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Why?"

"I've been acting like an ass, but I was just so scared for you," he said, talking into my hair now, his soft lips pressing onto the crown of my head as he held me. "Ever since you called I've been terrified, Cee."

My hands only hesitated a moment before I pushed them up the plains of his back. Grabbing hold of the back of his neck like he'd done mine the night before and working little massaging lines into the muscles there.

I would have thought it was my imagination, the groan he let out. But I felt it run through my own body as his chest rumbled against me.

"I'm okay now," I soothed, officially not liking this worried side of him. It made my heart hurt.

He huffed like he didn't quite believe it. "Tell me what you were doing in Claireview."

I started to pull back, but he held me close to him. "Please?"

Letting out a heavy breath, I mumbled into his body, "I was at the SWWS."

Connor jerked back, dislodging himself from me for the first time in minutes. His eyes looking wide and surprised and *concerned* as he studied my face. "What?"

“Um, It’s a shelter. Seaside Waterways Women’s—”

“I know.” He paused and leaned backward even more, like he needed to take a better look at me. “I know what it is. Tine donates supplies there every year around the holidays—I’m sorry, why were you there?”

“Don’t be such a snob, Con,” I said leaning back on my hands.

He shook his head, “No Cee, I’m not. You know I don’t mean it like that. I’m just confused. Why were you there?”

I looked away from him, not wanting to see the surprise on his face any longer. “I volunteer there every week.”

Silence.

“Nothing much, just helping out with event night and stuff.”

More Silence.

“Just for like a few hours at a time, you know?”

“How did I not know about this?” he asked and he sounded weird. I returned my gaze to him, and on his face there wasn’t the expression I thought there’d be. It was a contemplative, considering look, but not judgmental. He actually looked approving.

“Well, unless you read minds, you wouldn’t. I’ve never told anyone,” I admitted, my voice low.

“Why?”

“Why haven’t I told anyone or why do I volunteer in the first place?”

“Both, I guess.”

“You can probably guess why I volunteer. It’s important to me,” I started. “But I don’t tell anyone because I don’t like explaining myself.”

He just looked at me. Then with a slow arm he reached along the counter and picked up one of my hands. Staring at it as he moved a thumb along my red palms. I’d really done a

number on them yesterday in all the stress. But the sting was nothing compared to the way my stomach was flipping at his soft touch.

“Sorry for the interrogation,” he said, sounding guilty.

“I’ve decided to let it slide.” I shrugged trying to lighten the mood.

I don’t think it worked, his expression simply softening. His voice lowering to a soft timbre. “You did a lot of things right yesterday.”

“You think so?”

“I do.” He murmured, his fingers continuing to caress my palms. “And I’m proud of you.”

“You...are?” I asked. My heart may as well have been in my hands, it was beating so hard.

“I am. *Of course*, I am.” He touched my cheek with gentle fingertips. “About last night *and* about the shelter. Will you tell me more about it one of these days?”

I was officially preening. Staring up into his hazel eyes and wondering if I gave him another hug would it feel as good as the last one.

What I was *not* doing was paying attention to the sounds around us. Not until I heard the distinct jingle of keys or the banging of an opening door.

“Connor?” A deep voice called out. “Con? You here, buddy?”

On instinct, I kicked Connor away from me. Reflexes, you know. Connor, who was taken off guard by the door and my assault, went flying back. Okay, more like stepping back and looking from me to the door like he didn’t know which was scandalizing him more.

I knew which scared *me* more.

My stomach dropped. My heart dropped. I think my everything dropped. I suddenly had to pee. And maybe throw up too. Because that wasn’t just anyone coming into his house.



Not his housekeeper or dry clean lady or anything else that would make this any less terrifying.

Nope. That was his brother, Clay. Probably the last person I wanted to discover me and Con like *this*.

Or so I thought. Then we heard bickering and the call of another deep voice. This one sterner and to the point. “Connor we’re coming in. You ran off last night and never told us what happened.”

*Two brothers?* My eyes couldn’t go any wider.

“Con, we’re worried!” Another voice called out. and I got a little dizzy.

Fergy was here. *My Fergy*—well, I guess she was technically their sister, but she was my friend and this looked... This looked bad.

Connor sprang into action. He grabbed me off the counter like I was some sort of rag doll. Placing me on the ground and spinning around himself like he didn’t know the layout of his own kitchen. It was like watching a big Godzilla toy towering over a town in slow motion.

I rolled my eyes and pushed him out of the way. Then, bending down low, I opened a cabinet that was honestly big enough to fit a couple small children, and climbed in.

Connor crouched down, hands thrown up onto the counter above my head as he watched me crawl into the tiny space.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes,” I bit out.

“But it’ll be dark and you just—”

“Close the damn door Connor, they’re coming!” I snapped, unable to focus on anything but his crotch aligned right with my face.

He looked skeptical but then there was a sound from way, way too close, followed by the timbre of my friend’s voice saying, “Con is that you?”

Connor cursed silently and shut the cabinet door.

A second later he opened it again, shoving my shoes inside and making me eat sand. *Dick.*

It was as I was spitting out little particles in the dark of a little kitchen cabinet that I decided. I was going to get him back for that ass slap.

Yeah. I was gonna make this motherfucker pay.



# Chapter Seventeen

## CONNOR

What the fuck?

I may have said it out loud because seriously, *what the fuck?* What were my brothers and sister doing here?

“Con, Jesus, have some decency!” Tiney practically wailed as she entered the kitchen and immediately covered her eyes overdramatically.

I looked down at myself in confusion. Yeah, I didn’t have a shirt on but that wasn’t really cause for—*Oh*.

I guess she was referring to the part of me that was hovering at half-mast ever since Ceci had run her soft fingers along the back of my neck. *Oops*.

I took a step closer to the counter, hoping to hide my lower body beneath it just as my brothers materialized in the space beside Tine. “Sorry, I wasn’t expecting you guys.”

Clay locked eyes on me and spread his arms out wide, just as dramatic as his sister. “What the fuck, man?”

“I agree,” Clint said. “What happened to you last night?”

I pursed my lips. “I had an emergency.”

“Is everything okay?” Tine asked.

“Fine.”

“You were talking to someone on the phone last night. Who?” Clint asked.

I shrugged, crossing my arms over my chest. “No one important.”

Those were not the right words to say when the “*no one important*” in question was hiding right by my legs.

I was standing right in front of the little cabinet that Ceci had climbed into, guarding it. Upon hearing my comment, she reached an arm out of the door and pinched the shit out of my shin.

I hissed. Backing up a couple of steps and swatting her hands away before moving out of her reach. Her cat-like eyes held my attention as she slowly retreated into the cabinet, looking less like a girl and more like a ghoul from a grim fairy tale. Her words sending chills down my spine.

“Karma’s a bitch, Con,” she whispered, the words a promise.

Cautiously, I moved further out of her reach. My family just peered at me curiously.

“What the hell was that?” Clay asked, giving me a weird look.

“Uh,” I looked around the kitchen awkwardly for something to grasp at. Swatting the air a couple more times, I laughed lamely and said, “Mosquitos. The pesky things won’t leave me alone.”

Clint looked at me strangely and Tine lifted onto her toes so she could see over the edge of the table. But my attention was snagged on the little arm emerging out of the cabinet, a hand feeling around on the ground in search of something.

*What the hell was she doing?*

Next she popped her head out. Then shoulders, then another arm. Was she coming out? *The hell she was.* Not when I was half dressed and her being here would make it seem like we...

*Nope!* This was not the time to reveal our friendship. Not when it could be misconstrued as a hookup or something.

I moved forward again, shuffling my feet at Ceci to herd her back into the cabinet, and this time, I made sure to stay put in front of her.

This must have been her plan, because next thing I knew, I felt the brush of her fingertips over my bare toes. And a sound came out of me that I could not control.

Involuntarily, my feet did a little dance to get away from her fingers.

“Connor?” Clint said slowly, looking at me with raised eyebrows.

“Gotta pee? It looks like you’re doing a pee dance,” Tine asked, but all I could focus on was the little muffled snorting noise that had to be Ceci laughing.

“Um, yeah. I guess I do,” I forced out, barely able to say the words before she did it again, this time her light touch going on the inside of my foot and wiggling.

That same embarrassing sound left me again.

I was ticklish. Ceci *knew* I was ticklish. And the embarrassing truth about being a grown man who was ticklish, is that yes, you still giggle. Which had my brothers looking at me like I had lost my mind.

I tried to kick at her hand while also trying not to giggle like a schoolgirl but the result was some sort of painful constipated looking dance that just made my family think I was being suspicious.

Buckling down, I pressed my feet down hard, I focused on not giving into the featherlight sensation of Ceci’s torture. It was hard, but eventually I stopped laughing. Ceci seemed hellbent on embarrassing the shit out of me, though. So when her tickle torture stopped working, she moved on.

Two hands landed onto the tops of my feet, patting me down like she was trying to find something. She moved them up my ankles, over my knees, squeezing my thighs which were dangerously close to my—

“Woah!” I pivoted my hips and kneed Ceci’s hands away on reflex. I had no idea what she was looking for but I was pretty sure it wasn’t my dick. Or at least it better not be. Taken totally off guard, I hissed, “*What do you want?*”

Tiney, thinking I was talking to them, took immediate offense. “We just wanted to check on you!”

Ceci pinched me. Grabbing a finger full of skin and twisting so hard that it felt like my nerves were splitting. She was being such a menace, and she had to be looking for something. So I gave her the only thing I had if only it would get her hands away from my sensitive regions.

Yanking my phone out of my pants pocket I handed it to her. This must have been what she wanted, because she grabbed it and retreated into the cabinet completely, allowing me to lean my knee against it and lock her in so she couldn't pull anymore shit.

Finally, I was able to return my attention back to my family, who all stood across the island looking at me like I had completely lost my mind. I powered past it, feigning ignorance.

"I thought I gave you guys that key to use in emergencies." I breathed, feeling suddenly winded.

"You don't count storming out of a meeting with a murderous look on your face an emergency?" Clay asked.

"You're being dramatic," I said.

"No," Clint interjected. "He's not. Not to mention the fact that you haven't told us who you were even talking to. We got worried that it was Tine, but when we called to check on her she was totally fine. Something doesn't add up. Are you in some type of trouble?"

"No," I grumbled. "I wasn't aware that I had to run everything I do by the three of you."

"You don't," Tine hesitated, looking up at me through her eyelashes as if she were guilty. Her shoulders bowed as dejection covered her features. "We're sorry."

I let out a gust of air, instantly feeling like shit. I was gaslighting them to cover my own ass. They were exactly right. Things were not okay. And if Ceci didn't want me to keep this a secret from both our families, I would have told them about it immediately. Who knows, Tine might have been able to comfort Ceci in a way that I couldn't. And my brothers might have known something about reporting petty crimes that

I didn't. But I was leaving it up to Ceci to determine when, where, and why we told our families about our friendship and I was not about to go back on my word now.

“Guys, I'm sorry, I'm not trying to be rude—”

“Well, you're doing a pretty damn good job of it,” Clay said.

I groaned. “I'm *sorry*. I just—”

I'm not entirely sure what my apology was going to be. All thoughts went out of my head the second the sound of the virtual assistant on my stereo system booted to life. Filling the living area with the sound of a robotic voice.

***“Text message from \*blueberry emoji\* \*blue heart emoji\* \*blue jay emoji\*:* Hey Conny baby, when are you coming back to bed?”**

Blood drained from my face before it all came rushing back up in hot, heavy currents. I went cold. Then hot. Hotter than I've ever been. I'd never been more embarrassed.

So embarrassed that the only thing—literally *the only thing*—I was able to choke out in a horrified mumble as I covered my face was, “Oh my fucking God.”

“What the fuck?” Clay asked.

“Oh Connor,” Tine said, somehow sounding embarrassed for both me and herself.

Clint could only echo me with a stupefied, “Oh my fucking God.”

No one knew what to do or say. We all sat there staring at each other, stunned. I didn't think things could get any worse, but as Ceci liked to prove; where there's a will, there's a way.

The virtual assistant booted up again with a ding.

***“Text message from, \*eggplant emoji\* \*eggplant emoji\* \*eggplant emoji\*:* We miss you in here, big guy. Can't wait to finish what we started.”**

I choked.



Across the room, three pairs of eyes bugged out of their sockets. Tine took a noticeable step backward as if even being near me would rub something contagious off on her. Clint crossed his arms over himself, looking around as if he was suddenly in an unclean environment. And Clay took a step toward the hallway, looking between it and me while holding up two fingers.

“Two Connor? Really?” Clay asked in a whisper.

I didn’t get to answer.

*“Text message from: \*Blue heart emoji\* \*blue heart emoji\* \*blue heart emoji\*: Connor, we’re getting cold in here without you to warm us up. Hurry back or we’ll have to come out and get you!”*

“I think you guys should leave,” I said, clearing my throat.

Tiney was already on her way to the door. Practically running.

Clint was nodding his head and mumbling, “Yeah, I think that’s for the best.”

And Clay was alternating between silent dumbstruck looks at my face and the hallway.

I shuffled them toward the door. With a parting wave, I shut the door with a decisive click, while listening to Clay’s mumble to the other two, “It really is the quiet ones, isn’t it?”

Leaning my back against the door, I allowed my breath and my racing heartbeat time to calm. I couldn’t decide if I was mad, embarrassed, or if I simply wanted to strangle Ceci. But before I could land on any one emotion a vision of my family’s stunned faces replayed in my head and a burst of laughter escaped me.

From the kitchen I could hear the very distinct, very vindictive laughter of one Ceci Fernandez floating throughout the air.

I made my way back to her. By the time I did, she was out of the cabinet and sprawled out flat on her back on the kitchen floor, *laughing her ass off*.

The sight was a hell of a lot better than the one of her shaking from last night, that's for sure. Still, I glared down my legs at her.

"So you think that's funny, huh?" I asked through laughter of my own.

She continued to crack up. Nodding as she pressed out a garbled, "Yeah!"

I took a step toward her, "Yeah, I'll show you funny."

Like a cat, she was on her feet and running down the hall as she continued to laugh uncontrollably. I just shook my head, following behind her as laughter spilled from me.

"You better run, Fernandez," I called after her, "Because I know you're fucking ticklish too."



# Chapter Eighteen

## CONNOR

“What are you doing?” I asked my sister as she lay doubled over the coffee shop table waist first with her arms thrown over her eyes.

“I’m waiting until the coast is clear,” she said, her voice muffled into the table.

I rolled my eyes and pulled her hands from in front of her face. When she lifted her head she still had her eyes squeezed shut. I couldn’t help my snort of laughter as I poked her sides. “Stop it, Tine. You’re killing me. I already explained.”

And I had. Following Ceci’s little stunt in my kitchen I had to explain to my family that it was all a big misunderstanding. That a friend was playing a prank on me and that I really didn’t rush out of an important family meeting to have a threesome. They were skeptical but I think they believed me. They couldn’t help but keep teasing me about it though. I probably wouldn’t live it down for the end of time.

Case in point, the hazel eyes in front of me were now open but flicking behind and around me as if she was looking for something. When she met my narrowed gaze she shrugged. “Can never be too sure with you these days, Con. You might be keeping them in your back pocket.”

I groaned as I sat, “Them who?”

“All your girlfriends!” she said. “Really Connor, I thought you had found somebody special. I’m so disappointed.”

I stiffened. “In me?”

“In the situation,” she said, reaching across the table and squeezing my hand gently. “I’m the youngest and I’m the only one who’s been married. I want to tell your wives all your

embarrassing childhood memories—like how you used to be Clay’s shadow until that one night he tried to run away and you got scared and ran back and told on him. Or how you once went a whole month without saying a word to anyone because Mom and Dad tried to take your computers away.”

“Those stories are better left untold, Tine,” I grumbled, but I couldn’t help a lightness in my chest as I remembered them clearly.

Tine exaggerated some. I was Clay’s shadow for about a week when he took up for me at school and told a few bullies that if they messed with his brother again, he would send them straight to hell. I had been in first grade which meant Clay was only in third, but he had already started acting like a grown up and I thought that was so cool.

Until he tried to run away.

I think he did it just to shake me loose. Because instead of going toward the street, he went out to the rocky beach up sea, which I hated at the time because the shells would always stick me and it was nothing like the sandy little bubble behind the house. When we got there he said we could run away into the ocean and become sea people.

Yeah fucking right.

He wasn’t stupid. Not even back then. He knew just how to scare six-year-old me and I could have sworn I heard him laughing as I took off running in the direction of home promising to tell on him.

The silent treatment story, though, it was true. And I didn’t regret it still to this day. The only one it had been hard not to talk to was Tiney. She had once been all of our shadows and she was really hurt by being ignored. But sometimes a man had to put his foot down. Besides, they all broke sooner than I thought they would.

“No! Those stories are meant to be passed on. And I’m ready to have a sister-in-law. But I guess all my brothers are players... And whatever Clint is.”

I snorted. Poor Clint. “Don’t be too upset, Tine, she already knows those stories anyway.”

“*She?*”

Fuck.

I blinked up at her. She was watching me with the laser sharp focus only a sister who smelled blood possessed. *Fuck*. Clearing my throat I corrected, “I meant she *will* know. Because I’ll tell whoever I’m going to marry everything, right? You’re the expert.”

“Connor!”

“Clementine,” I warned.

“You really *do* have a girl.” She wasn’t listening anymore. Now she was staring off into space as a waiter came by to set a cup of coffee and a cup of tea down in front of us. “Oh, and she’s funny too! She wouldn’t pull a prank like that if she didn’t have a sense of humor.”

*More like a sense of torture*. And anyway, it was a slip of the tongue. There’s no way I meant to compare Ceci to my hypothetical future wife. Not out loud, anyway.

Subtlety would mean nothing with Tine gushing excitedly like this, so I skipped it all together and abruptly changed the subject.

“So Clint,” I started around a too hot sip of coffee, trying to appear casual. “He talk to you about anything lately?”

She didn’t fight the change of subject, and I assume it had something to do with the worried look that immediately crossed her face. Slowly, she brought her tea up to her mouth and sipped from the extra hot contents as she nodded. “Yeah. Well, not him directly, but Clay’s told me a lot. When I try to talk to Clint about it he brushes it off.”

“He’s stressed.”

“I can tell,” she sighed. “He also doesn’t trust me with sensitive information.”

I could tell by the way she shrugged and curled her shoulders she was hurt even as she tried to play it cool. I reached across the table and pulled at her braid to snap her out of it. “It’s not like that, Tine. He just doesn’t want to bother you. You’ve been through so much and it’s a miracle you still talk to us after everything. I don’t think he wants to mess that up with shit that doesn’t affect you.”

“But it does affect me!” she whined. “He’s my brother! *You’re* my brother and...” she swallowed, “just because I was married out doesn’t mean this isn’t my family anymore. So tell me what’s going on.”

Tracking my eyes over her soft features, I recognized an unfamiliar sternness about her now. A confidence that was always there, just a lot quieter before. That husband of hers was wearing off on her. In a good way though.

I sighed, “Last I heard, Clint’s fed up with the document search. We’re finding too many that have been compromised and it’s just working him up more. They range from his first year as acting CEO to now. He thinks our best bet is to just figure out what they could want and go from there.”

“Last you heard?” Tine asked slowly, eyeing me. “Meaning you haven’t been around lately?”

I rolled my lips into my mouth, my eyes going to the clock on the wall. “I’ve been a little busy recently.”

“Mhmm,” she said, eyes following mine over her shoulder and cutting back to me. “Am I keeping you from something big brother?”

I shook my head slowly, giving her a sly smile. “Nothing more important than my favorite sister.”

She grinned. “*Only* sister.”

I breathed out a sigh of relief as she smiled. I had to give this girl more credit. She was more observant than she looked. Truth was, I would have forgotten we even made this meeting if it wasn’t for the alert I had set up in my phone. It had only been a few days since Ceci’s incident and the most we’d done

was gone to retrieve her car and tell her boss what happened since he seemed super worried about her.

Other than that, it seemed like Cee didn't want to leave the house. Not for food, not for any of her normal shenanigans either. She didn't even rouse when I reminded her she was missing her family's weekly dinner. She just wanted to hole up in my house and watch TV (which really just consisted of her staring blankly at the screen). And if that's what she wanted to do, I was content to do it with her. But since she was sleeping this morning when I woke up to my alarm and I didn't want to have to stand up my sister, I'd left her there in my bed for a couple of hours hoping she would still be okay when I returned.

That sister narrowed her eyes on me from across the table. "What do you think of all this?"

"All what?" I asked, shoving my thoughts away from worrying about Cee and back to this room.

"All this drama, Connor," she said exasperated. "Do you think it's really serious?"

"I have no idea," I said truthfully. "But I think it's all a waiting game now. We were too late, and now, sooner or later it's all going to catch up to us and for better or worse we'll know what we're dealing with."

"You think it could have been prevented?" she asked.

"Most definitely," I grunted.

"But mom is still railroading you into doing things her way," Tine said, her voice taking on a quiet sort of knowing that made the declaration less of a question and more of just a statement.

While she was steadily working on her relationship with our mother, I don't think it could or would ever be entirely fixed. Tine couldn't trust mom to think of anything other than her precious business first since she had been the worst victim of her doing just that all of our lives. I couldn't even begin to relate to my sister's trauma from that time in her life, but we



could agree on one thing. And that was the complicated feelings we felt toward our parents.

Sighing, I sort of sank my elbows onto the table. Clapping my hands behind my neck as I shook my head. “And making me feel like shit for fucking it all up.”

Silence fell over our table for a couple beats before my sister looked at me. Her dark features were starting to resemble Mom’s as she grew older. But her eyes held a softness I don’t think my mother possessed. “Why do you put up with it, Con?”

“With what?”

She gave me a knowing look. “With being ignored. She’s a bulldozer. I know, I’m working on accepting it too, but that’s what she is. And she’s never going to stop until you speak up and make her.”

“It doesn’t matter what I say, Tine. It never has,” I said frustrated. “She’s only ever going to see it her way.”

She pursed her lips for a second and then reaching across the table she gathered both my hands in hers, waiting patiently until my focus went to her eyes. “Look, Connor. I know your secret.”

I immediately stiffened, my mind going numb and ready to make every excuse in the book. But then she kept going.

“I know you’re not this quiet recluse of a guy you make yourself out to be. I’ve seen you laugh and joke around and splash at the freaking beach like you’re just a kid and not a literal giant.” She giggled, and I smiled weakly, feeling my heart squeeze. “I think those five years away made you boys forget that I grew up with you. I remember why you got quiet. And I don’t blame you for protecting yourself when you felt like you would never be heard, but it’s time to give it up.”

“Mom’s changing. I think it’s age or the fact that grandma’s getting older, but she’s trying. She’s listening more but she’s still hardheaded as hell. It still takes you slamming it over her head for her to see things in a way that’s not her own. But

she's seeing them, *eventually*." She shook her head as if she couldn't believe she was even saying any of this.

"She'll never admit she's wrong, trust me I know. But when it comes down to it, she'll try (in her own way) to make up for the pain she's causing."

I felt my hands tighten around my sisters, our eyes locking and holding. "But how is any of that okay?"

She shook her head. "It's not okay yet. But that's what we're fighting for. To make it okay. You have to remember, she didn't just make up how to raise us, she was raised like this too. She's doing what she knows, but she's seeing the error in it. That's her journey, and she's owning it. Like she always does. We've got to own ours, too. I don't know what you're keeping to yourself in there, because you won't ever tell me. But I know you want to. I know you want us all to know."

"Tine, I—"

"I don't want to see anyone else trapped, Connor. Especially not you." She shook her head. "Stop being quiet about your feelings just to make everyone else more comfortable. *Make* them listen."

Unclasping her hands from mine she reached up her shoulder and latched a hand onto the one that just appeared there. I watched as my sister's husband leaned down just slightly to take her chin underneath his knuckle. Tilting her head toward him, he frowned and used the same hand to wipe a stray tear away. Then he turned a glare onto me.

"Making my wife cry again I see, Ferguson," Ox said as he took inventory of the aura between the two of us. He must have realized it was nothing to fight over because he just huffed before turning back to his wife. "Ready to go, Lu?"

Ferguson. The sound of my last name snapped me out of my spiral of sisterly advice and back to reality. To another Fernandez that was probably waiting on me right now.

Flicking my eyes down to my watch I cursed under my breath and whipped out my wallet to pay for coffee. As I

stood, I came face to face with an assessing man. His black eyes spearing me for just a little too long to be casual.

“Hey Ox,” I said just in case I’d been rude. I didn’t remember greeting him off the coattails of my sister’s truth bomb.

“Hey Connor,” he said. Tilting his head to the side he observed me. “Late for something?”

“Yeah uh, I gotta meet someone,” I said. Flicking my eyes to my sister I said, “I’ll think about it, Tiney. But please don’t cry for me, okay. I’m alright.”

“Alright,” she said, leaning against her husband. “Thanks for meeting me. Same time next week, right?”

“Right,” I said. “Bye Tine, bye Ox.”

“Bye—Oh, Connor.” Ox stopped, turning back to me just after they’d started toward the back entrance of the coffee shop. “Have you seen my sister around anywhere?”

Ice ran through my veins at the sound of that question. I narrowed my eyes, and Tine flickered a confused look up at his face. The guy just continued to look at me, seeming unbothered and unalarmed by our strange reactions.

I cleared my throat. “Which one?”

“The one that’s been missing,” he answered pointedly.

Flicking a look at Tine, I blinked. And then forcing myself to get it together, I made myself shrug. “Um, I think Alta works out at the same gym as me sometimes. But that’s about it. Why, is something up?”

Ox stared at me and I don’t know if it was just my guilty conscience or his intense nature, but it felt like he was staring *through* me. Then, like a bubble, the menacing demeanor popped and he shrugged, looking down at his wife with a loving closed lip smile. “Well, I thought I’d give it a shot. She missed dinner this week, so if you see her, tell her we’re worried about her.”

I didn’t take the bait and agree. He purposely didn’t specify who “her” was for a reason. To see what I knew and how

much. Which did nothing to tell me what *he* knew and how much.

But as I said goodbye and raced back down the coast to the very same girl he was looking for, it was clear he knew *something*.



# Chapter Nineteen

## CECI

“What’s wrong with you?” Nina asked a couple of Thursdays later as the three of us were picking up popcorn residue from the third consecutive movie night in a row. I didn’t look up from my attention on the broom and dustpan, but the silence that followed pulled my attention upward.

“You’re talking to me?”

“Yes, you!” Christine snorted from her corner of the room. “Who else has been moping around here silent all day? Directly after missing work last week, mind you.”

“You guys are aware I don’t work here, right?” I asked, less as a joke than normal. The lines seemed like they were starting to blur lately. Sort of like they were with everything else.

They waved me off.

“Stop avoiding the question,” Nina said, popping a hip out. “What is wrong with you? Did something happen?”

I bit my lip. Something had definitely happened. I’d learned from everyone’s concern including Paulo’s when he’d confronted me for my recklessness last week, and now my family’s growing suspicion at my continued absence, that something was definitely happening with me. I stopped denying it, but did I really want to rehash it with these women who saw and heard about so much worse on a daily basis? I wasn’t sure.

The way Nina’s eyebrows pulled down in her trademark expression for her listening face and how Christine outright dropped her broom and dustpan where she stood and rushed over to me to grab my hands, softened me up a bit. It made me want to confide in them, if only to tell someone.

I knew I could tell my family. I also knew I had Connor in my corner. But it was different with both.

On one hand Connor somehow experienced that terrible night with me. He had this fierce protection of me that wouldn't allow him to admit that I'd done anything wrong. I mean, he wasn't stupid, he knew that I shouldn't have been walking by myself. That I probably should have called the police rather than calling him. But he kept saying I did all that I could do and there was no reason for me to feel any type of guilt about it.

And that just wasn't true.

My family, on the other hand, *should* stay in the dark. Telling them would only cause a fuss. One that could last for *years*. I would probably have a bodyguard until the day I got married, in which a contingency of that marriage would be that I must be guarded at all hours of the day. I didn't want that.

So yes, maybe telling these girls would garner me something other than what I was getting, yet still I hesitated.

But in the end it was the seriousness morphing their faces that got me talking. The concern of friends. *My* friends.

With a breath that pained my chest, I let the words trickle out. "The other night when I left here, someone followed me."

"What!" they both borderline screeched.

"Shh!" I stepped toward them, gesturing for them to *shut up*. Looking over my shoulder, I flipped my gaze around the room to make sure there were no stragglers around to overhear. The last thing I wanted to do was trigger anyone who was going through something worse.

"What happened, Selena?" Nina asked, calm enough to at least keep it together. Christine, on the other hand, was pacing the large square room with her hands on her forehead and her breath huffing out fast. I chased her down first, pulling her hands from her braids and holding onto them in mine.

"Do not do that, Christine," I hissed. "I don't want to freak out any of the women here. And I don't want to make a big deal out of it."

“Is it a big deal?” Nina asked. “Like, what happened? Did you get away from them?”

I worried my mouth to the side and somehow that look said enough.

All of a sudden the two of them were so serious, it was actually amazing to see. Both going into a whirlwind of motion.

Christine set aside her dramatics for maybe about the first time since I met her, and instead was pulling out a chair from the other side of the room. Ushering me to sit and relax. Nina whipped out her phone, pulling up the security camera angles from that night while she questioned me about approximate timing, looking to pinpoint the exact frames. Both of them were amazing in their own right and both of them were now seated in front of me in their own chairs looking at me as if I was another one of the women in the shelter.

I didn't know how I felt about that, I mean I felt grateful enough to be treated with the same urgency as anyone else who was struggling. But I also didn't feel worthy of it.

I mean, my parents said it best. I had so much, and most of the time I just squandered it away. I took it for granted and made up excuses and I was wrong to do that. So the fact that I was wallowing and feeling sorry for myself when all in all I was okay, was sort of sickening to my stomach.

Still, even though I felt bad about feeling so shaken up, I didn't know how to stop feeling this way.

“Tell us what you're thinking, Selena. Don't bottle it up,” Christine said.

“Not much,” I said, offering a weak smile. An ache spread through my hands as I twined them together tight. “Just about how stupid I am.”

Sympathetic. Fierce. Apologetic. As I peeked up at them, I witnessed the rush of these emotions and so many more crashing over their features one right after the other. It made me want to take back what I said. I didn't deserve that look. If



they really knew me, knew what kind of life I lived, they might not feel the same. It felt like I was tricking them.

Nina gathered my hands in hers, Christine laying hers over top. “No honey, don’t you dare feel that way. Just tell us what happened and we will try our best to make sure, at least on this property, it never happens again.”

Was I selfish to want to soak that declaration in? Was I heartless to enjoy their attentiveness when there were others who might need it more than me? Was I a horrible friend to be given more in this friendship than I was willing to give?

Probably yes on all accounts, but at that moment I didn’t care. At that moment it just felt good to know that even these people, people who dealt with way worse every day, seemed to think my feelings were valid. Even though they didn’t have all the information, they still cared. That felt good.

So I told them.

I told them everything. How I had been feeling down and had left work early to come here. How I stupidly decided to walk, getting myself into trouble because of that decision. I told them how I felt helpless and powerless now that it was all said and done. Not because it happened, but because I would never know if I would’ve made one different decision could things have turned out differently.

They listened quietly. Expertly, and it showed they did this for a living. Hearing from them—two women who could have easily been in the same situation—that it wasn’t my fault, that stupid people were the only ones at fault for the stupid things they did, made me feel better. It showed me how much they cared.

I really needed to tell them soon.

“How are you feeling now? Scared?” Nina asked.

“No,” I said, picking at my jeans and trying to find the right words. “No, I just feel kind of unprepared, you know? Before, I felt confident in most situations because I’d never lost. But I lost this time. And now that I know I can, I feel weak all of a sudden. And I wish I knew what to do instead so I can feel

strong again. But it feels like every step I take lately has been the wrong one, you know?”

They looked at each other and then Nin leaned in closer. “Have you thought about going to see someone?”

I shrugged. “I’m not really good with sharing.”

“Therapists don’t only listen, they talk and advise too. And we can find someone who fits you well,” she pressed.

“We?”

“Yes, *we!*” Christine interjected, sounding offended that I even asked. “We are going to help you through this, Selena.”

“Guys come on, I don’t need to—”

“What you need to do is shut up and let us help you.” This came from Nina, which surprised me because she usually wasn’t so pushy. It made me feel both warm and a little guilty. They were being so nice to me and yet, they called me by a wrong name I’d given to them to hide myself. *One wrong step after another.*

“I... Okay,” I said, my shoulders sloping. “Thank you guys. But I honestly don’t think I want to talk to someone. I have a friend who...helped me that night and I’m okay, I just, I hate this feeling. Like I don’t know what to do if it ever happened again.”

“Selena?” A voice called from the entryway to the main room. It was Mary, a younger girl with blonde hair that she always wore in a low ponytail. She was quiet and I’m pretty sure she was terrified of me. Eh. That was okay. She was a little bit milk-toasty for me anyway. But she was nice enough, so when she appeared in front of us with a worried look on her face, all three of us stood in unison. “There’s a guy up front asking for you.”

I don’t think it was my imagination that we all stiffened. Men weren’t typically allowed in the women’s shelter unless they were approved caregivers doing a pickup, approved employees, or approved visitors. Basically, all men had to be approved. And the fact that whoever was out there was asking for me, a non-employee, was strange.

“By name?” I asked.

“Um, sort of,” she said, biting her lip. “He keeps calling you, like, See-See though.”

My stomach dropped. It was someone who knew who I was. I didn’t give out my nickname here even though it could technically be used for Selena, too. I wanted to be sure I was safe, just in case someone was clever enough to put the pieces together. So whoever was out front asking for me by name was someone who knew who I really was and had somehow followed me here.

*Dammit.* Why was everyone following me lately? It was pissing me off.

“What does he look like?” I asked, the words coming out a little more aggressive than necessary. Mary took a step backward, Christine and Nina taking a step closer to my side.

“Um,” she looked from each of our faces. “Big guy, dark skin, expensive clothes.”

What the—

I was charging toward the front of the shelter without another word.

“Do you know who it is, Selena?” Nina asked, hot on my heels.

“Is he *the* guy?” Christine asked, sounding livid.

I couldn’t answer either of them, too focused on getting to the front and seeing if it was who I thought it was. And how exactly I felt about it. Moments later, I was coming up at the front entryway of the shelter to see just who I expected. On one hand I was relieved it was him and not some creep or even worse, my family. But on the other hand...

“What the hell, Connor?” I asked, going right up to him and crossing my arms over my chest.

He was looking at me, staring really, his eyes having tracked me since I materialized down the hall from him. Now he had that Ceci-meter out, his gaze sliding over every

readable inch of my face before settling on my eyes alone. “Ready to go?”

“Go where?” I asked, then shook my head. “Never mind that. You can’t be in here.”

“I came to get you,” he said evenly.

Irrked that he ignored what I just said, I pointed at the double doors behind him, “You need to leave.”

He gave me a weird look and slid his hands in his pockets. “Not without you.”

“Con—” I breathed. Was he even listening to me?

I know he was worried, but he had seen me almost every day for the past two weeks. If he kept that up, he would start seeing it as a chore and pretty soon he would become sick of me. He was the last person I wanted to overdose on me. Especially because he thought I couldn’t handle myself. He needed to lighten up.

Before I could express this, however, there were bodies on either side of me. Both Nina and Christine wrapped an arm around my shoulder and another around my waist like they were some sort of safety harness. Together they stepped me a few large steps away from Con. His eyebrow rose, but that was it.

“Who are you?” Christine asked.

Connor looked Christine over, his eyes trailing from where her hands connected on me to the rest of her before he turned those eyes to me. He wasn’t going to answer. Not until he knew how I wanted him to proceed. He was trained well.

“This is Connor, my friend,” I said to Christine, using my hands to squeeze her forearm reassuringly. “He’s okay, I promise, he just doesn’t know the rules here.”

“Who are you?” Connor asked, and was that a little challenge I detected in his voice? Was I the only one who found that adorable?

“I’m Christine and this is Nina,” she answered, her chin inclining. “We’re Selena’s friends and we don’t just let her

leave with strange men we don't know.”

Instantly, Connor seemed to put together that I had told them what happened, and like it was written across his face in permanent marker, I saw that he appreciated them. Accepted them.

“In that case, thank you. I worry about her—you know she'll follow anyone who gives her food?” he asked, giving me a look that clearly said, ‘*Selena?*’ Oh so he thought he was funny, huh? I tried to give him a warning look that said, ‘*you'll pay for that later*’, but he was too busy talking to the others to pay me much mind. “Can I prove it to you? That I'm not some random guy?”

“Um, yeah,” Nina said slowly, thinking. “Show us a picture of you guys together! So we know she really knows you.”

“Or you could just ask me. I *am* standing right here,” I said, but they ignored me. I think they were just in it for the picture.

Con didn't even hesitate. With ease he pulled up his camera roll and scrolled to a picture not too far back. It was like he didn't even have to think about which one he'd show. He just went straight to the photo and flipped his phone around, handing it over to the girls. Not to me, I noticed.

My toes stretched as I rose onto them, trying to get a better look at the phone in Christine's hand.

The picture on the screen was of me and Connor on the beach. He was lying flat on the sand (a result of me having just tackled him) and I was lying on top of his back (a result of the same). He was raised up on an elbow and looking up at me while I laughed out loud. Both of us had drawn sand mustaches on each other. And later unpictured we will have dropped sand down each other's shorts.

Taking this in, Nina and Christine looked from the picture to each other and then to me. Then, as if they had communicated everything silently, Nina reached an arm forward and returned Connor his phone. Holding up a staying finger, Christine said in a sing-songy voice, “Give us just one moment, please.”

Still synchronized, the two of them flipped from being behind my back to at my front, their backs to Connor now. When I took in their faces, I was afraid of what was to come.

“A *friend*?” Christine whisper-screamed.

“What kind of friend?” Nina followed up directly after.

I made a face. “The normal kind? What other kind of friend is there?”

“Um, the sexy kind, duh! No one knows a man that beautiful and is just his friend,” Christine squeaked.

“No one but *me*,” I corrected.

Nina’s eyes seemed to light with something like realization as she peeked a look back at Connor and then to me again. “Is this the friend that was *there* for you?”

I flipped a quick look at Con who looked amused. I stuck my tongue out. “Yes, he’s my best friend. Has been for a while.”

Christine snorted. “Oh, *I bet*. Did you see that photo? You two are positively domestic!”

“We are positively nothing,” I grumbled. “Other than friends—are you guys done now? Or does everyone in my life insist on acting ridiculous all of a sudden? I don’t even know why he’s here.”

“To pick you up,” Con said again from behind us. We all looked at him to see that he was standing casually with his hands in his pockets waiting for me. “We have somewhere to be and I don’t want you out alone.”

I glared. “Can it, Con. I’ll deal with you in a second.”

Eyes glowed from the women in front of me, they might as well be shaped like hearts. “He lets you talk to him like that?”

“Chop, chop Ceci,” Connor said, looking down at his watch. “If you make us any later I’m carrying you out of here over my shoulder. *Again*.”

Gasps.

*Yep.* They were gasping like schoolgirls. “*You let him talk to you like that? It must be love.*”

“Alright,” I said, untangling myself from the two women and reaching over the counter for my jacket. “While this is *so* fun, I think I’ll go with the big guy now. I’m sorry for the intrusion guys, I’ll let him know the rules, really.”

We left to the mesmerized finger-waving of the two girls huddled together. I was almost positive they were watching Con’s ass as we went.

We weren’t a whole three steps outside before I turned on him. “What the hell, Ferguson! You can’t ambush me like that.”

He didn’t even stop walking. Instead, he roped an arm around my waist and pulled me along with him. “I wasn’t kidding, *Fernandez*. We’re late.”

“Late? For what?” I asked

He moved us along the sidewalk, bypassing my car that was parked on the street and going to his. “We have somewhere to be.”

“That’s news to me.”

He reached across me, opening the passenger door. “Good thing I’m here to deliver it, then.”

“Connor, would you tell me what is going on?” I asked, reaching absently for the seat as I moved to get in.

“I’m taking you somewhere,” he said, still being secretive. Trading me between his hands, he moved an expert grip from my waist to my hips, then shoulders in order to shuffle me from one side of his body to the other. “No, here, get in the back. You need to change.”

Grabbing a small bag from the floor, he closed the front door and opened the back. Climbing inside, I caught the door in my hand before he could close it. “Con? What’s up? Why are you showing up like this out of the blue?”

Without batting an eyelash, he started to pry my hand from the doorframe. Scooping my legs up at the knee, he tucked

them into the car safely out of the door's swinging range all the while shoving the bags from the front seat at me.

When I just stared up at him wide-eyed and clutching the bags to my chest, he leaned an arm on the top frame of the car, peering down at me like this was normal. "I told you, I'm taking you somewhere. You'll see what it is when we get there. And I'm picking you up because I don't like you hanging around here by yourself. Any further questions?"

Um, yes! I had about a million more questions, but my brain was tripping on the view of his large bicep flexing as he leaned on his arm. How he was once again so close I could smell that enticing mix of sandalwood and butters.

Tripping on the sensation of it, I stayed quiet. Which was happening a lot it seemed.

Con was throwing me off lately. Being all gentle and nice and still somehow being my best friend. It was confusing to me how he could be both. Confusing how I was reacting to it, too. My mind was going down tunnels of thought it shouldn't. My brain conjuring up images that I did not approve of when I signed the hypothetical best friends contract, and I'm sure Connor hadn't either.

This very image, the one of him with his arms above his head and his strong body leaning over me like he was a magnet trying to find its match, was committing itself to my memory as we spoke. So instead of pressing him further and prolonging any reason for him to linger so close to me, I simply nodded my head and allowed him to close the door.

Before he did, he reached a hand between us and knocked a knuckle under my chin, affectively shutting the jaw that had apparently been hanging open. The sly smile that tilted his mouth was sexy. The deep words that came out of it sexier, even in their mundanity.

"Good," he said, before leaving me alone in the back, wordless.

Sliding into the front seat, Con started the engine and pulled off. We drove for a few silent minutes, me just



watching the space between us, finding it weird that I was in the back seat and also feeling an unfamiliar tingling in my cheeks from his contact. I was starting to think we wouldn't say a word the whole drive, but after a while he flicked eyes up at the rearview mirror saying, "Change up."

Curious, I peeked down into the bags. They were all from decent shops, and there were quite a few of them. If he was offering gifts, I wouldn't turn them down.

Reaching into the first one, I pulled out little blue gym shorts and a workout top. I frowned, looking up at Con in the rearview. "We're going to work out?"

"You're getting warmer, now change already. We're only a few minutes away."

"I can't change with you here. I need to change my bra if we're going to work out." Somehow, as I dug through the bags, it didn't strike me as weird to be talking about my bra with Connor.

Proving my point, Con just shook his head. "I won't look, and you should have everything you need in there. Shoes are on the seat next to you."

"You went out and bought all this?" I asked, finding the bra and checking to size the find that he'd surprisingly gotten it correct.

A wry smile pulled at his lips as he navigated the city streets. "Who else would dress you up like a little ginger Smurf?"

"Good point," I laughed. Biting my lip, I surveyed the small cab area. I may be comfortable *talking* about bra stuff with Con but showing what was under that bra was an entirely different story. "I still don't think I can change my bra in here. What if you have to look up? You'll get an eye full."

"*I said I won't look,*" he grumbled. I still didn't move. He rolled his eyes. "Turn around and face the back then. I'll drive slow."

Good idea.

“Okay,” I said, still finding it weird, but turning around so that my back was to Connor as I tried to set the world record for fastest bra change in a car.

After a moment of my quiet effort, Con spoke again. “I’ve seen them before, you know?”

I had just slipped the little sports bra over my head and pulled it down over my chest when he said it. Whipping around, I looked at him horrified. My hair flying into my face as I turned.

“Seen *what* before?”

“You know...” he said and had the nerve to sound sheepish. *Him!* After he was the one to bring it up. “*Them.*”

My face burned. Embarrassingly so. Instead of actually breathing, I was doing this weird huffing thing that closely resembled cosplaying a dragon. Dumbstruck by his confession—and depending on the context, *furious*—I almost shouted. “When? Why? *When!*”

“Last year. You got really drunk one night and when we got home you just started stripping. Like, as soon as you got in the door.” He chuckled. *Chuckled!* Like this wasn’t monumental news. “I thought you were just taking a few things off but when I turned around you were fucking stripping! Like, *everything.*”

“At my place?”

“Yeah.”

“Did I know you were there?”

“I assume so, since we went to the bar *together* and left the bar *together.*”

“So! That doesn’t mean—”

“And you were grumbling for me to make you a pizza, but I couldn’t make you jack shit because one, I was trying to zap my brain back to life after seeing your bare ass. And two, you had zero groceries,” he went on.

“Oh.” I paused, momentarily stunned.

I did *not* remember this. Shouldn't I remember something like this? And if something like this really happened so long ago, shouldn't I be able to act all blasé about it like he was? I mean, did my heart have any reason to be pounding so hard I could feel it pulsing in my ears? Did my throat have any reason to be so dry? If this information had existed in the fabric of our friendship for over a year now, why was it affecting me like it was changing something between us?

Clearing my throat, I tried to hide the gruffness of my voice as I asked, "So you've seen me completely naked and you've never told me?"

"You kept your bottoms on." He shrugged. "*And* I was chasing you most of the time, trying to get you to cover up. I mostly just saw your back."

"And my butt," I corrected.

Again, that sheepish look. "That too, yeah. But in your underwear. You've seen me in my underwear, too."

"It's not the same, Connor!"

"It's not like you were wearing lingerie or something! It wasn't that big of a deal," he said.

My heart panged. Disappointment I couldn't quite rationalize spreading throughout my chest and making my whole mood sour. I was horrified, but still I couldn't help the snort that came out of me. Because Con looked horrified too. "Why do you sound disgusted?"

"I had to chase your naked ass around your apartment and get you in the shower," he grumbled. "I try to put the whole thing out of my mind."

Suddenly I was burning. Using the time it took to pull my shorts up, yank my tank down, and slide on the new branded running shoes from the box on the seat beside me, I tried to get myself under control. I knew he meant nothing by it, but despite his nonchalant attitude, I was quiet. Embarrassment from the whole realization choking out any more commentary I might have.

"Are you dressed?" he asked from up front.

“Yes,” I clipped, flicking accusing eyes at him in the rearview. When he caught sight of them his own eyebrows pinched. “I’m just trying to reason with the realization that you’re a perv.”

“Cee...” he groaned but trailed off seeming resigned and confused by my dig.

*Really, Con? Does this really confuse you?*

Ignoring his ignorance, I crawled into the front seat now fully dressed in the workout attire. Flipping the front mirror down I cut a sharp glance over at him as I shook my hair loose from its bun. “Ponytail or braid?”

He didn’t even look at me before answering, “Ponytail.”

Furiously, I used my fingers to comb my hair up into a ponytail. It was official. I was irritated, and I wasn’t hiding it.

“Are you mad?” he asked.

“No.”

“You’re a bad liar. You don’t even try to make it convincing.” When I didn’t respond, he sighed. “Look, I only told you because I thought you would laugh. Not the opposite.”

Dropping my hands in my lap, I whipped my head around to look at him. *Glare* at him. “Because it’s *so* funny that you think I’m disgusting, right?”

Woah.

*Woah...*

That did not come out the way I thought it would. That wasn’t supposed to come out *at all*. Yeah, I was irritated that Con had kept this vital piece of information from me for a year, just waiting for the perfect moment to slam it in my face. But I was *not* feeling some type of way about him seeing me naked and not being affected by it.

I couldn’t be.

*Because that would be crazy.*

Crazy and not very friend-like. In fact, it was distinctly *more* than friend-like, and we were not more than friends.

Con didn't pick up on my internal freak out, just on my venomous words. "Who said I think you're disgusting?"

I crossed my arms around myself, forcing my voice to be more level. "Your face when you were talking about my body."

"I—" he cut himself off, studying me quietly. "I thought we were joking around. You called me a perv."

"Well you are," I sniffed.

He gave me a look. "Technically, *you're* the perv for flashing me."

"Technically, it will be your fault when I punch you in the mouth, because you're *still* talking about it." There was no forcing my voice to be level here. Now it was all venom, my defense rising high and ready to reign down when necessary.

Dejection slipped over me even as I held fast to my words. I had no idea why I was acting this way with him. I never had to be defensive with Con before. Sure, sometimes it reared its ugly head, but most of the time he pulled me right back out with his steady attitude and reassurances.

Now suddenly it was like he was the thing I needed to be reassured from. The force that was driving this ball of anxious, restless energy in the middle of my chest. All because he cried boobies.

This was so stupid. *I* was being stupid. And I felt even more stupid for making it a thing. But I couldn't help it. It just felt big in the moment. Like, so big that I didn't want to look at him. So big that I wish I could have gone my whole life without knowing that Connor had...*seen* me and didn't have much of a reaction to it.

"Ceci," he tried, sounding pained. Like he regretted himself completely.

I turn toward the window, needing to get myself in order.

I didn't know what was wrong with me. But this was not the time to be getting insecure. And what was that, anyway? What had I really expected him to say? That he thought I was hot? That he wanted me? *No*. That's exactly the sort of thing I didn't want to hear from Connor, because that was exactly the sort of thing that could upend our friendship forever.

And I needed him.

We didn't have to go into the how or the why, I just needed him. And I didn't need to go scaring him off by starting to act all crazy. So, I stayed quiet for the rest of the drive, because I think I was a little hurt, but mainly I needed some time to get my shit together.

We parked outside of a large gym building. The front was outfitted from the ground to roof with glass, brick making up the other sides. Inside, I could see a front desk and the beginnings of gym equipment. Interesting.

Hopping out of the car, I had the urge to look back at Connor and ask if he also thought I was out of shape on top of being a disgusting monster, but I held my tongue. Instead, I charged right ahead toward the front door even though I had no idea what I was charging into.

I didn't even get past the side of the car before large arms wrapped around me and a strong hold pulled me into a broad chest.

"Connor," I grit out, pointedly ignoring the way my body wanted to melt into his body. Especially as he closed his arms more solidly around me and lowered his cheek to rest against the side of my head.

"Don't be mad," he said into our shared air.

"I'm not mad," I lied, and he was right. I was terrible at it.

"I messed up," he said. "I didn't think I had to tell you, I thought you already knew."

"Knew what?" I asked.

He shifted, and I could tell he was looking at me as he said, "That you're perfect."

I stiffened, my heart becoming an acrobat, flipping outrageously in my chest.

“I don’t want pity compliments, Connor,” I said tersely, trying to get away from him. He held onto me tighter, his forehead dropping to the crown of my head.

Voice low and deep and *serious*, he said, “Pity has nothing to do with it, Cee.”

“Con,” I breathed, feeling myself getting hot. Feeling as if I couldn’t take whatever he was about to say. But he didn’t let up. His front was molding like a sheet of wet paper to my back. I could feel every inch of his hard body against mine, just like I had in his bed. The familiarity of it didn’t make it any less mind melting.

His next words came out in a growl.

“I didn’t think that *I* should be the one to tell you—*you confusing fucking girl*—that you’re absolutely goddamn perfect, and the things that *this body*,” I had to bite back a gasp as his big hands grasped onto my hips and squeezed, “does to a man just by looking at you should be illegal.”

I was glad he wasn’t looking at me, because if I was melting before, I was evaporating now. I couldn’t speak. Utterly silenced by his sudden confession. I couldn’t so much as breathe.

Connor blew out a breath big enough for the both of us, his head shaking on mine. “I feel like I’m constantly fighting two wars when I’m with you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

His body shook and I assumed he was laughing, but the sound he made was humorless. “I mean, I have to scare off every man that catches sight of you when we’re together.”

“You do that?”

“*Of course* I do that.”

I shook my head, not believing him. “Not *every* man.”

Turning me around, he pressed my back against the car surface and laid a hand on the window above my head. “Every. Single. One, Celestia. There’s not a man alive that can resist looking twice at you. You’re captivating.”

I swallowed, my throat feeling dry and my body feeling warm. But a good kind of warmth. The kind that fills you up and makes you spill over.

“What’s the second war?” I asked in a whisper. Peering up into his light brown eyes with a curiosity I couldn’t ignore. He was being so honest right now. Even though his voice was cracking and his tone had gone gravelly and he had this pleading sense about him, he was being honest with me for the better or worse of our friendship. It was an honesty I couldn’t resist investigating.

Ironically, as soon as I did, something in his open eyes closed off. Grunting, he shook his head. “You don’t want to know.”

“I do.”

“Then *I* don’t want you to know.” His voice went low and whisper light as he flickered hazel browns over my face. We were close. Close enough that I could feel the heat of his chest over mine. The current of his breaths rushing past my face. “It’s a need-to-know thing and for now it’s my secret.”

I contemplated this for a second. Did I want to know what other so-called invisible war he was talking about, of course. But could anything feel better in that moment than the crashing relief that Connor did not find me disgusting? Not likely.

I was soaring. My heart feeling weightless and my stomach feeling fluttery all of a sudden. A complete one-eighty from how I felt in the car. I sort of wanted to bask in this escalated feeling of acceptance. The uncanny sense that I was desired. I could worry about the other details later.

Nodding slowly, I said, “Okay.”

“Okay?”



“I said okay already.” I wasn’t looking at him, because how could I look at him after he’d said *all that?*

Using a finger just under my chin, he made me. Then, reestablishing some level of our usual friendship, he smashed my cheeks together, giving me a duck face. “Are you done asking crazy questions now?”

“Yes,” I said. As I did, he honked my duck cheeks. I giggled and Connor looked down on me with the same amount of seriousness as ever.

“Done with your temper tantrum too?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Alright, then.” He let go and stood up straight, leaving me feeling unguarded against the open night air. With a stiff nod he said, “Now you know what I think.”

My eyes burned up into his. Words like *‘this body’* and *‘goddamn perfect’* running through my brain on repeat. Driving me crazy with curiosity and confusion.

To him, I simply agree, “Now I know.”

His eyes burned right back. “Then don’t mistake me again.”

I nodded again but blinked away from him, needing a break from this contact before I exploded. My eyes landed on the small glass box of the gym in front of us. “What are we doing here, anyway?”

“Self-defense 101.”



# Chapter Twenty

## CONNOR

“What!” The sound of Ceci’s excited voice followed me as she stuck close to my elbow, bouncing with every step.

I needed a second. I needed several seconds actually, after almost divulging to Ceci that her very presence caused a daily battle not to be attracted to her. Not to be so distracted by her radiance every waking second of every single day. Was she really that dense? Did she really not know that she was the hardest thing to look away from and the easiest thing to fall into?

I needed to get my head on straight. Both of them. Now was not the time to be lusting over my best friend.

Best friend.

The words never sounded as dull as they did now. Not when, for the first time ever, she was practically broadcasting that she might be ready for something different. Something more? She must be, if she was seeking reassurance from me, something she had never done.

But now was not the time. Not when she was going through all that she was lately. Not when for the past two weeks she had been jumping out of her skin around every corner. Constantly second guessing herself and falling into long minutes of staring off into space. Not when she wasn’t really being Ceci.

Now was the time for her to recenter herself. And while most of our centers were water or air or something else soft like that; Ceci’s center was all steel. Rigid and immovable and hard as hell. Underneath all of Ceci’s confidence has always been the sense of control her fearlessness brought her. Since she was strong, she felt like she could handle anything.

Being snuck up on had cracked that control.

In the time since the attack she had been tearing herself apart for losing that control over the outcome of it. Every time I actually got her to talk about it with me, she wished she had done things differently. And every time she refused to talk to me about it, I could tell she was wishing the same thing.

It was clear she was feeling ungrounded about the whole thing. Which is why I thought giving her grounds to walk on would be a step in the right direction of getting her back to normal.

Tossing a look over my shoulder, I said, “You heard me the first time, we’re taking a self-defense class.”

“We?” she asked, her eyebrows lifting.

“Yes *we*,” I repeated. “Is that allowed, Queen Ceci?”

Pausing, she looked at me for a second. Like, really looked, and it was instantly the only way I needed to be looked at for the rest of my life. Like I meant something to her. Like I could possibly mean everything to her. Like everything I was in that moment was enough. *More* than enough even.

It was times like this that made me wonder what those looks really meant to Ceci. What was going through her mind to make her eyes go so wide and glassy and for this foreign softness to overtake her face? Because it couldn’t just be friendship that made her look at me like that. It couldn’t.

Cool fingers wrapped around my forearm jolting me out of my thoughts and back to the scene in front of us. A woman had materialized from behind the front check-in desk, popping up with a huff and a smile while she noticed us standing there.

“Here for the SD course with Jenny?” she asked.

Ceci, whose eyes were as wide as a kid’s at the zoo, looked from the sneak attack lady to me expectantly. It was weird. I’d never seen her wait on me for anything, so seeing her hang on my arm with what looked like excited fascination was unexpected. I liked it. I’d have to surprise her more often.

Ceci tugged on the arm she was holding, trying to get my attention.

“Tell her, Con!” she whispered excitedly.

I couldn't help smiling at her. Looking down my arm I took a second to survey the girl next to me. She was excited, which made her adorable. Turning back to the woman I gave her a nod. “Yes, the uh, 101 course.”

“Well, you're right on time!” the woman said, chipper as ever. Moving so that her body was leaning over the other side of the oval desk she pointed toward the back left of the gym. This was mainly a fighting gym, from the looks of it. Mats and rings and bags were set up in various corners of the room. General gym equipment congregating in the middle creating the makings of a modest but up-to-date workout gym. “Go ahead and follow the walkway to the back left and you'll see Jen up front. She's got pink hair; you can't miss her.”

“Thank you,” I said as I led us both around the counter, aiming for the back left.

Turning just slightly as she followed me, Ceci asked the woman, “What's your name?”

“Oh, I'm Chelsea you cute little thing you. What's yours?”

She grinned. “I'm Ceci.”

She followed me blindly along the back edge of the room, her focus too grabbed by everything else around her. That was okay, I could be her eyes. Using a gentle hand on her shoulder blades, I guided us where we needed to go. When we reached the glass doors that led into a small room off the left wall, Ceci smiled a dopey smile at me too.

“I like her.”

“Oh yeah? Why?” I challenged, pulling the door open while trying to suppress my smile. No doubt it was some non-reason. The girl lived her life off vibes alone.

“I dunno, I just do,” she said. I just shook my head.

That was Ceci. Yes or no. Do or don't. So sure and never apologetic about it. We had been in here less than five minutes

and she was already starting to come back. In the car I was beginning to worry that this was a bad idea but seeing her so fascinated by everything was putting those worries to bed.

Inside the glass room were black matted floors and just about nothing else. Large bags were stacked in the back corner and some other gym equipment like medicine balls and free weighted items were there too, but for the most part the room was wide open.

At the front, was a girl with pink hair just like Ms. Chelsea said. It was long and brown at the roots and this ashy pink color that faded and twisted into her braid. She was small, both in height and in stature, but you could just tell by her definition and even in the way she stood that she was strong. I don't know why I looked over at Ceci after seeing her, but when I did, it seemed fitting that she was smiling at her the same way she smiled at Ms. Chelsea.

Leaning into Ceci's ear I asked, "You like her too?"

She just grinned, and I couldn't help my laugh. Happiness bloomed throughout my chest at the sight of her goofiness. It had been missing lately, even before the incident I'd been missing it.

I was glad to see it back.

Ceci led us to stand at the back of a group of mostly women. I wasn't oblivious to the eyes that followed me as I followed her, but I didn't mind. I was used to being somewhat of a spectacle, especially around women. I didn't let it get to me. Especially when I had my little guard dog with me.

True to form, when we settled into a good spot at the back of the group and Ceci happened to notice people looking at me, she crossed her arms over her chest and glared. Making eye contact and curling her nose up.

Essentially sneering.

Leaning into her I smirked, "Down killer. This class is about defense, not offense."

"I'm defending your delicate honor," she said quietly, her own mouth wobbling with humor. I pinched her hip and her

smirk grew into a smile.

My heart relaxed even more because here was my Ceci. Talking shit and taking no shit. Just how she was meant to be.

“Alright everybody!” At the front of the room, the pink-headed instructor clapped her hands together. “I think that’s all of us. Let’s get started.”

She was met with a series of grunts and apprehensive head nods. Ceci was a head nodder, her ponytail bobbing over her shoulder as she did.

“Welcome to Basic Self Defense. My name is Jenny and I will be instructing you throughout this short course.” As she spoke she moved along her station at the front of the room. “Over the course of our sessions we will go over the fundamentals of self-defense, important musts to remember in all situations, not just dangerous ones, and of course some moves to disengage yourself from potentially dangerous situations.”

Grunt, nod, grunt, nod.

“For the majority of this class we will work in pairs, but occasionally I will ask for volunteers—maybe the big guy in the back if he’s up for it.”

I shrugged, knowing I could only be the big guy mentioned. Ceci, however, grabbed my wrist and pulled me behind her. As if protecting me from things I might not want to do.

*God.* She had to stop being so—she just had to stop.

I bit my cheek to stop myself from feeling the rush of rightness that fell over me just by the little things she did. These were the things she’d always done, and I’d always been okay with pushing down my reactions in return. But lately, since having her in my arms, my bed, my grasp, I hadn’t been able to stop the wanting from bubbling up.

Jenny just laughed at Ceci’s protectiveness, “But from the looks of it, I’ll have to work on the bodyguard first.”

Another smirk, triumphant this time, graced her face and I shook my head. Only Ceci would take pride in being called a

bodyguard to a guy that had over a foot on her. I couldn't resist reaching forward and squeezing her shoulder though, because I was grateful for her even if she didn't realize what she was doing.

Absently, she touched light fingers to my hand and fell back to my side. Claiming me as her partner as she sunk her hip into the side of my thigh, leaning on me.

While Ceci couldn't keep her eyes off Jenny as she explained the breakdown of the class, I wasn't sure if I would make it through this class learning one thing. Not if this was how she was going to be. All clingy and bright eyed and possessive. Experiencing her like this, I was having a hard time putting my attention on anything else.

"Alright." Another clap from our instructor knocked my attention away from Ceci and back to the front of the room. "Before we get into any demonstrations or partner work, let's go over some basic instinctual rules of self-defense. Can anyone tell me what you think those might be?"

Someone up front raised their hand enthusiastically. Jenny, whose eyebrows climbed up her face, smiled politely as she gestured toward the man, "You don't have to raise your hand, but go ahead anyway."

"The best tool of self-defense is knowing your surroundings and not putting yourself in danger in the first place."

Beside me, I noticed Ceci stiffen, but her attention stayed fixed up front. Jenny nodded. "You're on the right track."

The guy jutted his chin into the air proudly and beside me Ceci rolled her eyes. Mumbling to no one in particular, "Teacher's pet."

I bit back the stupid grin threatening to split my face. So she was *that* type of student. Figures.

"Prevention is the number one rule of self-defense. If you can prevent an altercation from happening, or even prevent a situation from escalating, you're going to want to do that over anything else," Jenny started. "You want to use tools that are innate to us as humans. That feeling you get in your gut when



something just isn't right—listen to it. That urge to take a step away when someone is making you uncomfortable—heed it. Our bodies are our number one defense against off situations. They will let us know when the vibe is not good.”

Slowly, almost unconsciously I noticed Ceci's steps drifting forward. Her attention rapt with what our instructor was saying. Like a puppet on a string, I shadowed her. Not intruding on her space, but never too far away that she couldn't reach me if she needed to. She might stand in front of me, but I always had her back.

Up front, Jenny continued.

“While it's important to stay conscious of the situations you are in *before* they become threatening, not all dangerous situations can be avoided. Sneak attacks, lures, or even trusted individuals acting out of character can be large factors on why a situation may become dangerous. You honestly never know, and it's best not to use blame-laying language out of respect for any victims who have experienced attacks.” Jenny didn't look pointedly at the snarky guy from before, but I had a feeling by the shrinking of his shoulders, he got the message.

“The truth about this is, no one who's been put into these horrible situations is at fault. Prevention is our best tool, but it can fail too. So we are here today to build up the rest of the arsenal.”

Over her shoulder, Ceci turned her head to look at me for the first time since the instructor started speaking. And she was frowning at me. I frowned too. Her expression showing a glimpse of questioning I instantly wanted to answer. What was suddenly bringing this on? Why was she looking at me like that? I wanted to ask her. In fact, I was going to. But before I could, she looked my face over, up and down, before directing her attention to the front again.

Jenny spoke, but I was no longer paying attention. She could talk about the importance of being aware of your surroundings until she was blue in the face, and still I'd have the image of Cee's frown marring my vision instead.

My mind blurred out. I just wanted to know what that look meant. The only thing that eased my churning thoughts was the cross-eyed look Ceci shot my way when she noticed me staring for too long.

Even as I chuckled, the ache of worry remained. It was crazy how tightly my emotions were tied with hers. A twisting strand that just seemed to grow shorter and shorter, threatening to someday become too tangled to loosen.

Done listing off the top factors attackers look for when they're scoping out a victim or the best ways to disengage before an altercation even begins, Jenny clapped her hands again, breaking the image of me and Cee threading together apart.

"Now, let's talk vitals. Who can tell me any one of a person's vulnerable areas? These are spots that will hurt anyone, big or small," Jenny asked the class.

"Eyes, nose, ears, throat," Ceci said with no hesitation whatsoever.

"Good!" Jenny exclaimed with an excited hop. "On top of those, there's also—"

"Chest, knees, ankles, groin, and if all else fails, anything squishy. Organs hurt if you hit hard enough," she went on.

I looked at her. *Everyone* looked at her.

"Okay," Jenny said on a slow release of breath. "I think this is the bodyguard's way of telling us not to make her mad."

The class laughed, and Ceci raised her chin in the air, a proud student. I shook my head.

"What's your name?" Jenny asked.

"Ceci."

"Everyone, Ceci is exactly right. All the areas she mentioned are especially vulnerable to anyone. If you're ever cornered, and you need to think quickly, remember these places," she said, pacing her area as she spoke. "It's also good to note that elbows and knees only bend one way."

*“Elbows and knees only bend one way,”* Ceci repeated under her breath as if it was a chant or a mantra.

Leaning toward her, I said, “You are so scary. Put your fucking horns away.”

“Shh,” she reprimanded, waving her hand in my direction in a *‘quiet down’* motion. Though, a slight smile still peppered her expression as she shushed me.

“Okay, so let’s get into some moves.”

With that, we paired off and started into some hands-on demonstrations.

Starting off with what to do if someone grabbed you around the shoulders and tried to steer you away with them. Jenny explained how to use their leverage and their own arms and legs to twist those body parts that *“only bend one way”* unnaturally, allowing yourself time to run.

Next she moved on to explain how to get away if someone got a hold of your hair, which had something to do with twisting the hair grabbing arm and exploiting those vulnerable areas Ceci so graciously pointed out. Then she briefly covered the best ways to strike vulnerable areas from various positions.

Each move went through a cycle of the instructor demonstrating it first, the class attempting the motions on their own, and finally the class enacting the scenarios with their partners.

I let Cee take the lead on these, which she was more than happy to do. Her telling me to *‘pull her hair like I fucking meant it’* might forever be burned in my brain, but it was also testament to how much she was engaged in the class. Which was a relief.

I wasn’t really here to learn self-defense; I was here to empower Ceci into taking her control back. And be here for her while she did it. I didn’t want her feeling like I just dropped her off and told her she needed to figure it out. I know that’s how she was feeling with her family right now. I wanted her to know I would figure it out with her.

And selfishly, I wanted to know all of her options of escape if she ever, God forbid, had to defend herself like the other night again.

We were just coming back to our positions after a quick water break when Jenny announced, “Okay everybody, really good job so far! We are moving onto our last move of the day. And we’re running out of time, so I want to demonstrate this one on a volunteer.”

Instead of skating her eyes around the room and surveying for any actual voluntary offering, she zeroed straight in on me. “Ceci, is it okay if I borrow your guy?”

Ceci, whose sharp eyes assessed Jenny and then cut up to me, waited only until I nodded my head and shrugged to look back at our instructor with a barely resigned glare. “I guess but be gentle. He’s sensitive.”

The class laughed but my mind only zeroed in on one thing. She didn’t correct her from calling me “*her guy*”.

I stole another pinch on Ceci’s hip before I made my way up front to be used as a puppet for this woman’s classroom. She positioned me to face her so both our sides were to the class. Then she told me to grab onto her wrist like I was trying to yank her along with me. Initially I hesitated, not wanting to yank any woman, class or not, but she insisted. So, with caution, I grabbed her. Her skin felt cold compared to Ceci’s warmth. Wrong instead of right. Making me miss her touch almost reactively.

“This is what you’ll do if someone tries to grab your arm or wrist from in front of you,” she said. “First step, like every other move, is to not panic and to try to take control back from the controller. In this scenario, taking control doesn’t mean pull away. That might throw you off balance and put you into an even more vulnerable position.” She demonstrated the incorrect way first.

“Instead, you want to grab firmly onto their hand, lock that position *over* their fingers or knuckles, and then you are going to swing both yours *and* their arms so that theirs is now hyperextended behind their back, putting you in control once

again. Once you have that position, simply push. This will force them to their knees or into a submissive position in which you can disengage and run.”

As she spoke she acted out every motion. Pressing down on my fingers to a point where I had to loosen my grip. Twisting my arm behind me so unnaturally that it was uncomfortable to the point of pain. And pushing on the hold to the point where I had no other choice than to lower down to my knees. It was demobilizing and even with our uneven size matchup, I had to admit, she had me.

Loud enough that everyone could hear, I said, “Uncle.”

The class laughed, but as she let me go I noticed that Ceci had drifted slightly forward, her face pinched as she watched the exchange closely. Attempting at levity and getting that worried look off her face, I gave her a wink. Her mouth only pulled up slightly, but the smile didn’t meet her eyes. Eyes that were looking kind of weird.

“Ceci, you seem to be picking things up quickly. Why don’t you join us up front for your run through, so the class can watch if they get stuck. Everyone else, try this out with your partners,” Jenny said.

The class broke out in a series of movements. Some smooth and some sloppy. Grunts and groans and huffs of effort sounding all around us. In the middle of it, Ceci wasn’t moving.

No one else noticed, everyone preoccupied with getting their positions right. The instructor moving from pair to pair, commenting or correcting when necessary. But I noticed, and it wasn’t like her to get shy. I mean she’d all but begged me to yank her ponytail earlier in front of everyone, but now, she was frozen to her spot?

My touch made her jump as I grasped her elbows. Further evidence that she was not okay.

“What’s wrong?” I asked immediately.

She shook her head, a trance lifting and her throat bobbing as she swallowed. “Nothing. Let’s just go up there.”

“Okay.” I followed, not believing her.

Up front, Ceci turned to me and tried to say casually, “I should grab you this time. I’ve been hogging all the demos.”

This further solidified my suspicions. For all her trying, she was not pulling off the nonchalance she was going for. Instead she seemed jumpy and skittish all of a sudden.

“Um, no,” I said, and when she frowned up at me, I went on. “You gain way more from practicing on me than I do on you.”

Biting her lip, she glanced around us.

“C’mon.” I grabbed her shoulders and turned her toward me. “Just you and me, like always. Last one, then we can get pancakes or something.”

“I’m not a kid. You don’t have to bribe me with sweets,” she grumbled.

I leveled a look at her.

“I’m not bribing you with anything. I was going to get you something either way. You’re doing well, so you deserve a reward.” I continued to look down at her, watching her amber eyes for signs and cues. She was lashing out because she was nervous about something. Uncomfortable. But I wanted her to work through that. That’s what we came here to do. So sliding a slow hand up and down her arm I said. “Just do this last thing for me and then I’ll spoil you with all the treats you can eat, alright?”

“Like a dog?” she asked, and my heart panged at the reminder of our first day as friends. At how far we’d come from there, basically strangers then to now knowing each other inside and out. To doing anything for each other.

I grinned for more than one reason, my heart feeling achy but in a good way. Still I kept my voice light, sarcastic even and said, “Exactly, Sparky. Now be a good girl and finish this up.”

Her eyes did something funny, they traveled from mine to flick down my body ever so softly before she yanked them

back up. Smiling softly, she nodded a little weakly and backed up into her position.

Every other time I moved for her throughout the class, she was ready. Counting her movements under her breath as she acted out the instructions from our teacher. This time, as I moved to grab her arm, she jerked back. And hell if that movement and the look of fear on her face didn't tear me apart.

She looked genuinely afraid. *Of me.* It had me straightening up and thinking *fuck this class.*

“What’s wrong?” I asked again. She opened her mouth to answer but one look at her face had me cutting her off, adding. “And no bullshit, please.”

She closed her mouth and looked around us again. She was being weird.

*He grabbed my wrist and twisted and it hurt.*

The sentence materialized in my mind in a whisper of memory. My eyes widened as realization washed over me. I was convinced my chest was cracking, pain lancing throughout my abdomen at the thought that she was scared. *Still* scared, even right now as she stood there with me. Or at least remembering a time when she was. And she was being so weird because she didn't like feeling that way, especially around people she didn't know.

My voice was low as I stepped toward her. “Is this how he grabbed you?”

Her eyes clamored into mine. Brown and gold. She clung to my gaze as if it were a life raft as she nodded slowly. I nodded too, understanding.

“Okay.” I swallowed. “Alright. We can do one of two things. We can sit this one out, no problem. No pressure.”

Her eyes didn't move from mine, but her chin moved ever so slightly. Shaking her head from side to side as she refused that option. Like I thought she would.

“Or,” I continued, “I can come at you for real and you can take control *for real*. You don’t have to hold back on me, don’t worry, I can take it. Think of me as him and do it however you want, yeah?”

This lit a spark in her eyes and I didn’t even have to ask if that’s what she wanted. I knew. So taking a few steps away, I waited until she took a few readying breaths. Her shoulders stiffening and her gaze locking on me in a way that was unfamiliar. Fierce.

I felt a little sick trying to grab her so aggressively, but the feeling of needing to help her through this insecurity won out. So I forced myself to move.

The first time I grabbed her, my hand wrapping around her wrist and tugging her gruffly, she freaked out. Squirming and wiggling to break free. Instinctively, I let go. Slipping my hand down to hold hers and tugging her heaving body close to mine as I apologized.

I didn’t think I would hate this so much but seeing her so uneasy was officially my newest weakness. I didn’t want to do it again. But I knew if she didn’t do this as believably as possible, she’d always beat herself up over it.

“I’m sorry,” I said, searching her eyes for confirmation she knew I wasn’t serious. She shook her head silently, trying to get her breathing under control.

“Fuck,” I muttered and against any of my better judgement I leaned my head down at the same time I lifted her arm up, dropping a kiss to the inside of her wrist. Her eyes flicked up to mine, startled. Still, she continued to right her breathing. “I’m so sorry, honey. But we have to do it again.”

Four more repeats later and I could see she was getting frustrated. She was so impatient with herself. But I wasn’t. I’d be here if she got it on the next one or if it took her a hundred more.

And on the fifth try, she didn’t retreat.

As soon as my fingers closed around her arm, she pressed down on my knuckles just like Jenny had in her



demonstration, but much harder. I could feel both her panic and her strength as she gained control over me. And I didn't make it easy for her. Selfishly, I also wanted her to master this, to know that she had a chance of being safe in situations like these. Before I could struggle much though, she had my arm extended behind my back. Pressing hard to bend my wrist and kicking my knees in to send me to the ground.

She did it.

It probably took all of her body weight, but she had me on the ground. Kneeling down, arms outstretched, and probably looking so silly, I cast a glance back at her. She was at my back, focusing hard on the hold she had on me. On her hands. Her eyes were glazed as if she was in a different place altogether. When she saw me looking at her, they cleared.

And she smiled.

Relaxing her hold on my arm she let it curl behind my back and rest there pinned up against me. Then she laid her body over it and hugged me, her other arm coming around my neck as she held on.

“Uh, Cee?”

“Hmm?” she asked in a sigh of relief.

“You know I love your sweet side, but uh, this is basically still a chokehold, honey.” Straggled chuckles rose throughout the room.

Ceci held on for a few extra seconds, hugging me tight, before she let me go. As I stood, I pulled her up with me and she absently rubbed at my arm. A silent apology for being rough on me.

*So sweet.*

Jenny rounded everyone up as she spoke her closing statements. “This has been a really great first class! As we close and say our goodbyes until next week, I want you all to remember that very first rule. Prevention is your best form of protection. But when you can't prevent, remember your next best option is to remain calm, regain control, and remove yourself as quickly as you can.”

After Jenny dismissed everyone, Ceci and I made our way to the side where we left our little paper cups of water and the rest of our stuff. I couldn't resist leaning into her. "You earned yourself an extra pancake for the hug."

And nothing. Not even a playful jab of her elbow or a warning glare.

"Cee?"

She turned on me and boy did I know that face.

"What?" I asked. "You don't think you did good?"

She frowned and crossed her arms over her chest.

"No, I did fine," she said in a tone that implied '*obviously*' and I barely restrained my scoff. "But Con, did you..."

Stopping, she frowned even more as she tightened her arms around herself. She looked like she was going to forgo her question altogether until I ducked my head to catch her eye. Quietly I probed, "Cee, I'm listening."

"Did you bring me here because you think I did something wrong that night?"

My head jerked as I stared at her. Sharp air sliced through my throat and into my lungs. I tried to swallow it down but it didn't work against the raw feeling that her truth was giving me.

All at once, I started to understand. I understood her withdrawing, her jumpy behavior, her staring off into space with angry eyes. I think in that moment I saw straight into her mind. Straight into the depth of the fear and doubt she had been battling with, and I didn't fucking like it.

"Come here," I said.

She did, without hesitation and I found that satisfied some frazzled part of my subconscious that was afraid she might be mad at me or blaming me for the way she was feeling. Really, what I found as I looked into her downtrodden face, was that she was looking to me for support. For reassurance. For strength.

“Look at me,” I said to the top of her head as she suddenly found her fingernails so interesting.

This time she didn't obey so easily. She peeked upward just a little before biting her lip and rolling her eyes away, like this was stupid. My hands itched to spank her sassy ass like I had outside my house. But my need for her to be alright urged me to do something else.

Stepping into her space, I slid both my hands behind her neck, fingertips pushing slightly into her hair. Her ponytail had loosened over the course of the class, so my hands slipped through the fiery strands easily. Her head was warm and a little damp with sweat and soft to the touch. I tugged on her hair just a little so that she would look up at me. And when she did, the cradle of her head flopped into the support of my grip.

She looked at me then, her eyes glaring slightly but her focus successfully mine. I massaged her gently in thanks.

Humming, she closed her eyes, and I wondered what else I had to do to keep her purring like this for me. Finally, when she opened those eyes again, she was waiting for me to explain myself.

“Do you remember when Tiney was in the hospital?”

Stiffness overtook her muscles and I circled my fingers slightly, trying to alleviate it. I appreciated her caring when it came to my sister. When she'd fallen ill enough that there was a chance she wouldn't make it, my brothers and I hadn't been the only ones terrified. The Fernandez's were right there with us. Stressing, worrying, crying. Ceci most of all.

That was a time where I couldn't tell my up from my down. When someone could have told me the sky was red and I would've believed them. I remembered being so crowded by fear and pain and regret and shame and every horrible immobilizing emotion imaginable. I didn't have to recount it for her. Ceci had been there. We almost broke the secret of our friendship way back then, as she held onto me in the middle of the hospital and borderline growled at me as she told me to keep it together. Her attempts at a pep talk.

All these memories were clear and vibrant as they danced along Ceci's eyes. She nodded.

"Remember how scared I was?"

She nodded again.

"Remember what you said to me?"

Her head shook.

Leaning down, I lowered my voice. "You told me that if I wanted to close my eyes, I could, and you would let me know when it was safe to open them again."

"Poetic," she drawled sarcastically.

"Yeah I know, you've got a gift," I drawled right back. She wrinkled her nose fighting a smile. "But you do remember that don't you?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So, you were my lifeline then. More than my brothers or my parents or any of my other friends. *You*.

"The other night is the only time I've ever seen you scared. It made me realize that I've never actually seen you struggle with anything, Cee. When you do, you're either trying to cover it up or you hide from me. But I'm not going to let you struggle through something like this alone.

"You did nothing wrong. But I can tell you're struggling to let yourself believe that, so I want to help you through it. And I don't care whether it's me, or your new friends or this place that becomes your lifeline. Whatever it is, I want to help you find it. You were there for me. I want to be here for you. *Let me be here for you.*"

I'm pretty sure I was whispering, or just talking really softly. Although the class had cleared out for the most part, there were still some people hanging around talking or exchanging contact information or just stretching. They weren't important. I wished they weren't there, especially since this was a subject Ceci was sensitive about, but if I had to go another minute with her thinking I was disappointed in anything she did... I just couldn't.

“Okay?” I asked.

“I guess.” She shrugged.

Growling, I tugged at the strands of her hair. She sucked in a hissing breath and let it tumble out in a giggle, her chest rising just slightly and her neck craning to expose her throat. I don't know if she saw my eyes trail from her neck to her chest and dip to her blue sports bra, but when I raked them back up to her face, her smirk did something to my pants that would need adjusting later.

“*Okay,*” she amended in a smug whisper.

Oh, she was trouble. She had always been. But for whatever reason, I felt like the real trouble had just been awakened in her.

I released her, more so for myself than for her.

As if she sensed my attraction, her eyes slid down the length of me and back up to mine with a calm, almost claiming stare. Then she turned and started her way out the room calling, “Pancakes on me tonight.”

# Chapter Twenty-one

## CECI

“What are you looking at, Ant?” Paulo asked as he craned his neck over the other side of the counter.

Clicking the lock key, I shut down the website I’d been looking at, flipping my phone down on the table and straightening up.

“I’ve rotated the bottles in the cellar, corked the new inventory, and swept up the main floor,” I said. “I’m on my way to restock the shelves now.”

“Pssh,” Pau waved a hand. “Pipe down, bimbosa. You’ve handled everything, I will take care of the shelves. Sit.”

“Okay...” I said, lowering back down to the stool behind the counter. My legs ached just slightly from all the foreign bending and moving I’d done in the self-defense class the night before. But a good kind of ache. An accomplished pain that reminded me I had done something. One that brought my mind back to the website I was looking at just seconds ago.

It was only the day after our first self-defense lesson and ever since being in that building—taking the class, getting a peek at *other* classes—I had been feeling this jittery feeling. I’d stayed up all night thinking about Counter Strike Gym and the people in it. The only reprieve from my sudden obsession were the thoughts of Connor’s sweet hands and sweeter words still dancing along my memory. Memories that were becoming hard to think of in the daylight for fear of looking absolutely fucking lovestruck over my best friend. *Fuck*.

I wasn’t an idiot and Connor wasn’t my first friend who also happened to be a boy. When you were friends with guys there were those times when things were said or done that could seem *totally* different if they were said or done with a

guy you were actually interested in. A long hug or a passing compliment was just that with a bro. Nothing to examine, nothing to worry about. But with a man you were interested in, that same hug or same compliment was suddenly more intimate, more sensual, just *more*.

Last night at the class, everything from the way his voice had gone tender when reassuring me to the way he'd slipped his fingers into my hair (and pulled at it), had felt like more.

Which was scary.

Terrifying really.

And the way I distracted myself from the scary and terrifying, was pushing it aside and focusing solely on the other things occupying my brain.

Jenny was so cool. With her half-dyed hair and subtle back tattoos. And the way that she taught the class with both an easy laid back nature and a sharp hawk's eye for detail and movement. Plus the way she controlled her body, like she was so in tune with every move, every tiny action adding to the bigger picture she was painting. It was gripping. It made me want to do more than just remember. It made me want to go back.

But what for? The self-defense class was cool, cooler than I thought it would be. Part of that had to do with Connor being there with me, doing anything with him was an automatic drop in the fun bucket. But I think another, deeper part of it had to do with the satisfying power it gave me to feel in control. Of my body, of my movements, of the situation. It was, of course, a hypothetical situation, but having just been in that position recently, I could testify that the knowledge would be useful. Much more useful than what I'd come up with.

“Are you going to tell me what you were looking at with such stars in your eyes? Or will I have to guess?” Paulo asked, reaching a hand across the counter and poking me on the cheek with his long finger.

I smiled sweetly at him, leaning two elbows down onto the counter. “How about you guess?”

The finger he'd just poked me with rubbed along his chin thoughtfully. "Knowing you, you're probably thinking of the next meal you will feed that greedy belly."

He grinned when my mouth dropped open. Waving, he added, "Or that boy."

"What boy?"

"The large one."

"Con?"

"I suppose that's what you call him in your daydreams," he said, so airily it made me want to smack him.

My mouth dropped open again. "I do not daydream about Con, Paulo! He is my *friend*."

*Lie.* I was daydreaming about him a lot lately.

*Double lie.* Did friends pull you in close and play with your hair and say things like '*that body*' and call you perfect? Even if they did, the way Connor had done it was *very* friendly. Too much so.

But Pau didn't know that. The only interaction he'd had with Connor was looking at him through the window days after the incident. We'd come by to get my car and to tell Pau what happened, only to encounter a livid Italian grandpa of a man who simultaneously chewed me out for putting myself in danger and thanked the heavens that I was okay. Turned out he'd gotten the alert late at night that same day but by the time he'd woken up, everything was already over. Still, he watched the video footage and apparently felt sick that this happened when he wasn't around to protect me. When I asked him what his old ass was even going to do, he said he didn't have a bear of a husband for no reason.

But so what? He'd seen us together once. That didn't make him an expert on the way I felt.

"Ah, but you are daydreaming about something. You think I don't notice you staring into the universe like you want to be somewhere else? And now you mess up even more than you



did before.” He tsked, shaking his head like I was a petulant child. “Tell me what you’ve been thinking before I—”

“You know, you can’t just keep threatening to throw me out any time you feel like it,” I said. “*But* since you can’t help your nosey old ass, I’ll tell you.”

Pau only glowered as he crossed his arms. But he settled in with a hip against the counter to listen.

“We—I took this class yesterday at a fighting gym. For exercise! Don’t give me that face, *just for exercise*—Anyway, it was actually a lot of fun and I dunno.” I shrugged as my thoughts trailed off, incomplete.

“You don’t know? What does this mean, *you don’t know?*”

“It means, *I don’t know!* It was...fun”

“You already said this.”

“Fun and...*I dunno.*”

His mouth wobbled at the corners and I got the distinct impression that he was laughing at me. But before I could narrow my eyes and call him on it, he straightened up and looked out the front window. “Looks like the sun is setting, bimposa. Time to go.”

Sunset was the new curfew Connor had given me for leaving here by myself. He’d made it abundantly clear that he didn’t want me hanging around here at night in case that guy decided to come back and finish what he started. Pau didn’t seem to have a problem with it at all. Especially because it was *not* sunset right now. Nowhere near it.

I looked outside too. We were in the middle of our midday lull. The sun was very high in the sky, far from setting. But when I told him as much, he just waved me off. “You are young. Go enjoy the day. Maybe explore those classes that are so...*fun.*”

\* \* \*

“Can I help you, honey? Oh! You were here the other night weren’t you—don’t tell me, let me guess... Cecil?”

I smiled at the front desk woman at Counter Strike Fighting Gym, Ms. Chelsea. Her deep skin glowed against the sunlight streaming in through the front window. The sun was setting just on the horizon, casting the room in this half glow.

Pau sent me away early again. The first time he’d done it the other day, I had almost come to the gym like he suggested, only thinking better of it at the last second. Yesterday I had only gotten as far as the parking lot, peeking in through the window like a total fucking creeper. Today I told myself to stop being a puss and go in.

So here I was, standing in front of the short black woman who called me honey and gave me warm feelings. She seemed like a warm hug of a person, but as she leaned forward on the countertop, I realized that warm hug would be pretty fucking tight if her jacked arms and toned shoulders had anything to do with it.

I knew I liked her for a reason.

“It’s Ceci,” I said as I approached the counter. Black surfaces took up the space she leaned on and I ran my eyes along the top, not sure what I was searching for.

“Right, right! Well, can I help you find anything, Ceci?” she asked as she watched me survey the empty countertop.

I paused, contemplating. Could she help me? “I don’t know. I guess I’m just wondering if you guys have any brochures or an information center?”

The smile that spread across her round, weathered face was knowing. “We’ve got a bulletin board right over there. Take any flyer you want, we replace them all the time.”

I followed her finger over to the wall that separated the main rooms from space around a bend. I suspected they were offices by process of elimination. The bathrooms were in the very back and I’d already seen each of the separate activity rooms. The offices were the only thing I hadn’t scoped out yet.

The bulletin board was as big as a classroom whiteboard and covered an array of papers ranging from flashy gloss flyers to white copy paper with barely legible scribbles on it. They all offered some type of service or another. Boxing lessons, Introduction to Muay Thai, Jiu Jitsu sparring sessions, Krav Maga and so on.

They all seemed interesting, but I wish I knew more about them. More about which one might be good for *me*.

“I had a feeling you’d be back.”

I jumped. I never used to be so jumpy, but ever since that night, it was an unfortunate side effect. Lord only knew how long the small figure had been standing beside me before she said anything. Jenny, the self-defense instructor, looked more casual than she had during our class as she stood next to me now, arms clasped behind her back and hair pulled up into a messy haphazard bun.

“You did?” I asked. That was strange, because I didn’t know I’d be back until I actually was. I shrugged. “The Self-defense class is a five-week course, so I guess it’s not rocket science.”

“Nah,” Jenny shook her head. “SD is cool and all, useful too, but you strike me as someone who needs to hit something.”

“Oh goodie, glad to know the feral vibe I’ve been going for is finally paying off,” I laughed.

To my surprise, she laughed too instead of looking at me like I was crazy. I kept my attention on the board, leaning into it as I scanned over the options. “What’s with this bulletin board, anyway?”

Another laugh. “Each instructor gets to make their own postings. That’s why they’re all so different.”

I nodded. “Whose is this, the company dog’s?”

“*That* would be Jim, the MMA guy,” she said with a knowing smile. Jim must get a lot of comments like that.

I bit my lip. “And which one is yours? Other than the self-defense one, I mean.”

The knowing smile stayed right where it was as she reached forward and landed a pointing finger over the top of a black and red flyer that read: ***Boxing Lessons! Beginner, Moderate, and Hard available.***

*Boxing, huh?*

Electricity fired along my fingertips as I itched to take it from the bulletin board. But I didn’t want to seem too eager. I had no idea what it would even mean to take boxing lessons. What skill level beginner even entailed.

Would I look stupid if I showed up with no prior experience? What if I didn’t like it? Would I seem indecisive if I jumped ship right away to a different class? Would I even be able to do it? I wasn’t having a very good track record with skill lately.

“Ever thought about it before?” she asked, breaking me out of my spiral.

“What?”

“Boxing.”

“Never.” I shook my head. *Until now.*

As if she was reading my mind, she asked, “Thinking about it now?”

I hesitated, then thought, what’s the point in lying. “Kind of.”

Jenny reached forward and tore her sign off the bulletin board. Turning to me for the first time since she appeared, I found that her face was warm. Just as warm as the front desk lady’s. I liked her too, and not just because of her hair.

She reached between us, handing me the flyer. When I closed my fingers around it, she said. “We can start as soon as you want.”

\* \* \*

“I’m warning you now, you’re going to be shadow sequencing for weeks,” Jenny (my new boxing instructor) said from the other side of the room.

It was early morning and I was back at Counter Strike for the third time in three days. The fifth in five if you counted those times I hadn’t come in. This time I was dressed in a pair of leggings I’d never actually worked out in and an old top from when I played sports in high school.

“You told me that yesterday,” I said, but it was a mistake to speak while trying to remember which number I was on. It messed me up completely and after a growl, I started again from the top. I could hear a chuckle from across the room, but I ignored it.

After Jen had handed me the flyer the other day, I’d almost agreed right away. But then I remembered my wrist. Looking at her I screwed my mouth to the side before reluctantly handing it back to her. “I can’t hit anything. I’m in PT for a broken hand.”

“Why?” she’d asked.

“For hitting something,” I answered truthfully.

And just like that, we’d made eye contact, both breaking into matching grins. She chuckled and reached between us a second time, handing the flyer right back.

“You don’t have to worry about your hand. You’ll be in the shadows for weeks before you even touch a bag.”

I didn’t know what the hell that was supposed to mean, but I took the flyer anyway and let her take my information so we could set up a time to start lessons.

And now here I was, shadow punching for an hour with wobbly arms.

“One, two—jab, cross. Three, four—hook, up,” Jenny chanted along with my slowing swings. “Keep that wrist firm

—Good. Again. Again. Again...”

Jenny’s voice faded to the back of my head as I ran through the same motions over and over again. The repetition of it settling me into a steady rhythm of control. The fact that every punch I threw was better than the last, every movement a step in the direction of something better spoke to something in me. Each sequence powerful yet controlled. Something I’d never been simultaneously. The feeling drove me forward to throw the next punch. And the next and the next.

My instant appreciation for the exercise didn’t exactly correlate to instant mastery though. And my sore arms could attest to that as they faltered on about my bagillionth punch.

“Jesus, when is it going to be over!” I groaned.

Jenny laughed. “Just for that, you’re starting your five hundred over again.”

My mouth dropped. *You’ve got to be kidding me!* I didn’t dare say it out loud though, because Jenny had a glint in her eye that reminded me of me.

*Evil*, I thought as I dejectedly started again. And damn, I kind of liked it.

\* \* \*

“I think your man is outside waiting for you, Selena.” Nina said as we worked on packing up another movie night. It was officially becoming a “thing”—the fact that the shelter was not able to book actual events for event night. It concerned me.

Ever since I started coming here, the staff has always had a consistent rotation of productive events to host. It was important for everyone lodging here to be able to get that outlet and escape. And the fact that it was currently being overlooked was not lost on me. It seemed like an ode to an end, but what did I know?

I tried to ask Nin and Chris if something was going on, but they just waved me off telling me not to worry about it. Which only made me worry about it more. But what could I do with no details or even the slightest idea on how to help?

Not much.

I could continue to pitch in where I normally did, adding on an extra day here and there, and maybe I could make the check donation that I “mailed in” every month a little larger, just in case. I’d have to remember that when I dropped it in the mailbox next time.

“My what?” I asked at the same time Christine ran toward the entry way and practically gushed, “It’s Connor!”

Oh yeah. Con was here to get me for our second self-defense class. He still insisted on picking me up just like last time even though I knew where the gym was now.

And I didn’t hate it, if the burn in my cheeks was any indication.

Still, I rolled my eyes as I whipped my phone out to use the camera as a mirror. In it I began working on my ponytail. Braiding the long thing so it was out of my way during class.

“Christine, you need to work on your listening skills. Connor is my *friend*,” I said.

“Your friend who you love,” she cooed

“In a friend way, sure.” I shrugged.

“In a fix your hair and check your face before you see him way,” Nina corrected with a damning finger pointed my way. Christine gasped *again*.

“I’m fixing my hair for class. I told you guys where we’re going,” I grumbled, snapping my ponytail in place and grabbing my stuff.

“Yeah sure,” they said, waving me off. They might as well have been kindergartners the way they “oohed” and “ahhed” as they walked me to the door. Giving Connor girly little waves as he stood on the curb leaned up against his car waiting for me.

“Hey,” Con said as I bounced down the steps to get to him. His eyes tracked me slowly, his mouth not frowning, but not quite happy either. Bags under his eyes solidified it, he looked tired. I frowned as I noted dark circles under his eyes.

“Hey,” I said as I eased up under him. “You know you can skip a day if you’re tired, Con.”

Frown lines marred his pretty plump mouth as he looked down on me.

“Don’t be crazy. I’ll never skip a day of being here for you Ceci, now come on,” he said it so simply, like it was just something normal that anyone would say. But really, no one was like him. No one else could make my heart do this squeezing thing it kept doing. Or the bursting thing in my chest when he reached over and slid his hand down the length of my ponytail, testing the weight of my braid. No one but him.

Dammit Ceci, *rules*.

All the way to the gym and even as we settled into our spots in class, Con continued to be quiet in his thoughts. I usually didn’t mind it, just as long as I knew what he was thinking. Now, it seemed like he was worrying about something he wasn’t letting me in on. And that tight pull of his mouth as he frowned in concentration was starting to mess with me.

So before Jen started class, I pulled on Connor’s arm to get his attention. My breath almost caught when he gave it to me. All dark skin, and brooding hazel eyes as he focused intently on me. He stared at me like he’d hang on every word. Like he knew anything I’d say would be worth it. It was a familiar and unfamiliar feeling all at once. Had it always felt like this to have him look at me? Had it always felt so...exposing?

I didn’t know, and now was not the time I wanted to figure it out. Now was the time to get those big stupid eyebrows to stop pulling together in a frown.

“I have a confession to make,” I whispered to him in a tone that suggested urgency.



He grunted, but I could tell he was a little on edge by my tone. Rotating my wrist I gestured for him to lean in. Then, with a dramatic cup of my hand to the side of my mouth, I said, “I’ve seen you naked too.”

I have not. But I went on.

“And—woo—you’re really starting to let yourself go.”

A complete and total fucking lie. Anyone who laid eyes on Connor could see that he was a specimen to behold. Toned everything, from his big arms to his bigger thighs. His flat ridged abs and even his forearms felt dirty to look at for too long. All thick and veiny, leading into wrists I couldn’t even wrap an entire hand around. Hands that were probably big enough to palm one entire...

*Okay, Celestia, enough of that.*

Luckily, I was cut off from my inappropriate thoughts by the slow rumble of Connor’s laughter. The way he went from looking at me like I was crazy to a slow smile spreading across his face to outright laughing had me mirroring each state in accompanying glee.

I loved to make him laugh.

I loved to make him anything really. Any reaction I pulled from him gave me this sick sense of satisfied power. It reminded me that I meant something to him.

And I never wanted that to change.



# Chapter Twenty-two

## CECI

**Pancake:** Text me when you're ready. I don't want you walking over alone.

**Me:** Mama bird, you need to stop worrying and let me fly. I can walk from a parking lot to the door just fine.

**Pancake:** Nah, I'll get you.

**Pancake:** And I thought I told you not to drive.

**Me:** I don't plan on drinking much so it should be fine.

**Pancake:** I'm worried about you.

**Me:** I'm worried me not drinking gets you worried about me.

**Pancake:** Just get here already. I'll see you soon.

I should have noticed the strange wording right away. *Get here*. Like he was already at the quiet little bar on the upper end of the city. He'd told me to meet him at seven and it was only six-fifty. So why was he already there?

Unfortunately, my mind had been focused on other things as I made the short drive over to the spot. The glass storefront that looked into a warm dimly lit bar room with high wooden tables and a rustic iron display of liquor was usually only a few minutes' walk from my apartment. Ten at most. But I was being more cautious about when and where I walked these days. Ten minutes suddenly seemed like too long a time to risk it alone in the dark.

But I was getting better about not being so scared.

Lately, ever since I started working out at Counter Strike Gym, what happened in the dark that night in front of the store wasn't messing with my head as much as it had initially. Now, what happened whenever I closed my eyes is what really taunted me.

Hands, arms, chest, thighs. Touches, caresses, proximity, language. All these things, foreign and confusing, seemed to be playing on repeat in my brain. And it wasn't the touch itself that was freaking me out. Or even the fact that it felt good in a way nothing had ever felt before. It was who they belonged to that was the problem.

A knock on my window jolted me out of my thoughts and I looked over to see Connor peering in with a worried look on his face. I guess I'd spaced out.

Cutting the engine I hopped out of the car. Con stepped out of the way shutting my door behind me. When I moved to start walking in, he stopped me by my elbow.

"What?" I asked peering up at him.

"Let me look at you," he said quietly and my gut twisted. *See what I mean?*

"Why?"

His hand on my elbow burned, his thumb taking it upon itself to rub softly at my exposed skin. Had he always touched me so gently? Or was I just making things up in my head? I swore I was making up these sweet unexplainable gestures from him ever since he saved me.

I shook my head. I had to be suffering from transference of some kind. I'd looked it up and apparently it was perfectly normal to start developing what you think are strong emotional feelings for someone after a traumatic event. Apparently it had some shit to do with our brains that made us crazy.

But were these really new feelings? They didn't seem new. Yeah sure it was new to me the way I could look at Con's arms and remember the way they wrapped around my waist and pulled me close to him. And it was new the way looking at his lips made me wonder what it would feel like to press my own against them. Of course that was new. I had never let myself think about it before. But despite those thoughts fighting their way to the surface, was this feeling of safety and warmth and home really something new? Or had I just never placed the

importance of them before? At least not in the correct category.

I didn't know. Yet even though I was trying to ignore it, my brain was working overtime on its own trying to figure it out.

I must have been staring at his hand as I zoned out again because all of a sudden there was a big shadow in my side view, reaching for my face. Unconsciously, I jerked away, and when our eyes met again I could have sworn I saw pain etched into his.

"Sorry," I said huskily.

He sighed and reached instead for my shoulder, turning me so that we were hip to hip and I was tucked into his side. "You're jumpy again tonight."

"It's getting better," I said as if apologizing again. Because it was, I just hadn't expected him to be reaching toward me. *Besides, being as lost in thoughts and feelings for him as I was, a strong wind could've made me jump.*

He nodded. "You know, I sometimes used to wonder what it would be like if you ever settled down—stopped being so hyper and thought more before you spoke."

"Gee Con, I love it when you compliment me," I grumbled.

He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I'm finding that I don't like it at all. Bring back my old Ceci."

*His Ceci.*

My eyebrows pinched, but damn did I not want to melt into the way it sounded. *His Ceci.* I could get used to that. But I wouldn't. Because under that feeling of butterflies and runaway hearts, there was the knowledge that this was different. There was danger along the lines we were toeing and at some point or another someone was going to tip over.

Besides Connor wasn't talking about his feelings for me, they may not even exist. He was just asking for his friend back. Checking in on her. And there was something to admire in that too.

So looking up to him with an open face, I let him see my eyes. My truth. “I’m just tired, Con. Is this why you wanted to go out? Because you think I’m not acting like myself?”

“Yeah sort of.” He shrugged. “I just wanted you here with me. I worry about you sitting all alone thinking too much. You know your brain can only take so much of that a day.”

My smile was instant.

“You’re such a little shit,” I said, as we continued through the doors. “But fine, if you’re that excited to be drunk under the table like always, then it’s my sworn duty as your friend to oblige.”

“Good,” is all he said. The hand along my shoulder seemed to do the roving thumb thing, but it was less electric with the barrier of my short-sleeved bodysuit protecting my poor confused nerves. Thank God.

Drinking with Connor would be good. It would loosen me up. Ever since that night I had been wound up tight. With the anxiety of walking alone, the memories of my stupid decisions, and also these new feelings that were stirring inside me every time I saw this steady man. The only thing that had given me reprieve from it at all was my new hobby of punching air.

But even that wasn’t enough to mask the fact that things with Con were starting to feel so different.

That morning, when he carried me over his shoulder and listened to my story in his kitchen, that was the last day I’d felt normal around him. Back then I was so exhausted and drained from so much happening, it was hard not to fall into the comfortable friendship that was a part of us now. Now, after I had more and more time to think and reflect, it was hard to fully return to what we once were (goofy friends doing goofy friend things).

Not when I knew what it felt like to have his hands on me. To have him talk in that low voice that seemed more intimate than even some of his sugar sweet touches did. To have him say ‘*sleep baby*’, when he knew I couldn’t. To have him sign

me up for classes that he knew I would never think to do myself. To have him be there for me even while I was retreating from myself.

It meant something.

But I didn't know what that something was. So it was stupid of me to let my mind wander into territories that were detrimental to what we already had.

We were friends. I was allowed to take comfort in him taking care of me. But that was it. There needed to be a thick line drawn in the sand between comfort and the swirling in my tummy I refused to think of as butterflies. *Maybe more than a line.* There needed to be an entire beach between it. Because lines tended to blur and I wasn't sure what would happen if the line of our friendship blurred into something that felt as good as his roving thumb did on my body.

Connor didn't go to the hostess when we entered the bar. Instead, he led me around a bend where it opened up to a wide room full of cozy seating and various style tables. Some were high tops, some low, some were large booths that could fit many bodies. Con led me to the very back where a small coffee table sat. Around it, there was a long stylish couch, a couple of chairs on either end, and a cushioned bench on the outside. All the seats looked comfortable and clean.

And occupied.

Realization hit me like a smack to the face. Con hadn't asked me to come out with him, he had asked me to *join* him. Him and whoever the hell these people were. Friends of his I assumed. Friends I wanted to meet? Absolutely not. Not when I wasn't feeling like myself and definitely not when he had told me jack-shit about them.

This is why he was here already, and knew where to go without asking the hostess, *and* why he was dressed so nicely come to think of it—with his jeans and an open button down over a t-shirt. While I was there in the same white bodysuit and loose denim shorts I had worn to work that day. My hair was down, but who knew what it looked like. And I didn't even get to put on a decent bra.

Realizing what was happening, I didn't even hesitate. I turned around and started making my way back the way we came. I'm pretty sure I made eye contact with one of the guys sitting on the long couch. I didn't give a shit. I was not doing this.

Connor and I were not those kinds of friends. Or at least I thought we weren't. We didn't meet each other's *other friends* and do the whole commingling thing. It was enough that I had him. I had no idea what would happen if we suddenly started introducing others into the mix.

Quick and easy, Connor caught my retreating form by the hips and pulled me back. Turning me toward the group, he situated me in front of his chest and started walking us forward.

In my ear he spoke softly, "Come sit. These are some friends of mine. You'll like them, I wouldn't have invited you if I didn't think so."

"But you *would* apparently ambush me with them," I said. And I couldn't decide what my voice sounded like, but it was not normal.

"Don't be mad. You've turned down every attempt I've made at hanging out outside the house. I had to try."

I sighed because it was true. Connor had done a damn good job at barging in lately. Insisting on checking up on me, making sure I was okay, and making sure I wasn't alone at night in the city. All things I was actually pretty grateful for. But when it came to anything other than dinner and curling up at one of our respective homes, I hadn't been up for it.

Which is why my sigh was defeated as I said, "I know, and I'm not mad. I just—you didn't warn me."

"Why would I? We drink here all the time."

I wrinkled my nose. He wasn't getting it. "Yeah, but not with *actual people*. You know I'm not socialized properly."

He snorted, "I am an actual person Cee, and I thought we've already covered the topic of you being perfect. Besides,



they're my friends, they won't care either way. They will love you as much as I do."

Oh how he glazed over the "P" word so carelessly. And don't even get me started on the "L" one. It spread warmth throughout my body from head to toe, causing my grumble to lose some of its grumpiness as I went on, "Of course I'm perfect, but I didn't put my civil pants on tonight. I might be a bitch."

And Connor, as if there weren't other people in this goddamn room, tightened his paw sized grip on my hips as he leaned close to whisper, "I don't care what you are or what you do, I still want you here. Even if you get drunk enough to do that thing where your civil pants turn into invisible pants and you—"

My elbow found his gut before he could finish whatever it was he was going to say, causing him to laugh happily and heartily as we reached the group.

He didn't let go of me as we approached his friends and I couldn't help but wonder what they must think about his hands splayed possessively over me like this. He apparently didn't think anything of it, sounding casual and happy as we came to a stop before the small group and continued to talk only to me. "Now smile big and say hello."

I scowled. Half because of the bullshit he was putting me through and half because there he went saying things that made me squirm again. Things that made my heart feel like it was doing something that was not anatomically possible in the slightest.

"Guys, this is the friend Ceci I told you about," Con said. Moving his hands from my hips (thank God), he curled them around my biceps and gave them a quick squeeze as he introduced me. My pulse spiked. Even though he was only touching my arms now, he was holding me close to his front like he wanted to keep me close.

I gulped, trying to right the pounding of my heart, and the extra beat made me miss my cue to say hello. Thankfully, a

brunette with a martini in her hand leaned forward and took over for me.

“Oh Connor, she’s so little!” Martini girl said.

“Very little,” the man I most definitely made eye contact with agreed. Looking from me to Connor, he looked like he was measuring the height difference between us. He had an English accent and wore a turtleneck even though it was like seventy degrees out, reminding me of Pau.

“*She’s* also standing right here,” I said before I could stop myself. And when eyebrows raised around the small table, I scrunched my face into a ‘*very nice to meet you*’ smile.

Connor, who was always on my side, rubbed those thumbs soothingly along my skin as if to say ‘*down girl*’ before offering his friends a small smile. “She’s big where it counts.”

“Where, the ass?” I mumbled under my breath, remembering how he said I had “cushion” back there.

I peeked behind myself quickly. I was only kidding, but the way he looked down at me, eyes burning with something I wasn’t sure how to place, I’m not sure *he* was kidding as he lowered his voice and said, “Exactly. Now sit that ass down and be nice. I already ordered what you like.”

\* \* \*

Like Connor said, his friends were actually great. I guess Con was one of those people who was good at choosing his people.

Malcolm, who was the blunt British man seated on the couch, had apparently been Connor’s roommate in college. I knew he went to Oxford for his undergrad, but I guess the fact that he studied out of the country somewhere so prestigious had never really stuck for me until I heard him volleying back and forth about foreign policy and state politics like it was small talk.

Sandra, the pretty brunette who made the “little” comment like I was some kind of pet, was a friend from high school. She was from the North Seaside area which meant she was a country club girl. But she wasn’t snobbish or uppity in the way that so many of them were. She was actually really sweet and made funny digs at their other high school friend Juan from across the table.

Juan was an interesting one. He knew of my family and found it to be his favorite subject of conversation. But I suspected that was to keep conversation off of him and the embarrassing stories Con and Sandra kept bringing up about him as a high schooler.

Lastly there was Ria. A quiet, beautiful girl with dark skin and darker eyes. She claimed to have gone to college with Con, but she had no accent. She was American, and not from Rhode Island. She also didn’t talk much. Didn’t drink much. And didn’t engage much with the others, mainly talking only with Connor and Malcolm. I didn’t think she was shy, though. I think she just chose to stick closer to those two which gave me a weird itch, knowing another girl was as close to him as me. Could she be the girlfriend? The one Con had yet to officially tell me about

If so, I had no chance in this race...

*Oh my God, what was I saying? There is no race to have a chance at in the first place, Ceci! Pull it together!*

I might as well have been background scenery it was that clear I was never meant to be a part of this. They were all nice enough to include me in their conversations and take interest in my life, but it was obviously a reunion for them. They all knew each other in some capacity. Malcolm knew Ria from school, Sandra and Juan knew the two college friends from visiting Connor back in undergrad, and they all knew Connor as this big, lovable constant in their life.

I was just an addition to their otherwise perfect group. I didn’t have the prestige of saying I graduated from Oxford University like Malcolm or Ria. Or the talent to be a PGA Tournament winning pro golfer like Sandra. I didn’t even have

the history to back up an otherwise mundane existence with simply being Connor's longest friend, like Juan. Among the list of great people doing great things in this little circle, I was definitely the odd man out.

Con kept me included too. Keeping his soft hand close enough so that he could reach out and touch my knee whenever he noticed my attention slipping away. Including me in conversations and giving me time to contribute to everyone even if it didn't really involve me. Watching my drink diligently just in case I needed another one.

He was good. He'd always been good, and he would always be good. But was I good enough for him?

Maybe his friends wanted to know the same thing.

"Ceci?" Malcolm cleared his throat from across the table. My eyes landed on his rich dark face and chocolate irises. "What do you do for work?"

"Not much," I said truthfully.

"What do you do for fun?" he asked.

"Also not much. Nothing to note anyway." I flicked a quick look at Con, but he was too busy glaring at his friend to notice.

You would think he'd take a hint, but he just went on. "Do you like computers like Con does?"

"Not at all." I tried my hardest not to frown but my nice girl allowance was running out.

Malcolm leaned forward, as if he was suddenly fascinated by all of this. "So what *do* you two have in common, then?"

I leaned forward too, my elbows falling against the knee of my crossed leg. "Is this some sort of test?"

He smiled, "What if it is?"

"Then I'd tell you I hate tests. And that you should shove yours up your British—" I glanced at Connor and seemed to remember right then that these were his friends. They had been his friends *first*. If I fucked up and he decided he needed to get rid of someone, it would be me getting the boot. So

straightening, I cleared my throat and amended what I had just been about to say. “*Nose.*”

Malcolm just grinned, seeming elated by the sparring, but I was already distracted. Looking over to Con before I could even help it, I frowned. This got me an intense stare in return. He held my eyes as he leaned in to grasp my knee. Squeezing and rubbing his big thumb along the inner seam.

I frowned even more.

Why was it me he was comforting? I was the one acting terrible. Well, I was acting like I normally acted, but I felt weird all of a sudden. Like Malcolm was too right in his interrogations. I knew me and Connor were a weird match, but I didn’t need him to point it out to Connor. I didn’t need him to bring it to my best friend’s attention that he’d gotten the short end of the stick. My family was already coming to realize it, I didn’t need Connor to wise up to it too.

*Whatever.*

I just needed to get through this. I clearly didn’t belong here with these perfect for him friends. And as Malcolm didn’t mind pointing out, I didn’t belong anywhere near him at all. But Connor was who I cared about. I was meeting these people for him, anything else could be examined later on. For now I just needed to meet his friends and play nice.

Ripping my eyes away from Con who was trying to communicate calming telepathic vibes to me through staring alone, I returned my attention to the rest of the group and smiled, hoping it didn’t come off as a grimace.

Con spoke before I could even rejoin the conversation, tightening his grip on my knee and saying, “Lay off Mal, not like the two of us have anything in common either.”

His eyes were like spears laying into his friends even as his voice remained calm, “You asked me every Friday for a year if I wanted to go out and party. I said no every time, or did you forget? I don’t think we have a single hobby in common and we’re still friends.”

“Fair, mate. Fair.” Malcolm shrugged but as he leaned backward in his seat it looked like he was trying to smother a grin, flicking looks around the table at his other friends before meeting Connor’s eyes again. “Was just having some fun with your girl...*friend*.”

“Well, don’t,” Con said, Malcolm raising his hands immediately in surrender.

*Annnd* now I just felt shitty. Like some kind of buzzkill, and that was not me at all. And the sad thing was, I’m pretty sure I liked Malcolm. He seemed like fun. I liked *all* of them, actually. They all complimented Con in a way that made sense.

Quiet and loyal, blunt and outspoken, tried and true.

They worked well with him, and I was happy about that. Happy *for* him. Yet, I just couldn’t experience that happiness to the fullest because my head was so messed up with stupid thoughts lately. Flicking my eyes to Ria, who I caught communicating something to Connor with her eyes, I swallowed. Something thick and icky that tasted a lot like envy lining my throat.

Yep.

*Stupid, stupid thoughts.*

\* \* \*

At some point during their love fest, I found a good opportunity to dismiss myself from the group. I told Con I was going to use the bathroom, but really I went to the bar to grab another drink. I needed some time away. My thoughts were consuming me, even as I forced myself to be a better conversationalist and company for Connor’s friends.

Being around them, in that circle of perfect warmth, just irked me. And I hated being sour during such a happy time for

Con. He was probably better off without my dejected aura over there anyway.

Almost as soon as I sat down at the bar, there was a guy at my side. Sliding up next to me and leaning on his elbows as he looked down his shoulder at me.

“What are you drinking?” he asked.

“Surprise me,” I said without even sparing a glance.

He scoffed. “Who said I was buying you anything?”

I did look up this time, seeing a clean shaven, straightlaced, bro looking guy. He had blonde hair and green eyes (probably the most interesting thing about him), and he was smirking like he knew he already had me.

Gross. But still, I decided to lay on my own special kind of charm. “I did. Unless you can’t afford it—”

“Martini, two olives, please,” the guy growled at the bartender.

I swallowed a laugh. *Yes*, antagonization was my “special kind of charm”. You’d be surprised how much it worked for me.

Still, I made a face at his drink choice and he noticed. “What? Not a martini girl?”

I’m not. But I didn’t say that, instead I said, “Not an olive girl, but I do like free so, I guess I can’t complain, right?”

A little smile pulled up on his pink lips. “You’ll love it, trust me.”

I rolled my eyes. “And now that you’ve *told* me to trust you, of course I magically do.”

Rolling a look over my face, he leaned in on his elbows as he surveyed me. “Do you even want to be here right now?”

I contemplated this. Looking at him, he was dressed nicely enough to assume he wanted to be recognized, but still casual enough to suggest he came here with friends. He was clean and not an asshole, or at least not an immediate one. Plus, he

was the opposite of my reluctantly popular bear who had been overwhelming my senses lately.

This guy looked like he was itching for attention, and I was itching to distract myself from my roaming thoughts of Connor. About how he could possibly surround himself with so much good, yet destroy that good streak to befriend someone like me.

So as soon as the martini arrived in front of me, I picked it up, knocked it back and swallowed the two olives whole. Making a show of them being in my mouth one minute and disappearing the next.

My eyes flicked up to my new friend's, his catching onto mine with a sheen of interest in them. I smiled.

“Get me another without the olives, and I might consider letting you convince me to be somewhere else,” I said, sliding the empty glass his way.

He looked me over. Trailing hungry eyes from the top of my head to the toes of my shoes before meeting my eyes again. With a smile that I could tell was surprised but he tried to play off as cool, he nodded and ordered me another.

I should have stopped at one drink. Despite his promise, Blondie (his actual name was something like Brandon or Brendan or something like that) was pretty fucking boring.

Minute after minute I had to fight myself from slipping into thoughts of Connor and his cool friends, Connor and his high education, Connor and his perfect everything. It was like my brain was on a mission to show me how misaligned this friendship was and had been from the start.

I was no longer listening to Brendan-Brandon as he yammered beside me. I just continued nodding and offering sporadic “mhmms” pretending like I was.

I didn't want to be here with him. Funny enough, I didn't want to reenter Connor's little bubble of friendship either. It felt too *right* over there. He seemed too normal, too perfect. Like he was somewhere he belonged rather than playing stupid games and sneaking around with me.



*God what was wrong with me?* Why did I even care? I shouldn't. I should feel happy that Con had other friends to share the other parts of himself that I couldn't offer anything toward. And I did, I just...I just wished I knew exactly what I even offered Connor. Why he was my friend in the first place.

Aside from my one obvious fuck up, I usually have a pretty keen ability to notice when things were off around me. But as Blondie stopped talking entirely and I continued fingering my napkin along the bar, I didn't even realize someone was behind me until *after* a broad chest was pressed up against my back.

Fluidly and without question, my hand slid around the hilt of the little butter knife beside my napkin. But it relaxed almost immediately when I heard the voice of the chest behind me.

"Put the knife down, Celestia," Connor said, low and rumbly near my ear. I could feel the reverberations of his deep, familiar voice all along my spine.

"Con?" I asked, less to confirm it was him and more to ask what he was doing over here, away from his friends.

He chuckled, "Were you going to stab my eyes out if it wasn't me?"

"Was thinking about it," I admitted.

"I should have never signed you up for those classes. You're more of a threat now than ever." He was close to me, leaning over my shoulders and talking close to my ear like our conversation was this secretive private thing rather than a simple little joke. I frowned. I bet he talked about important things with his other friends. Connor leaned even further into me and I fought the urge to sink into his chest. Normally I wouldn't have a problem doing so, but today, somehow, it felt wrong. "Celestia, what's wrong?"

I was just about to answer with a lame "nothing" when my blonde headed friend decided to make himself known. "I thought your name was Ceci."

"It is," both me and Connor answered.

"Is that short for Celestia, then?" he pressed.

I bristled, the name sounding forced and butchered and tasteless coming from him. “Don’t call me that.”

“He *just* called you that,” he said, sounding both insulted and indignant. “You didn’t have a problem with it then.”

I was going to tell him to fuck off with his tone when big arms circled my shoulders. Hands landed on my thighs as Con wrapped me up in a cocoon of him. His head ducked lower, and I could just imagine him glaring at the poor guy.

“She doesn’t have a problem with me touching her either. You want to take a guess what that means, boss?” Con said, and *oh my god*, had I ever heard his voice so deep and challenging before? I don’t think so. It had me peeking over my shoulder at him to see what his face looked like.

Mad.

You wouldn’t be able to tell it if you didn’t know him. The way his eyebrows pinched intensely or how his jaw set tight and stiff, veins straining along his throat. But I did know him, and for some unknown reason he was irritated. Which did nothing to alleviate my rushing thoughts, only ramping them up further.

Good thing Blondie was here to distract me. With a scowl he straightened up in his seat and glared at me, “You didn’t tell me you had a boyfriend.”

“I—” I faltered, momentarily distracted by the word *boyfriend*, not to mention the way Con’s hands gripping my thighs felt much more provocative than they ought to. Especially as his grip grew tighter and his hands inched upward. Thumbs caressing my inner thighs the way they would if—

“She’s shy,” Con said. I audibly snorted. When he looked to me I could see mischief in his eyes, “Right, *Jellybean*?”

Nodding my head slowly I agreed with Connor.

Blondie, whose name I remembered was actually Dan, narrowed his eyes at me. “You didn’t seem shy when you swallowed two olives and dared me to get you to leave with me.”

I could feel Connor stiffen behind me.

Oh, so now he was a snitch. I narrowed my eyes and mouthed something that may have started with a “B” and ended with an “itch” to him. He glowered right back. Behind me Connor hummed, but it did not seem as relaxed as before.

“Swallowed, Ceci?”

“Yeah,” Bitchy Dan said. “*Whole*. Damn, what a waste of two drinks.”

He threw some bills on the table and excused himself from the triangle. Connor didn’t move. Not his body, not his hands, nada. Instead, he just looked at me. “Swallowed, huh?”

“I hate olives.”

“Just don’t eat them then. You don’t have to swallow,” he said like I was the most ridiculous person in the world.

“Would you rather I *spit*, Con?” I asked.

“Cee,” he hissed, biting my name off like a curse. His hands tightening along my body.

“Get your mind out of the gutter,” I said, but I couldn’t lie. I reveled in the reaction that got from him. His hands could span the width of my entire thigh and they did as he gripped me. I hummed as they rubbed against the soreness of my muscles.

I could feel his gaze on the side of my face as he rumbled. “Get your mouth out of it first.”

“Sorry,” I sighed. “I was in a zone.”

“You’re a pain in the ass, that’s what you are.”

“What? I was good all night!” I protested. Well I was *mostly* good with his friends. At least putting in a conscious effort to stop being so terrible after I realized I was forcing Con to take up for me.

Still, he shook his head. “You weren’t being you.”

“Hmm.” I wrinkled my nose. “I should have just said ass, huh?”

His chest bounced as he rumbled out a soft laugh. His hands making another pull up and down my bare legs. “Yeah. Nose was a decent save, but we all knew what you meant to say.”

I laughed a little too, feeling instantly lighter being in this little cocoon he’d made.

“You left, Cee,” he pointed out in a soft voice. It wasn’t accusing, it was just there. But it instantly made me feel bad.

Deflating a little, I sighed. “I’m sorry, I just needed a break. We can go back now.”

“No, everyone left. I told them I’d tell you goodbye from them,” he said. “It’s just you and me now.”

“Okay,” I said and for some reason I finally allowed myself to sink back into him, feeling exhausted. His soothing hands ran up and down my thighs like he was trying to comfort me without even knowing anything was wrong. I think he could just tell. What he couldn’t tell was how the feel of his big hands on my bare thighs did things to me that I really needed to get checked out.

Another low hum rose in my chest and Con tightened his arms around me, lowering his voice even more. “Tell me why you left.”

“I felt like I was imposing.”

“That’s never stopped you before.”

“It’s different when it’s you. I didn’t want to cause trouble.” I was whining. Why was I whining? Were his hands pulling it out of me? Or was it the close proximity to his body?

He looked at me knowingly and I smiled weakly. Nope. It was neither of those things. It was just the comfort of him.

Him, him, him.

Because with him I could even be the sides of myself I didn’t like, and I knew it was okay.

“I don’t want to cause *unintentional* trouble. Not for you,” I amended, knowing that look. It had the word ‘*bullshit*’ written

all over it.

Beneath him, I tried not to snuggle into his warmth, or relax my legs into spreading as his hands lingered there. His voice got darker. Hands going nowhere, definitely not leaving my body. “So you were just going to leave with some other guy, huh? When I’ve been waiting for you for all this time.”

I stiffened, his word choice giving me this cagey alert feeling. He kneaded my thighs with big soothing palms that I enjoyed more than I should.

“That’s pretty bold, Cee.” He squeezed my flesh hard as he growled, and dammit, it felt good. Missing absolutely nothing, he squeezed again and after hearing my hiss, he murmured, “Sore?”

“Mhmm,” I answered, my head tipping back just slightly to lean against him. “I started boxing lessons twice a week and my body hurts.”

“Hmm,” he said. Running his hands up and down the length of my legs again. I think he did it just to get another hum out of me. When I gave him one he smiled as he rumbled an approving, “That feel good?”

Um, hell yes! It felt mind numbing. It felt like I needed to feel it again and again before he moved on to more needy places and started from the beginning. It felt like I needed to feel this *everywhere*.

But that was the crazy talking. And I blamed it on his voice. That voice had gone straight to my center, causing me to squirm. He took it the wrong way, like he was hurting me or something, and switched to rubbing his fingers back up my thighs in a softer motion.

I tried to hold myself together, but I couldn’t. He was too high up on my thighs and too gentle with his touch and too frequent on my mind. Unintentionally, I let out a short breathy moan that I immediately regretted. His hands stilled. So did his body behind me, suddenly feeling as stiff as a board.

Slowly he said in a voice that I recognized was forced control, “You need to stop it, *right now*.”

“You started it,” I cleared my throat and my legs tremored just slightly.

“*You* started it.” He turned my bar stool around and placed a hand on the table beside me, showing himself for the first time since finding me at the bar and damn.

*Damn.*

Had he looked this good the whole time? My eyes ate him up as they roved over his chiseled face, tailored dress, muscled form and took in his intoxicating scent. *Damn.* What the hell was he doing to me? Just, damn.

“You started it with those sounds and you keep starting it every time you look at me like that, Celestia,” he went on, now spearing me with his stare.

“Stop saying my name like that,” I said, my voice husky, my eyes trailing from his eyes to his lips to his eyes again.

He lowered himself, bringing our faces closer. Level. “Stop looking at me like you like it.”

“Stop touching me like you like *me*,” I spat at him, lowering my own voice and raising my chin in challenge. It brought us nose to nose, and I could have sworn he leaned in (maybe just an inch) before stopping.

A breath went by. One where I could feel his air on my lips. Smell his breath laced with bourbon, his drink of choice. It drove me wild. But his words detonated me.

“I do like you, Cee,” he said simply, his voice gravelly and low. “You’re my person.”

I froze. Blinking, my heart seized and I had to take inventory of his features, trying to understand what he was saying. I cocked my head. “Like, your best friend person?”

He stared at me for a second, eyes sliding from one of mine to the other and over and over again. I don’t know what he saw in me after that analysis, but it had him shaking his head and pushing away from me, effectively breaking our little bubble. “Fuck, Cee.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” he said quickly. Standing up to his full height, he put a hand on his hip, the other going to his face to cup his mouth as he just looked at me. He shook his head *again*, like I was disappointing him somehow. The movement made me feel panicked, afraid I was losing him that quick. He must have seen it in my eyes, because sighing, he let that hand drop to his side. “I mean, yeah. Like my best person—sure.”

*My best person.*

Not quite like “best friend” but not quite like “my person” either. And why did that make *me* feel disappointed? I should be feeling relieved that he didn’t mean what I thought he meant.

I should, but I didn’t. And suddenly, I felt cold without him. I had been sleeping in his bed lately. Cuddling close to him on the couch. And now soaking up his comfort in public. I was becoming attached. I blamed that as the reason why I slid out of the bar stool to stand right under his tall frame, finding his hand and enveloping mine into it.

A rush of relief flooded me when he instantly held on, too.

“Mad at me?” I asked, looking up, up, up into his eyes and just needing to make sure. Needing to make things right.

But I was worrying for nothing. Because looking down, face grim but eyes soft as ever, he said, “Never.”





# Chapter Twenty-three

## CONNOR

“What the hell is she doing here?” I asked. Strangely enough, I heard the same statement being echoed from behind me. I resisted rolling my eyes. It was from Clay, because of course it was.

I wasn't worried about him. What I was worried about were the two girls standing at the front door of my parents' house waiting to be let in for dinner. One was my sister who looked a little gray like she always did coming here. The other was my best friend.

The same best friend who I had my hands all over the other night. The same best friend whose moans I couldn't stop replaying in my head. The same best friend who was slowly losing the title of best friend and morphing into something else.

*And the very same best friend I wanted nowhere near my mother,* I thought with an internal groan. Especially as her face went from neutral to a deep frown, her eyes tracking from the forms behind my shoulder to mine before she downright scowled.

“Nice, Ferguson.” Ceci barreled through the doorway bumping mine and Clay's shoulders as she charged in like she owned the place. She hardly even looked at our other guests and for some reason, it put a bad taste in the back of my throat. To my sister, Ceci barked, “Let's go, Fergy. Show me your old room.”

I groaned externally this time. On top of showing up out of the blue, Ceci's fuse was at a zero today. I could just tell. I'm not sure if something happened or if it was just a bad mood day, but I'd probably only had one chance to get on her good

side from the moment I opened the door. *And we now knew how that went.*

Before she could fully make it past me, I came shoulder to shoulder with my sister. Lowering my voice, I hissed, “No really, Tine. What the hell is she doing here?”

Tiney reared back to look at me, horrified. “Ox couldn’t make it so he suggested I take Ceci. Geez, Con. You guys are over there all the time, don’t be so rude!”

“Yeah, *Connor*,” Ceci said. Her instigating hat pulled down tight. “Don’t be such a hypocrite.”

I glared at her. Oh, she was in a mood alright and I did not have the patience for it today. Not when my mom was also agitated and I knew those two would go together like oil and a fucking lighter. And not while we had guests. Plus, if I had any doubts about Ox knowing something, they were all confirmed now. He might be grasping but he was grasping in the right direction. Whatever was bothering Ceci was blinding her to the fact.

*Whatever.*

I’d check on her later. For now, I turned away from my sister and my friend as they retreated up the stairs toward my two friends who were looking at me like I had two heads. Waving Malcolm and Ria over, I leaned in and lowered my voice. “Remember how I told you Ceci and I don’t talk about the fact that we’re friends?”

They nodded.

“That’s because it’s sort of a secret. She’s Tine’s sister-in-law and a family business connection. So on, so forth,” I explained.

Mal’s eyes lit up. His face working into an over-amused smirk while Ri simply shook her head and sighed, mumbling, “Oh Connor, *why*?”

“Her idea,” I shrugged.

“And you go along with *all* her ideas don’t you, mate?” Mal asked, the smirk growing into a grin.

I glared at him. “Just keep your mouth shut or I’m kicking you out, okay?”

To Ria, I clasped my hands together as I began to back away, mouthing, “Please?”

Making my way out of the main room, I searched for my next target. Hoping to find my mom and suss out her mood before Hurricane Ceci came back. Unfortunately for me, someone was hot on my heels.

“Mate...”

“Malcolm,” I groaned.

He slapped two hands over my shoulders and shook. “What’s going on? Why so stressed?”

I turned to him with nothing short of panic in my veins. “They’re going to kill each other.”

“Her and Clayton?”

I shook my head. “Not them.”

“Mum Ferguson, then?” he asked, and as he looked at me, he began to nod. “Ya, right. They won’t get on.”

“Yeah no shit. And I can’t jump in and stop it without it looking weird because of...”

Malcolm raised his eyebrows expectantly.

Lowering my voice I whispered, “Because of what I just told you.”

My dear friend of almost ten years cackled. Laughing and laughing at my expense like it was the funniest thing in the world. Malcolm and Ria had been coming to visit once a year since our college days. When we were young, we all used to stay here with my parents. Now that we were older and I’d since moved out of my parents’ place, they usually just spent their last night here. Mom loved him and Ria and insisted they come up to the house to see the family whenever they were in town. Sending them off with a dinner and a promise to visit again soon.

Now, I pushed his shoulder, saying, “Yeah, it’s so fucking funny, huh?”

He knew it wasn’t. He had been around my family enough to know that this would not bode over well. Mom was not one of those cool Moms around friends. She acted no differently around strangers than she did around us. She was tough, strict, and maybe a little terse. You would never know if she liked you unless she actually told you so. And Ceci was practically the same. Same but different.

While Mom was older and knew when to hold her tongue... sometimes, Ceci did not possess that skill. Wouldn’t use it even if she did. And she was already not a fan of my mother even though they’d yet to have an actual conversation outside of introductions.

I confided in Cee a lot about Mom. Told her things about how she made me feel unseen and unappreciated, sometimes even unwelcome. Things I didn’t even talk to my siblings about. That coupled with the mood she had shown up in, something told me that she would not be pulling her punches.

Beside me Malcolm held his hands up in surrender. “Sorry. Sorry. I couldn’t help myself. This is just so *stupid*. The secret friends part, not the part where your little girlfriend and your mom are going to tear each other apart.”

“Thanks, Malcolm. Really,” I said sarcastically, and he laughed again.

Slapping another hand over my other shoulder, he said, “Don’t worry yourself, friend. I’ll help you out.”

I peeked over at him. “You’ll...help?”

“Yeah, man,” he said. “Gracious guy that I am, I’ll keep your girlfriend on simmer if things get too hot.”

“My friend, Mal,” I corrected. I know I sounded like an idiot—a grown man denying the obvious to another grown man with working eyes—but whatever. “And thank you, thank God *for* you.”

He laughed, joking, “Oh, you know it’s music to my ears when you talk to me like that.”

But I wasn't joking. I was so relieved.

Correction.

I was *momentarily* relieved.

Turns out, I had thanked that fucker too soon.

Apparently, I must have misspoken. When I *thought* I'd asked him to mediate the inevitable fire between my mother and Ceci, what I really must have said was "Malcolm, please flirt with Ceci all fucking night."

Because that's exactly what he did.

Him and his British ass stayed attached to her hip. The two of them forming some kind of devilish alliance and bonding with each other throughout the course of the night.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't hoping for them to hit it off in some way or another. They'd all been cordial last night, but it was no secret Cee hadn't been herself. I didn't tell my friends everything, but I had to tell them that she was going through something rough personally to explain her behavior the night before. And it showed. Ceci had been off when meeting my friends for the first time, and I regretted forcing her out because of that.

But now I might be regretting bringing her around Malcolm at all. Because *now* she was having no problem being herself. Zero problem whatsoever. She was being herself all over the place. *All over him.*

Grabbing his arm as they both doubled over in laughter together. Joining his team instead of mine during backyard games. Sitting next to him on the living room couch as we waited for dinner to be set on the table. Tugging him around with her as she continued to be her normal electric self around everyone *but* me.

She was avoiding me. Or giving me confusing dirty looks whenever our eyes met.

We were all hanging out on the back deck now, waiting for the caterers to set the finishing touches on the back dining setup, when I heard for maybe the hundredth time tonight the

familiar and somehow piercing sound of Ceci's laugh. A sound that usually never failed to warm my chest, but now made me want to throw the cup I was cradling in my palm.

Looking across the deck, I could see Cee sitting in a chair beside Malcolm, leaning shoulder to shoulder with him as he showed her something on his phone. They watched it again from the top, I could tell by the repetitive sounds coming from the little device, and when the punchline hit, she laughed just as loud this time. Tipping her head back and letting it touch his shoulder slightly as she leaned on him for support.

"Damn." The sound of Clay's voice literally jolted me out of my irritated haze. Liquid sloshed over the side of my glass and onto my hand. Even though I knew it wasn't his fault, I glared at him anyway. He didn't seem to notice as he set his hands on his hips and looked out in the same direction as I was. "So, Pip-squeak and Mal, huh?"

My head whipped to him, and I glared. Then, all but slamming my drink down on the table, I shoved him by the shoulder so he was out of my way. "Fuck off, Clay."

"What!" he said, sounding genuinely shocked. "What'd I say?"

Ignoring him I stomped right over to the two idiots who couldn't stop laughing and stood right in front of the bigger one. They had just been passing the phone between themselves again but paused at my sudden appearance. This left them holding onto the phone together as they looked up at me. Basically holding hands.

Reaching down, I snatched the phone from their joined hands and pointed to Ceci first. "Dinner's ready."

"I'll wait for Mal," she said. Looking up at me for less than a second before skirting her gaze away.

I think a blood vessel popped in my head. I spoke next through gritted teeth. "No, you go now. Mal is coming with me for a moment."

Before anyone could say anything else, I reached down and latched onto Malcolm's shoulder, pulling hard to yank him up.

“Let’s chat, bud,” I said. To Ceci I said under my breath, “Sit in the middle with me. I’ll be there in a second.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, I pulled Mal into the house and into the hallway where we met up with Ria. She’d been walking from the kitchen toward the backyard but stopped when she saw us standing there.

“What’s up?” she asked looking from me to Mal and back to me.

“Oh, I’m waiting on that information too, love,” he said, casting his glance up at me. “Connor was just about to get on with it, actually.”

Unable to keep the disgust off my face, I casted my eyes away from him saying, “I can’t even look at you right now.”

Malcolm cackled, and taking a hint, sauntered away. He knew it was all just an excuse to get him away from her. And judging by his reaction, he knew what he’d been doing too. But had Ceci? Or was she actually...interested?

Shaking my head, I matched my pace to Ria’s as we started our walk back out together. Turning her face up to me, she nodded her head in the direction of the table and asked, “How are things in Paradise?”

Following her line of sight straight to the outdoor dining table I noticed my mother taking a seat in the space right across the table from Ceci. The other thing I noticed were eyes. Burning, laser sharp eyes as Ceci watched Ria and I enter the dinner area. When she noticed me looking too, she raised the glowing orbs to my face and gave me the weirdest look. A small frown marring her face, cheeks redder than normal, eyebrows pinched together like she was thinking of something particularly confusing.

Why the hell was I getting that look while Malcolm got nothing but smiles?

I wasn’t exaggerating when I say, I sat down at the dinner table in a grumble. It took all of me not to turn to Ceci completely, but instead I leaned in slightly and said in hushed tones, “What the hell is wrong with you?”

She looked up, looked past me to my other side and then scowled at me. “Whatever do you mean, Connor?”

*Oh, the fucking brat.*

With a groan, I sat back in my chair and participated as plates, napkins and knives were handed around. Everyone had their glasses and base plates laid out for them already. But when it came around to secondary plates, one came offered to me from both sides.

To my right, Ceci was offering me a plate and to my left Ria. Unconsciously, I took the one on my left as I watched Ceci in hopes of catching her expression. Did her offering me a plate mean that she was done being...*whatever this was* at me?

No. No it did not.

I know this because being able to look at her meant being able to watch firsthand how a flush of rushing anger flooded her face. Eyes lighting on my movements.

She didn't comment. Didn't fucking tell me what was going on in her head. She just turned away, all but slamming the plate down on her own place and kept the line going.

I'm sorry, did I say I was dealing with a brat? I meant an actual temper tantrum.

Sighing, I just turned to Ri to thank her and continued with distributing dinner.

On the menu there was blackened chicken, ceviche, roasted corn husks, fish, peppered cucumbers, and tons more. Mom never cooked unless it was with our grandma on the holidays, but whenever those days rolled around is when we got the really good food. For now though, we were used to having things catered from the best chefs in Seaside.

I think my plate was full to the brim when the last two dishes came around. One was sort of a cucumber salad that looked like something my dad would like, but the coloring was too red, like there was too much pepper added. The other was a pasta salad I was familiar with.



Leaning over to my friend I said, “You made it again this year. Thank you.”

Ria smiled up at me although her eyes went wary as they trailed over my shoulder, “I know you like it and I only see you once a year now so.”

Reaching over I squeezed her shoulder before spooning a helping of the pasta salad onto the side of my plate. The other thing I passed over to Ceci. She liked spicy, I’m sure she would like the red looking dish.

Taking the offered dish in her hands she looked at it for a couple of extra seconds, her shoulders seeming to bow in dejection. An expression that was very unlike her. I wanted to reach out and say something but didn’t know how without making it weird.

It was my little sister who cracked the silence. “Why don’t you try some of Ceci’s dish too, Connor? She and I used Alta’s recipe to make it.”

Ceci’s dish?

I felt a swirl of unease coat my stomach as I looked down my shoulder at her. She was already looking up at me with a frown on her face. *Fuck.*

“Oh sorry, I didn’t realize,” I said, reaching for the dish.

Before I could grab hold of it, Ceci snatched the bowl to the side and passed it along to her right. “That’s okay, Ferg. Seems like he likes pasta salad way more anyway.”

Fuck, Fuck, Fuck.

Across the table Malcolm laughed and I wanted nothing more than to pummel the asshole. But I was too focused on backpedaling. Reaching out, I motioned for the bowl saying, “No, no, no. Give me that.”

“If you don’t get your arm from in front of my face, Ferguson. I’m going to bite it,” Ceci said in a voice she wasn’t even trying to pass as nice. And knowing enough to *never* think Ceci was bluffing, I slowly retracted my arm, leaving her

to raise the bowl up with a sugar sweet smile to the man across from her. “Malcolm? Want to try?”

“Of course, love,” he said with a smile. “Hand it over.”

“Me too Pip-squeak, looks good,” Clay said.

“Yo tambien, mija,” my dad said from across the table.

By the end of it, I was the only asshole who’d passed on her dish and when it got back around to me, it was empty. Beside me Ria patted my arm, probably sensing my dejection.

I didn’t even look to my right. I could just feel the blazing aura from her ignited body. Something was obviously eating her, but fuck, something was eating me too.

Now as dinner conversation floated around softly to the background of soft instrumental music, clanking forks, and the ocean far off in the distance, I felt my mood regressing. And like a tether on a chain, I felt Cee going down with me.

Which is exactly what I didn’t need as Mal piped up, saying, “Connor’s told me you lot are doing swell, yeah? Business is going well?”

Across the table my mother coughed, more so for dramatics than a bodily reaction. Her eyebrows rising on her face as she looked at our guest. “Oh he did, did he? That’s quite interesting.”

“Interesting how?”

She shrugged, “Just interesting, I suppose.”

Beside me, I could just *feel* Ceci’s antennae poking up. She sat up straighter in her chair, her head swiveling from me, whose bite of pasta salad had gone sour in my mouth, to my mom, who looked as if she was holding back words she itched to come out and say.

“Is that some sort of riddle or something?” Ceci asked pointedly.

I knocked my leg against hers under the table in warning. She just knocked mine right back.

“No.” Mom waved. “It’s only a bit of family business. I just find it interesting Connor describes it as a particularly good time for us. That’s all.”

Malcolm paused. Blinking to me and then back to mom, “I’m sorry, I’m not following.”

“We’re getting hacked!” Clay said with a little too much mirth as he shoveled the helping of Ceci’s salad that was supposed to be mine into his mouth. “Like in a spy movie, but real life.”

“I’m sorry, hacked? Are you serious?” Mal set his utensils down and looked at me, stunned. “Are they quite serious?”

I grunted, my mouth going into a flat line. I couldn’t blame him. I’d be surprised too if I learned he was getting sued randomly considering his profession. Saying we were getting hacked was very broad spectrum. And very insulting considering what I do.

Groaning I leaned back deep in my seat saying, “Clay, would you shut the fuck up?”

My brother just threw his hands out to the side as if to say, *‘what did I do?’*

Beside me, Ceci said, “No. For once, Clay, please don’t shut up. Tell us more.”

I couldn’t help but glare at her, because seriously what was her problem? Okay fine she was upset for some random reason, and fine she decided to blow that steam off on me—right okay I could handle that. But was she really turning on me to prove some kind of point?

The thought lifted a dagger sized point to the edge of my heart. Nicking it just slightly but causing me to bleed everywhere. With a hardened jaw, I set my own utensils down.

Somewhere down the table Clint was silent, working at his food like nothing was happening around him. Clay continued to act like this was a joke. “Just as I said. Someone is hacking into the databases at Ferguson and mixing shit up. We won’t know what they want until Connor finds out who they are though.”

“And who knows when that will be,” mom said around a bite of chicken. “I’m thinking we should get lawyers involved before we run out of time waiting for your brother to do his tappy thing.”

Tappy thing. Like writing algorithms and networking was akin to playing with toys. I swallowed.

Under the table I felt a pinch on my thigh. Glaring to my right I met a gaze that was all fire and heat. In it I read exactly what she was saying with those eyes. She was telling me to say something. To speak up. But I couldn’t, so I just turned my chin away from her and resumed not enjoying the dinner in front of me.

Ceci stabbed a piece of chicken on her plate and started cutting like it was a hacksaw against a tree. Without looking up, her feeble attempt to seem uninterested, she said, “I heard the tappy stuff is called Computer Analytics, Marsha. We have a whole department for it at Fernandez if you want to check it out.”

My mom didn’t even look up at her, waving instead.

“Oh that’s okay, sweetie,” Mom said, her eyes cutting at Ceci. “We don’t need that, we’ve been doing things a certain way since before you were born. What we really need is a new CFO. Oh, and I know my boy loves his toys and what have you, but that brain of his was made for something greater.”

“Last I checked those ‘toys’ were called computers and they just so happened to, oh I dunno, revolutionize the new world,” Ceci said. “And in case you’ve never used one before, I’ll tell you a secret. They’re really fucking complicated to figure out, let alone program.”

Under the table I pinched Ceci this time. She didn’t so much as flinch, taking the assault as she took up for me. While it was sort of dread-inducing having her flickering flames over the explosives of the conversation, it was also sort of heartwarming to see her fighting for me. Without question or hesitation, just here. On my side.

Still, she needed to stop. I changed from pinching her to palming her bare knee. Squeezing slightly to try and smooth her growing agitation. She just shook me off.

Across from us, mom continued to wave that same dismissive motion. “Yes, I suppose. But really we’ve been fine for years. We’ll get through this and things will keep working like they always have.”

“Nothing’s going to be working when the rest of your shit gets hacked,” Ceci mumbled.

“Celestia,” Tine said sweetly, but sternly. “*Stop.*”

Ceci shrugged.

Malcolm continued, still confused. “Sorry. Is cyber security not part of what Connor is doing for you all?”

“We actually don’t know what Connor does. It’s quite a mystery to all of us,” Mom answered. “He could be doing so much and yet—”

“Why are you picking a fight right now?” I cut in, exasperated.

“I’m not doing anything, sweetie,” she said, laughing humorlessly. “We are all *actually* wondering what it is you do. You said you’ve been finding out who the file tampering sources back to, but you haven’t done that yet. You said you were securing data throughout the company but you obviously haven’t done that either. So what *are* you doing, Son? Other than jeopardizing your entire family and this business?”

“I’m doing whatever you tell me to do, Mom!” I said, my voice raising minutely, but that’s it. “I’ve always done what you tell me to do. You wanted it this way, so that’s why things are this way. I’m sorry I haven’t found the guy yet but I’ve been—” I cut off my eyes flashing to my side momentarily before focusing back on mom “—busy with something important and I haven’t had the time or the fucking tools to backtrack on mistakes that shouldn’t have been made in the first place.”

Marsha Ferguson glared at me from across the table and I felt a frog in my throat begin to rise, “You’re right. These

mistakes shouldn't have been made because I should have been tougher with you. You were always smart and always had a gift for learning. I should have guided you more on your path instead of indulging you. Maybe then you would be prioritizing your family over whatever you've been playing around with *this time*."

More utensils hit the table, and I swear the seat beside me burst into flames. "It sounds like if you close your mouth and actually listen for a change you wouldn't be in this situation in the first place."

Mom blinked, her head tilting back as she looked at Ceci with eyes that were truly seeing for the first time. Then she blinked around the table at her children.

"Who brought this girl here?" Mom growled.

"Tine did," Clint said, still way too calm in the middle of this chaos.

Mom faltered, shooting a guilty look at my sister before saying, "Oh."

"Marsha," Papa said from beside my mother. Laying a hand on her arm he caught her attention fully, looking at her. She looked back and, as always there was the smallest bit of softness that only he could bring out of her. Quietly, almost inaudibly he whispered to her, "Cálmate."

This would usually work. Calm her down enough to be a silent force rather than a punishing one. But that was on the occasion we didn't have Ceci the hornet buzzing around stinging wherever she saw open flesh.

"Doesn't take a rocket scientist to see you're just doubling down on your mistakes, *Marsha*," Ceci taunted.

Mom's gaze ripped from Papa's, easily baited. "And what mistakes would that be, *little girl*?"

"Being too proud to admit you're wrong," Cee said. "You have this crazy smart son who has his own programs for exactly the kind of support you need and you refuse to acknowledge it because he's not doing what you envisioned him doing."

This got the attention of my brothers and sisters, my true support system. My people. People who didn't know about my programs yet.

They all perked up, heads whipping to look at me for answers. But I didn't have answers, because I hadn't expected any of this.

Tonight was supposed to be like any other night. I was supposed to say goodbye to my friends and thank them for visiting with a nice dinner and maybe some talk on the beach. Tomorrow when I woke up I would drop them off at the airport and then find Ceci. *My Ceci*, not this psycho crazy hot and cold version of herself and we would be normal.

None of this was supposed to happen. I wasn't supposed to be feeling like this right now, and that was making me mad. So fucking mad that for once I was quiet because I couldn't find the words to speak, not just because I'd decided not to say the ones in my head.

"Your own programming, Connor?" Clint spoke up slowly, confused. "You've never said anything to us."

"Yeah," Clay said. "Half-pint, how do you even know about it?"

"Oh...I don't know about it," Ceci said slowly, her voice sounding a little cautious as she realized her error. "I don't know anything about it really, I was just saying."

"But you do know. You just brought it up like you've heard about it before," Clint drilled. "*How?*"

"I-I'm just repeating what I heard from Malcolm earlier," she said. "He was telling me about some project since college or something. I just assumed maybe his own family's company would be the first to take advantage..."

Clint's eyes fell to me and he looked for a long moment before sliding his gaze back to Ceci as he shook his head. His voice was quiet, regretful as he said, "We didn't know."

Annoyance swam over me as I listened to the silence around the table. No they hadn't known but they *could have* if they even cared the slightest bit.

And Ceci. Sure she sounded remorseful now that she realized she fucked up, but she couldn't just keep her fucking head for one goddamn second in the first place? Really?

This night was not supposed to be like this. And that is why I said something I probably wasn't supposed to say to the girl that had been, in her own way, sticking her neck out for me.

“Celestia.”

“Hmm?”

“Just shut up, okay?”

What did she do? She reared back like I slapped her, her eyes racking up to mine and clashing with them like we were in our own mental battle. I could see it all there. Anger, frustration, irritation, all in her eyes. I tried to tell myself that she had shown up that way already. In a bad mood. But sometime throughout the night that mood had changed from being aimed at me to being aimed for me. To defending me. Yet for some strange reason, that too made me feel stupid and weak. Like having her be the one to tell my family about my passions and her be the one to stand up to my mother made me just as small as I felt.

It was embarrassing to watch.

Swallowing, Ceci's expression morphed into something way too private to be having in front of the dinner table, but it was clear neither of us cared.

“Are you really telling me to shut up right now?” she asked.

Her implication was clear. Was I really choosing her *of all people* to push back at? And yeah, I guess I was. Because chaotic family dinners aside, she was the one taking me on this rollercoaster of emotions. She was the one who could make this situation better or worse. *She was the keeper to my emotions.* And all I wanted her to do was turn this stirring feeling back to normal, not stir it up more.

But instead of understanding that, I saw the distinct flash of hurt pass through her eyes before she shot out of her seat, storming past me and into the house.



“Nice, Connor,” I heard her mumble for the second time as she left me behind.

\* \* \*

I thought I would find her in my sister’s room but funny enough I found her in mine.

After Ceci stormed off, the room continued to be silent for several long seconds. I needed to think. But all I could see behind my eyes was a mixture of Ceci flirting with my best friend, my mother and her fighting, and the hurt in her eyes.

“I’ll go check on—”

I didn’t even look at him. Raising a hand in the air I said, “Malcolm you don’t even know her. Sit down.”

“Right then.” He sat quickly, seeming almost relieved to be let off the hook.

Next Tiney began to rise, “Then I’ll go—”

“I will find her and apologize in a second. I’m the one that said it,” I grumbled.

Tiney gave me a small smile. “Okay, thanks. She’s probably not that mad at you anyway, she’s been in a bad mood all day.”

My ears perked up at that.

“Why—” I started to ask but was promptly cut off.

“No kidding,” Mom huffed as she crossed her arms over her chest. “Are you really friends with that girl?”

“Yes.”

I was spared the embarrassment of having to explain my vehement response. Because Tine and I weren’t the only ones who spoke up. We all vouched for Ceci. Our little hardass. But ours.

“Mijo,” my dad said in a soft voice. He hated drama which is why he usually stayed out of our ample amount of it. “Explicame.”

I shook my head. “It’s just what was said. I program. You all knew that. We don’t have to have a conversation about it.”

“Entonces, por qué estás tan enojado?” he asked.

Why was I so angry? I didn’t know, but I had a feeling the answer lay with the girl who’d just left the table. So shortly after, I excused myself and went to go look for her. When I found her she wasn’t sulking or moping in her hurt feelings from earlier. She was going through my fucking shit. Rummaging through drawers and papers and old boxes like she was on some kind of mission.

“What are you looking for?” I asked from my spot leaning against the doorway.

“Your balls,” she mumbled. I probably deserved that one.

“Cee, I’m sorry,” I said.

“Not okay.”

“Celesti—”

“Ceci,” she corrected.

That correction hurt way more than it probably should. Storming further into the room, I dropped to my knee so that I was on her level. She was rooting around on the floor under my bed trying to find something, but I pulled her up so she could look at me. So I could see that face. And nope. The hurt wasn’t totally gone yet. Did my little “shut up” really hurt her that badly? Or was it something else? Grasping her chin, I tilted her face to look at me.

“C’mon,” I said. “Don’t be like this with me. You saw what I was working with out there.”

“Not like you wanted my help with it,” she mumbled, tossing her chin over her shoulder. I brought it back around to look at me

“What the *hell* is wrong with you?”

“Why do you keep asking me that?”

“Because there’s something wrong with you and I want to know what it is,” I stated.

Staring up at my eyes, she looked at me long enough, deep enough that for a second I thought she would drop the tantrum and just tell me. But just when I thought she was about to open up, she shook her head, saying, “Nothing Connor.”

“Celestia,” I groaned.

“Ceci,” she corrected again, and I glared.

“I—”

“Connor?” A soft voice called from down the hall. It was Ria. “Just coming to check on you, babe.”

If murder had one specific appearance, I think it was in Ceci’s eyes. It took me so off guard, I almost didn’t notice when she stood and started toward the door. On reflex I reached out and banded an arm across her chest, grabbing her shoulder and turning her back to me.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“I’m leaving, you have a visitor.”

“But we’re talking.”

“No, we’re *done* talking.”

“We are not fucking done, Ceci.”

“Did he answer?” another voice asked from near Ri. *My sister’s voice.*

Again, acting on instinct, I grabbed onto Cee and dragged her in the direction of the far corner of my room. Yanking open a door, I shoved clothes aside, kicked boxes out of the way, and pushed Ceci in.

Turning toward me frantically, I caught Cee’s surprised glare just before I clicked the door shut and plunged us both into darkness.

“What the hell?” she asked. “Why are we in the closet, Connor?”

Slowly, my eyes adjusted to the lack of light. “We’re hiding.”

“That explains why *I’m* in the closet, not why you’re in here with me.”

“Because I’m not done with you.”

“Oh really?” She barked a laugh before she remembered we were supposed to be hiding. In a whisper she hissed, “You seemed pretty done with me before.”

“What’s wrong, Ceci?”

“I’m not doing this right now,” she mumbled, pressing forward in attempts to get by me. I held onto her shoulder, putting her back in place just under a clothing rack where she had to smack old football jerseys away from her face.

“You *are* doing this,” I said. “You’ve been acting like an absolute fucking brat the entire time you’ve been here, even before I told you to shut up. I want to know what’s up your fucking ass.”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck me?” I bubbled up in a laugh, sounding surprised and a little deranged. “Oh my fucking God. You’re unbelievable tonight, I swear.”

She tried to move again but I moved in front of her, blocking her path. Her eyes blazed. “If you don’t let me out right now, I swear to God I’ll scream.”

Before I could even dare her to (like I even would) she opened her mouth to do it. Thinking fast, I reached out, grabbing her around the waist as I clamped a hand down over her mouth.

A muffled gasp is all I heard as she jerked against my grip. I grunted in frustration. I was getting real fucking tired of her acting like this. Slowly, I walked her backward. Pressing her flat to the wall as I loomed over her, one hand gripping her hip as I pinned her and the other banding across her mouth. My body hovered just inches in front of hers, the heat between us

feeling static and charged. I had to fight the urge not to press in further.

She bucked, struggling against the restraint of my hands, the movement bringing her front brushing dangerously close to a growing portion of my anatomy that loved being this close to Ceci no matter how mad she was. I had to turn my hips to avoid a collision because if we did touch, I really wasn't sure what I'd do.

"Let go!" she struggled, the words sounding like a jumbled smushy version of themselves as they left her mouth and died in my hand.

Tightening my grip on her hip, I growled low and slow, "Talk. To. Me."

She didn't. Instead, she bit me.

Hissing, I ripped my hand away from her mouth and shook it out at my side, examining the extremity before looking at her dumbfounded.

"Go talk to your girlfriend, Connor. Leave me out of it," she said.

"What?"

"You heard me," she said.

"No, no," I said, waving my hand to stop her rant. "Seriously, Cee. What did you just say?"

She crossed her arms, narrowing her eyes at me. "You know, I've been waiting for weeks for you to just come out and tell me, but whatever. I already know about your girlfriend, Connor. Secret's out."

"What girlfriend?"

She raised her eyebrows.

"Ri?" I scoffed. "Ria is not my girlfriend."

"*Babe*," she said, mimicking Ri from just a few minutes ago and I couldn't help but just blink at her.

“Yeah, she says stuff like that sometimes,” I said slowly. “It doesn’t make her my girlfriend, Ceci.”

She frowned but studied me. She must have thought I looked sincere because eventually she leaned away from me and crossed her arms. “Then who is your girlfriend?”

I blinked again. *Was she crazy?*

Clearing my throat, I felt my cheeks start to burn. “I don’t have one.”

“Bullshit,” she answered without hesitation.

“No, not bullshit. I don’t have a girlfriend, Ceci. I don’t even know where you got that idea from.”

Blinking at me with the most puzzled look on her face, I realized she truly believed this craziness she’d made up in her head. It showed now as she contemplated the truth of what I was telling her, weighing it against the earnestness of my expression.

In a quick move she reached a hand forward and swiped my cell from my front pocket. Stabbing a few buttons, she put in my code and went straight into my text messages before handing it over to me. Straight to a conversation I’d had with Tine weeks ago. A conversation about a girl.

Watching me read the messages Ceci waited impatiently for some kind of reply. Her arms crossed over her chest, her body bouncing slightly like she was tapping her foot or something.

I peeked at her. Her hair was pretty today. Curled and long as it cascaded down her shoulders. Her little blue tank was that fancy material that looked like silk and she had on a matching blue skirt that made her look innocent in a way I knew she wasn’t.

She looked like a little blue angel. An angel of hell, but an angel nonetheless. And all the while she sported her pouty little face and red ass cheeks and that fucking frown, I felt this massive growth bubbling in my chest. It was immature and so not cool, but damn was it there.

*Because Ceci was jealous.* Whether it was about Ria specifically or about the thought that I had a girlfriend, she was jealous about it. And her little tantrum today was a result.

Flipping the phone back her way, I simply shook my head. “These are all hypothetical. About a girl they *think* I’m seeing whenever I’m with *you*.”

Her eyes fluttered around my face and back to the phone. “But you went on a date on my birthday.”

“I spent the day with you on your birthday, what are you talking about?”

She shook her head, “Fine, the night before my birthday if you want to get technical.”

Pausing I thought about what the hell she was talking about and...*oh my God*. Shaking my head I tried not to roll my eyes as I said. “You asked if I had a date that night and I only agreed because I still had to go out and pick up your gifts.”

She was still blinking at me like she was dumbstruck. Like she was rewiring everything she believed about me. Damn. I shook my head. Had she been thinking I had a girlfriend since her fucking birthday?

I moved to her, stepping right into her space and taking the side of her face in my hand. I made her look at me. “Is that why you’ve been acting like this all night? Because you thought there was some girl I wasn’t telling you about?”

Gazing up to me she nodded, looking dazed as she blinked. Damn, I wanted to kiss that look right off her face. Instead, I just got close enough to. Causing her to puff out a surprised rush of air as I lowered my voice to a hoarse whisper, speaking directly into her breath. “You’re my only girl, Cee. That what you want to hear?”

“That’s not true,” she whispered back. I could hear her swallow roughly as her eyes trailed from my lips to my face and then up to my gaze. “You have other friends that are girls. You have Ria and Sandra and—”

Leaning forward I nipped the side of her face, just under her jaw. A quick motion. One that shut her up entirely. Still my

voice remained low. “They are girls, but they’re not mine, Ceci.”

“They’re not?”

“No.”

“And I am?”

“Yes, baby.”

“Oh. Okay.”

I chuckled, but it was an incredulous sound. A relieved one too. She wasn’t so mad anymore. I heaved out a long breath, chuffing. “All that shit, and it was this easy all along?”

Shrugging, she relaxed slightly into my hand cradling her face. “I guess,” she sighed, all blasé sounding.

Shaking my head I couldn’t help but scoff. I couldn’t help my body from walking her back against the wall again. From flattening her there and leaning into her warmth and feeling her against me right there in the closet.

I looked at her then. Wide-eyed and shocked and, whether she knew it or not, obedient to my every demand under the cover of this closet. So goddamn head strong and confrontational and bratty and now she wanted to shrug it off like it was another fucking day. Yeah, no.

*No.*

Thumb under her chin, grip around the back of her neck, I used it to tip her head back. The slope of her neck was almost as pretty as her pink little mouth. Almost as pretty as the rest of her body sheathed in her one and only color. Almost as pretty as the rest of *her*.

So why did I want to wrap my hands around it?

“Do you think that’s fair?” I asked.

“What?”

“That you get to drive me absolutely insane all night, *torture me*, and I don’t get to torture you back?”

“I *what?*” She sounded confused.



Lowering my head so that my lips were right beside her ear—so that she heard every word, not missing anything—I said, “Do you think you can just hang all over him, *give him what’s mine*, and get away with it?”

“Him?”

“Don’t play dumb.”

“What’s yours?”

“Mhmm,” I said lazily. Moving, I blew soft breath along the lines of her neck, causing her to shiver in my hands—a sensation I didn’t know I was obsessed with until it was happening. I wanted to make it happen over and over again. Speaking into the side of her throat, I said. “Your laugh. Your smile. Your attention. You gave it all to him and you gave me what?”

“I dunno.”

“*Attitude*, honey.” Pulling back, I couldn’t help but drink her up in front of me. I shook my head. “*So much fucking attitude.*”

“You knew that already.”

“I did.”

“So why are you complaining?”

“I’m not,” I said. Tipping her chin up higher I heard her hiss as her gaze had no choice but to move from me to the ceiling. My fingers moved on their own. Running down the curve of her neck and only stopping when I *made* them along her collar bone. My hand splaying across the bottom of her throat like a necklace. It tightened just slightly and the only way I could describe the sound she made was a whimper. That sound went straight to my balls. “I’ve never complained about this fucking attitude, have I?”

“No.”

“Why do you think?”

“You’re a masochist.”

“Hilarious,” I said dryly, fingers tightening further. “No, Ceci. I don’t complain because that’s fucking mine too.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You should be,” I said. Moving my thumb up and down, I watched it go over the hill of her throat and back again. “Give me something back.”

“What?” She asked, still sounding confused. But I was not having her dense bullshit tonight. Pressing forward I finally closed the distance between us, feeling her soft curves press against my unmistakable hard. She made that whimpering sound again, but her movement was toward me not away.

“*Keep up, Celestia,*” I murmured. “Make it up to me and give me something new you haven’t given him.”

“Like what?”

“Tell me why it even matters.”

“Why what matters?”

“If I have a girlfriend or not.”

“It *doesn’t* matter.”

“You just threw a fit. It definitely matters,” I scoffed. Leveling my gaze on hers, I lowered my voice again. “So tell me.”

What did she do? She rolled her lips into her mouth. Theoretically zipping it shut and silently promising she wasn’t going to admit shit.

I shook my head. “Alright. Remember that you made me do this.”

“Do whaa—ah!” she squeaked as I dipped my head down and bit gently at her neck. “*What are you doing!*”

I shrugged but didn’t remove my mouth from her skin. “You bit me first. I’m biting back.”

“Not like *this!*” she cried. A smile tilted the corner of my mouth as I dragged my teeth up her smooth skin toward the place behind her ear. She shivered again, hard this time and

grasped onto my shoulders. I couldn't tell if she was moving me away or pulling me forward, one hand doing one of each. Breathless she said, "Okay, okay! I'm sorry for being a brat."

"Not good enough," I murmured. "Tell me why it matters."

"No."

I bit down on her earlobe and she jerked. I don't know if she knew her hips were inclining toward me, but I wasn't fighting her on it. In her ear I continued, "Tell me."

"Connor, no."

Moving along her jaw, my mouth found its way in front of hers, my hand still wrapped loosely around the base of her throat, holding her in place but no longer squeezing. It just looked so damn good the way it decorated her skin. She moaned quietly, so close I could taste it on my tongue. Fighting the all-consuming urge to lean forward and make that mouth mine, I rasped. "Tell me, Ceci."

She whimpered. "Con—"

"Connor Ferguson, I know you're in here! You ran Ceci off with your bad mood and now you're being rude to your friends. Stop hiding in here and come downstairs," A voice said. It was my sister again.

"Uh oh," I murmured over her mouth.

"What?" she asked.

"She's like a bloodhound when she's on a mission. She's going to find us," I tsked a little disingenuously. It almost made me feel bad when her eyes went wide with alarm.

Almost.

"Let me out then," she said, squirming.

"Not until you tell me."

"Con," she whined. My finger brushed low on her throat and back up, outlining the curves of her neck. Outside the closet, we heard my sister getting closer and in response Cee got more anxious. "*Please.*"

“You know what I want.” My hand brushed back up her skin again, cupping her jaw. My thumb finding her lip and playing with the plump pink round of it. I loved the way her skin felt under my fingertips, and if she wasn’t stopping this, neither was I. “Just tell me, baby.”

Outside the door, we could hear footsteps now. Discovery nearing closer, racking my own heartbeat up like I know hers had to be.

Her mouth parted, her chin inclining as she unconsciously chased my touch. But something seemed to grab hold of her. A decision—and it caused her to pull her gaze down to mine. In it, I saw so much. More than I’d ever seen before. But front and center was a sort of vulnerability. It had me pausing in my teasing and looking at her with the same openness that she looked at me.

Her eyes moved to the door, but I had the feeling she wasn’t worrying about Tine showing up. Just as quickly as they shied away they came back, her lip going between her teeth as she bit at it nervously. Rubbing my palm along the side of her face, I hoped to give her support without pulling her out of the decision to open up.

Finally, looking up at me through her eyelashes she mumbled, “You’re mine too.”

Fuck.

*Fuck.* I wasn’t expecting that. Wasn’t prepared for it. Not from Ceci. Not from little miss “like my best friend person”, *little miss oblivious*. The words were a shot right to my heart. They had me coughing out a strangled sound as I asked, “What?”

She glared. “You’re mine. My best friend, my person, mine. And if you want to date, that’s fine, I guess. But I want to know what’s going on with you. I don’t want to get left behind.”

I looked at her. Her eyes were still saucer sized. Still open and vulnerable and looking at me with an expression I’m almost positive was designed just for me. One that not many, if

anyone had seen before. And even though her words weren't exactly right, weren't exactly what I wanted to hear, she was giving me what she could. And that had to be okay.

*I don't want to get left behind.*

I blew out a breath. I wanted to tell her it was more than that. That it had to be. But I didn't. Because if that's all she could give right now, it's all I would take.

"Say something," she whispered. The red in her cheeks spreading through her neck to the middle of her chest.

Smiling softly, I nodded. Dipping my head down low I dropped my lips on the top of her cheekbone. Light and quick so that I might trick my brain into thinking it didn't want to linger there for hours. When I lifted and caught her eye again I smiled more, telling her I understood.

And so that she understood me, loud and fucking clear, I cleared my throat and agreed. "I'm yours."

# Chapter Twenty-four

## CECI

My days passed in numbers. Numbers that made up punching sequences. Numbers that counted down the minutes until I could be at the fighting gym again. Numbers that signified my family's growing calls crossing my screen. And numbers that tallied the times I caught myself thinking of Connor Ferguson in inappropriate ways.

*Especially after the closet.*

Intervention from God himself wouldn't have been enough to prepare me for what happened in Connor's childhood room, that night. I was still recovering from it. The way his hands covered me, the way he put his mouth on me. The way his words sounded like molten versions of his usual speech. Hot and sexy and sort of punishing.

The way I'd wanted even more.

*Stop Ceci.*

The whole ordeal of the night had been a mistake. I had only shown up at their stupid dinner because I had to. Ox all but dropped Fergy off at my apartment door so she could beg me to go with her to her family's house in North Seaside and the last thing I'd wanted to do was make an appearance in front of Con's friends so soon after the night at the bar. But knowing how nerve-racking the family visits could sometimes be for Ferg, I couldn't say no.

So I loaded her up in my car and drove her out there.

I was already nervous about keeping up our lies in front of Connor's family, so Fergy not being able to shut up about *Ria this and Ria that*, while insisting that her and Con would be "perfect" together had set me on edge. That coupled with the

oh so welcoming ‘*what the hell is she doing here?*’ greeting I received at the front door and my mood officially circled the crapper before I even stepped foot in the house.

The whole night, the girl did nothing but follow Connor around. It was like she was his shadow, popping up out of nowhere just to whisper something that made him laugh or offer him something that he’d been searching for, or just sit with him when it was supposed to be me sitting with him. Me getting him things. Me being by his side.

It was so obvious that Clay, the big fucking idiot, had paused as we both watched Connor and Ria balance a round of too many drinks in too little hands and scoffed to me, “Perfect for each other, right?”

I just looked at him. That motherfucker always said the stupidest shit, from the very first time I met him with his snide insensitive annoying-ass commentary. Yet, I don’t think I’d ever wanted to strangle the shit out of him more.

Instead of wringing his neck though, I just shoved past him saying, “Fuck off, Clay.”

Which generated a startled grumble from him as he whined, “What the *hell* is wrong with everyone tonight?”

The whole thing annoyed me, but moreover it solidified my suspicion that I had finally found out the mysterious girlfriend. At least, I thought.

And because of that, I assumed it would be okay to hang out with a certain other friend who didn’t boil my blood into this ugly jealous feeling I didn’t understand, like the girlfriend did.

Turns out I was wrong. Very wrong, if Connor’s words and hands and fucking teeth had anything to say about it.

And he had *a lot* to say about it.

The things he said about it were still living in my brain, circling my stomach with these unbearable butterflies. And the way I could still hear the roughness of his voice—the sureness of it, as he told me ‘*I’m yours*’—did things to me that I was

still finding hard to understand. Awakening things in my chest, my stomach, and the place in between my legs, just the same.

Now it was Thursday again, another week gone and I still couldn't get the hot feeling of his breath on me or his teeth or that kiss he put along my cheek out of my head.

Not the way my nipples had pebbled when his hands were around my throat. Or how my center had warmed, getting slick and hot as he pinned me to the wall. And definitely not the tremorous beat of my heart as I endured his teasing in the dark of his closet.

I couldn't get any of it out of my head, even as I forced myself to get it together and try to think clearly for the good of this friendship.

But that was just it, it was all in my head. As long as I never let it out, never let it get too far, we'd be good, right?

Stepping out into the late night, I tried to shake the building thoughts from my mind. Con had just brought me back to the shelter where my car sat waiting for me after another self-defense class. I ran back in to grab something, thinking Con would just wait for me to meet him when I was done, but coming out with my favorite blue hand wraps in tow, I was startled to see that he wasn't there.

That was weird.

We were going to the shelter a lot lately. "We" because Con didn't like me coming this way by myself so he often came by to pick me up or simply walk me out. *I* was coming to the shelter more and more these days because something weird was going on with the staff that I couldn't quite place. They were down two social workers out of the blue, so I was picking up extra shifts to offset their obvious need for more help. Christine and Nina wouldn't tell me what happened, but from what I could tell all hell was breaking loose and they were holding things together just barely on a good day.

Still, even if he was a little sick of having to show up here all the time, Con wouldn't get so tired that he'd outright leave me on the side of the road.



“Con?” I called out into the night. The summer air was no longer cool as we moved into late July. Months were slipping away in a blur of novelty and comfort. I couldn’t even count the number of times I had woken up early to train with Jenny and lost track of time, running later and later to get to Pau’s shop. The number of times I had left early to sneak into the back of her group lessons, either. And after the long days split between my growing interest in martial arts and my obligation to Pau’s shop, I found comfort in returning to Connor’s place and having dinner with him while we did literally whatever.

Some nights he worked on his computers, some nights we watched repetitive TV and some he even asked me to show him what I was learning during my time at the gym. Every night we spent together and almost the same amount of times Connor gave me a reason to question our “just friends” status.

He was still my friend, but some of the things he was doing were more than friendly. Like how he kissed the top of my head before he left the room or the fact that I woke up every morning with some form of Connor wrapped around me. His arm if he was still sleeping, his hand if he was grasping my shoulder to wake me up, and his big body if he decided he just needed a good morning hug.

He was so *handsy* when he wanted to be.

He’d even started to close the doors to the guest rooms so I couldn’t sleep anywhere other than his bed. And when I asked him about it, he just shrugged and said, “I like you in my bed.”

None of which was doing my already growing attachment (more like addiction) to this new side of him any good.

“Con!” I called again as my heart picked up speed. *Where was he?*

“Calm down, honey. I’m right over here,” his voice said from a place still unknown.

And another thing...

Just like the way Connor had of saying my names, “Ceci”, “Celestia”, and even his own personal “Cee”; the word “Honey” leaving his mouth seemed to be becoming my own

personal serotonin. Like he knew just when to say it to put my mind at ease. And like always, it did just that.

Looking around, I edged deeper onto the sidewalk and looked both ways, still not seeing him. “Where?”

“Here, by your car,” he said, as he rose from a crouching position beside my wheel.

I strode up to him, ready to ask if we were going to cook or eat out tonight. I was tired, and I didn’t feel like cooking. But Connor was the one that usually cooked, so really what I meant was I didn’t feel like waiting around while he did that. I wanted food now.

I was about to tell him just that when all my breath left my lungs. Because in Connor’s arms as he turned around was the cutest, smallest, white and gray kitten. It couldn’t be any bigger than a melon, but somehow it looked even smaller as she snuggled into Connor’s large arms. Big gray eyes stared back at me from the other side of those arms and when she looked at me (I had decided on sight that she was a she), she opened her little kitten mouth and meowed the sweetest, little sound.

I think I gasped. Maybe I cooed. I definitely garbled.

Connor chuckled, “Speak words, Ceci.”

“I want her!” I said immediately.

His face changed instantly as he grumbled, “Speak *different* words.”

“Oh my god, where did you find her?” I asked, practically rushing them with my arms outstretched, ready to take my cat.

Con stepped back and moved her out of my grasp. I frowned. No, I scowled, opening my mouth to let him know exactly what I thought about him restricting my kitty snuggles. He just shook his head.

“Don’t touch. We don’t know if it’s diseased,” he instructed calmly.

“But *you’re* holding her,” I pointed out.

“I know I’m holding it, *Captain Obvious*.” He gave me a face and I could tell he must be tired and maybe hungry too just by the attitude he was giving me. So I didn’t give him attitude back, just letting him continue. “But if one of us is going to catch something from it, I’d rather it not be you.”

*Pang!* That was my heart beating out of my chest again. Don’t mind it, it’s been doing that a lot lately.

Ignoring the bodily reaction Connor Ferguson enacted from me every minute on the hour, I crossed my arms and cocked a hip. “She’s not an it, Connor.”

He narrowed his eyes. “How would you know?”

“I just know.”

“Bullshit.”

“Check,” I raised an eyebrow motioning toward the sweet quiet thing.

Connor moved carefully as he hooked his hands underneath the cat’s arms and lifted her up so that she was eye level. I knew instantly when his eyes met mine that I was right. My smile could have met my ears it was so wide.

He glowered at my gloating but didn’t point it out. “I found her over by your wheel, but I noticed earlier she was following you.”

“You did! When?” I asked trying my hand at reaching toward her again. Connor just batted me away.

“Before self-defense class.”

“And you didn’t tell me!”

“I thought it was just a stray walking around. How was I supposed to know she knew you?”

“She knows me?” I asked again, liking the idea of that. Looking down at the sweet little creature, I realized she was still looking at me with the biggest baby eyes. I melted right on the spot. I wanted her. I *needed* her.

“Looks like it,” he said slowly. He was watching me, and as I reluctantly tore my eyes away from the kitty and met his, I

think he could tell that I was going to have her, too. “Any idea why?”

Looking up to the sky I thought about it for a second before shaking my head. “No—Oh well...Nah, never mind.”

“Well, what?” he asked skeptically, eyeing me from the corner of slitted lids.

I screwed my mouth to the side, thinking. “Well, I did notice some wet paw prints a few weeks ago. So I’ve been leaving little treats in that spot whenever I come by. But I’ve never actually seen an animal around I thought maybe the rats were getting them or something.”

He grunted. “You shouldn’t feed stray things, you know. They tend to get attached. Trust me, I would know from experience.”

“Are you talking about me?” I blinked, voice low.

He smiled sarcastically, “The pinnacle of wit and charm aren’t you, gorgeous?”

*Pang!* Again, I ignored the butterflies the “G” word gave me and glared.

“If you weren’t holding my cat, I would show you the pinnacle of my fist to your face.”

“She isn’t your cat, Ceci. You can’t keep it,” he said.

“The hell I can’t. She needs us!” I argued. He gave me a look so I carried on. “I can’t just leave her. Not like I did that other cat.”

He raised two scrunched eyebrows, his face working its way into a tight frown. “*Other* cat?”

“Yeah, the one I met outside my apartment.”

“*Explain,*” he demanded.

Geez, someone needed a nap. “Well, I never fed this one. He always had his own food. And I only see him at night when I take out the trash.”

“Uh huh...” I don’t know why he looked so skeptical, but he had started petting my cat on the head absently as he fixed that horrified look on my face. “Go on.”

“He’s kind of gray and he’s got these small black eyes and brown circles around them. Like a cute little mask.”

Connor was just staring at me now, his expression blank. Or maybe that was disbelief, I’m not sure, I couldn’t place it. Maybe he still wanted me to explain? I went on.

“He’s got a funny tail too...” I trailed off, peeking at him to see if he was still interested.

“Yeah? Tell me about it,” he said. I side eyed him, not quite liking his smart-ass tone.

His attitude really starting to work my last nerve. “It’s pretty bushy for a cat and it’s got black stripes. Anyway, I’m pretty sure he has to be somebody’s because he’s too fat to be a stray and—”

“Cee?” Connor cut me off.

“Yeah?”

“That’s a raccoon. What you’re describing right now, is a fucking raccoon.”

I took a step back. “What? *No!* Ernie is not a *raccoon!*”

He palmed his forehead and mumbled. “You named the damn raccoon Ernie?”

“It’s short for Ernesto.”

“You’re fucking kidding me.” He looked at me again with incredulousness dripping from every pore of his face. “I truly don’t know how you’ve made it to twenty-four years on this earth.”

I could tell Connor’s disbelief was genuine. I groaned. Flashes of the little creature I saw roaming around the apartment late at night entered my brain as a cold rush of reality crept over me. In my defense it was dark out there at night when I took the trash out, but now that I thought about it...Yep, Ernie was a raccoon. *Damn.* How did I miss that? I

thought raccoons were mean and bit people, but every time I interacted with him he... Oh no.

Looking up to Connor, I couldn't mask the panic in my eyes. "Hey, Con?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't raccoons carry rabies and stuff?"

Another side eye from the man holding a cat. "Why?"

"I may have pet Ernie a few times," I admitted.

For the second time that night, Connor just looked at me. His resigned, yet horrified expression made me want to beg him to say *something*, but I knew it was better to just let him take his time. Finally, he shook his head and ripped his gaze from mine, his disbelief finally winning over everything else. Pinching the bridge of his nose he said slowly, "You are making my head throb."

I frowned for only a second, before I shrugged. "I guess we can just ask the vet about rabies or the clap when we get there. I'm keeping the cat."

Connor burst into a half-laugh, half-groan. But that amazing smile was full as he said, "*You don't get the clap from touching animals, Ceci!*"

And there he went, making my heart pang again.



# Chapter Twenty-five

## CONNOR

I was running a bath for a cat.

Albeit she was now a fully vaccinated, defleaed, and dewormed cat, but a cat nonetheless.

Ceci held strong in her stance on keeping it. Honestly, from the moment I saw the furry thing beside the wheel of Cee's car, I sort of knew she would want it. As Ernie the goddamn raccoon could probably attest, Cee loved a furry friend. So, a furry friend who chose her first? Close the curtain, especially for one as cute as little Lila here.

Her deciding to keep the cat wasn't really the problem I was looking to avoid. The fact that Ceci hadn't gone home in probably four weeks, instead popping in and out to grab clothing or other necessities from her apartment before returning to my place, was the real problem.

"Where is this going to go?" I asked as we stared at the extra-large cat tree in the middle of the pet supply store. We'd finally made it here after getting out of the vet with a sleeping Lila in our arms.

"Um, I was thinking in the living room. You know, beside the small couch, where all the sun comes in," she said, half bent over as she examined the intricate looking thing, shaking it to test it for sturdiness.

I sucked in a breath. *Exactly* what I was afraid of. "In *my* house?"

She straightened, her ponytail flopping against her back as she jerked upright and turned animatedly until she found me. Her eyes bounced from me to the cat in my arms and then back. Her expression moving from confused to soft to



confused again. “Of course in your house. What do you mean?”

“I mean she’s not my cat, Ceci. Why would she have a cat tree in my house?” I asked.

She recoiled like I slapped her, looking me up and down like she needed to take inventory of the man that stood in front of her. She was *such* a brat. And I catered to her, which made her even more of a brat. “*Connor.*”

“*Celestia.*”

“No, don’t you *Celestia* me! Lila Rose Ferguson-Fernandez needs a two-parent home. I can’t believe you would suggest otherwise,” she said, horrified.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, and I couldn’t help a private laugh from slipping free. She named the fucking cat with her own middle name *and* a hyphenated name between the two of us.

*This girl.*

“Ceci, I don’t like cats,” I tried to explain as I held her fucking cat in my arms like it was a baby. This was the only way I could hold her without waking her up, though.

It was necessity, not nurture.

Ceci’s eyes tracked the very motion though, as if it was all the proof she needed. “But you’re so good with her! And you said I could keep her!”

“Yeah, *you* can! Not me,” I specified. And anyway, I had said no such thing. Hell would freeze over the day I told her what she could and couldn’t do.

“I can’t have a cat in my building!”

“You *own* your building. You can have whatever you want,” I said. My voice rose just slightly, but the little ball of fur began to move in my arms, reaching her paw up and lazily patting the air. Both of us noticed and lowered our voices. Like two arguing parents.

Ceci took a step forward so I could hear her whisper. “Yeah, but I want you to help keep her. Your house is cozier than my place. And I’m over there every night anyway.”

“I still don’t see the point of this.”

“To give our cat a better life, she can’t be cooped up in my apartment all the time. She needs space to roam free and grow.”

“How big do you expect her to get?” I asked incredulously.

She shrugged. “As big as cats get?”

When I just looked at her, she huffed. “I don’t know! Too big for an apartment, Connor, *whatever!*”

I blinked at her. It’s crazy to me how she truly believed she was making sense.

“Your apartment is too big for you, let alone a cat, Celestia. And it’s *your* cat, not *ours*,” I said while staring down at the thing.

She *was* cute. And sweet. And pretty quiet.

“Right,” Ceci said slowly, trailing off and just waiting as she watched me watch the cat.

“Right,” I repeated just as slowly, flicking my eyes over her features as she watched me with eyes just as big as the cat’s and a face that pulled off both hopeful and knowing. I shook my head suppressing a growl.

*This. Girl.*

“So then, we’ll take her home to your place?” she asked, and damn if the cat’s stupid big eyes didn’t open at that very moment just to work double the voodoo on me in the middle of the pet store. How could I say no?

Grumbling, I moved past her to grab the cat tree box so we could take it to the front. “That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

And what Ceci wants, she gets.

So now I had a cat *and* a live-in best friend. One of which I was intent on keeping and the other I would keep if it meant

holding on to what's important to me.

Just because something was important to me, did mean it didn't irritate the shit out of me, though.

"Connor," Ceci said through gritted teeth. "Hold. Onto. The. Cat."

"I am *trying*, Ceci. But she's slippery," I grumbled. Flicking my eyes up to her burning ones, I watched as she bent over the tub beside me and tried to pour water over Lila's head.

Our little angel reared her teeth and hissed at her, causing Ceci to jolt away. I placed a staying hand on her back as I laughed.

"Just like her mom," I sing-songed. Then looking down at the wet cat I altered my voice to that of baby talk. "Aren't you little Lili?"

Ceci glared jabbing me with an elbow before sighing exasperatedly. "Connor, she is *eight pounds*. You lift, like, a hundred times that every day. Are you really telling me you can't hold a little cat still?"

I resisted giving her a funny look. Eight hundred pounds? What did she think I was made out of, titanium?

"Yes. That's what I'm telling you," I said. "Not unless you want me to squeeze her or get scratched the hell up. Look at her, she's volatile."

"You've got to be kidding me," she grumbled.

I narrowed my eyes. "If it's so easy, you do it."

"Fine." Rolling her eyes, she huffed as she stood up to her full height. She proceeded to take her socks and sweats off quickly, leaving her body covered only in an oversized hoodie. It looked like she had no pants underneath but I suspected she had on those compression shorts she always wore. "If I get in this tub and hold the cat, I swear to God—"

She stepped one foot in and Lila hissed again. I smiled, not able to help the gloat I felt welling up in my chest. "Yeah? Be my guest."

Never one to back down from a challenge, she continued on into the tub. As she began to crowd the area, Lila backed away, moving as far away from her as she possibly could.

“No tengas miedo, gatito,” she cooed under her breath. Hunching over and holding her hands out in front of her.

I smirked. “I’m pretty sure she’s even more scared with you hunched over like that.”

“Shh!” she hissed over her shoulder at the same time the cat did the same thing. I chuckled. *Great, now I have two feral animals.*

I watched quietly as Ceci crept through the bath water with her arms out in front of her like she was catching a rabbit or something. Every step she took closer, Lila’s back hunched higher. I wanted to tell her it was a warning, but she was in a stubborn mood. It was best to let her figure it out on her own.

And that she did. Hard actually. After creeping so far, finally she made a move on our kitten, and what did the little thing do? She scattered. Scrambling past Cee to the other side of the tub so fast it tumbled Ceci off balance, sending her sliding to her ass in a splash of warm sudsy water.

Lila meowed.

Ceci yelped.

I lunged to catch her head from hitting the tile but pulled up short when she caught herself first.

Silence passed over us all for several moments.

Now that everyone was safe though, I couldn’t hold it. I doubled over in laughter. Laughing so hard that my own hand slipped into the tub causing my elbow to hit the tub floor, getting a whole half of my sleeve wet. This just made me laugh more. And even more still as I looked over at Ceci to see her staring at me in an annoyed huff. She was wet from the waist down, half her hair hanging limply as it dripped down her side. The other half still dry and fluffy, if not a little frizzy.

The color yellow never looked so much like fire as it did in her eyes. She glared, but the longer she looked at me, the more

her mask began to crack, until finally she was chuckling too as she pushed half-wet hair out of her face. “Connor, come on. It’s like two in the morning. Let’s just get this done.”

Still laughing, I gestured at the form huddled on the other side of the tub. “Get your cat then.”

“*Our* cat,” she corrected as she flipped over to her hands and knees and began crawling through the water slowly, she crept toward the cat. Her attention focused as she made every move deliberate and careful. And I don’t know what came over me but my arm moved on its own and before I knew it, I was pushing her sweatshirt clad butt and sending her barreling chest first into the water. “Connor Ferguson, you...”

She was laughing though, her words cutting off as she spit soapy water out of her mouth. “You... fucking... asshole!”

I couldn’t take offense; I was too busy holding my stomach as it ached with continuous laughing gasps. I could hardly breathe. “You’re doing great, Cee. *Really*.”

“It’s so late you’re delusional, pinche chiquillo.”

“It’s so late your Spanish is slipping out, *bajita*,” I said, dipping a hand in the water and splashing some into her face.

Ceci recoiled, and Lila did something so, *so* cute. She turned her face up at me and let out an angry meow. Then she gingerly picked her way toward her sopping wet mother, sitting directly in front of her before meowing protectively my way again.

We basically raced to look at each other, our eyes like magnets as we both broke out into huge, dumb grins. As if we were sharing the last brain cell in the room, we simultaneously cooed, “Awwwww!”

Then we laughed again.

“Okay,” I said sobering and for some reason whispering. “Pick her up now.”

No smartass remark resulted from unnecessary instructions. Ceci just did it, wrapping her hands around the middle of the cat and letting her little cat arms flop over the front of them.

Lila cocked her head back to look at Ceci and let out a shrill meow, begging Cee to stop the torture.

Ceci's face wiggled in a mix of what I could only describe as '*cuteness overload*'. Pushing her hands and Lila forward, she held her out to me. "Okay, do it."

"It" was lathering a generous handful of cat shampoo in my hands and then proceeding to get scratched mercilessly by kitten claws as I enacted the crime of simply washing her. Every movement of my hands was rewarded with another swipe of her claws. She was just trying to get away, still each one got a hiss out of me. Those claws were fucking sharp.

But the poor thing was covered in dirt, basically turning the white soap a murky gray color. She had to get clean.

"Ow, Lila," I murmured as she swiped my forearm again. "What did I ever do to you?"

"Oh, stop complaining. At least you're not soaked," Ceci said.

"Yeah, yeah. Well, she's all soaped up now." Leaning away, I set my now raw forearms on the edge of the tub, surveying. She was as good and washed as she was going to get. Looking up to Ceci with a wry smile, I said. "*Dunk her.*"

Ceci sputtered, her smile that goofy one I loved. "I'm not dunking the cat, you nut. What's the other option?"

I tsked, shaking my head. But reaching behind myself I swiped up the plastic bowl I brought in from the kitchen when we first got home. "Alright, bring her here then."

She did, wading through the tub on her knees to bring them both closer to me. Close enough that when I leaned down to scoop up water in the bowl, my cheek brushed hers gently.

Was it dramatic to say that every touch from Ceci felt like a touch from the sky? The sun even. Just like her name. So bright, so beautiful, and so right.

I ignored the sensation of it like I always did. If I thought too much about it, I might fall down the very slippery slope I almost did that night at the bar. Just thinking of it now, my

hands started to itch with the memory of Cee's sweet thighs in my grasp. Her body fitting perfectly against my front. Her voice sounding like a siren song as she moaned from the touch of my palms alone.

“Con?”

Shit. I was doing it again. I had been doing it for *weeks*. I couldn't stop thinking about it. Because that moan had been a mistake, I could tell by the way she froze directly after it. As if she'd made a wrong move or a wrong step in the sand. But at the same time, it had been anything but a mistake. Ceci opening to me, melting for me, *moaning* for me could never be a mistake.

It had been so right, I couldn't not tell her.

That she was my person. That she was mine.

Maybe that was the real mistake. Because the look in her eyes after I did. The denial, the shock, the fear. It hurt. It hurt just enough for me to take it all back. So I did, and we continued to hang in this purgatory of knowing but not acknowledging.

Except in that damn closet.

The closet of my childhood room where I'd had my hands all over Ceci now sat under special review in my mind. Not only had I been acting crazy, but she'd also acted out of character too.

*You're mine.* The words played in my mind on constant repeat, the feeling of her skin on my lips forever burned into me.

“Earth to Connor,” Ceci said, and had the nerve to sound soft, honeyed. She was clearly tired, but she was comfortable. Comfortable *with me*. Quietly, she coaxed, “Come on, we're starting to prune in here.”

I blinked at her, then down to the cat. Both were looking at me with big wide eyes that were more similar to each other than apart. Both trusting me. Both mine.

Carefully, I poured the water in the bowl over Lila's head, trying my best not to get it in her face, since that seemed to freak her out the most. I have no idea if I succeeded though, because my eyes had gone unseeing. A word playing on repeat in my head.

*Wait.*

That's what I needed to do. That I needed to be patient and wait. But the word pulsed in my mind like a taunt. The last two years feeling like they were nothing *but* waiting all of a sudden.

Had I not waited long enough?

"Alright, she's done," Ceci said. She stood, reaching over to the hook on the far wall. Grabbing a towel to wrap Lila up in, she rubbed the fabric around her fur, stopping only when a protesting meow warned her to. Then she reached over and set the little bundle down on the fluffy bath rug on my side of the tub.

It was so domestic. So normal. This whole night was. And I really liked it. So why was it knocking at the back of my nerves right beside that same irritating word. A chant now. A chastising plea to myself. A reprimand.

Wait, wait, wai—

All air left the room as I looked up at Ceci. I might as well have been slapped. *Punched*. I think I sputtered, or choked, I'm not sure which one. And eyes that were just unseeing now saw everything. Well not *everything*—but damn, they saw enough.

Ceci got out of the tub too, and I assume because she was dripping from the waist down, she removed the sopping wet sweatshirt she had been wearing. Pulling it over her head and dropping it in a heap on the ground. Leaving her only in a tight white tank top and little things that were not quite underwear and not quite shorts. They were black. They were shaped like shorts. But they came up around her thighs and ass in arches that curved flatteringly, exposing a lot and outlining the shape of her in every excruciatingly perfect detail.



The initial assault of the sight stung me. Stunted my heart into stuttering beats and my boxers into tightening to accommodate unpreventable growth. But even as I greedily ate up the amazing fucking sight of her slim legs and rounded curvy ass, I thought I had it all under control. I could handle a little ass, even if my hands itched to wrap around it and squeeze until I elicited a moan quite like the one she had gifted me on other recent occasion. Hard as fuck or not, I had it under control.

But then I saw her nipples. They were peeking boldly out from underneath a completely drenched, wholly transparent white tank top. The white cloth didn't do a damn thing to hide them. Not them and not the shape of her full chest either.

She was utterly exposed.

Her breasts shapely and heavy. Her nipples maybe pink but maybe a mauve sort of color. It was impossible to tell for sure underneath that fucking tank top that was now suddenly frustrating me. It was too thin and too damn stifling at the same time. It both molded to her body like it was painted there but covered up the smooth promise of her flat stomach and soft skin. It teased me. The shirt and her perky nipple taunting me good.

I wanted to know what color they were. They were pebbling, curling up into taunting points that begged to be touched. To be sucked. And I wanted to know.

I wanted to know a lot of things, it seemed. The feel of her. The warmth of her. The sound of her.

Fuck waiting. I was going to know now.

"Connor!" she gasped. It was not a frightened sound. Not unwelcome either. Just...surprised.

I was surprised too.

My mind hadn't consulted with my body before I pushed up to my feet and grabbed Ceci by the waist. Further evidence of my mindlessness showed as I moved to back her up against the wall beside the tub so fast you would think my life depended on it. Her body felt soft under my touch. Hot too.

And my mind barely registered her voice as my eyes ran along every curve, every dip, every swell of her slight, feminine body.

I ate it up. I would eat *her* up.

I bent down and pressed my face into her neck, needing to have her closer to me. Closer to the need that was swelling *inside* of me. She smelled good. Like salty sea and some kind of flower and *me*. She always had a slight smell of me. Especially lately, now that she was staying with me so often. Using my things. Becoming mine.

She was mine.

She had always been mine. And the way that her body reacted to me, her arms tightening around my neck as she held onto me, her breath coming out like panting pleas, told me so.

My mouth opened on her skin, tasting her. She was sweet and salty and—damn, *that sound*. She let out a strangled moan. More free and yet more startled than any I'd elicited from her before. Her hands were on my back as I moved my own behind her. Cupping her ass and squeezing just as hard as I wanted to. *Really* fucking hard.

It took a tight grip to make her moan that sound again. Just like I fucking knew it would. She was so stubborn. So tough. I knew she would need it rough to make her melt for me.

“Connor,” she cried. This time it seemed a little more pained. Not a hurting but *needing*.

Fuck. I needed her too.

I needed her closer. I needed her *higher*. I needed to reach down and use my hands to heft her up to my level. Let her legs wrap around my waist. Let her feel my—

“Fuck,” I hissed as her body rubbed against mine, causing my knees to go just a little weak.

“Con, what are you doing?” she asked breathlessly, pulling slightly away from me.

It seems I *had* done all those things. I had picked her up and pressed her against the wall and pressed my growing

attractions into the warm center of her. Losing my fucking mind.

She was so hot. So soft. *So fucking right.*

But the way she was looking at me was off. Her eyebrows raised, her expression alarmed, her breathing ragged and whimpering and labored as she tried to both catch her breath and speak.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. Was I scaring her? Was I rushing things? I was quite possibly fucking this all up. And yet, I could only get myself to pull away from her body just enough to lay my forehead onto hers.

“What...are...you doing?” she repeated, her voice not sounding like her own. Beneath me, she chased my touch. Her chin raising, her lips grazing just under mine as she spoke. I didn’t even think she knew she was doing it. And that was just the thing with Ceci. Actions that she wasn’t ready for the consequences of.

I chased her lips right back, brushing mine against hers softly as I spoke onto her mouth. “What does it feel like, honey?”

“I...” she trailed off as she panted, her hands running up the back of my neck, her head just falling back against the wall as she continued to catch her breath. Exposing the top of her dripping wet chest to me.

I groaned and my hips moved into her again, sending my head into the stars and my brain into black.

I couldn’t see, just feel. She was tight and warm and drugging. Squirmy as she bucked her own hips against me, causing a friction that felt too close and too far from the real thing. Her hands clamped down on my neck, pulling at me. *Needing me* as she pushed out another uncontrolled breath. Her eyes were that fire color again. Maybe not a color per se, but an expression. And she was looking at me with a burning that I knew I couldn’t quench with our clothes on.

“Please, Celestia. You’re fucking killing me,” I groaned into her neck, my lips running up along the curve of her throat

to the base of her jaw.

Her grip moved along my collar to the front of my shirt, bunching it between her fists as her greedy little hips rolled over me again, causing her to find exactly what she was meant to, hard and waiting for her. I groaned, meeting her with a thrust that I couldn't quite control.

She panted again. "Connor... You're being crazy."

*Me?*

"And what the hell did you think this would do to me, Ceci?" I

grunted, hardly able to think of words let alone comprehend the crazy ones she was saying.

"What?"

I gripped her ass hard again, this time pushing her down onto me as I rolled myself against her letting her feel exactly what she did to me. If I saw stars before, I saw the universe now. I'm pretty sure I was hard enough to burst just by a few more of these touches alone. I'd never had anything more perfect wrapped around me. And the reality of it made me crazed.

I did it again and again, racking up a chorus of tight strangled sounds from her that were addicting as I spoke through each thrust. "This goddamn ass in your tiny fucking underwear?"

"They're not—"

I bit her lip, shutting her up. It was soft between my teeth, and I had to pull the plump thing into my mouth to suck the pinch away as she gasped out yet another hiss of surprise. I pulled back, sliding my hands up the sides of her waist just under her rib cage. Cupping her with one hand and pinching a peak hard. She was soft, the weight of her perfect in my hand. I pinched again, rolling her between my fingers until she cried a needy little sound.

I *growled* as I leaned down to her, my mouth near her ear. "Your fucking nipples on display? Cee, really? What the hell

are you trying to do to me?”

She groaned an impossibly guttural noise that had me wanting to make her mine in truth right there against this bathroom wall. “Connor please.”

“Please what?” I murmured against her jaw.

Her breaths panted as I dragged my lips there. “Please—”

“Don’t ask me to stop, Ceci. Don’t you dare fucking do that. Not when you’ve been over here driving me wild *all day, every day,*” I said, nipping her all the while I did.

“That’s not what I was trying to do,” she whimpered, trembling.

“What then?” I asked, my voice sounding like a mixture of deranged lust and a gruff demand.

“I don’t know I—”

“Are you misunderstanding me again?” I asked against her skin. “Are you already forgetting I just told you how damn sexy you are? Are you fucking testing me, Celestia?”

“I—*fuck,*” she shuddered hard around me and her eyes closed for just a second as her mouth parted and her limbs went molten around me. Then her whole body paused. Everything going still, her breathing halting as she played opossum. She held that for maybe three seconds, and when she opened her eyes again she looked at me with a determined, *closed off* face. She spoke in a whisper, like she didn’t want to startle me. “Connor, I don’t know what’s happening. But listen to me, you *have to stop.*”

Stop.

The word echoed through my mind like a lost call. *Stop.* She wanted me to stop.

Through all her begging and whimpering and surprise, she hadn’t asked me to stop, until now.

I removed my hands from her, using her waist to keep my grip until I set her safely on the ground. We were both panting. Both staring. Both wide eyed and confused and holding onto

each other even as we pushed each other away. I could see walls coming down around her. *Feel* them coming down around me.

They made me want to punch something. But they also made my throat close up. Feeling tight and restricted and too, too dry. Had I fucked this all up? Had I fucked up everything because of a fucking wet t-shirt?

Reaching out, I dared to place my hands on her skin again. Cupping her face and rubbing my thumbs along the flushed red splotches of her cheeks. These cheeks gave her away most days. The color that rose in them when she was hot, or angry, or embarrassed letting me know how she was feeling. But usually I had the context of knowing her in every situation to determine her emotions. I didn't know Ceci like this. Like it or not, I didn't know her this intimately. So I had no idea what *this* red face meant.

With rocks in my throat, I made myself ask, "Did I scare you?"

"No."

"Did I hurt you?"

"No."

"Do you hate me?"

Her eyebrows pinched. "*No.*"

"Are you alright?" I finally asked, and maybe that was the question I wanted answered the most. Or the one behind it.

*Are we alright?*

She hesitated, only slightly, but I noticed it. And instead of answering with her words, she nodded weakly.

It cleaved my chest.

"Fuck," I bit off and leaned forward to press my forehead against the cool wall for support. For several long breaths, we stayed there. My head on the wall, her face pressed against my chest, our breath matching. Then I pushed back and looked at her, shaking my head. "I'm sorry—"

“Don’t be. It’s okay, I—”

“I need to go,” I announced before she could get the rest out.

She jolted, standing up straighter and looking alarmed. Her hands came about my waist, grabbing onto my shirt and holding tight. “What? No! Con, *no*.”

“Just—” I caught her hands, because their soft touch was burning me. “Just for a little bit. I need some air.”

Leaning forward, I pressed a soft lingering kiss to the top of her head and barely refrained myself from cursing again as I pulled up and pushed away.

“I’m sorry,” I repeated as I exited the bathroom without even looking at her.

The beach. That’s where I went. That’s where I always went, hoping it would somehow fix me. It never did. The only person who ever actually fixed me, who even knew when I was broken was also the one unknowingly doing the breaking. Even more ironically, I had maybe just broken things more than she ever could.

Marching far enough on the sand that I came right up to the split of the shore, water kissed my feet in its up and back motions. The waves were loud as they crashed over themselves, but I somehow wish I was under them. *In them*, so the sound could be louder.

Fuck. Why had I done that? I raked a hand over my head and groaned. Her body just felt so good, *too good* pressed close to mine.

But still... *Fuck!*

It wasn’t worth it! It wasn’t worth having to hear those words.

*Stop*. That word, it rang through my head and clanged against my mind like a caged animal, even now. Even after she insisted she was okay. She still wanted me to stop. And the slice of that word, what it meant, had not been worth the

fleeting feeling of her body finally being on mine. Not even if it did feel fucking amazing.

Who cared how good it felt then if I could feel like this after? What the hell was it even all for if I ended up losing her in the end?

Stop.

I needed to fucking stop. Needed to get a grip on this strange feeling that was crawling up my spine and taking hold of my control center. It started a long time ago, but truthfully, it had only grown since then. And now, ever since the possibility of her being taken from me, I couldn't control it from slipping out. Whatever it was, it was steering me over and over in the wrong direction. In the direction of pushy, and needy, and too damn much for her. Too much right now.

I had to back off. Had to. Even though the sadist in me kept wondering why, after all this time, wasn't it enough for her? Why wasn't I?

I shook my head. *Stop, Connor.* It's time to stop. Before you fucking lose her.

I don't know how long I was out there or how many times it took to convince myself not to drown myself under the thrashing waves, but eventually I made my way back inside.

I found Ceci dry and comfortable, tucked up against the headboard of my bed. She held the little ball of fur in the cradle of her arms, and she wore my clothes from top to bottom.

*Mine.*

My mind emphasized the point as my eyes skittered around her form, looking for any sign she was unwell. There were none. She looked content tucked up close with her new baby. And she looked serious as she raised her head and assessed me. Her eyes moved about me the same way mine moved about her. Hers was a special sort of look.

For most, Ceci was a hard person. She was harsh and stubborn until you until you found the secret parts she protected. *Hid.* And then she was like Jell-O. Never quite soft,



but bouncy, flexible, fun, and never quite as serious as she was with those she doesn't know or trust.

She had only ever been that hard, serious Ceci with me once when we first met. Sometime between mistaking her for my sister in bed and that very same day when we went out to get pancakes, she had trusted me. And for every second since, she'd been "Jell-O Ceci". She rolled with the punches, absorbing the hard stuff and bouncing the soft stuff right off her back.

Her looking at me so seriously now, like she wasn't sure who I was standing in front of her—like she didn't know me, and she had to size me up like we were meeting for the first time. Her looking at me like I was *new* to her, it broke me.

My voice cracked right along with me as I stared at her from the doorjamb, my hands shoved deep in my pockets. "Mad at me?"

Her face seemed to open up. Her yellowy eyes softening, recognizing me. Her entire body relaxing. Still, the look she gave me was foreign. Cautious in a way Ceci had never been with me before. But at least her voice was that same confident promise as she looked at me in the eye and said, "Never."

And I believed her. I believed she wasn't mad at me, but I didn't believe that we weren't changed. All because of a stupid mistake. If we had gone any further, I might not still have her...*this*.

I couldn't make that mistake again.



# Chapter Twenty-six

## CECI

One, two. One, two.

Jab, cross. Jab, cross.

“Good. Good. Good, Ceci! But remember your footwork.” Jenny stood in front of me with boxing pads as we went through punching sequences during our lesson. Before, I could easily decipher if this was our Monday morning lesson or Tuesday afternoon, or even one of our Wednesday double sessions. But by now I think we had both lost track of when and why I was coming into the gym. It was essentially just all the time.

I loved Jenny. She was a hardass in the best possible way. She pushed her students for the sake of showing them that they had another gear in them. She emphasized the right things, like technique and footwork. but she didn't shy away from the gritty mental work like motivation and confidence, either. And she was a bit of a shit talker.

“Alright Ceci, you're done for the day,” she said, straightening up and letting her pads drop to her sides.

“What?” I straightened too and whipping my head around to the digital clock on the wall, I frowned. “It's only a quarter 'til.”

“Yeah, and you have PT in a half hour. You were late last time, remember?” she said, already stripping the pads off of her hands and dropping them to the ground. “Not to mention your head's somewhere else today. You almost punched through the pads and broke your sloppy wrists in the process. What's up?”

What's up? Oh, what a fucking question.

Following her lead, I began ripping the Velcro off the base of my boxing gloves. Baby blue, of course, and a gift from Con.

Connor.

It had been weeks since the incident in the bathroom. Weeks in which I had continued taking boxing lessons, along with other sprinkles of martial arts classes. Weeks in which I had started working out with Connor. Starting out with small weights that I was gradually building on every session. Weeks in which I still basically lived with my best friend. But weeks in which things had felt unmistakably different.

I'm almost entirely sure my brain had short circuited and rewired the moment Con had pressed me up against his bathroom wall and grinded against me like we were teenagers dry humping in secret. In the moment I definitely lost all brain function, the only thing I remembered from it was how fucking good it felt to have him touching me. His hands were big and rough and punishing on my skin... On my ass. His mouth was hot and claiming as he ran it over my body. And his fucking body...that motherfucking long, hard rod that he pumped against me not one, not two, but *several* fucking times between pants, and groans, and *begging*... Yeah. I was forever changed.

But it wasn't me I was worried about. I had gotten it under control. I had seen the light at the end of that pleasure tunnel and realized the reality it would send us into if we kept down it.

Connor had been horny, maybe. But thinking straight? Definitely not. I had to stop it to save our friendship. Whatever line we had blurred I redrew it, even if it had taken a lot out of me to do so. And I thought after his walk outside and his twelve fucking apologies after that we had gotten past it. That we would overlook it. We certainly hadn't brought it up again.

But still Connor was different.

First, he was quiet. Not the usual Connor in public quiet where he let me take the lead and communicated with me through looks and smiles and opened back up when we were

alone again. No, he was being quiet *with me*. Withdrawing into himself and holding back words he was just on the brink of saying. He was looking at me with this new regretful expression that I couldn't read. And on top of pulling away from me, he was being overly formal and treating me as if I was some acquaintance he had to be overly polite with to avoid offending.

And worst of all, he refused to touch me.

In my entire fucking time of knowing this man, he had never had an aversion to touching me. The first time he held my hand was only a couple months into us knowing each other. I had talked him into going to a music festival and he was convinced I would get lost or worse run off into the crowd and he'd never be able to find me. He held my hand whenever we were in dense groups no matter how sweaty or gross it got being palm to palm like that in the heat. The first time he picked me up was at that same festival. He let me get on his shoulders even though he told me people would yell at us for blocking their view, and they did. The first time his lips touched me was in the hospital waiting for news on his sister's condition. He hadn't kissed me, just pressed his face into my neck as he shook, me holding onto him. I had kissed him, though. On the top of his shaven head, on his cheeks, on his hands and fingertips because they were shaking. And there were probably a million other times after that, none of which he ever pulled away. *Ever!*

Now, I would be lucky if he didn't jolt his hand back if it accidentally touched mine. Gone were the sweet touches he had been showering me with just weeks ago. Gone were his long hugs or the strong arms I had grown accustomed to wrapping around me in my sleep. Just gone.

And it wasn't like I was begging for it or anything. I don't think I was ever overly touchy either... Was I? I just, I guess I just never realized how much physical reassurance I was used to in our relationship until it was taken away. And now all I wanted to do was scream at him. Yell at him and let him know that all I meant by telling him to stop was for him to stop trying to fuck me, not stop touching me... *loving me*.

I frowned.

No, that wasn't the right word. But for the life of me I couldn't find another one to fit. It felt like Connor had stopped loving me. As a friend, of course, and wasn't that what I had been trying to avoid by telling him to stop anyway?

"You know," Jenny said, jolting me out of my self-pitying trance. She had materialized in front of me and by the looks of the way her hands were moving, she was taking my hand wraps off for me. Probably because I had zoned out and completely stopped doing it myself. "If you would pull the stick out of your ass, replace it in your wrist, and hold it firm when you punch; you probably wouldn't even need to go to PT anymore."

This time it was her I frowned at. "What the hell are you talking about, Jen?"

She looked at me with an amused smirk, her eyes dancing. "You just spaced out for five whole minutes. And if you're not spacing out, you're beating my equipment into the ground. Something has you wound up tight. *What is it?*"

"Uh," my eyes bounced around the room, looking for a distraction. "Nothing Jen. Just a lot on my mind."

"Is it Connor?" she asked. Unwisely, I reared back at the question. Giving her a frown and turning my nose up slightly. In doing this, I totally gave myself away. She nodded as if understanding. "Ah, of course it's Connor."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I asked, despite my plans to deny, deny, deny.

She shrugged and began working her fingers to roll up my wraps since I hadn't moved to do so. "You two have looked a little less...in your own world lately. Something happen?"

"In our own world?" I asked.

She paused. "Oh, come on. Don't tell me you think you're fooling anyone with the friends act."

"It isn't an act, Jen. He's my friend."

"Then tell me what happened."

“Tell me what *‘in our own world’* means first,” I protested.

Jenny sighed and put her hands on her hips. “When the two of you are together, it’s like there’s this bubble around you. I’m not sappy enough to say some shit like, you’re the only two people in the room, but it does sort of feel like you’re the only two that matter to each other. When it’s the two of you, the rest of us might as well be background noise.”

Crossing my arms over myself, I frowned. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Of course it doesn’t make any sense *to you*. You’re in the bubble,” she said, not elaborating on it any further. Instead, she just inclined her chin in my direction. “Your turn, spill.”

I bit my lip as I dropped to the ground starting a quick stretching sequence. I guess she really did want me to talk. Sighing, I bent over and curled my body along an extended leg, stretching my left hamstring and avoiding Jen’s eyes.

“We may have had a slip up a couple of weeks ago,” I said, keeping my eyes on my leg instead of hers.

“A slip up?” she asked. “You’re going to have to explain.”

Another sigh, which was fine because it brought me deeper into my stretch. “You know what I’m talking about Jen. Connor and I *slipped up*.”

There was a beat of pure silence where I switched legs and began stretching the other side and then there was an audible gasp from my boxing instructor. “Oh my god you slipped up! Did you guys kiss?”

“No.”

“Have sex?”

“No!”

“So what? Did he just like slip inside—”

“Jesus, Jenny!” I scrambled to my feet and looked around us even though we were the only two in the boxing room at the time. “No! We just—Things got a little heated, you know?”

And if it had gone on, we may have done all of those things by the end of it.”

She rolled her lips into her mouth as she looked me over head to toe. Then she laid into it. “Let me guess. You’re the one who stopped it.”

I narrowed my eyes, feeling instantly attacked. “I had to!”

“Why?”

“Because we’re friends. Do you think we could stay friends if we did something like that?”

“So what?”

“*So what?*” I reared back to look at her fully. “So what is, I would lose my best friend over something stupid like—”

“Love?” she asked.

I glared. “Sex.”

“Okay one, sex is not stupid. Sex is an expression of love and judging by the way you keep pulverizing my equipment, you might be a little overdue for it right about now,” she said. I gaped, and I’m pretty sure my cheeks flushed. “And two, you might be pulling one over on whoever the fuck else you’ve been trying to convince that the two of you are just friends, but you’re not pulling one over on me. And I barely think you’re convincing yourself anymore.”

“I—”

“Nope. I don’t want to hear it. Save it for someone who’s stupid enough to believe you. What I want to know is what’s got you all pissed off?” she said. “What? Has he finally had enough of waiting around for you?”

“Jenny—”

“Be straight up, Ceci. You expect everyone else to be. Don’t be a hypocrite.”

See what I mean by hardass?

I grumbled. Then I paced. Then I came to stand in front of her again with a huffing sigh. “He’s not acting like himself.



Pulling away. Not...doing things like he normally does.”

To her credit, Jenny might have been a hardass but she wasn't the gloating kind. Not unless it was about boxing. Instead, she nodded and flicked a look over me. “And you're hurt.”

I shook my head slowly. “Not hurt. Confused.”

“Mhmm,” she said slowly. But didn't linger on it. “Well honey, however confused you may be, he's feeling it too. You rejected him, mistake or not. You rejected that part of him and reset a boundary that was blurring between you guys for a while—Take it from someone who's witnessed it and trust me, *it was blurring*. And I've only known you since you started coming here, who knows exactly how long it has been heading in this direction.”

Of everything she said, all of which I heard and acknowledged and *kind of* saw the reason in. Of all those words, the thing that stuck out to me the most was that she'd called me honey. Connor had stopped doing that, too.

Smoothing a frustrated hand over my head I sighed and looked at Jen. She had been candid with me. Even if she wasn't entirely right, she had been straight enough to give me her thoughts. I could give her mine. “It never used to be like that, you know. The bubble thing.”

She raised an eyebrow in question.

“We've always been close, but it started getting confusing a couple months ago when... After—” I stopped and looked at her, swallowing one rough time.

Her eyes were knowing, softening just a little as she met mine. “The reason you started coming here.”

I blinked a few times, trying not to go down the rabbit hole that was remembering. I was stronger now, and I wasn't afraid anymore. I had Connor and this woman right here to thank for that.

“Yeah. After that happened, it just seemed like a switch was flipped. And now after we slipped up that switch is broken. Things aren't like they were between us after the attack, and

they aren't like they were before either. It's just different now, and it feels wrong."

Jenny looked at me for a long, long time. And then she sighed. "Come here, babe."

When I did, I think the last thing I expected was for her to open up her arms and wrap them around me. I probably expected myself to melt into her even less. But I did. There was something so shattering about a hug you didn't know you needed and even more so from a person you didn't know you needed it from.

Jenny was a hardass. She was also a hardass that was becoming my friend.

"Can you handle a little more truth?"

I chuckled and shrugged, "At this point, why not?"

She laughed too. "Alright here goes. And it's the kicker babe. Can you honestly say that what you had before was any different from what you had after? Maybe after this 'switch' flipped he was more physical or more outward with what you and him both already knew was there. And maybe now he's less because of what happened. But if you can tell me that the man he's been to you as your best friend is vastly different at his core than the man he's been to you as your whatever he is now, then I'll believe you. And if you're telling me with one hundred percent honesty that you're freaking out because you've never been interested in it, then I'll lay off you. But it seems to me whatever's happening has been existing for a while. Maybe forever. And you're freaking out for whatever reason you have to freak out—I won't ask. But now that you're starting to wise up and see things for how they really are, you're running Ceci. And I know I don't know you guys all that well but from what I can tell, Connor doesn't seem like someone you need to run from. And you don't seem like a runner. So, what are you so afraid of, hun?"

I could hear my breath. It was steady but loud as it was the only thing that seemed to be making noise in the room other than my thoughts. *Can you say that what you had before was any different...*

Could I?

My mind circled as it thought about Connor in our first days, looking at me with that serious expression but ultimately going along with all my crazy ideas. Connor opening doors for me, and taking care of me when I was sick, and making me pancakes whenever I was feeling down. Connor who could read my mood like a book and never shied away from telling me the hard things even when I acted like a brat who didn't want to hear them. Connor who made sure I knew that I was important to him. He said things like "if you need me, call me" and he'd let me set ridiculous rules for our friendship, like keeping it from our families and experimenting with boundaries like children. Connor who I could laugh and laugh with over something as silly as the sky being too blue or as personal as us finding our cat and giving her a barely successful bath. Connor who for the past almost two years, had been my person. My happy person, my sad person, the person I turned to for anything.

*Connor...*

"Ceci?" Jenny asked me again.

"I can't think about that right now, Jen." I tightened my grip on her just slightly. I was hiding and I knew it, but I just couldn't think about the possibility of having him in a different way, not when I'd already successfully gotten him in *this* way. Not when having him any other way might mean the possibility of not having him at all. Pulling up, I released her and looked into her face before shaking my own. "I really can't."

She frowned at me. "It's not—"

An electronic buzzing sound cut her off, pulling her attention to her digital watch. With every scan of her eyes, her face paled more. Suddenly, she was rushing over to her stuff in the corner to pull out her phone. She read something on the screen there too, before returning to me and looking up with a different sort of expression in her eyes. A worried one. "I have to go."

“Is everything okay?” I asked, stepping forward. I did not like the look on her face.

Jen shook her head. “Uh—yes. But it is an emergency. I really have to go now.”

And before I could say anything she was speed walking toward the glass door. She only made it so far before she was whipping back around to face me. “I don’t have anyone to cover my classes.”

“Oh shit,” I said. “Um, you go and I’ll let Chelsea know that you need to cancel and—”

She was shaking her head. “No, no. I can’t cancel same day classes. I either need a sub or I’m screwed.”

“Can Tim do it? He never has people,” I offered.

“Maybe. I’ll have to text him. But he can’t do my self-defense runs.” She bit her lip, but her eyes had relocked on mine in a way that made me take an apprehensive step away. “Ceci—”

“No way.”

“I really need—”

“I have never done this before, Jenny. I’m telling you right now, it’s not something you should ask.”

“Ceci. I really, *really* need to go. Will you please take my self-defense at noon? You know all the steps. You know exactly what to say. They’re only on the first lesson, you can do it.” She spoke every word like it was a carefully placed piece of a puzzle. Like if she said it just right, I would feel differently about my answer. I was just about to tell her hell no, when her phone chimed again and whatever crossed the screen made her look sick.

“Fuck,” is all I could say as I sighed into my hand.

She rushed me and gave me the second hug of the hour. And as she grabbed a hold of my shoulders I knew she truly meant it when she said, “You’re a life saver. *Thank you.*”



# Chapter Twenty-seven

CECI

“Con?”

Grunt.

“Are you busy?”

Silence for four consecutive seconds. “Kind of. Is something wrong?”

Don’t tell me why my throat and nose and every other possible orifice decided to choose this very moment to burn up. But they did. He was more than just distant; he was mad at me. And I didn’t know what to do with that. I released out a few breaths, letting the burning subside. Still, my voice was raw as I said, “Okay.”

“Cee?”

“Hmm?”

“What’s up?”

“I—” Damn, my chest hurt. I just wished he wouldn’t use that tone with me. Like he didn’t know me or he couldn’t be bothered. Like he was done with me, even before we had started. He’d been pushing me away so much lately. Giving me just the bare minimum of himself. He did the same to so many other people, but I had never felt it aimed at me. It made me apprehensive to keep sharing my secret parts so freely. Like if he was withholding, then I should be too. But Connor was my best friend, and so he was the first one I went to when I needed help. Sometimes the only one. So I pushed on. “Jenny asked if I could teach one of her classes last minute and I wanted to go over some things with you. Like a test run. If you’re free.”

I don't know where the hope in my chest had bloomed from, but it died promptly on the long pause from the other side of the line. I had to swallow down a hitch in my breath as I listened in dawning horror. At first I thought maybe he had just been bullshitting before and he actually would help me. That he may be mad at me, but he would never leave me high and dry.

Some things were harder to be wrong about than others.

"Damn, Cee," he started, sounding less closed off but still regretful. "I really am busy. I don't think I can—"

"That's fine!" I said before I had to listen to him tell me that he couldn't. For some reason hearing him finish that felt as if it might break me. And I was already feeling fragile with nervousness for what today held. I called him for support, not for a fracture. "I'll find somebody else to do it. I gotta go okay?"

"Celestia—" he was groaning, but I cut him off again.

"It's fine. Bye, Con."

I hung up the phone. I know it probably seemed like I was being rude, but really I couldn't handle an emotional break. Not now. Not ever really, it had been so long since I'd had one of those and I wasn't even sure what I would do if it happened. But definitely not now. Not two hours before I was supposed to teach my very first self-defense class with no training or experience whatsoever. Jenny had sent me a message with the location of the lesson books and other materials in her little office off the front of the gym. It was all helpful enough but even after reading and re-reading through them I still felt like I needed a test run. I just wouldn't be getting it from the person I expected to always be there with me.

"Hey, stranger!" the person on the other line of my next phone call answered. "Long time no talk. Where you been?"

"Can you keep a secret from your husband?" I asked.

"Hmm," she said as if she was really contemplating it. "The last time I did, it got me into big trouble. But for you, I could try."

“Good enough. Meet me at the address I just sent you in thirty minutes please, please, please. I need your help.”

Fergy walked into the front doors of Counter Strike Fighting Gym thirty minutes later. I was actually quite impressed that she made such good time, seeing as she drove like an absolute grandma one hundred percent of the time. I had briefed her slightly over the phone, so she at least came wearing workout clothes.

She was dressed in orange from top to bottom. Her tangerine tank top and legging set probably looking better than it did on the model on her tall, lithe form. Her curly hair was tied in a tight ball on the top of her head, and she carried a gym bag expensive enough to pay someone’s lesson book out for a week here. *Damn, I didn’t tell her to dress down.* She probably looked like a walking money sign to some of these guys. I stuck close to her side, staring down anyone who looked twice at her as we approached the counter for her to check-in.

“Is this the guest you were telling me about, Ceci?” Ms. Chelsea asked as me and Ferg walked up to the black countertops and opened the sign-in book to an empty page.

“Yes. This is Clementine, my sister-in-law. She’s just here to help me out a little before I take Jenny’s twelve ‘o’ clock,” I said to Chelsea. To the girl walking next to me, I said, “Ferg, just sign your name and the date and you should be good.”

“Okay,” she agreed as she moved over to the desk and began to sign the book. As she finished, she looked up to Ms. Chelsea and smiled in that sweet quiet way she tended to keep with people she wasn’t comfortable with, then she looked back at me.

Only for a second though, before she was whipping her head back to Ms. Chelsea as the woman exclaimed, “Oh, you two look just alike. You must be related to that Co—”

Chelsea stopped. Mid-sentence, *mid-word* she stopped. It probably had something to do with me shaking my head and waving my hands wildly from behind Ferg’s back. Slashing my hands across my neck horizontally in the universal sign for



‘ABORT MISSION’. Thank God she’d noticed too, or it would have been all over.

But what exactly would be over if people were to find out that me and Connor were friends? Would we suddenly not be anymore? I doubted it. What was I really holding onto the secret for?

“Related to...what?” Ferg asked as she edged closer to the woman behind the desk.

“That cousin of mine,” Chelsea said, slapping a palm to her forehead. “I meant you look like a cousin of mine, but now that I think of it. You don’t! Would you imagine that.”

“I sure can’t,” I said, almost sarcastically. Fergy just gave a short “huh” before nodding politely and starting on her way. Before I passed the desk I leaned an elbow in and eyed Ms. Chelsea. “Your cousin? Really, Ms. Chelsea? Are you trying to rat me out here?”

A wry smile just spread across her face as she leaned in close. “Ooo! A secret affair, how exciting! You have to tell me how this turns out. Although I will tell you, you shouldn’t be keeping secrets from family. They all come to light one way or another.”

“You shut that mouth of yours or I won’t be bringing you any more homemade baked goods,” I pointed a wagging finger at her and she looked scandalized. Straightening up and placing a hand over her heart. I smiled and then reached over to squeeze her arm. “Thanks for the room Cheals, I’ll pay you back.”

“No need, hun. Although, I won’t say no to homemade sugar.” She laughed and patted me right back. “Now go, you’ve got room three open until eleven. Then move to four until twelve. Your very first lesson will be in six, just like your first day here. Good luck.”

“Thank you,” I said again, more seriously this time as I followed Fergy and swiped her by the gym bag dragging her along with me.

Ferg followed my lead into the open studio room with wide eyes. She looked first at the gym and everything that came with it. Various fighting rooms, equipment, and large guys using said equipment. However, after only a couple of moments I could feel her assessing gaze move to me. No doubt taking in the novel sight of me in a gym.

She even said as much when we settled into the room and set her stuff down near my own. Beside her gym bag were my boxing gloves and wraps. She took those in too, not missing much with her eyes that were both same and different from her brother's. Those eyes fixed on me after a while. I don't know why but they were making my hair stand up on ends.

"You look different Ceci," she said.

"You should take a picture, Ferg. It lasts way longer," I said. I don't know why I said it, but I recognized the defensiveness in my tone. I didn't want her to judge me. Not yet. But just like she had a tendency to do, Ferg derailed my attitude by the sheer sincerity of hers. Instead of getting mad, she whipped out her phone and held it up in front of her face. Taking several snaps of me as I figured out where I wanted to start.

Flicking eyes up at her I said, "Did you actually take a picture of me?"

"Yes, brat, I did," she said in a sing-songy voice. "No one will ever believe me when I tell them you're *ripped!* And you don't come around enough anymore for them to see it for themselves."

I couldn't help but frown. "You didn't agree to come just for a reason to lecture me did you?"

Her soft face softened even more, and she put her phone away. "I agreed to come because you said you needed help. And you know I'll always do that."

"I know."

She eyed me like she wanted to say more. Possibly something about my family and how they missed me and all the things I had been hearing a lot of lately. But the truth was,

I still needed room from them. From my parents and especially Apá. I made a conscious point of coming to family dinners and gatherings. I didn't want to alarm anyone, and I didn't want to be so selfish as to think mine were the only problems in the world. But I needed space and time to get my shit together on my own.

I had tried to do it under their umbrella and it ended up hurting me. I could admit it, I was hurt by their judgment and their teasing and probably most of all by how easy they made it all seem. But now that I had found something of my own, I was feeling more and more wanted. *Needed*, in a place where I could one day belong.

*Places*, actually.

To give Ferg her credit, she was pretty astute. When it came to my family, she didn't bring it up. Instead going with, "Who let you in here anyway? Don't they know you're already a threat to society. We don't need you learning any new tricks."

I smiled. But that smile quickly faded when the first answer I wanted to give was "your brother" and I realized I couldn't. Instead, I just shrugged. "I started taking different lessons a couple of months ago. One of the instructors here had an emergency and asked me to teach her classes for today."

"You're going to teach?" she asked, eyeing me.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "And what's wrong with that?"

She snorted. "*Oh God*. Come on then. Let me be your test dummy, quick, before you really hurt somebody."

I snorted too but felt a twinge of something warm in my chest. Something I had been missing lately now that I was so consumed with my own problems and with my relationship with Connor.

Truthfully, I did miss my family. I missed this. And even if I wouldn't admit it, it was sort of freeing to know that they had been there waiting all along.

\* \* \*

“Get up, Ferg!” I said, laughing and pulling on her hands. “Come on, let’s try it one more time.”

Clementine Fernandez was beautiful and toned from her various Pilates and yoga classes. She was poised and graceful...when she was sitting down. Or maybe even walking. But anything else... *Dumpster fire*.

We had run through all the exercises for the self-defense classes. Starting from the very beginning and even rerunning through parts I tripped up on.

Fergy was patient and listened intently as if this was a real lesson. Asking questions, but still telling me when I could tweak a certain point or another. And for the most part the lessons were working. She caught onto instructions quickly and followed them well.

So how had she ended up on the ground?

By literally tripping over her own feet. That’s it. After doing so well with various self-defense moves, the girl had tripped over herself and rolled ungraciously to the floor. And now, as I was trying to pull her up, one of her long lanky limbs caught my ankle and tripped me too.

“Jesus Christ, control those things!” I said as I fell half on top of her and half on the matted floor. But I was laughing again, and she was shaking with her own giggles underneath me. “You are a goddamn liability, I swear.”

“And you’re heavy! Get off,” she said but made no moves to push me off.

Untangling, myself I rolled away from her. I don’t know what made me look towards the glass door but when I did I was met with the second pair of Ferguson hazel eyes that day. Outside the door stood Connor, looking in on us with a weird mix of admiration and concern on his face. Our eyes touched and all the feelings I had on the phone came rushing back.

I frowned and started to blink away from him like I wanted to, but for some reason I couldn't. For some reason I couldn't pull myself away.

Why was he here? If he could've come in the first place, why did he say no? Did he lie? Was he avoiding me? Was he tired of me like Jenny said? Or was he just punishing me?

And why did it hurt so fucking bad?

My confusion must have shown on my face, because his meter came out. His eyes tracking over my face more than a few times as he tried to gauge my expression. I don't think he was able to decide on anything before he was ducking away from the door. Released from his hold, I blinked away just in time to see Fergy peeling herself off the ground, still chuckling softly. I hadn't even noticed her getting up.

*It's like you're in a bubble...*

Lifting my leg up, I used my foot to plant on Ferg's ass and pushed. She fell over again before whipping her head around to me and exclaiming, "*Celestia!*"

I smiled. "Sit down, princess. We're done for a while."

"Oh," she huffed, moving gingerly to work herself around to a sitting position. "Well you didn't have to kick me!"

"That was payback for knocking me over," I said, making her glare. In sync, we both laid back onto our backs and sighed. After a minute, I let my head fall over to look at her curly one. "Hey, Ferg?"

"Hmm?" she asked. She had her eyes closed and was breathing deeply as she rested.

"What do you remember about your wedding day?"

Her face scrunched a little, but she didn't open her eyes or even move at all. "Um. Hmm—To be honest, I don't remember many details, Ceci. It was a hard time for me back then."

"Yeah, I know," I said, feeling a little bad for bringing it up. But if it was making her uncomfortable, she would have told me. "But if you had to say *something*, what would you?"

“I guess I remember being scared. I was nervous Ox would be like before, you know? I remember Ox at the altar, he was telling me to breathe and calming me down. And I remember brunch. He and I had a little argument,” she said.

“You don’t remember me spilling water in Clay’s lap?” I asked. “Or him calling me every short joke in the book?”

Her eyes bugged out of her head. “No! When did that happen?”

“At brunch. We were sitting right across from you.”

She hummed. “No, I don’t remember that at all. I guess I was a little preoccupied.”

I hummed too. “What about the hospital? When you first woke up?”

“I remember a lot of things from then. There was a lot going on.”

“What do you remember most?”

“Ox,” she said, this time more definitively. “He was a wreck. I remember being so tired and I remember him.”

“Do you remember us standing outside the window?”

She screwed her face up in a way I could tell meant, ‘*not really*’. And I couldn’t help but think back to what I remembered about her waking up in the hospital after such a huge scare.

Connor had texted as soon as he got word that his sister had woken up. I told my family directly after that. Ox was already at the hospital, having snuck out in the middle of the night somehow, and the rest of us were congregating at his house. Taking care of minor housekeeping items that had gone forgotten in the craziness of the ordeal.

We got to the hospital as soon as we could, and when we did Ox was in the room with a frail but standing Clementine in his arms and the three Ferguson boys were outside the window looking in. I immediately went to Connor’s side and without even looking over at me he reached down and grabbed onto my hand.

He held my hand so tight that day. He didn't let go until I gently informed him that it was time to leave.

That day, I remembered Ferg waking up and being so happy that she was okay. And I remembered him. That's it.

I guess that's what Jen meant by a bubble. But it couldn't be exclusive for love could it? Or at least not romantic love. Ox and Ferg had been homed in on each other since the moment they realized they were getting married. I think they fell for each other not long after. Me and Con were different. Our bubble was different. It had to be.

"Are you asking me all these things because you're trying to tell me I'm self-centered or something?" she asked, letting her head flop to the side as she looked at me.

"No, Ferg. Just curious," I said, trailing off as my brain wandered into a zone of unrest. Not quite thinking of anything, just buzzing with a little bit of everything.

We lingered in the comfortable silence for a moment before she turned over slightly on her side.

"So, this probably won't come as much of a surprise," she started, voice soft as she looked at me. "But you're pretty good at this, Ceci. Kind of a natural."

"Natural what?"

"Leader!" she said way too excitedly. "This is going to be a cake walk for you!"

I hummed. Even though I was inexperienced and didn't know a lot of what I was doing *yet*, I kind of agreed. Yet, for some reason that made me sad.

Ferg looked at me for a quiet second. "Why doesn't that make you happy? Doesn't that mean you can stop this war you have going on with your family and come home?"

I didn't bother telling her that there wasn't a "war" or that I wasn't avoiding them. I knew she would call me on my bullshit. I just heaved out another long breath.

"Don't you think it's all a little...simple for my family?" I asked.

“What?”

I looked at her. “Do you really think that I can go back to my dad or even Ox and tell them this is what I’ve been doing with my time?”

She blinked at me. “Yes.”

I shook my head and looked away. She was on top of me in a second, grabbing onto my shoulder and looming over me with a serious look on her face.

“*Hell yes, Ceci!*” she emphasized. “I really do think if they saw what you were doing here they would be proud of you. And I know this could just be a hobby or whatever, but I’m just saying if it’s not, I don’t think your family cares either way. They just want to see you happy and fulfilled.”

I kept my gaze pointed away from her. “Thanks anyway, Ferg, but I’m pretty sure I know more on this one than you do.”

“And I’m pretty sure you’re full of shit,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest. There she went, changing colors again. I swear she was like sour candy sometimes, but inside out. Sweet at first and sour inside. Well-meaning or not, her accusation irritated me.

Sitting up, I glared directly into her eyes. “Ox runs a billion-dollar company. One that’s been in our family for generations. Melissa is the youngest CFO to take charge of Fernandez Inc. in its history. Mateo started investing when he was *sixteen*. Against the wishes of Apá, and he’s proving us all wrong with multiple successful ventures. And Alta can make anything marketable. *Anything*. Everything they do is amazing, and you expect me to believe that they are going to be impressed that I can punch a bag?”

“Ceci, it’s *your life*. It’s not comparable to anyone else’s. It’s not a race nor is it a competition. Your family only wants to see you happy. No matter if it’s backpacking through Europe or punching a sweaty boxing bag. I guarantee that if they see you happy, then *they’ll* be happy,” she said. Her voice going low and serious, her eyes holding mine with every word.



I swallowed, my throat suddenly feeling dry. This conversation was pointless anyway. I didn't even know why we were having it, I hadn't even taught *one class* yet. And happy? Was I really happy? Did this pit in my stomach and snaking around my heart since that night in the bathroom really count as happy?

I found my eyes slipping back over to the glass door. There was no eavesdropping form there waiting for me anymore. I guess he had left. But from my vantage of the walkway, I could see that people were starting to arrive for class. Getting up to my feet, I reached a hand out to my sister-in-law and asked for the support that I had needed from her brother earlier.

“Playtime’s over, are you staying for the real thing?” I asked, and why for some reason, was I hanging on for the answer?

I have no idea if she knew it at the time, but I needed her then. She was now the only one other than Con to know about this new part of me and she hadn't shunned it. Now that Con seemed to be tired of dealing with me all of a sudden, I didn't know who else to go to with this novel sense of insecurity and nerves about this first class.

If she noticed, she didn't tease me about it. All she did was get to her feet and say, “Wouldn't miss it.”

\* \* \*

The sound of the soft closing door on the other side of the room pulled my attention from my reluctant stretching. I felt like keeling over. I taught three self-defense sequences and either sat in on or assisted with three others. Fergy had only been able to stay for the first one, but she didn't leave before gathering my hands up into hers and pulling my eyes into her sincere gaze.

“I would never have guessed,” she said.

“Guessed what?”

“That you’re a teacher! I’m so proud.” She grinned.

“All I did was follow a few steps,” I argued.

She scoffed. “You did way more than that. You’re a mentor, Ceci.”

I rolled my eyes away from her, my head shaking on its own, but somewhere in the back of my mind that word replayed. Me, a mentor? Helping people, motivating them, advising? Was that even possible? I wasn’t sure, but somewhere—probably in my wildest dreams—it didn’t sound *not* possible...

Shaking myself from my crazy delusions, I pushed Ferg’s shoulder, smiling. “Thanks for coming.”

“Thanks for trusting me,” she said. “We can talk about all that other stuff again later, for now just, great job.”

And with a quick hug and a goodbye she was off. So, if it wasn’t Fergy coming in the door, I wasn’t sure who it could be at this time. The gym was closing in an hour, but all the classes had finished up with that last one. But whoever the hell it was, better not be coming to mess up the room that I had *just* finished wiping down and sanitizing.

Whipping around, I instantly wished I had taken Tim up on his offer to clean up. Because standing right there by the door was the very man making what should be a hugely accomplished feeling after teaching my first class and loving it, instead feeling like I swallowed a frog.

Seeing him did nothing to ease the feeling. In fact, it made me feel a hundred times worse.

Turning away from him, I busied myself with gathering up the cleaning supplies and returning them to the closet built into the corner of the room. Over my shoulder I called. “Don’t get comfortable, I was just about to leave.”

“Cee, I—” I let the closet door slam shut behind me as I put away the supplies. I was trying not to be so dramatic. The man had work and responsibilities for Christ’s sake. There was no

reason for me to be acting this way. But unbeknownst to me, my stomach started to revolt at the sound of his voice. That and the tight constricting of my heart told me I didn't want to talk to him.

It was strange to me how I could feel so disappointed in a moment where I should feel pride. I had just been feeling so good. Giddy in a way I didn't quite understand but somehow knew was akin to that feeling I recognized in my siblings way back in that first week I spent working with them. Yet, one look at Connor—not the normal Connor, but this weird Connor who felt more like a stabbing knife rather than his usual comforting calm, had me feeling uncharacteristically choked up and emotional.

Dropping the pail of cleaning solution, spray, and wipes onto the ground, I forced myself to breathe. One, two, three deep breaths. They were poisoned by the scent of chemicals and dust from the closet, but they were calming enough to allow me to push back out into the room. Connor was still at his place by the door, now standing with a grimace on his face. His shoulders were hunched as he curled his hands into his pockets, looking like a guilty little boy.

Ugh.

I looked away, not wanting to think he looked adorable with his big, towering features so small and curled up and remorseful. But he did, and the flutter it sent to my heart was just as confusing as the pain he'd sent there earlier.

“Ceci, can I talk to you?” he asked.

“Since when have you ever asked if you can talk to me?” I asked giving him a look. “Just talk.”

“I would, but you're mad at me.”

“That's ridiculous, when have I ever been mad at you, Con?” I asked.

“Not ever, at least, not really,” he said.

“Well, there you go. Proof. I'm not mad,” I said, but I refused to look at him as I strode over to where my water bottle, sweatshirt, and keys lay in the corner.

“I’ve never let you down before either,” he said. He kicked at nothing in particular, mumbling, “Until today, I mean.”

I faltered a step, my knees getting wobbly at his dead accurate assessment on how his recent cold shoulder was affecting me. Ever since the incident in the bathroom.

He was right. He *had* let me down. Disappointed me—not because he was busy, but because he’d made me feel like, for that split second, I didn’t matter to him. I wasn’t used to that feeling. Wasn’t accustomed to the taste of disappointment from Connor.

I was learning, it could be pretty damn bitter.

My silence wasn’t pointed, but it confirmed his earlier words. He cursed when I didn’t deny them. I ignored it, instead pulling on my shirt and picking up my things before turning to him and raising my eyebrows slightly. “I need to lock the door.”

His face was miserable as he looked at me. “How was your lesson?”

I swallowed, my damn nose burning, taking my eye sockets along for the ride. What was he doing? Asking about my day like I hadn’t attempted to share it with him earlier. Did he even really care, or was he just trying to cover his own ass? My nose stung even more at the thought that he didn’t.

“I need to lock up,” I repeated, my voice croaking.

Connor hissed and was in front of me in a second. His hand went under my chin to lift my face up with a knuckle. Eyes boring into mine and searching with frantic urgency. His voice remained soft.

“Don’t do this to me,” he requested.

“Do what?” I asked confused and more than a little distracted by the feeling of his skin on mine for the first time in weeks. He was warm. He always ran warm. And I could smell him again from this close up. I wanted to cry with relief, I had missed this so much.

“Scream at me, curse, anything. Just don’t—” he pressed his lips together as he looked over my face. “Don’t ice me out, Cee.”

I felt my teeth grind together at the back of my mouth. I tried to unclamp my jaw, but the nerve back there was working hard. Connor noticed, or maybe he just knew, because he moved his hand up the outline of my jaw and cupped me there. Used his fingers to massage the spot where my temple met my jaw. The motion was both dazing and like a release. It irritated me even more.

“Don’t ice you out? What, like you’ve been doing to me for weeks?” I asked, my voice doing that cracking thing it had before but worse now that it was laced with the anger I supposedly *wasn’t* feeling. “So on top of being punished for my reaction before, I’m also not allowed to react the way I want now, either?”

He sighed a deep sigh before brushing that hand up my jaw toward the back of my neck, cupping me there too. “No one is punishing you for anything, Cee. I’m just trying to respect your boundaries. I can handle that, but I can’t handle you cutting me out.”

“What, and I can?” I asked, rage bubbling up fast and noticeable in my voice. In my face. In the damn stinging in my eyes. “That’s not fair, Con and you know it. *You know it.*”

“Okay, okay,” he placated softly and somewhere in the back of my mind I was thankful the lights were out in the room, or else anyone could see us from outside the glass. “I’m sorry, Ceci. Will you show me now? Please?”

I felt the wobble of my chin and could do nothing but rip away from him. This was absolutely ridiculous. I was *not* about to cry in the middle of the fucking gym, and especially not over something so stupid. “I called you when I needed help. Now I don’t.”

He groaned. Apparently I was hurting him. Tough. “If you would have just stayed on the phone for two more seconds I would have been able to tell you I could meet you a little later.”

I narrowed my eyes. Whatever emotion that had been working its way up my airways evaporated into mist. Into anger. I pointed my finger and held his eyes. “When I need help, I come to you. You *first*. You *always*. If you can’t do it, fine, I get that. What I don’t get is having to wonder if I should’ve even bothered. If I’ve done something wrong or if we’re even still friends anymore.”

“Cee you’re being—”

I held up a hand. “No. Save your shit. You wanted me to be mad, now I’m pissed. And I *have* to lock the doors now, Connor. So, *let’s go*.”

He looked at me with his miserable-boy look, like someone had stepped in his ice cream. But eventually he straightened up. “Where are we going?”

I looked at him from the corner of my eyes, deciding right then what to do. “I’m going home.”

“To mine?”

“To mine,” I said. The implication loud and clear. I was going home *alone*. “Bring me my fucking cat.”



# Chapter Twenty-eight

## CONNOR

When I was fourteen I grew six inches in one summer. I had already been in the high five feet by then and that summer was a blur of always being hungry and my joints always aching mysteriously. But by the time it was over a few things had happened. I had shot up past my older brother, who was the tallest in the family until then, and those two idiots started pulling their punches with me.

By the time I'd turned sixteen, unless they wanted to get dropped, they didn't come at me at all. Which is why I was a little bit taken aback by the hard knock to the chest I received on entry to my brother's office.

Clint hadn't quite punched me, but he did shove papers into my body with so much force, I had to take a deep breath to return the air there.

Giving him a long look, and not liking what I found, I gathered up the papers, but my eyes stayed on him. On the outside he looked about the same. Same tailored suit, hair lined to perfection, curls short but not faded, face clean shaven, and expression dull. But there was something about the look in his eye. Something wild and agitated and not at all grounded like my brother always was. It worried me.

"Clint?"

"The papers, Connor. Read them," he said, controlled but not in the way he usually was. He was usually effortlessly controlled, while right now it looked like he was fighting to keep it tooth and nail.

I looked down at the papers in my hands and blood drained from my face. "H-how—"



A finger came down on the text as my brother pointed at the document, “It says it right there. Tampering with financial records, falsifying federal taxes and embezzlement.”

“A charge?” I asked.

“An investigation,” he said, those fingers going to find the bridge of his nose. More testimony to him freaking out. Normally he would have said something else by now. Usually explaining away the next “action steps” and “probable outcomes” at length. But now, he was silent.

*Shit.*

I guess I would be freaking out too if the company I was in charge of was apparently about to be audited in the investigation of multiple white-collar crimes that I didn’t commit.

Inside I was already freaking out because, holy shit. I didn’t want my brother to go to jail! Especially not because some bullshit hacker with an obvious vendetta was out to get Ferguson Enterprises.

I guess now we knew what the hacker wanted.

“When did you get this notice?” I asked, looking down at the papers again.

“I got it on my desk this morning, but legal has had it for a week...” he said. “There was apparently an anonymous tip.”

“To the authorities?”

“Yes.”

“And now we’re being—

“I don’t know what you’re not getting out of this Connor. We’re fucked. We’re being fucked.”

I blinked. *Okay, he was pissed.*

“None of it’s true, though. And it’s all old, like years old. I checked. Whoever it is, they weren’t able to access any of the recent reports or records. Not since I took over more than four years ago. Everything they’ve got is ancient history now... right?”

Clint shook his head. “It doesn’t matter how old it is, if it’s guilty, it’s guilty.”

“It’s bullshit.”

“We don’t have any evidence to prove otherwise,” Clint said. “No matter how real the originals are we don’t have them, they do. And what we have is a big pile of steaming illegal shit. Shit that can put us under, Con.”

I blew out a breath, my hands going to my hips as I started to pace. “Okay. Okay, don’t freak out.”

“I’m not freaking out,” he said calmly, but a little mechanically.

I nodded. Sure he wasn’t. “Where’s Clay?”

My brother’s hand went to his forehead, rubbing. “He’s outside holding her off.”

“Her—” I started to ask but stopped. *Oh*. Mom was here. Of course she was here. “Why are you holding her?”

Dropping his hand, he looked up at me. He’d ventured over to his desk, leaning against it in an almost seat. Now he leaned forward, his forearm on his thigh as he stared at me. Grimly, he said, “Because I wanted to talk to you before she riles you up. I want your opinion.”

“You what?” I asked, whirling my shoulders to face him. I couldn’t help my surprise. My utter shock, really.

The grim look didn’t go anywhere as he pushed off his place against his desk and crossed the room to stand in front of me, hands tucked deep in his pockets. “Connor *please*, I know you’ve had your own thing going on this summer. I don’t know what, but I just know, alright? And I know she’s been harder on you than ever, but please. If this gets underway and we’re in the same place we have been for the whole summer, we’re so screwed it’s not even funny. *We* know the records are false, but the way they read, they look...it’s bad man. We need this handled. *Now*.”

I pressed my lips together, my mind going to the woman undoubtedly on her way here right this very second. I shook

my head. “What do you expect me to do about it, Clint?”

“Do what you do Connor. What you’re good at.”

“You mean the same thing you told me you didn’t have time for a month ago?” I asked through gritted teeth.

“Exactly that.”

“Clint—”

He shook his head and lowered his voice as he leaned in. “I’ve seen the data. Since you got to Ferguson, you’ve done what you said you’d do. You’ve increased functionality by over 200 percent, reduced breaches by eighty, and enhanced efficiency overall. Not one of the files accessed was one under your jurisdiction. I know that you’re good at what you do. I’ve *always* known. And I’m sorry I’ve been so nonchalant about telling you that, I just...” He scraped his hand over his hair. A sign that he was really getting flustered. “I’ve been busy with other things and Mom always wants everything a certain way and I can only do so much with her, and I know that shouldn’t be an excuse. I’m sorry I haven’t tried to do more on your account.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose, his words getting the better of him. “I know it’s different with you guys and her. I know that you can fight back and the more you do the more vicious she gets. But we’re all grown now, and I thought you could handle it, but I—I guess I don’t know when to say when.”

“Clint.”

“What?”

“I said don’t freak out,” I grumbled. “You’re rambling. Which means, you’re definitely freaking out.”

He huffed. “You’re right. I just, I’m at my wit’s end, Con. Someone is out to get us while Mom is out to get you and you’re out, I don’t know, punishing us for it.”

“Hold on,” I said, cocking my head and holding up a hand. “I’m not punishing anyone for anything. What are you talking about?”

Clint looked at me, his face hard, but his eyes appraising. He swallowed. “Mom may want you to be something else, but I’ve been counting on you to be you since I asked you to help me.”

“To be me?”

“Yeah,” he pulled his eyes away and looked out the window. “Stubborn as hell. Determined as hell. *Smart* as hell. I haven’t found the need to hire anyone else to look into this because I knew you’d be able to figure it out. But it seems like you’re over feeding a hand that lets its controlling mother bite you all the time.”

I pressed my mouth together. Damn, he was laying it on thick. And I didn’t even think he was meaning to. He was just so...sad. I think the hardest thing to watch about Clint making mistakes (something he didn’t do often) was watching how badly he took it.

I swallowed. “Are you sulking?”

“No.”

“You sound like you’re sulking.”

“Connor, I’m sorry—”

“Don’t fucking apologize for her, Clint. For the last time you are not her,” I said. In all honesty this had just always been.

Clint was an extension of my mother. Unfortunately they both thought of him that way, and while it was true they were a lot alike, they were plenty different too. And it was so hard watching him strain against the restraints of being forced into a puzzle piece he didn’t quite fit in, that I was sort of guilty of the same offense as him. I was letting him suffer all the same for the sake of not wanting to rock the boat. So being mad at him would make me a hypocrite. “Anyway, it has nothing to do with you or even Mom.”

“What?”

“My absence lately. It has nothing to do with you or mom being monumental assholes.” I crooked a smile. “I’m not

stalling or punishing you or anything. I just genuinely haven't found out who the hacker is. It hasn't been at the top of my priorities. And I'm sorry for that."

Damn was I fucking sorry for that. I didn't want my brother to get arrested just to prove a point.

I sighed. "And maybe I was a little frustrated that you just let Mom be Mom all the time without saying anything in my defense. But honestly, I think in the end I want to be the one to stand up for myself. Turns out it's hard for me too...but *I* will be the one to say 'when'."

"Okay," he said, his eyes flicking over me quickly to assess. They narrowed slightly. "So you're saying you've just been...busy?"

"Yes."

"And you don't hate us?"

I laughed, "You guys are damn annoying, but I don't hate you."

He stared right at me. "And you think you can find them if you focus?"

I thought about it for a second. Thought about the work I had already done and the work I had unconsciously ignored in this dance of emotions and novelty with Ceci. I had definitely been spending more time and energy fixating on my changing feelings for her than on this issue that was turning out to be bigger than I initially thought. Still, whoever was fucking with the files were good, but they weren't *that* good and even if they were, I was better. I could find them. If it was between that and my brother going to literal jail, I *would* find them.

And I told Clinton that much.

And you know what, he believed me. And that was the thing about him. As much as his spine seemed to disappear when mom was around, he had always believed in us. And I would not let that be a mistake for him. I would not let this come down on him. So, like we were having an actual illegal meeting and not just one about how to stop a cyber security attack on my family's business, I leaned in and spoke in an

urgent whisper. Clay had skills, but I doubted he could hold mom off for long.

“What all do you need to clear this up for good?”

So he told me. And by the time the door burst open and the jumbled mess of my mom, my dad, and my other brother spilled through the doorway, I was already formulating a plan of action in my head. Which made me all the less excited to deal with whatever drama that had just rolled in.

“You’re done with this,” Mom said, pointing at me with a menacing finger that used to have us shaking in our boots before it was even fully extended when we were kids. Now it had a hell of a lot less shock factor coming from half a foot below.

“Okay.”

Her head cocked, confusion appearing on her face immediately. “Okay?”

“Yeah, Mom. Okay,” I said, starting to move so that I can push out of the room.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

“I’m leaving,” I said. “I’m done with this, remember? Or is that not what you just said?”

“It is, but you’re not leaving. This is a family discussion. You need to be here.”

“Really?” I asked, my own head cocking in that same way. “Because I have nothing else to contribute, since I’m so done. So I might as well leave now, huh Mom?”

She was silent for two beats. And then she flipped her gaze to Clint. “What’s wrong with your brother?”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s all mouthy, like that one,” she said, flipping her hand over her shoulder in Clay’s general direction. He blinked and jerked his head back, offended.

Clint looked at me and then shrugged. “He’s a grown man, Mom. Talk to him about it.”

Her mouth puckered, no doubt not used to (and not liking) the cold shoulder from Clint. But she turned back to me, her eyebrows raising. “You have something to say to me?”

“Do you have your listening ears on?”

“Don’t get smart with me, little boy.”

I held my hands up in surrender, but I was beyond frustrated with her antics. “I just want to talk like normal, Mom. No more yelling. No antics.”

“Okay,” she said crossing her arms. “I’m listening.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“*I am*,” she insisted.

“Why don’t you want me working on this? Why don’t you want me working on *any* of this? Because you think I can’t do it?”

She looked at me down her nose for a long steady beat before turning it up and away from me. “I never said that. I know what you can do.”

“You do?”

“Unlike what that annoying little Fernandez girl said, I know how hard it is to do what you do.”

“What then? You just don’t want me to do it?”

She looked at me and I realized then that was exactly it. She just doesn’t want me to do it. And all of a sudden I was irrationally angry.

I laughed, the sound coming out deranged and annoyed. “So what would you have me do, then? In your perfect world?”

She pressed her lips even further into that line. “I want you here at Ferguson doing something bigger. Something worth your name.”

“The only worth on my name is the worth I grant it, Mom. Me and the people who love me. What you’re saying right

now is that without the title that *you* allow, I'm worthless. Do you understand how that hurts?"

"You're putting words in my mouth."

"Damn right I'm putting words in your mouth," I said roughly. "I'm putting the words that you never say out loud, but you've been *thinking* for years out in the open."

She blinked as my voice rose, seeming to pause for the first time in what seemed like *ever*. Finally. But I already made my decision. I would help my brother, and then I would start helping myself. This had to be the first step. I couldn't keep holding back or pulling up short or minimizing myself. Not with her, not with anyone.

I had to stop worrying what would happen if I expended all of myself and it still wasn't enough. Because all I was doing now was giving half of me and it definitely wasn't enough. I had almost let Clint go to *jail*, for Christ sake.

I needed to start being enough for myself, and letting people decide if they wanted to take that or leave it. But I wouldn't be compromising myself to accommodate other's versions of me in my head.

Just then, an image of Ceci flickered through my mind and my heart squeezed.

I winced internally. I didn't have to change all at once. I could always start small and work my way up. Right now, I would start with my career.

"What words do you think I'm thinking, Connor?" my mom asked, pulling me back.

I scoffed. "You mean what words do I *know* you're thinking? You think I don't know that you wish I was more like Clint or Clay or literally anyone other than myself. That you don't believe in me so much that you have been shoving this idea of something I don't and have never wanted down my throat for almost my entire life. That the second I shared that I wanted to be the slightest bit like you, you started tapering my dreams and forcing me into a box you thought was more



suitable for me. Do you think I'm blind, Mom? That I'm stupid?"

She swallowed. "Never, Connor. I never—"

"I know what I want mom. And no amount of bullshit business degrees or executive positions or all the goddamn pressure in the world is going to change that. I know what I want, I've known it since I was nine years old, and you have too."

Because she had.

A vision of a boy who'd just disassembled and reassembled a computer all by himself came to my mind. He had begged his father to sign him up for the *'Kids Love Coding'* classes he saw on TV and had begged his mom to get him some books on analytics. He had just spent a whole summer indoors rather than playing outside like the rest of the kids because he'd found a passion. Something so consuming, he could hardly breathe when he wasn't around it. And on a day at the end of that summer he had looked to his mother—his mother who seemed like she ran the world sometimes with the way she commanded her own life—and he told her, "Mom, one day I'm going to run my own big building with computers everywhere. Just like you!"

And she got the weirdest look on her face. She looked down at what she was doing, handing over some cash for yet another advanced coding book she was buying me, and then she looked over at me...and her eyes were different. Her eyebrows were pinched, her lips gray like she felt sick. Her eyes seemed to mist and her neck gained color it never held before. And when she swallowed, and cleared her throat, she looked down on me and said, "We'll see."

And that was it.

That was the kicker. Ceci wasn't really the only one who knew I wanted to build my own company someday. The first had been my mom. She had been there when the dream was born. A dream born after the model of the woman herself. A mix between what I thought was the best part of me and the best part of her. And the response I got...

We'll. Fucking. See.

And ever since then, I've been living life one foot in each direction. The direction of my own dreams and the direction of the ones dreamed up for me.

In middle school I was in the robotics club but also on junior varsity. In high school I got a job at a computer store, but also interned in my family's accounting department. In college I majored in Computer Science and Analytics but double and triple majored in Business Operations and Finance. We teased on Clint all the time for being the way that he was, but really I was the worst of them all. Because all the while I was supposedly chasing my own path, I'd been waiting for permission from others to do so.

Waiting on approval to fully live my life.

I shook my head out of the memory. "I'm going to be enough for one of us, Mom. And I think the timer's out on it being you."

I saw her open her mouth to say something else, but I was already looking at my older brother instead. Without words, I nodded at Clint and he nodded back. We understood each other.

I would take care of this. And then I would start taking care of me.



# Chapter Twenty-nine

## CONNOR

Despite the room being extremely familiar, it was dark in a way I had never seen it before. The smell of cigar smoke permeated the air, but that was all too familiar too. All of this was, and that's what made me feel sick.

I swallowed as I stepped inside, shutting the door behind me. Down the long line of the room, I could make out a desk at the end, half shaded in light from the nearby window.

“Ah,” a deep voice reverberated from the direction of that desk. It stopped my progression, causing my sure steps to falter. I must have stopped completely, because at the end of the room the silhouetted figure that had been lounging in the chair turned slightly, raising an eye in my direction expectantly. “Vamos. No te preocupes.”

*Don't worry?* Well, that was going to be hard considering the fact that, in my hand I was harboring the damning evidence of this summer's little hacking excursion right in front of the culprit himself.

It had taken me days holed up in my computer room to actually track them. Hours poring over past breeches and hits in my security system only to find out, the reason I hadn't been able to find the outside threat in all this time was because the outside threat was me.

Well, me in a sense. My own IP...from years ago. So many years ago, I had forgotten it even existed.

And there was only one person who could have access to that now.

At first I thought it was Mom. It added up perfectly. Her recent adavance about my role at the company had seemed

sudden and almost obsessive. And while she'd always been tough, she was never tyrannical...but on second thought—she'd never had the time to fully focus all her attention on us before. Maybe now she'd decided to use that extra time to finally force her sons to do what she wanted. But the thing was, mom didn't have the finesse or the patience to run a secret scheme against her own company behind everyone's back. If she wanted to sabotage me, she would just do it to my face.

She was sort of like Ceci in that way.

No, it wasn't mom, and the errant thought that it could be, departed my mind almost as soon as it surfaced. Which just left...

“Siéntate, mijo,” he instructed. “Nosotros tenemos mucho de qué hablar.”

Stepping up to the clean wooden desk, two large leather chairs directly across from it, I was momentarily stumped. It was one thing to suspect; it was another thing entirely to confirm that the man behind the voice, behind the desk, and behind this whole scheme, was my father.

“Papa—” I started but didn't know where to go from there. So many questions ran through my head at once. How? When? For how long? But most of all I just wanted to know one thing. “Por que?”

Turning in his own leather chair, he finally faced me. And to my surprise he looked no different. He didn't look evil, or changed, or suddenly this person I didn't know or trust. He still looked like my dad. Yellow brown skin that freckled where he caught the sun most as a child. Light-brown eyes that he passed down to all of his children. Dark alabaster hair that was starting to salt around the ears. And that same mild expression he always kept. No matter what was happening, no matter how bad or good, he always stayed this same constant calm.

That calm remained intact as he nodded an insistent gesture toward the seat across from his desk and repeated, “Siéntate, Connor.”

With lead weight in my feet, I did. Moving to sink into the large wingback chair across from my father with measured care, my eyes met his and for a long moment we just stared. Then my eye caught onto something dark and clunky sitting wide open in the corner of his desk, and I scoffed.

“Is that what you’ve been using this whole time, Papa? That old thing?” I asked, surprised to see one of my old computers from high school displayed open on his desk.

He smiled, his closed lips merely lifting at the corners as he looked fondly between the open laptop and me. In Spanish he started, “Did you know you first built something like this when you were eleven?”

Despite the pit in my stomach and the rapid, nervous beat of my heart, I smiled a little too. “Yeah. I remember.”

He nodded, gazing back down to the laptop wistfully. “This isn’t one you built. You grew out of that phase quickly. But this *is* a very special device to me, *mijo*. Know why?”

I shook my head.

Something about his voice was settling my nerves. Something about the way he was talking; unbothered, unhurried, unrepentant to the reality of this situation, that made it feel far off that he’d done something shady to bring us to this point. Making it feel like I was simply visiting my father at his club to chat, instead of confronting him about a possible betrayal to our family.

In front of me, Papa continued gazing at the device like it was speaking to him. He spoke as if he was watching a memory reel.

“It was the operating system you built this time. Completely from scratch.” He huffed a small laugh as he looked from the computer to me. “Know how old you were then?”

“Fifteen.” I said, the memory clear. Me sliding into the kitchen in the early hours of the morning because I hadn’t gone to sleep. Everyone else was busy. Mom was gone to work; Clint was out of the house by then with Clay on his way

out next and Tine was in those years where she either had a good day or a bad one. She was nowhere to be found, so it was already shaping up to be a bad one. The only person in the kitchen that day was my dad. He was standing at the island drinking a cup of coffee and leaning over a newspaper. When he spotted me, he flicked his eyes up and raised his head.

“Buena.”

“Buena, Papa.” I said, ducking my head and tucking the computer under my arm.

He noticed and eyed the device suspiciously. Probably wondering if I’d broken another one. “Qué paso?”

I hesitated. In that moment remembering, just how much nobody in this family cared about this “silly little hobby” I had. Every time I tried to show them something I was proud of doing, they were either too busy or too uninterested to care. Papa had never been as harsh as say Mom or Clint, but he had never asked any questions about it either. So I doubted he’d cared about it then.

Tucking the computer further away, I shook my head. “Uh, never mind Papa. It’s nothing.”

I immediately started to retreat, backing out of the kitchen so that he wouldn’t see what I was holding any more than I’d already divulged. It was too late, though.

“Basta, mijo,” Papa said, punctuating his command by a sharp cluck. Using two fingers, he waved me toward him. “A ver.”

More hesitation followed from my part but unconsciously, my feet did gravitate closer to him. “It’s just computer stuff. I forgot Mom said no computers in the kitchen, sorry.”

“Show me, mijo,” he said, patting the space beside him at the counter. “And quickly too. Your sister is in one of her moods today.”

Now, I huffed at the memory, finding it both amusing and a little sad. Even back then I had been afraid to show my family my true desires.

And yet...

I shook my head. I can't believe I'd forgotten about that day. Papa had listened to the entire explanation on how I'd built the software. Joking about how he thought he was going to have to buy me another one and asking questions about how I managed certain aspects of the program. He was curious where I learned everything and even more curious if the computer would actually work like a normal one.

And he was impressed when it did.

That same excitement persisted now, in the set of his eyes as they glowed at me from behind his desk.

"Papa...I still don't understand," I said slowly. My thoughts running back to the folders and folders of compromised files that now lived within the company's system.

"You arrived back home from school over five years ago," he started. He eyed me for a long moment, waiting as if he wanted me to answer a question that had not yet been asked. "Yet, you're still in the same position as before you even left."

I shifted in my seat, feeling instantly more uncomfortable than when I'd first walked in. Flicking a glance at him, I mumbled. "Yeah, so?"

"So that's a shame, mijo," he said. "One that I couldn't let go on for much longer."

"So you...?"

"I've been a weak father for most of you kids' lives. I let your mother run things because, truthfully, she runs me. But after your sister and everything that happened, it's been hard to live with the passivity I've let myself dwell in all these years. And once the universe gave us a second chance—with Clementine—I decided I didn't want the same fate for you boys either. I wanted to step up and help you, instead of letting this current trajectory play out."

"Okay Papa, but why did you decide to jeopardize the company to do it? You could have just talked to me."



He shrugged. “You know, I’ve known what you’ve wanted to be since you were nine. Since your mom sent me on an errand to sign you up for those ‘*kiddy coding classes*’ you begged us to go to. You had never begged for anything in your life, *mijo*, but you begged for that,” he said. I chuffed. “But, ever since then, I’ve watched you place your dreams aside. Always hiding them in your back pocket for when you’re alone, instead of shouting out loud like you should have...Like you should have been *able* to.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, not really knowing what to say. I shook my head; squaring shoulders with him and giving him a sterner look than I should have to administer to my father (who appeared rather carefree for someone who had just fucked with his whole livelihood for shits and giggles). “You...you stole my high school computer to hack our own company and compromise official documents?”

He wrinkled his nose. “It isn’t truly yours if I bought it, no?”

I scoffed incredulously, saying, “That’s not the point, Papa. I don’t even want to get into how—but *why*? Why would you do this? Do you understand how dangerous the things you’ve been playing around with are?”

Silently, he rolled his lips into his mouth for a beat as he looked me over. Rising up from his chair, he started his way around the desk toward me. “You know, Clinton is all your mother, and Clementine is all me. Lord knows what Clayton is, but you Connor, you are a mixture of both of us, I think.”

I laughed despite my confusion, “So what?”

“So, like me, you’ve always been decisive. You choose fast and hard,” he started, “But, you suffer the unfortunate disposition of idolizing your mother. Which is an impossible task to live up to—believe me, I’m still trying.”

Closing the distance between us, he placed a hand over my shoulder and squeezed. “Your mother, she never learned to show her love from the inside out. You didn’t know her father, but he taught her that love was accomplishing things, and setting people on paths of ‘excellence’ even if it wasn’t the

path they would have chosen. I won't make excuses for her, there are none for me either, but she's doing her best, mijo."

"Her best to what?" I couldn't help but scoff. "Let me know I'm not good enough?"

He shook his head. "No. She's doing her best to set you on a path she believes will be a successful one. In the only way she's known how."

"*Force?*" I asked incredulously. He shrugged. And I shook my head, not believing this.

"You say you don't want to make excuses for her, but you *always* do. Now you suddenly take matters into your own hands in the most reckless way possible?" I scoffed, feeling my body temperature rising. "And to what end, Papa? With things the way they are now, all you've done is make it harder for me to leave and given her more reason to tear down what I love. It sucks being treated like some kind of disgrace, but I want to stick it out for them. To make sure their alright. But I also don't. Because why is it my job to stick it out somewhere I'm not even appreciated?"

Why should I have to continue to endure and see new perspectives for someone who refused to do the same for me? I was sick of being told *why* this was happening, I just wanted it to stop.

All the heat that was building in me as I ranted suddenly dissipated when my father shrugged, simply saying, "You don't."

I blinked at him, and he smiled, shaking my shoulder encouragingly. "You don't. You shouldn't! Hell, I've been trying to get you to stop since the day I could. Who do you think talked your mother into letting you go all the way to Europe for college? I've been trying to get you out of here Connor, get you away from your mother's grip for long enough for you to decide to stand on your own. I even tried to get you fired. But you're stubborn, just like her. And you love her, you just want her approval, yes?"

I swallowed, just staring at him now. Listening to him speak. Wrapping my head around the crazy backwards thinking he was implying.

“If you’re waiting on her blessing to fly the nest and follow your dreams, you’ll be waiting forever,” he said, softer now. “I know it’s scary and I know it feels like you’re giving up on something. But the truth is you’re doing yourself a disservice trying to please everyone when the only one you have to live with for the rest of your life is you.”

More silent watching, and his big hand came up to cup my cheek, patting it slightly.

“We are a family—” he cleared his throat, the adam’s apple there working in a rough bob. “We were sometimes a good one. We’re working on becoming that again, which means, you’re always going to be a part of us, mijo. No matter how far you go, but you’ve got to take the first step.”

“She’ll never forgive me.”

His eyes softened. “She will. Trust me.”

Did I trust that he knew what he was talking about? I wasn’t sure. But I did know that in a roundabout way, he had thrown his all into emancipating me from my mother’s iron grasp. And at the very least I trusted that he had my best interest at heart.

Looking up into my father’s eyes, I almost felt a bubble of laughter fall from my mouth. It caught in my throat, though. Right behind the ball of frustration that had originally brought me here in the first place.

“Will she forgive *you* for fucking around with her beloved business?” I asked with a slitted gaze. “Because this is real fucked up, Pa.”

“Ah,” he smiled mussing a hand over my head. “That’s why I have a clever son to get me out of it. With your scary mother and brother, I mean. Don’t worry about the files, or the police. I’ve got them covered.”

“You do?” I asked—and I’m going to be honest—I didn’t quite believe him.

“I do, mijo; this is my scheme after all.” He said, but he could read the apprehension on my face. “I know people, don’t worry. And I worked the financials at the company before retirement, or did you forget? I’ve still got a few tricks up this old sleeve.”

*Okay.*

I frowned, my mouth worrying into a scrunch. The first step, huh? I just needed to take the first step.

“It’s all going to be alright mijo.” Papa said from above me.

I gazed up at him to catch him smiling knowingly at me. Giving me an encouraging nod. One that seemed to go beyond just the problems with the company, but to that of all my other impossible decisions too. The first step. I contemplated again, this time with red hair on my mind. Papa’s smile seemed to get bigger, recognition clear in his eyes as he patted my shoulder one last time and assured me, “*Everything* will.”



# Chapter Thirty

## CONNOR

“What are the chances that we ended up on the same team?” I asked Ceci as I leaned into her shoulder and brought my mouth down near her ear.

She was bouncing beside me, her excitement for the day ahead of us palpable. Grinning big she turned her head up to me, “One hundred percent.”

“Oh yeah?” I raised an eyebrow and tried to resist the strong urge to kiss her. Those kinds of urges are what had gotten me into this mess in the first place. “How’s that?”

Her grin turned wicked and she leaned in closer, “Because I rigged it, duh. Now let’s go, we’re about to start the first game.”

My stomach kicked with hopeful excitement at the sight of that smile. She was being normal. Looking at me, talking to me, smiling at me. Things she hadn’t been or done in a little while. Ever since the day at the gym.

As regrets go, disappointing Ceci might be one of my biggest. As stupidity went, asking her to get mad at me was definitely the stupidest I’d ever been. I wanted to take back both. Take back the sulking I’d done after the bathroom incident and the senseless words I’d thrown around after I knew I’d hurt her.

And I *did* know I was hurting her.

I knew even before I heard the croak in her voice that day. The sad way she had been looking at me for weeks leading up to the whole thing was a big enough hint. But I’d been tired of being the only one who knew how to pick up on hints, so I’d let her hurt. And then I took it too far on a day she really

needed me. Fucking up so badly and wanting to take it back so vehemently that I just made it worse.

I wasn't stupid. Ceci was a hothead and I wasn't exactly sunshine and rainbows myself. Sometimes we clashed, like the day at my parents' house. Like other times before. We were human, and we spent a lot of time together. But we always found a way to make it back safely.

Something else had been happening lately, something about the messy way we couldn't seem to fully deny this thing between us anymore. It was making the little things bigger, the messy things messier. The heart things heartier. Every day that Ceci burrowed her little stinger deeper into my heart, she got closer to it and her venom became less like poison and more like a chemical I was addicted to down to a chemistry.

The point was, we had disagreed before. We argued, we wanted to wring each other's neck, but we had never been mad at each other like this. It was different from a little argument here or there. I could tell almost as soon as she told me to go get her cat it would be different, but the days and even weeks to follow solidified it.

Ignored phone calls, unread text messages, avoiding meetups and the chest aching pain of her one-word replies made sure I got the message loud and clear. She didn't want to talk to me. Not even when I showed up at her jobs with lunch, showed up at her apartment with peace offerings, or showed up at her classes to try to make it up to her.

"Teach me," I'd begged her every single day for a week straight. Showing up at the gym when she did. Catching her before her lessons with Jenny or after her sessions in the main room.

Each time she answered in the same clipped fashion. "I'm not an instructor here, Connor."

"You've been teaching every night," I'd argue.

She'd just shake her head. "To help Jenny out while she tries to find a new permanent babysitter, that's it."

Seeing an opportunity there I would try to connect with her, asking, “You like it though, right?”

“Yeah,” she shrugged.

“So then teach me. Show me what you show everyone else.”

“It’s the same self-defense class we’ve been taking, Connor. You already know what’s going to happen.”

“It’s not the same if it’s taught by you,” I tried.

And that’s when she would glare or cross her arms or shake me off like I’m some pesky annoying thing. “One on ones aren’t an option anymore...for *you*.”

Yep. She really knew how to kick a guy where it hurt. And she was stubborn as hell too. She could keep kicking and kicking, the cycle continuing and making it the longest she’d ever been upset with me. Making me desperate.

Which is also why we were in the middle of the Seaside Beach Park getting ready to play something called “Three Ball” with the whole Fernandez squad and my siblings, sans Clint. It was a public park near the market district that pressed up against the Seaside beaches but rolled in lush green grasses for miles in both directions.

From the looks of things, everyone was getting tired of the arctic shock of Ceci’s silent treatment. So her family had extended the olive branch of her favorite childhood game to try and break the ice. My beloved sister had unknowingly extended that branch to me (and my brothers) and I’d all but tripped over myself to take her up on the offer.

I had no idea what to expect from this. Knowing this family it could be anything. Clay had said it best when we’d arrived at the park to see all the Fernandez siblings in attendance preparing for what you would think was the damn Olympics. They had a mini score board and everything.

“So they’re that kind of family, huh?” Clay asked, sarcasm and disdain dripping from every word.

I knew what he meant, but I asked anyway. “What kind?”



*“Fucking insane,”* he’d grumbled. I didn’t even mask my snicker.

He was right. Especially if the look I noticed on my little redhead’s face had anything to do with it. She was sitting on the ground in front of my sister getting her hair braided. All the girls had the same hairstyle of two French braids that ran the length of their head and came down into pigtails at the back of their necks. Ceci’s hair looked like a shining, blazing beacon in the sun of the beautiful day. And the way she was bouncing as she looked from one sibling to the next, laughing and poking fun wherever and however she wanted was both heartwarming and slightly anxiety inducing.

It had been a long time since she was this uninhibited self. Probably since her birthday. I was glad she was feeling like herself again, but “herself” was still undeniably a little shit. And I could tell by the glint in her eye she had something planned.

After my and Clay’s arrival, the first thing we did was pick teams, and since it was Ceci’s day, she got first draw. All the names had (apparently) been stuck in a bowl. When Ceci drew hers out of the bowl, her eyes had flickered up to me as I sat in front of her fixing my shoelaces.

“Looks like I’ve got the big guy,” she said, and the look on her face had me immediately narrowing my eyes. What were the chances? But I didn’t say a word, just happy she wanted me on her team to begin with. I was so ready to have her look at me like she used to, I might do anything. So however strange the Fernandez family outings were, I was here and I was ready.

Now we sat on a blanket in the park. Just in sight was a large sandbox with a big net and another right beside it. Volleyball.

I couldn’t give a damn about the game, however. Not when the radiant girl in front of me exited her shoes, stepped out onto the sand, stuck her face up to the sun and smiled. Then, with her golden eyes blazing directly at me, she kept that smile

like she hadn't just been ignoring me for a week and said, "Ready?"

I couldn't resist her. Couldn't deny her. Couldn't fault her for anything. Nothing but the irrational, incomparable, exhilarating feeling she gave me every time she looked at me just like that.

I smiled, and it was a wonder I wasn't leaking my feelings all across the park that day. It was amazing that I was able to simply follow close behind her and say, "Let's do this."

Because what I really wanted to say were three different little words.

\* \* \*

Three Ball was a series of games played in quick succession of each other. The first ball was always volleyball, a sport the Fernandez girls all played in high school. The second was soccer, a sport the family loved and *all* played. And the third (if it came to a tiebreaker) was a good old-fashioned game of dodgeball.

Ask me how these people came up with this stuff, I had no idea. My family would be lucky if we played a game of cards without killing each other. Our bi-weekly dinners were a miracle in themselves. I couldn't imagine us—especially Clint—orchestrating something like this. But since I was committed to being here for Ceci I was all in.

Volleyball was okay. Ceci was a high jumper, and she and all the girls (except Tine of course) had played the sport competitively, so it was a pretty good game between them.

Our team—myself, Ceci, Clay, and Melissa had concerned me until Ceci patted my arm and told me it would all make sense in the long run. When Melissa had silently nodded in agreement, I just trusted the family to do what they do.

Turns out they were right. When volleyball started and the game was pretty evenly matched, the trash talking had slipped out, both across the net and on the same side.

“Ferguson!” Ceci hissed, the venom directed at Clay. “You do know you’re hitting the ball that way, right? *That way!*”

All the while she said it, she pointed animatedly toward the net that stood in front of us. I snickered into my hand. So far, Clay had punted the ball back behind us and out of bounds maybe three times. He was not getting the hang of the volleyball thing and Ceci was not letting him catch a break about it.

Cracking his neck, he grumbled. “Shut it, half-pint. I’m just warming up.”

The two of them arguing was better than the alternative, though. Having switched positions with Ceci as the setter and Clay a hitter, they only found common ground enough to work together to continuously set Ox up to get hit. It was apparently very amusing to see their brother and in-law go from brushing off the first few hits to glaring at them red-faced and pissed with the next. So amusing, in fact, it was bonding the two idiots.

“You’re supposed to use your hands, not your face, Ox!” Ceci cackled, doubled over after Clay had spiked another ball at the poor guy.

Clay was laughing too, his hands on his knees as he wheezed. “That ugly mug is their best player at this point!”

Tiney begging them to stop had not deterred them, either. They made it their sole mission to mess with Ox the entire game, which is probably why we lost. That and I suspect the little pow wow of a team meeting Ox had rallied together once we were tied. The result had been Alta stepping up front and setting Ox up to pay back his assaults three times over. To Clay’s face.

They were the winning shots, and Ox had done nothing but cut his granite glare at the two culprits up front. One holding

his face and the other cracking up *again* at the pain she was inflicting around all of us.

*Tyrant.*

Soccer was another story. This was apparently what the two girls had been nodding to each other about before. Volleyball was such a crapshoot—it could have gone either way. But according to the girls, we had soccer in the bag.

It was some kind of mind game they played with Ox. He was the best player in the family and Alta was the worst. “*God awful*” were the words Melissa had snorted about her sister. Somehow, Ox always got paired with Alta and, being competitive like the rest of them, he was sick and tired of losing because of her. That explained his irritation as soon as the teams were chosen and Alta was stuck with him.

We played soccer in the grass, using pop up nets on opposite ends as our marks. Before the game started, Team Captain Ceci huddled the four of us up and delivered her game plan.

“Okay, strategy. Stay away from Ox at all times. Connor, you need to stay close to the net, you’re the goalie, but only when someone’s near the goal. We don’t have enough of us for you to just hang out there all game.”

Okay.

“Clay, you block Ox. Do not let him get anywhere near the ball. Not even close, understand?”

Clay just grunted, causing Ceci to train a glare on him, speaking exasperatingly slow. “*Understand?*”

“I understand fucking English, Fernandez,” Clay hissed. “Stop looking at me like that, *I understand.*”

She glared for three more seconds before continuing. “I’ll take Mateo, and Lis has the ball.”

“What about Tine and your sister?” I asked.

“Is Clementine any good at soccer?” Melissa asked, raising an eyebrow.

Clay and I's eyes met and without a doubt we both answered, "No."

Ceci just smiled, "Then don't worry about them."

The girls knew what they were talking about. Just like they instructed, boxing Ox out was the right thing to do. He was the most adept with the ball by far with Melissa as second. They were both better than any one of us, but the difference was, Ox had no chance at getting the ball. Not when Clay was just as impish as our little devil leader in his pursuit of Ox and Ceci guarded Mattí like a dirty elbowing Chihuahua. And then there were the girls...

The girls were just...*terrible*.

To count how many times they fell would be cruel. To count the number of missed kicks would be worse. We racked up goals at alarming rates (alarming to poor Ox who had called no less than three team huddles in the same number of plays). And Lord save him, I'd only seen him snap at my sister one time, but the way she looked at him after he'd calmly (but frustratedly) told her to "open your damn eyes when you kick ball, Clementine", might as well have been him yelling at her. He spent the next team huddle just trying to get her to look at him again. *Ouch*.

The game was decisive. Ox had gotten a hold of the ball exactly three times and they'd scored just as much. The other ten, we could attest to Melissa for the skill and Cee for the strategy. Me and Clay just pawns in their vicious game.

We were tied. One point for team Ceci and one point for the other guys. Which just left the tiebreaker.

Dodgeball was a disaster. Okay—to be honest, it was *all* a disaster, from the trash talking, continuous tripping, and dirty tactics—but dodgeball most of all.

It was clear how the origin of this game started between the siblings. The boys liked soccer, the girls liked volleyball, *none* of them liked losing so they had to settle on a game to break the ties between the two. If I had to guess, it was the two troublemakers Mattí and my very own Ceci, who had come up

with the idea that dodgeball be the tiebreaker. The proof of which was in the savage way the two of them played.

Everyone else seemed to have some decency when it came to who they went after and how. Bouncing balls off of people's shoulders or hips, or at best their backs. But the two of them—*Dirty, dirty, dirty.*

Ceci was what we call a nutcracker. Yeah. She went for them. And sometimes, (sorry Mattí) she aimed true. Mattí, on the other hand, had just as good an arm and had no problem going for the face. Poor Melissa had taken one so badly to the head, she needed to sit down for a while on the sideline. And I had almost gotten my ear sheared off as I barely dodged his Hail Mary of a shot whizzing by my face.

Playing with the Fernandez's was dangerous. But, as I watched and participated and laughed so much my head started to hurt, I understood why we were out here in the first place. This was a reminder that they had each other's back. That no matter how much their lives were changing, they all came from the same place, and they would always bring each other back to that place when one of them went astray.

And honestly, they succeeded. The girl laughing and running and bringing smiles to everyone's faces was proof of that.

To look at Ceci at that moment was like looking at gold. Not just because the sun was shining on her like some magical beacon of burning anglicism. But *she* was gold. She was so precious and rare and even though her presence didn't always bring out the best in people; it brought out the real in them. Which, in my eyes, made her more desirable than anything else. She was irresistible.

And it was probably because I was looking at her, noticing all of this, that I saw the exact moment when her attention was pulled away from the game to somewhere beyond our little slice of field.

I think I heard the sound of female voices calling out, "Selena!"

Her head snapped up, and it only took that split second of broken concentration for her fate to be sealed. In that second, Mattí ran to the line, cocked his hand back and beamed Cee with a ball right to the head. Only, she had been looking the other way and wasn't expecting it, so she didn't duck or move away in the slightest, like I'm sure Mateo was expecting her to. Instead of the ball just grazing her, her face took the full force of the hit.

And she dropped like a ton of bricks.

“Oh shit,” I heard myself say before I was running to her.





# Chapter Thirty-one

## CECI

Blariness and ringing.

That's the only thing I noticed for about five whole seconds. The last thing I remembered was having a ton of fun. Three ball was an old game we played as kids. But with only five of us, there was always some finagling that had to be done with the odd number. It was good to have enough players for a change. *Fun*. The last time I remember it being this fun was when we'd played with a bunch of our cousins. A brawl had broken out after dodgeball in that game though, so it edged out today by a little bit.

Maybe it was because we knew just how to get under my older brother's skin, or because I'd seen Clay Ferguson get hit in the face three times, ha! Or even because I'd seen Connor, my Connor, trip up over a soccer ball of all things! The man who seemed larger than life with his brains, brawn, and everlasting patience with me, falling to the grass and rolling around. Even I had stopped and stared for a second as he laid there and laughed. His big chest shaking up and down until his brother came over and gave him a hand up. I'd run over too and snuck a slap on his butt mumbling, "Nice one, twinkle toes," and he'd given me one of those kid smiles that made me want to see baby pictures of him and compare the resemblance.

The day had served its purpose. I came into it feeling apprehensive, but I was almost immediately feeling lighter. I loved every single person here. My siblings in a strong, familiar way; Connor in a stronger, unfamiliar sense that scared me but calmed me at the same time.

But as perfect days went, *of course* something had to go wrong. Not terribly wrong, though. Hearing the name Selena

and seeing the two fresh faced girls I had only ever seen on nights cooped up in a stuffy brick building wasn't exactly a hardship. Glimpsing Nina in a cute little sundress and Christine in jean shorts instead of their usual work attire was actually refreshing and new. But it took my attention off the game. And I had maybe taunted my brothers a little too much during the first two rounds. So did I deserve the ball to the face? Probably. Did I expect it, or expect to lose my balance and fall so hard the back of my head was the first thing to break my fall? No.

Hence the blariness.

Blurriness?

"Stop trying to speak," a voice said from beside me. "You're not making any sense."

I think that was my brother talking. He was calm, so there probably wasn't much to worry about, even though everything was pretty black.

"Mateo! What were you thinking!" Alta borderline screeched.

"I was thinking she would *move*! Not stop it with her face," Mattí hissed back at her.

"I think she hit her head. Ox, do something!" That was Fergy.

Lis was next, and I could just hear the disapproval in her voice. "You've done it now, idiot."

"I *didn't* mean to!" Mattí pleaded.

"Mateo! Go sit near our things," Ox hissed, and Mattí groaned.

"Damn," a less familiar voice said. Maybe Clay, or maybe Clint had finally arrived. "She's really out, huh? Damn Fernandez, didn't know you guys worked like that."

"*Oh my God!*" Mateo groaned again and then he said nothing. I assumed that was the silent sound of his retreat.

The bickering went on like that for a couple more minutes all the while I tried to open my eyes or get up or *something*, but my head felt fuzzy and my eyelids felt heavy.

“Move,” a deep voice finally said. A deep buttery voice that I knew all too well. I smiled, or at least I thought I did. Connor’s calm but firm voice was like a drug slipping over me. If my brother’s composure reassured me, Connor’s was a promise. I was okay. “Move over.”

They must have moved, because the next thing I knew, my head was being lifted. Big fingers cupping the back of it gently and sifting around as if he was looking for something. When he set my head down again it was on something soft and cozy, a grumble following the movement. “There’s a little bump, but no blood.”

There was a chorus of hisses and sighs but no other words. Not until a large hand encompassed my shoulder or maybe my collarbone and shook very, very gently. “Ceci.”

“Hmm,” I answered Connor. I wanted to talk to him. To see him. I missed him and today was supposed to be the day we made up.

“Open your eyes, Cee,” he said, voice low and for me.

My eyes popped open. I couldn’t believe he called me that in front of my family. But as the light became less blinding and my eyes cleared to the faces hovering over me, it didn’t seem like any of them gave a crap.

I tried to get up, but the paw on my shoulder kept me laying down. Gazing up, I latched onto hazel brown eyes that showed slight flecks of green in the sunlight. Those eyes were narrowed on me. A familiar meter tracking my every blink, every facial expression, every breath. It seemed like he looked for hours before finally, he let out a long breath and let me go. But only so he could hold up three fingers in front of my face.

He didn’t need to ask. I could see the question in his eyes. ‘*How many fingers, Cee*’, I imagined him saying. So I answered aloud. “Tres.”

He changed them up.

“Dos,” I answered. And again. “Cinco.”

“Okay,” he said. A frown pulling at the corners of his mouth. I blinked multiple times hoping it would go away, but it didn’t. “Ceci, I want you to take your time, and say something. You were slurring earlier. If you do it again, even once, you’re going to the hospital.”

I narrowed my eyes. It was just like him to threaten me when I had a head injury. But he was baiting me. He knew I would rise to the challenge. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath before taking my time and saying very carefully. “Chinga...tu...madre.”

A very small, very subtle smile crossed over my big guy’s face. The set of his shoulders relaxing a bit. “Now English.”

“Fuck... Off,” I said just as carefully in my second language as I had in my first.

“She’s fine.” Connor sat back. He was on his knees beside me, leaning over me to watch my face. As he moved, I saw that the rest of my family were still around, witnessing the interaction. Absently, I wondered if they noticed anything weird between Connor and I, but from the looks on their faces, the focus was on me.

“Good.” I smiled lazily, any worry I might have had slipping away. My eyes blinked heavily, my brain feeling tired as I let them drift closed once again. “Sleepy time now.”

“Nooo, no, no, no,” Con said calmly. “No sleeping. C’mon.”

Gentle hands slipped themselves underneath my back and began to slowly pull me up to a seated position. As I rose. My head felt like something was knocked loose, my brain jostling slightly with the small effort. “Nina...and Christine.”

“What?” someone asked. I blinked over my shoulder to see it was my sister. Alta had come up behind me and was placing steady hands on my shoulders and Melissa was running over with a bottle of something in her hands. I blinked around but couldn’t see anything past the curtain of family crowding me. I shook them off.

“Guys, I’m fine. Just let me walk it off,” I said, trying to stand. I was a little clumsy to start, but eventually, with the help of many hands, I stood.

I leaned into the closest body there, which I thought was my sister’s but ended up being one even more familiar. The guy who was supposed to be acting like we didn’t know each other well, was instead acting as if this was the most normal thing in the world. Him sliding an arm around my shoulders and letting me lean completely into his side.

“I’m gonna take her over to sit in the shade. Can I get some ice from the cooler?” Con said. Someone materialized with ice in less than a minute. “Thanks.”

With no further explanation he began leading me toward the other end of the park, toward the little hut for bathrooms and vending machines and possibly some air conditioning I could sit in. I knew because that’s exactly what Con told my family as they started to follow him, asking him where he was taking me and why.

“Maybe we should take her,” Alta piped up from behind us.

“I got it,” Connor answered simply.

“We could take her in the bathroom and get her cleaned up,” Lis tried.

“*I got it,*” Con said a little slower, a lot sterner this time.

So he *wasn’t* so calm then. He was grumbling again, and at my sister no less. I absently patted at him, trying to reassure him I was fine. But I could hardly focus on anything other than the itching feeling that my family was looking at us strangely as we walked off. Connor with his arm around me and me not able to peel myself from his side even if I wanted to. On top of that, it *had* been Nina and Christine I thought I heard before and now I was passing their horror-stricken forms with a ginger wave and a dazed smile. Connor held up a finger to them that I assumed meant ‘*one moment*’ as he led me past them and far away from everyone to enter the little hut in the center of the park.

It was busy. People in and out of the bathrooms on both sides, kids running around or sticking fingers into the vending machines, harsh noises and sounds coming from every direction. Connor must have noticed my wince at the loud assault on my senses, because he led me straight through to the other doors on the opposite side and back out into a warm but shaded air. We rounded the front side of the building and quickly located an empty stone bench pressed up against the wall. It wasn't as cool as the air conditioning inside, but it wasn't as warm as the direct sun, either.

Once Con had me sitting, he kneeled in front of me. One knee on the ground, one pressed into the bench beside my thigh. The ice my siblings brought him had been put into one of Al's reusable zip-up baggies and was now being placed on the back of my head where Con felt the bump. The cool sensation as he pressed the icy pack into my warm scalp both stung me with alertness and relaxed me simultaneously.

"Mmm," I moaned, and let my eyes flutter closed as I took a moment to situate myself.

It was Saturday. I was with Connor and my family. My head hurt a little, but not too bad. And I was going to kill whoever fucking hit me.

My hand lifted, but not by my own command. Connor was pressing my palm into the makeshift ice pack so he could free his own hands up to reach beside him for something. A water bottle. Big and blue and adorned with a butterfly sticker on the front. Mine.

Opening up the nozzle, he held it up to my lips and landed his eyes squarely on mine. "Drink."

My eyes held steady on his, curious of his mood as I leaned forward and wrapped my mouth around the straw piece and drank. He had been happy today. Normal again. Mine again. Then the world had gone black for a second and when I opened my eyes he was this. Serious, his jaw a little too tight and his shoulders a little too stiff.

A breath seeped out of him as he watched me. In relief maybe? Not sure. When I finished, he set the bottle aside

before replacing his hands on my skin. Grabbing onto my shoulders and kneading large fingers into the muscles that connected them to my neck. I groaned.

“You took a hard fall,” he said, eyes moving on me as I leaned into his touch. I hummed my agreement, the only sound I was able to make as I focused on the feeling of his fingers on me, loosening up tight muscles and peppering me with this magical pressure that both wound me up and set me loose at the same time. Lately, I was learning that Connor Ferguson gave the *best* massages. His next words pulled me out of my pleasurable haze. “I was worried.”

“I’m okay,” I said, my eyes popping open.

“You are,” he agreed, his head nodding but his voice was still gruff. “Are you happy now?”

“Happy?”

“Yes, *happy*,” he said. “You’ve had your fun now, so, *are you happy?*”

The question seemed simple but something in his eyes gave me the impression it was more serious than he was letting on. I looked from one of his eyes to the other, trying to read him. But my head felt fuzzy and honestly I was tired of guessing.

“What does my happiness have to do with anything?” I asked.

Shaking his head, he let his hands fall still on my body. Let his palm raise up the slope of my neck to rest on my jaw. Let his eyes bore into mine as if he was trying to invade my mind with his laser stare. Leaning in slightly, it was like his words pulled him toward me as he murmured. “You know you’re a pain in the ass, right?”

I nodded slowly. “I don’t see what that has to do with anything either.”

He clicked his tongue. “You’ve driven every single person here crazy with your self-righteous silent treatment bullshit.”

I shrugged.

“And we’re all bending over backwards to try and make it up to you,” he went on, leaning in even further. “And on top of *everything*, you have the nerve to scare us half to death?”

“Maybe it was a test to see if you really cared.” I smiled, lazy and full. But when I noticed he wasn’t smiling with me, I added in a whisper, “It was just a little fall, Connor. I’m alright.”

He breathed out heavily and before I knew what was happening, he was leaning into me. His forehead falling to my shoulder and settling there with a deep, deep sigh. “You are a tyrant when you don’t get what you want. Know that?”

I hummed again. Did he want me to say sorry? I wasn’t going to.

He peeked up at me from the side of his eyes, his head turned so that his face was suddenly in the crook of my neck. The sensation was novel and familiar at the same time. Pulling me back to how I felt with his mouth on me against the wall of his bathroom. My skin buzzed and if the shoulder massage hadn’t already gone straight between my legs, the feeling of his soft mouth on my skin picked up the slack.

He kept on speaking into my skin as if it wasn’t melting me right there on the spot. Whispering as if he didn’t want anyone else to know. No one but me. “But I will beg at your feet, if that’s what it takes to make you happy again.”

I swallowed, “What?”

Pulling up, so that we were face to face, his not even a handful of inches away from mine, he said in a low voice. “I *cannot stand* that you’ve been mad at me.”

“You asked me to get mad.”

“I thought it would make it better, not worse,” he said. “Now I know that you mad at me is way, way worse.”

Reaching my free hand up, I chanced a touch to his face. Squishing the tips of my fingers into his cheek. It was a playful touch, but I couldn’t deny the heat of it. There was something about Connor’s touch that I’d never quite realized before. That every time his skin was on my skin, it was like a



battery charging me up, making me strong, making me *me*. He was my charge and right then, I needed him.

I pressed my palm into his cheek next, soaking up that charge. Then I sighed with obvious content. “You made it better, Con. I’m okay now.”

He turned his face into my hand, his lips doing more than just touching my skin, but kissing it gently. Purposefully. I shivered, and he flicked his eyes up to watch the reaction. I couldn’t tell by his face, but his eyes looked hot and heavy with...something. That kiss trailed up the palm of my hand to my inner wrist and from there to my forearm. He flicked another glance at me. “Better?”

Gulping, I nodded my head and he raised his. Bringing our faces nose to nose, breath to breath. “How’s your head, baby?”

“It’s fine,” I said, dazed and dopey. My heart had started fluttering. Seizing my once steady heartbeat and making it erratic.

Leaning in, his lips grazed a hair’s breadth in front of mine. “I think you’re kind of out of it, honey.”

“Why?” I asked, and I know I *sounded* out of it. But I was too busy pulling myself against the sudden urge to close the tiny, tiny distance between mine and Connor’s lips and finally feel what it would be like. I blamed the head injury for my loose thoughts and even looser inhibitions. But really, Connor was the only drug in sight. His smell, sandalwood and...shea butter today, wrapped around me like a warm blanket. Making me miss the mornings when I woke up in his bed with his big arm wrapped around me. His touch—hot and familiar and somehow knowing of each tender, sensitive part of my body, was melting me.

And he knew it. I could damn near *feel* the movement of his smile, just a breath away from my lips. His nose moving forward to touch my own gently, sweetly. An Eskimo kiss! Connor Ferguson was giving me soft, sweet Eskimo kisses. The same guy who slapped my ass and told me he had to play “hard ball” to get me to listen. The same guy who yanked me off the ground and pressed me against the hard wall of his

fucking bathroom. The same guy who threatened to kick my ass in every game we played, without mercy. He was being so sweet and soft, even when he knew I wasn't either of those things and it was making my already fuzzy brain even fuzzier.

“You aren't fighting me—*this*,” he said, in a voice that was low enough it was almost like he spoke it into my mind. “That's how I know you're broken.”

It was my turn to smile. “I don't *always* fight you.”

His laugh was just a breath. “You don't make it easy either.”

“What do you mean?”

He paused and sighed. “You're pulling me apart, Cee. And you don't even know it.”

“My head's okay, I promise,” I said, trying to ease his worries.

“I'm not talking about your head, baby.” *Baby*. There went that word again. And why did it feel like a warm blanket falling over me?

“Then what?”

Another pause, followed by him pulling back just enough so he could flutter slow eyes over my face. Then he said, voice still low and still for me. “Don't get mad, okay? I need this right now.”

“Need what—”

I did not get to finish that sentence. Not because someone interrupted me. Not because I coughed or choked or anything normal or within the realm of possibility. But because Connor kissed me.

Kissed didn't even begin to describe it.

The way he leaned forward and pressed soft closed lips to mine once before flicking his eyes open to see my reaction. Then how he moved again to press a firmer caress over me was otherworldly. I hardly breathed as I registered that these were Con's lips, full and warm from the sun and belonging to

my best friend, that were moving along mine in a slow languid caress that said many, many things.

The slide of his hands, one to the back of my neck and the other to the side of my face, said that he liked my head angled just so, giving him full access to part my lips with his own and lick a slow tentative touch inside. The press of a body moving closer to me, his slim but muscular waist parting my legs and leaning as far as our positions would allow, said that he wished he could be closer. And the deep rumbling sound of his groan as he let it rise from his throat and into my mouth said that he appreciated it when I sucked him a little deeper just to see how he would react.

In a second, I had forgotten where we were. *Who* we were. Which way was up or down and maybe even my full name. All I could think about was Connor. He felt so good. His hands placed possessively over me, because I was his. Just like he was mine. Connor. Whose lips were just as soft and good as I always imagined, his tongue even better. Connor who knew how to touch me, hard in some places, soft in others, without ever having done it before. Connor...

*Connor.*

Suddenly, I pulled back. The second our lips ripped apart it was like a record screeched over all those sensations. Everything around me halted. Everything but the crazy crackling of my skin and burning of my belly. Where was I?

It was Saturday. I was with Connor. My head still hurt a little, but for different reason than banging it against the ground... And Connor had just kissed me.

*Don't freak out Celestia. Do. Not. Freak. Out.* What had he said before? He needed this? Maybe he was just scared. *Or maybe he was having another one of his crazy-person attacks like he'd had in his bathroom.*

I shook my head just slightly, trying to clear it. No. Everything was fine. *Just open your eyes and everything will be fine.*

I did, and to a certain degree, I was right. My best friend was still there. He hadn't spontaneously burst into flames just because we had crossed a line I'm pretty sure we were not supposed to cross as friends. He was right there still looking like him. Fine and fucking glowing in all his brown-skinned glory.

But in another way he looked...weird. His lips looked swollen, his chest rising and falling just slightly faster than usual, his eyes dazed and yet wholly focused on me.

Even weirder, I had no clue what he was thinking.

"Better?" I asked, and what the hell? Did my voice really sound like that husky wanting thing I just heard or was I imagining it?

It must have, because his eyes flicked between mine then down to my lips then back again. "Think so."

"Okay," I said.

"Okay?" he echoed. His eyes narrowing on me. I nodded, and I don't know how to explain the change in his face, but I knew it was an expression that I dreaded. I dreaded it down to my core. Sincerity and admission and who the fuck cares what else was crossing that face. And knowing Con like I do, I just knew—*knew*—he was about to say something that could very well change us forever. "Cee, I—"

"Don't say it!" I blurted. His eyes went wide with surprise, his eyebrows raising as he leaned his head back slightly to look at me. I coughed, trying to recover. "I mean...*I meant*; you don't have to say anything. I get it."

"You get it?" he asked. I nodded, and his eyes narrowed into something darker than before. "I don't think you do."

"I do, Con," I basically pleaded. "I really, *really* do."

I didn't. And he *knew* I didn't. And what did that do? It pissed him off. I could tell by the way his shoulders got bigger, broader, like he was taking in a breath to steel himself. Against *me*.

Oh God.

This was exactly what he had done before he'd closed off. I was just getting him back. I had just kissed him, whatever that meant! He couldn't be shutting down on me again.

"Okay," is all he said before he started to move away.

*Fuck!*

Dropping the ice pack, I darted hands out to latch onto whatever I could grab first. His shirt. Both my hands twisted into the fabric in a desperate squeeze. Halting him in his place and causing him to run his calm, steady gaze from that point of contact all the way up my arms my shoulders then face until he met my eyes. Where he just stared.

Yep. He was pissed.

"Don't be mad," I whispered. "I'm sorry."

His lips flattened. "Do you even know what you're sorry about?"

I opened my mouth to say the first thing that came to mind, but nothing did, so I closed it again. But judging by the feeling of my heart beating wildly—it hadn't stopped pumping like a track star's from the kiss onward—I knew I had to say *something*. "I don't honestly, but I don't want you to go. Not like this, Connor."

"I don't understand."

"That look on your face," I explained, my voice hoarse. "The distance. I don't want it. Not again."

He sucked in a swift, angry breath, hissing, "You don't seem to know *what* you want."

I winced, knowing he was right.

"*I'm sorry*," I whispered again, feeling suddenly defeated. He was right. Everyone was right. I was this directionless, lost wanderer who was managing to cut down every relationship and person she came across. Nothing ever fucking lasted when I was involved, and with Connor, I was trying to make this the one thing that did. "I'm sorry, Connor. But please, don't go away, okay? You needed that and I need this. I need you. *Please?*"

The sigh he let out, could move the ocean. Then, with softer hands than you'd think, he unraveled my fingers from his shirt and engulfed my hands in his, bringing his head down to rest on my head. I almost whimpered at the touch, nuzzling upward to feel every inch of his warm skin I could. Wishing it could be the cure to this weird feeling that was overtaking my beating heart. Like it was cracking and being repaired over and over again by all these half-truths and part confessions.

Con spoke slowly, like if he said one word out of place, he would mess something up. "I don't know what you want from me. I really don't."

"Just you," I said, without hesitation. I shuddered a breath and for the first time I realized that I was fighting the urge not to cry. "Just like it was before I broke everything. I swear I won't get mad ever again, and I won't care if you have a girlfriend anymore, and I'll be nicer to your friends, and I won't make you keep Lila, and I'll be good Connor. I will. Just don't leave again. Don't pull away like before, please."

A long, long pause separated my literal begging from his response. And that only response was him gripping my hands so hard they shook as he said, "You are *killing* me, Ceci. Have some mercy."

"I'm sorry," is all I could repeat. I don't even know what for, and I had never apologized to anyone more in my life. But I *was* sorry. Because the sound of his voice was killing me, too.

I wish I knew what his response was. He had taken a breath to say something else and whatever it was going to be, I was fully invested in hearing. But right then, the sound of footsteps rounding the corner and halting, and the high pitched, "Oh!" broke us away from each other.

*Shit.*

Five minutes, five hours, five days could have passed as I tried to regulate my breathing. My body was trembling, heart pounding to the rhythm of a power drum. Skin prickling with this electric buzzing feeling across every nerve.

My chest hurt and I yearned to just give this up and give in. But my mind was stronger than these urges that would soon pass.

*Rules, Ceci.* I reminded myself. You only have one fucking rule. *Don't fall in love.*

I didn't know what had exactly happened here, but I knew it was against the one and only goddamn rule I *needed* to follow.

Leaning back against the wall, I breathed deep one last time. Preparing myself to push away all these dizzying feelings stirring inside me once I opened my eyes. But as I let the breath seep slowly out of my lungs, I found that my eyes were still squeezed shut. I didn't want to open them. I didn't want these feelings to pass. I didn't want to return to a place where it was wrong to have my lips on Connor's lips and wrong for me to like it. But I had to.

*Fuck.* I had to.

And as I opened my eyes again and saw the face of the man I adored, I had to wonder if it was still considered breaking the rules if it was just a little crack.





# Chapter Thirty-two

## CECI

The lord was merciful to let Christine and Nina be the ones who caught us like that. If it had been my sisters or God forbid Ox, I don't know how the rest of the day would have gone.

But since it *had* been my two sweet friends, and they had come at that precise moment (and not a few minutes before when Connor's mouth had devoured mine like it was his favorite meal), I could still ensure that everything stayed wrapped up tight. Even if me and Connor still might have things to talk about after the day was up.

Somehow, I convinced my friends that what they saw was nothing. And even if it was, my family—who we were on our way to rejoin—could *not* know about anything they had just witnessed. Being good friends, they agreed. But somehow I knew I would be getting the inquisition of a lifetime the next time we met without an additional audience.

Connor led the way—more like steamrolling several paces in front of the three of us—as we rejoined the rest of my family on the blankets they spread out. I had no idea how long we were gone, time having no meaning after being caught in the moment of Connor's kisses. So when we arrived at a fully configured picnic, including sandwiches, charcuterie, both wine and water, juice too. Fruit that was probably washed and put into designer glass stowaway canisters, vegetables with dips and spreads, and little desserts all wrapped up and probably home baked by the lovely master baker herself...It was safe to say Chris and Nin were impressed.

“Holy shitballs,” were Christine's literal words. Nina who was on one side of me, Christine taking up the other, reached behind my back and pinched her.

I smiled. “Guys, this is my family. Brothers are there. Sisters there. Sister-in-law, and her family over there.”

I pointed to everyone with each introduction and when I got to the Ferguson boys, I managed a stern look at each of them, hoping they understood why I wanted them to keep their mouths shut about Connor and me.

Ushering them toward the blankets I prompted them to sit. They did, still flanking me as we all lowered to the edge of the blankets and made ourselves comfortable. “Everyone, this is Nina and Christine. They’re joining us for lunch.”

I tried to proceed as I normally would, but after an entire minute, I broke. The staring was just rude.

“What is it?” I hissed at my family in particular.

Mattí pointed a finger, bread hanging out of his mouth surprised. “And you know them how exactly?”

I picked up a grape and threw it at him. “Don’t talk with your mouth full, Mateo.”

Looking over both of my shoulders I addressed my guests. “What do you want to eat?”

Christine was staring right back at those who were staring at her, probably distracted by their rudeness. “We’ll take whatever you made.”

A ripple of laughter moved across the group and, *oh my God*, could they be any more embarrassing? Nina and Chris both looked at each other and then me confused before they asked in complete unison, “*What?*”

I grumbled before going to my knees and leaning over the spread to pluck up a couple of plates, loading them up with qualifying materials. Nina was a vegetarian, so it was all fruits and vegetables for her. Christine was the opposite and would probably only pick at the vegetables and devour the meat, so I made her up a mini charcuterie on the disposable bamboo plate. After I situated them with their respective meals, I leaned in again to grab some cups. Everyone was still watching me like I was putting on a damn show, so I didn’t

bother asking them what they wanted. I knew the two of them liked wine. So wine they would get.

When I finally settled back into my seat, it was Nina, God bless her, who leaned in and reminded me softly, “You didn’t get yourself anything, hun.”

To which they all laughed again. I grimaced but swung my eyes to my family and just as I thought Melissa passed along a plate loaded up with all my preferred picks to Fergy, who passed it to Ox who passed it to me. As I accepted the plate, I glared at them, hopefully portraying that they had better cut it the fuck out, or there would be hell to pay.

“Is lunch always so quiet with you guys?” Christine asked. She had settled into her spot, crossing her legs and setting her food down on the blanket in front of her.

Ox finally, *finally* broke the freeze spell on my annoying family and said, “We apologize for our rudeness. I think you’re just witnessing a sort of group shock, that’s all. Our Ceci doesn’t bring many guests around.”

Behind her cup, I saw Alta lean into Mattí and whisper, “I think that’s the first time she’s ever made a plate!”

I threw a grape at her too but was distracted from catching her eyes by Nina who spoke next. “Aw, you call her Ceci too! How cute.”

“Too?” Multiple voices questioned.

I groaned. Oh my God, this was going to be a disaster. Looking briefly to Connor, I hoped momentarily for some assistance. I didn’t know what he could do, maybe offer a different topic or throw in a diversion. But as his serious eyes landed on me, there seemed to be something stern in that gaze. Something hard and immovable signifying a mind that had been made up.

*Not this time.* Those eyes seemed to say. *Not anymore.*

*Fuuuck.* I inwardly groaned. I couldn’t dwell long on whatever had crawled up his butt though. Because my friends were talking again and it was not going in a good direction.

“Yeah,” Nina nibbled on a celery stick as she looked at my family. “We’ve been trying to find a nickname for Selena for years, but nothing ever had a ring to it. I can’t believe we never thought of Ceci until we heard Co—um—*someone else* say it first.”

I took the time to give every one of the surprised faces a warning glare before settling down into my seat and patting Nina’s knee. “Now you know I prefer Ceci. Just call me that Nin.”

Mattí choked on whatever food he was shoveling down his throat. *Good.*

“I’m sorry, but this is so fucking bizarre,” Clay started to say. I expected Con to stop him, but it was Ferg who flicked him on the neck first. He turned to her. “What did I do?”

“What’s bizarre is this spread you guys have.” Christine tried defusing the situation. “I’ve never seen anything so big. Ceci, what did you make out of all this stuff?”

Ox’s eye may have twitched. But leaning forward, he moved to pluck up some meat that had gone low on Christine’s plate with tongs and added to her carnivorous pile. “Ceci didn’t make any of this. She’s more of a show up when it’s done kind of person. How did you say you guys know each other again?”

“She didn’t,” I said. Everyone ignored me.

Christine smiled, “Oh, we work together at the shelter. She’s been a great help, especially lately with the extra days and late hours.”

“I don’t work there, remember guys?” I mumbled. They continued to ignore me.

Ox raised an eyebrow. “The...*animal* shelter?”

“No—you volunteer at the animal shelter too?” Nina asked me, but getting distracted, she turned her attention back to the group before continuing. “No, we work for Seaside Waterways. The women’s shelter in Claireview.”

“Ah, that’s right,” Ox said with a quick smile before turning wide eyes to his wife who returned his same silent communication with just as much surprise. She was the next target for my grape assault.

“And did you say *years*? I’m pretty sure I heard the word years.” Matti went on.

“Yeah,” Christine said slowly, finally picking up on the weirdness. “Did you guys not know or something? I’m surprised you would keep your mouth shut about it, Selena, you don’t keep it shut about anything else.”

She meant it as a joke, but then she realized what she was saying and let her eyes dart over to Connor suspiciously before dropping them to her plate. Ox tracked her the whole time. *Oh my God!* I elbowed her, and she apologized with her eyes before trying to fix it. “But enough about work—”

“We are *very* interested in work, though,” Lis said. “Tell us more, please. *Selena* never really explained to us what she does with you all.”

“Well,” Chris started holding my eyes for just a second longer as I tried to plead with her to not speak. She didn’t understand the look, so she just continued. “Mainly she works event night. Set up, break down, restocking, and execution. We need a lot of help when it comes to making sure the ladies have a safe outlet for escape, even if it’s only once a week. But lately she’s been coming by to fill in for some...staffing issues. I know that gym is trying to get her on the hook for teaching, but if she really wanted to, she’d be great at social work.”

I’m pretty sure I surpassed my allotted usage of God’s name in vain.

“Is there no other topic than me?” I piped up finally, directing my comment at my family. “Or are you guys obsessed or something?”

“I think I’m obsessed,” Alta said, mesmerized and totally serious. She always answered rhetorical questions.

“What do you teach, Ceci?” A voice I didn’t expect to hear in the mingle asked. I whipped my eyes over to see Connor stretched out on their blanket, lazily popping grapes into his mouth as he watched this all unfold. The fucking traitor. But there was clear amusement in his eyes as he watched my two secret worlds come crumbling down around me and I wonder if this was his payback for whatever he had been frustrated about near the bathrooms earlier.

*Whatever.* He was still here, that’s all that mattered. I would deal with the rest later.

“Anyone want dessert?” Fergy sprang up to her knees and started to frantically unwrap her desserts from the middle of the pile. “I packed all kinds.”

Ox set a hand on the back of her leg and looked up to her as she kneeled over him. “We’ve barely eaten, Lu. Finish your plate first.”

They seemed to look at each other for a long moment, before she slowly lowered and shot apologetic eyes to me. I just shook my head. This had already gone to hell in a handbasket. *So whatever.*

My eyes felt murderous as I swung them over to Connor. “I wouldn’t call myself a teacher really. They just exaggerate.”

“I’m sure they don’t,” Connor said again, shrugging. “They seem to know you pretty well.”

“Uh, we aren’t exaggerating. She’s just being modest.” Christine said and ignored the snorts that popped up around the circle at the word. “We’ve been having to compete for her time lately with that boxing gym. If she spends any more time there, we’re afraid she might need to move in.”

“She gave me a lesson already!” Nina said, turning to me. “I think I’m going to sign up for more once you get your own schedule, Ceci. I told you that you have a way of empowering others, even when they have no clue how to throw a punch. It’s amazing. Maybe you could teach at event night sometime! I know you’d be awesome with the ladies.”

The suggestion lifted my eyes from their semi-permanent spot on the picnic blanket. The acute possibility of it lighting like a fire in my head. That actually sounded like a great plan. One I'm surprised I hadn't thought of myself.

Slowly I nodded, letting the idea sink further and further into my mind. To Nina I said, "Yeah, maybe." Yet, it sort of sounded like a promise falling from my lips. Especially as we made eye contact and she reached forward to squeeze my hand, promising me right back that she would make it happen.

A familiar voice interrupted the moment and I turned to meet my brother's piercing black eyes. "Maybe we could all come down and see the work that you do at the shelter, *Selena*. I'm sure we could help out in some way or another.

Swallowing roughly, I refused to look at him any longer, unsure if he was being genuine or not.

"Maybe," I said, smiling at my friends feeling resigned. They looked so excited by Ox's suggestion, I couldn't shoot it down.

Who was I even kidding? With my family looking at me like they just met me and Connor instigating things like it was his job to out me, I didn't stand a chance of keeping this a secret any longer. And why would I want to? All these two wanted to do was brag about me, and God I loved them for it. At least they could be proud of me. At least they wanted to brag about little Selena being good at something as simple as volunteering and fighting lessons. I wouldn't make them feel bad about being on my side. So sighing, I leaned my side into Nina's and murmured, "My head hurts."

"Oh hun!" Nina sprang into action. Smoothing hair away from my face and replacing my water cup in my hands. "That's right! What were you guys doing playing so rough anyway? That was a really bad fall you took."

"Family game," I said. And then I explained the Three Ball tradition to the two of them.

"That seems like fun!" Nin said.

"Besides the getting hit in the face part," Christine snorted.

“That’s okay,” I sighed.

“It is?” they both asked, disbelief in their tone.

I hummed. “Yep. You see, when we were kids, Ox made up this rule. He said that since they were older they would never hurt us. But if they did, even if it was an accident, we got free payback. An eye for an eye.”

“That’s kind of gruesome,” Nina said. Then she laughed. “No wonder you seem excited about it.”

I *was* excited. And I hadn’t forgotten. So, with slow, deliberate purpose, I raised my eyes to connect with the party in front of us—to the two dark-haired boys in particular and smiled. They both winced in response, knowing what was coming. “So which one of you fuckers hit me?”

I took the frustration of everything that seemed to transpire after that perfect kiss out on the one free ball I got to throw at my brother’s big head.





# Chapter Thirty-three

## CONNOR

Something had changed.

Somewhere between hoping Ceci would just look at me with that happy smile on her face and having her lips on mine—her tongue exploring me just as much as I wanted to explore her. Her little whimpers disappearing into my throat as she enjoyed that fucking kiss just as much as I had. Somewhere between then and now I had become fed up with pretending.

Which is why I immediately decided I wasn't playing her little game anymore. Not with her friends, not with her family, and definitely not with her.

I cared about her. Hell, I more than cared about her. I needed her. Needed her like a fish needed water. Like balloons needed helium to float. Like the air I fucking breathed. And it was doing neither of us any favors acting like I didn't.

The confused reaction I kept getting from her every time I poured myself out to her was my fault. *Partially my own fault at least.* I had let it come to this. Let her push us into a box smaller than the reality of us, and now that this thing between us was seeping out of the edges of that box, she was freaking out. I should have put a stop to it way, way sooner. But it was that same face she carried after I kissed her. That same scared to hell expression that always gave me pause. That had me thinking maybe if I just gave her a little more time, a little more love in the small ways maybe it would come back around with the remarkable synergy I knew we had.

I was done being small. Her lips had made me big. Her smile had made me whole. And her love had made me new.

She loved me. I believed that. I had to believe that. Because if she didn't...

*Fuck that.* She did, and just like I let whatever we were doing before run its course, I had to be okay with letting her settle into what she knew in her heart was the truth.

I was okay with waiting, but not with pretending. Not anymore.

Which was probably the reason why I was standing in front of my mother and brother in the executive offices of a building I'd grown up at with two stacks of papers in my hands.

One, was everything I knew about Mateas Ricardo. An old employee from back when my mother was acting President and CEO of Ferguson Enterprises. A senior level financial analyst on the executive track. A termination after evidence of professional misconduct. And the name that would be taking the fall for my father's well-timed recklessness.

Ricardo's name and IP had been one of the first hits my security scans clocked back when I started at Ferguson years ago. He had tried to access company information multiple times from his personal computer and had since been sent a cease a desist letter before he actually got to anything important. And since the "misconduct" he'd been terminated for wasn't only the result of his professional malpractice but also the copious amounts of sexual harassment violations in his HR file, I had no problem throwing him under the bus. I didn't know what my mom and brother were going to do to the poor guy, but I'm sure it was no less than he would have received if Ferguson had decided to take action back then, rather than simply taking his job.

"What's this?" my brother asked as he looked over the papers in his hands. When I nervously started to tell him about Ricardo, hoping to God he wouldn't notice me blundering—he shook his head, waving me off. "No, Connor. Not the stupid hacker, *this*."

He was wagging the stack of papers in front of himself. The white sheets crumpling just slightly in his too tight fist. The gesture had me pausing and wondering if this was a good time. But then I remembered that I was no longer waiting around for

it to be a good time for those around me to accept who I was. They either did or they didn't.

With the quickest look to the corner of the room where my father leaned "uninterested" against the wall, I caught the subtle movement of his head in a nod. A nudge that said, 'go on.'

Returning my gaze to Clint, I slid my hands into the front pockets of my jeans and let out a long, readying breath. "That is my letter of resignation, boss. Effective immediately."

"Excuse me?" the cold deadly sound of my mother's voice said. But she was quickly collected by my father. Pulled to his side and placated with soft words.

"Holy shit," Clay whispered in shock and glee.

But it was Clint I watched. My older brother who wore an impenetrable mask ninety-nine percent of the time, but who had just looked as if I shot him in the back for a fraction of a second. The same brother who still wouldn't let himself off the hook for what happened to our sister years ago and would probably never forgive himself for this either if he thought it was because of him.

He was who had my attention as he swallowed and stared back at me, begging for an explanation. "Why?"

I thought of all the answers I could give. Snarky ones, smartass ones, angry or frustrated or annoying little brother ones. Self-righteous ones that said I told you so or serves you right or a million other things. But really that's not what I wanted. I wasn't mad; I was done. So instead of any of that, I just shrugged, saying, "This just isn't for me."

Clint was quiet. His body tight from his head down to his toes, but his eyes calculating, like they always were. And after a minute, maybe two, he began to relax. Inch by inch he released that tension that wound him tight and he just sighed. He just looked at me and he sighed. Then he said. "But programming is?"

I nodded.

He nodded too. "Always has been."

“It has,” I agreed simply.

Clint’s eyes held a regret I’ve only seen in him a couple of times, and that might as well have been an apology in my eyes. Clint didn’t do regrets. Or second guessing. So when he did, he did them big.

Shaking his head he said, “I’m sorry I didn’t know, didn’t care to ask. I swear I am trying to be less shitty.”

This had me smiling.

“I don’t think you know how to be shitty at anything, Clint.” I wrinkled my nose. “Never mind—You’d be pretty shitty at being in jail. So you might want to handle that sooner rather than later.”

He shook his head, like he couldn’t even think of that right now. And I smiled some more. “Don’t worry about the rest, Clint. It’s okay, really. I’m done with this job, not this family. And I couldn’t expect you to know what I didn’t tell you.”

Clint nodded slightly. His eyes still looked a little dazed. Nowhere near loopy but not the same laser pointers they usually were. And his jaw still looked a little tight though the rest of him had loosened up. But looking at me he seemed resigned and okay with all this. Then again, I wasn’t really giving him another option.

“Is there anything else?” Clint asked. I blinked at him so he added, “That I should know.”

Nodding, I glanced over to my mother. She was still standing by my father’s side, watching us with an ashen sickly look on her face. She was silent and still and unlike herself as her eyes glued themselves to me. And in them, I saw something that reminded me of the first year we’d lost Clementine. No contact, no updates, no knowledge of where she was or how she was doing. Gone and unreachable in the blink of an eye. It made me feel a string of pity. Made me want to hold my hand out to her and let her know I was still here. Just on my own terms now.

If it was a surprise to me that my mother, proud and stubborn and prickly, took that hand with no hesitation—I

made sure to swallow that shit down as I walked her over to the seats in front of my brother's desk and told them both to sit down.

Looking at them across from me, both stunned but both with rapt attention aimed my way for once; I felt a bittersweet sensation crawl over my heart. Because even as I stood there making the decision to choose myself, I still didn't know if I would be enough for them.

But I was enough for me, and possibly for somebody else too, and that's all that mattered right now.

It had to be.

"Look, in my professional opinion, you guys are going to have to make some changes around here," I started.

And for the first time in what seemed like forever, I had their undivided attention.

\* \* \*

"You sound sort of sad mate," Malcolm said as I talked to him on the phone. "No wait, sad isn't the word. No, you sound..."

"Winded?" I asked him as I finished yet another sprint out back on the beach. I had been out there for hours.

"No, no, that's not it. I don't know what you sound like. I don't think I've ever seen you this way before," he said, voice contemplative. "It's eerie."

I laughed, exhaustion hitting me at the same time his tone did. Pulling up short I walked off the burn of the last sprint a little before collapsing to the soft warm sand.

"Thanks... Mal," I said between huffs of air. "Good to know freedom sounds good on me."

I could hear the smile on his voice as he said, "Ah don't be like that. You know I'm happy for you. And now that you're free you can come over for the reunion yeah?"

“Maybe, if I can.”

“If you can...” he trailed off waiting for me to finish. When I didn’t he finished for me. “If you can leave your girl.”

“Yeah.”

“So that’s what she is, yeah? Your girl?”

“Always has been.”

“And she knows that?”

*Yes? No? Cross my heart and hope to God?*

“I don’t know how she could miss it, Mal,” I sighed.

“There! There it is again. That sad—not sad tone in your voice. It’s freaking me out man, what gives?”

I chuckled. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’m not sad, I’ve just made a lot of big decisions lately. I’m just settling.”

“How’s mum?”

“Okay.”

“How’s big bro?”

“Which one?”

“Big, big bro.”

“He’ll be okay. He always is. They all will honestly,” I said. “It was a lot smoother than I ever thought it could be.”

And it was. My resignation. My advising my family on the state of their network security. My leaving the Ferguson building for the last time as an employee. It was all much less climactic than I thought it would be. Which just went to show how little it had all meant to me. I hadn’t lied when I told Clint I wasn’t quitting on my family. Which meant the family business was always going to mean *something* to me. But it didn’t and had never meant everything. It had just taken me a while to come to terms with what did.

As for this “tone” Malcolm kept bringing up. I couldn’t help but think back to the conversation I had with mom just outside of Clint’s office on my way out.

She followed me there, her heels somehow not making a sound as she walked softer than she ever had on them.

“You’re not leaving are you?” her voice asked over my shoulder, causing me to whip around and land eyes on the smallest vision of my mother I’d ever seen. She was standing there with her arms crossed over her body and her face drawn down into a confused and hurt scrunch. I must have looked at her with confusion in my face because she went on, taking another step toward me. “Town I mean. You’re not moving away to Silicon Valley or something, right?”

I couldn’t help but think about Ceci then. Her face flashing in my mind with the biggest, best smile I’d ever seen. That image alone had me shaking my head. “No, Mom. My family is here. I’m staying here.”

“Okay,” she’d said in a small voice. But her face had more to say. She only hesitated for a second before she was looking at me again and asking. “It’s because of me right?”

“What?”

“That you’re leaving. That you’re done. It’s because I pushed too hard, isn’t it?”

“Mama,” I said, shaking my head and closing the distance between us. I grabbed her shoulders, looking at her from an arm’s length. And I smiled. “Tu eres la razon, que yo soy quién soy.”

She shook her head. “You know I’m not as good as you kids. Papa never had the patience to teach me Spanish.”

I knew that. I just didn’t have the courage to tell it to her straight the first time. But looking at her, I felt that finally I could do it. “You do push, Mom. You push so fucking hard and I’m not gonna lie, it hurts sometimes, but... It’s because of you that I am who I am.”

“Me?”

I nodded.

“But you’re so much like your father.”



I shrugged. “I’ve been terrified to go out on my own, because who knows if I can ever live up to what you’ve done here. I know I’m like Papa, but Mom I’ve always wanted to be like you.”

Her face may or may not have crumpled. But only for a second. She and Clint were cut from the same cloth after all. But her voice croaked ever so slightly as she said, “I drove your sister away for years, Connor. I was just trying to hold onto you. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, mom.”

She shook her head, at some point becoming the one holding me at arm’s length. Looking me over with the strangest expression. “You had the biggest head when you were a baby.”

“Um...” I gave her a look. “Thanks?”

“I knew you were going to be so smart even then. And now look at you.” And then she pulled me, six foot four to her five something, into her like only a mother could. And she held me there. “I’m shit at showing it, but I’m proud of you. I knew one day you would wise up and realize you’re too good for us here. I’m sorry for trying to keep you here where I could reach you, that’s not what mothers are supposed to do.”

Shocked, stunned really, I hugged her back, murmuring, “It’s okay, Mom. Really.”

She held on for more long seconds before eventually letting me go and taking a step back. Shaking out her limbs she swiped a knuckle under both her eyes so quick, I would have missed it if I blinked. And sniffing slightly she took a long breath before letting it out and becoming normal again. Normal except for the soft, sad smile on her face as she nodded. “You’re gonna be great, baby. Better than I ever was.”

“Thanks, Mom—”

“At least, you better be. I didn’t raise any mediocre children.” Her stern voice cut me off. She seemed like she was half joking, half serious, but it wasn’t until I heard her last

fluttering words as she turned around and headed back to Clint's office that I realized what she was saying. "Not one."

So maybe it was the grounding feeling that my mom didn't think I was mediocre when I could have sworn that's all she ever thought of me that had me sounding so bittersweet. I told Malcolm the same but in way less embarrassing detail.

Vibrations on my wrist pulled my attention to my notification screen. Looking at it, I felt my entire body warm, and not from the sprints I'd just been doing.

"Hey Malcolm, let me hit you back, man. I gotta go."

I could just hear his eyes narrowing from across the world. "Don't tell me. Her name starts with a C and is followed by another C."

I laughed. "Did you graduate from Oxford or something? *So smart.*"

"Fine, fine," he said. "Go snog with your girlfriend but don't forget the reunion. I'm accepting an award and it would be nice if you could make it. You can bring her too, lord knows you lot have the money for it, yeah."

"I'll let you know," I said before saying goodbye and heading inside.

Through the back door, the hallways, past the living room, and through the foyer I went straight up to the front door and pulled it open. She hadn't even knocked yet, but she had come. She was standing there with her bags on the front step, the cat in a carrier beside them and her head tucked down as she dug for her key. And when she noticed the door opening before she even announced herself, her hand went to her hip and she turned her gaze up at me with a little smirk.

"Were you waiting on me, Connor?" she asked, eyebrow raised.

My own smirk crossed my face but I didn't stop at the threshold. *No more hesitating.* And hesitate I did not as I scooped her up and gathered her into my arms. Cupping her face in one hand and the back of her neck in the other, I bent

low to her level and did what I've been wanting to do since the first time she let me.

An inch away from her mouth I said, "I'm always waiting on you, Ceci."

Her lips were soft as I set mine on top of them. They parted in surprise as I advanced which gave me access to her warm wet mouth that I didn't hesitate to taste. Her body, a little heated from the summer weather and a little wet from a misting of sweat, arched into mine and I didn't know if it was because I pulled her or because of her own effort, but she rose up to her tiptoes to get closer to me. A little moan escaped her when I sucked her tongue into my mouth and a deeper moan tumbled from her as I dragged her body up further against my own.

It was only when I had her panting and shivering in my arms, that I let her go. Let her settle in the moment and let it sink in. I pulled away just far enough to place a kiss on either side of her face.

She was beautiful as she looked up at me with worlds in her eyes. And she loved me. I *know* she loved me. I was just waiting for her to see it too.



# Chapter Thirty-four

## CONNOR

“CONNOR FERGUSON!”

The shriek of Cee’s voice as it reverberated down the hallway, up the stairs, and to my fucking shower alarmed me immediately. I barely dried off before I pulled on sweatpants and a shirt to see what she needed.

“What?” I asked as I made my way into the kitchen following the sound of her ruckus.

When I finally surfaced in the living area, she was ablaze. Her hair was everywhere, sticking up in a fluff of barely brushed out chaos. Her cheeks were red as she bent over the drawers and rummaged through them in a mad rage before slamming them shut and moving around to the next one. And her eyes, when she finally turned around to scowl at me, were igniting in a sparking gold color that reminded me of burning ember.

*Okay.*

“Where are my wraps?” I asked.

My eyes narrowed on the long white strips of fabric hanging around her neck. I pointed. “Aren’t those your wraps right there?”

She looked at me like she wanted to slap me before grunting angrily and whipping around in the opposite direction. My eyes narrowed even further, but only for a second as she then proceeded to start climbing the kitchen cabinets.

What the hell?

“Get down before you break your neck,” I said, immediately plucking her down and setting her on the ground behind me.

A grunt is all she responded before trying to shove me out of the way and climb back on. I grunted right back and grabbed onto her waist to deposit her behind me again.

What did she do? She charged *again*. Shoving me and trying to push her way up.

Aggravated, I turned, blocking her route up the countertops and staring down at her incredulously. She growled.

“*What are you doing?*”

“Trying to find the wraps that *you* put somewhere,” she said, her eyes accusatory, her stance challenging.

I grumbled. “You know this is my house don’t you? So I have the right to put whatever, *wherever*.”

This did not make her happy. This actually pissed her the fuck off. I could see it as it crossed over her face in a wave of confusion, then hurt, and then pure fucking anger because this was Ceci we were dealing with.

“Fine,” she said. “You want me to fucking leave, then *fine* Connor. I’ll go. I can take a goddamn hint.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. I hadn’t had coffee yet, and she was being a fucking pill. But I hated that the middle emotion I recognized on her face was hurt. I don’t even know what I said to hurt her feelings, but it was there and now that I’d seen it, I wasn’t about to leave it there.

“Celestia,” I chided with as patient a tone as I could muster.

She didn’t answer. She was too busy storming through the living room again, grabbing her bag and her shoes and her extra clothes for the gym. She picked up Lila from a dead slumber and tucked her against her chest in a dramatic harumph as she marched them about the room gathering the cat’s things too.

*Okay*. This was getting more bizarre by the minute.

Two more minutes of angry marching had me snapping just slightly.

“Celestia! I need you to use your words, *right now*. What is going on? What are you looking for, baby?” I asked, honestly at a loss.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Please don’t make me come over there,” I groaned.

“*Do it*,” she taunted, and *oh my fucking God* she was being impossible.

Gruffly, I swiped a hand over the top of my head and then let it fall down to the countertop in a pat. Pushing off, I moved to reach her. When I did, I worked at dislodging everything she started hoarding into her hands when she *apparently* decided to move out of my house just a second ago.

Starting with the cat, I dislodged Lila and set her onto the little tree that was sitting tackily beside the couch. Then I removed her bag from her shoulders and the pile of miscellaneous items from her arms, setting them all down on the cushions. Finally, I unraveled the white wrap from around her neck and held it between us.

Holding onto my favorite eyes, I tried to get to the bottom of this.

“What’s wrong with these?” I asked, my voice low and calm, but unable to fully mask the disbelief in it.

She crossed her arms over her chest and sniffed her nose in the air. As I watched her, I noticed her swallow roughly like she did whenever she was frustrated. What was so wrong? Was it serious?

Using a finger to turn her chin back to me, I chided, “*Honey?*”

“I want the blue ones,” she pouted.

I blinked. “You’re serious?”

“*Yes, Connor,*” she glowered.

I blinked some more. “What is *wrong* with you today?”

She hugged her arms tighter around herself and refused to meet my gaze. “They’re my favorite and I need my favorite whenever I teach. You *know* that.”

I did know that. But it was usually never this extreme. There had to be something else. Looking around myself I tried to see if there was something I had missed. Some kind of stressor or event that was making her so cranky. And then it dawned on me.

Looking down at my wrist, I found no watch. That’s right, I rushed out of the shower to come see her. Reaching between us, I picked her wrist out of her arm pretzel and looked at her sports watch instead.

And yep. That’ll do it.

“Okay,” I said, just nodding. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

She blinked, looking me over and then away without another word.

“Do you want light blue or dark?” I asked as I turned around to grab the cat from the tree again.

She peeked an eye over at me curiously but blinked away again when she found my eyes. Just like a brat, she pouted as she said, “Both. They get sweaty and I’m doing double today.”

“Okay,” is all I said, before dropping Lila into her arms (well more like dropping the cat in front of her and making her scramble to scoop her up midair) before turning to walk away.

It only took a quick trip to the mud room and back to find her blue hand wraps, light and dark, hanging on one of the hooks. I swiped them up and made sure they didn’t drag along the floor on my way back. When I materialized in front of her with the wraps, she said nothing, but I did notice the moment’s pause in her petting of Lila before she resumed.

“I washed them last night because *they smelled*, Celestia. They’ll be hanging in the mud room next time you go looking, okay? Where do you want them?” I asked.

She nodded toward the bag I had swiped from her shoulders. I moved toward it, setting the wraps in on top.



Making a detour to the kitchen, I grabbed a protein bar from the cupboards and a bottle of ibuprofen from the medicine stock. A banana, some yogurt, and an apple later and I was returning to her stuff with a little lunch box. If Ceci had been a food gremlin before, she had turned into an absolute monster about eating after she started working out. I swear she could put down more than me if she wanted to.

Packed and ready to go, I returned to my place in front of her and traded the cat for the bag, taking little Lila into my arms and holding her up close to my chest while I ran a hand up and down Ceci's shoulder. I waited until she gave me her eyes again before I asked, "Anything else?"

She narrowed hers at me. More than likely trying to understand my change in tone. I had my reasons. For now, I just wanted to make sure she was alright.

"I think I'm good," she said slowly, giving me one last glance over before turning and starting her way toward the door.

We followed her. Me on foot and Lila in my arms. When she got about a step or two out of the door, she turned, her mouth open as if she was going to say something. She stopped short as I held the cat right in front of her, face level. Flicking her gaze up to me she asked me a question with her eyes.

*'What the hell are you doing?'* those eyes asked.

"Give her a kiss goodbye," I said, still holding Li out for her. She eyed the cat and then me suspiciously. I nudged her a little further, and God bless the little furball because she just hung there staring up at her mommy expectantly. I wiggled her. "Go on."

Leaning forward she kept her eyes on me the whole time as she placed a little kiss on the side of Lila's nose. It was as if she was expecting me to pull hijinks or something.

And since she was already expecting the worst of me...

I leaned forward next, offering my face this time. "Now me."

I couldn't help the burst of laughter that escaped me when she leaned forward and closed the door in my face.

Only I knew that I was laughing through the sting.

\* \* \*

By dinner her condition had gotten worse. She came straight home and disappeared right into the shower, hardly saying hello to me or her feline love as she zombie waddled her way into *my* room to use all of *my* products like she usually did. I didn't care if she did or didn't use my shit. I mean hell she basically lived with me and had literally convinced me to let her cat live here too. No, her being in my space wasn't a problem.

My mind thinking of her being naked in my space... *That* was the problem. It didn't matter how many showers or clothing changes or closet raids that happened over the years. Lately, every time my brain (and my little brain) so much as thought about Ceci undressing in my proximity let alone in my own personal spaces, I got unreasonably aroused. It's like I couldn't stop myself from thinking of her slim and now muscular frame. Her curves, her olive skin, her hair. And when she was showering, I thought of all the same features, just being wet and soapy. Which was about a hundred times worse.

While I wasn't used to being an absolute horn dog around her, I *was* used to her in this condition. That's why I wasn't all that surprised to find her exiting her shower in the biggest sweatshirt of mine she could find, a pair of my socks bunched around her ankles. And when she flopped down on the couch and demanded food, I produced her favorite fried rice and a simple chicken and cheese quesadilla.

"I want a burger and fries and a milkshake," she said, even while she nibbled on the quesadilla.

"Maybe next week," I said, helping my own food onto a plate and cutting it up.

“What’s up with the hodgepodge?” she asked, leaning her nose ass over into my plate and sniffing my steak quesadilla. I picked it up and held it out to her. Without hesitating, she leaned even deeper and took a bite.

Brat, just like I said.

Raising an eyebrow, I met her eye, asking, “Stomachache?”

She rolled her lips into her mouth, her eyes cutting me with suspicion as she nodded her head. Biting another piece of quesadilla off, she watched me. Her eyes let me know that she knew that I knew.

Stomachache? *Yeah right.* Stomachache my ass.

What did you call a stomachache you get every month that is accompanied by mood swings and food cravings that just leave you feeling shitty after you gorge yourself on them? Ceci called it a “stomachache” like I didn’t know, or like I gave a shit that her period made her extremely sick and extremely moody.

Spoiler, I didn’t care. The only actual concern I had about it was the fact that every month it caused her so much pain. More pain than my sister had ever gone through with her cycle or any girl I had ever been involved with. So much pain that it called for a lot of pain medication. Which caused me a lot of stress.

Sometimes, when her cramps were really kicking her ass, she could pop back two extra-strength pills every few hours or so. That couldn’t be healthy. Nothing too bad had come of it yet, but I worried about her health down the road. That quantity of medication, even if it was just a couple of days out of each month, could turn out to be serious trouble if we didn’t cut her back soon.

Neither of us ever mentioned that I knew she was on her period. I assumed it was one of those lines Ceci convinced herself we should not cross. So instead of outright admitting that I noticed it was her time of the month, I just fed her and let her gallivant naked in my room and continued to play nursemaid like I did every month, because apparently using

my shower and wearing my clothes and having me wait on her hand and foot always made her feel better.

After a dinner of simple foods that wouldn't make her feel worse, I gave in and set the little pink box I got for her earlier on the coffee table. She was lying face down on the couch by the time I got back to the living room after washing the dishes. Looking at her, I couldn't help the hand that slid up the length of her back, rubbing long lines over the taut muscles there. She looked so miserable laying like that. I wanted to do anything to alleviate her pain.

"Got you something," I murmured, leaning down toward her ear. Peeking an eye out, she zeroed in on the bakery box on the table.

"For me?" she asked, the look on her face a mixture of relief and disbelief.

I snorted, patting her ass in a gesture for her to move over. "Do you see anyone else face planted on the couch groaning like she just had a root canal?"

She grimaced, flipping over to her back and collapsing into the cushions. Then she opened her mouth wide. "Feed me please?"

Suddenly, I was the one expelling effort. Trying not to think of the image as a dirty one. I swear this girl was the only person who could be so ridiculous yet so endearing at the same time. I'm almost positive the first time I saw her at her abuelo's funeral, she'd sneered at me. The next few times hadn't gone much differently, and yet here she was years later, in my home at my mercy. And here I was, in her hands and completely at hers.

I shook my head. "Alright, but you're sharing some with me."

She hummed but her big amber eyes trained themselves on mine quietly. "I'm the only person you ever share food with."

I hummed too as I popped open the bakery box and picked up the one and only fork I brought over. She wasn't wrong. I hated sharing food. If it was mine it was mine.

“Drinks too,” she pointed out as she watched me spear the cake. I hummed my response again. She just kept on looking at me. “You weren’t always like that. You actually tried to prick me with your fork on our first date when I tried to take a piece of your bacon.”

I quirked a smile. She was pouting like she was still holding a grudge over it. Scooping up a corner of cake that was mostly frosting, her favorite part, I leaned over her and brought the cake down close to her mouth. Grasping her chin into my other hand, I angled her head up to an accessible angle as she laid underneath me. I didn’t have to speak louder than a murmur for her to hear me loud and clear. “That was not a date, Celestia. If you went on a date with me, you would know the difference.”

Her mouth flattened and she squirmed in her spot, but I didn’t care. I was so done bottling this feeling up just so she could use it as another excuse to hide.

For a while, I thought I’d do anything to bring back the way she looked at me *before* what happened in the bathroom. But it turns out, I’d do anything to bring her forward to the way she lost herself in me at the park. With abandon and trust and full force ahead.

Tapping the piece of cake against her full bottom lip, I said, “Open up, baby.”

In response, her eyes flicked from the cake to my eyes, imprisoning me in an iron tight hold. Unlike many of her gazes, she wasn’t challenging me. She wasn’t poking fun or cracking a joke at me either. She was warming to me. Trusting me. Submitting to me, in the smallest of ways.

And damn did it not shake my core when she did.

Slowly, she began to open her little pink mouth. And just as slowly my mind started wandering to things other than feeding her cake. I watched patiently as she opened wider and wider, tipping her chin up and sticking that cute little tongue out to wait for me.

Dirty, dirty visions of her passed through my mind. And I just let them, all the while I was sure she could see my thoughts through her hold on my eyes.

Transfixed, I watched as she wrapped her mouth around the fork full of cake I placed on her tongue before pulling the utensil away clean.

“Good girl,” my voice rumbled through me, my lust and wanting hard to hide after watching *that*. I set the box down, unable to continue feeding her without pitching a tent while the poor girl was on her period. Instead, I cleared my throat and leaned back. Picking up her legs and replacing them on my lap as I depressed into the cushions. “But to your point, there are lots of things I share with you that I don’t share with other people, Cee.”

“Why’s that?” she asked.

Snaking a hand under the leg of my oversized sweatpants, I found one of her calves and started massaging. She swallowed a moan in her throat and, yep—looks like that tent was going up anyway. “Do you just like wringing confessions out of me?”

“I don’t know what you mean, but that feels *so* good,” she sighed as she leaned back, letting her eyes flutter closed at my ministrations.

Oh hell.

I fixed my eyes away from her as I continued my work on her muscles. She was sore a lot lately. Working hard at multiple goals, and I knew she had to be that much more tired today given the circumstances. So I wouldn’t stop what was making her feel good. Hell, you couldn’t pay me to stop after hearing that breathy sigh fall from her mouth. But I would stop looking at her like a siren when she was simply enjoying an unprompted massage. No matter how fucking hot she still managed to be in clothes many sizes too big.

Clearing my throat, I tried to talk through it. “You know my middle name. I try to keep that under wraps a minimum of one

hundred percent of the time. If I could raise it to two hundred, I would.”

“Oh, don’t be like that, *Marvin*. It’s cute,” she said. I pinched the underside of her leg in retaliation and a giggle popped out of her throat.

I sighed. “You’re the only one who knows my computer passwords too. Clint has them in safe keeping for emergencies, but I told him if he ever accesses them just cause, he’s dead to me.”

“Hmm,” she said. “Sounds like you’re protective over your stuff.”

“Seems like it,” I said, not helping the harder than normal squeeze on her leg, as if I needed to hold onto her. She didn’t notice, only purring more in satisfaction. I moved onto her small feet, rubbing at the sole and pads in deep circular motions. Her mouth parted and she hitched a little breath but otherwise held off from moaning again. I swallowed. “You were the only one I told about wanting to open my own thing.”

An amber eye popped open. “Were?”

I nodded.

The other popped open. “Do tell, *Marvin*. I believe you’ve been holding out on me.”

I huffed a laugh and leaned my head back against the back of the couch. Silently, I wondered if I should tell her about the meeting with Clint and my family. I wondered if I should tell her that I’d quit and that I was technically, no, *officially* going out on my own.

Wiggling her legs against my lap, Ceci caught my attention. Peeking an eye up to her, I was met with a raised eyebrow and pursed lips. “I can tell you’re thinking about not telling me, and that’s not allowed. And keep going—You can talk and use your hands at the same time.”

It was my turn to raise my eyebrow at her and I swear she went pink under my scrutiny. Pushing at my shoulder she said, “You know what I meant.”

I did know what she meant, but I also knew that I would love to show her how I could use my hands and my mouth at the same time. In *many* ways.

Pulling my eyes away from hers, I suppressed the thought and made myself take a breath before admitting. “I didn’t exactly tell them about my ideas. It was more like, we fought, then we didn’t talk for a while, and then I told them that if they wanted to act like they didn’t need me, they wouldn’t have me. I turned in my resignation the other day.”

“Is Clint going to jail?”

“No,” I huffed, a relieved and sort of humorous sound leaving me. “Took care of that too.”

“You said ‘they’,” she said cautiously. Like she knew where this was going but could only hope it was true. “Your brothers?”

I nodded, my chest feeling sort of heavy at the memory of my conversation with her. “And Mom.”

Cee sucked in a sharp breath and sat up in her seat. Before I knew it soft hands were reaching forward and cupping my cheeks. Scooping up my chin she used her hold on me to guide my gaze to hers. Then she captured me with her steady, perfect eyes. These were Ceci eyes, the eyes I had become so used to. The eyes that had been missing in recent months as she discovered new sides of herself that she wasn’t fully sure about yet. It was reassuring to know that she was still sure about me, even though it wasn’t quite in the same way I was sure about her. Not yet at least.

“Do you know how great that is, Con?” she asked with a gusting laugh.

“No,” I answered truthfully.

“It’s *amazing*,” she said. “And it’s about damn time. You know I don’t get all the computer stuff, *but I get you*, and on top of being the smartest person I know, you’re also the most steady. The most loyal. The strongest. If anyone deserves to go after what they were born into this world to do, it’s you.”



I wanted to tell her that I was born into this world to meet her. To sit here on this couch with her and play reruns of our favorite shows. To wake up ten minutes before her and listen to her breathing, then close my eyes for ten minutes after just to have an excuse to hold her close for longer. To be near her for any reason on any day and not worry about crossing some imaginary line when I wanted to touch her a certain way or kiss her or make her feel good or any of the millions of sensations and experiences I wanted to shower her with. I wanted to tell her that I was born into this world to be hers and that she owned me body and soul.

I wanted to.

But that was a lot, and I wouldn't even know where to begin. Not after so long in this weird 'friend' limbo. So instead, I just savored the feel of her touch, closing my eyes for a brief second as I nuzzled into her hand.

"Ah," I hummed, narrowing my eyes up at her. "Just when I thought my little poet had retired."

A wry grin spread across her face and she smushed my cheeks a little before sobering and just sort of rubbing at my stubble. "I'm serious, Connor. You're a saint for putting up with their judgment for so long. I know how hard it is for you to give up on something after your heart's in it, but sometimes it's okay to choose yourself. Especially if they're not choosing you back. Choose yourself first, and I promise they're going to wise up and realize what they've been missing."

Opening my eyes fully, I looked at this girl beside me. I wanted to scoff, to rage, or throw a fit at how fucking ironic she could be. But she wasn't making fun of me. She wasn't kidding. What she was saying, she was saying with her whole heart. I couldn't chastise her for it. Even if it was painful for me to watch her view things so right when it came to the inconsequential and still get the important things wrong.

*If they wanted to act like they didn't need me, they wouldn't have me.*

In the back of my mind I wondered miserably if I would ever have to implore the same rule on Ceci, but just as quickly

as the thought surfaced, I chucked it away. She wasn't the same as my parents or my family. It wasn't her inability to see me that was holding her back; it was her inability to see herself with me. It was her own demons warring with something she had not yet shared that was stopping her time and time again from taking that last step.

I was hers. Long ago, she'd stolen parts of me that I thought I'd locked up tight. Parts that resembled kid-like laughter and uninhibited joy. Things like selflessness and compassion. Sacrifices like swallowing my pride and working through hard times for people you loved. Like the little thief that she is, she'd stolen parts I didn't even know I had to give, and she wasn't returning them. They were hers now, *I* was hers. She just needed to become mine.

Ceci rubbed her hand up and down my face once more, causing my eyes to blink clear and flicker to hers.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"You," I said honestly.

"What did I do?"

I shook my head. "Sometimes you say these amazing things to me and I can't help but wonder how the hell you don't know."

"Know what?" She gulped.

I could do it. I could say it right now. Lay it all out on the table, bare and brazen for her to do with what she would. But looking into her eyes, I still recognized that sliver of panic that always seemed to stop me in my tracks. And seeing that, I realized that a part of me wasn't as fearless as I wished I was. A part of me still feared what I suspected she feared as well.

What if we mess this up?

So instead of pushing it too far, I moved my face into her palm, kissing her there before pulling back to look at her. "That you're the only one I'll ever share my all with, Ceci. You're the only one, period."



# Chapter Thirty-five

## CECI

“You mean everything to me, and you’re breaking my fucking heart.”

The words had been haunting me for days.

Nights when I was on my cycle were like fever dreams most of the time. I sweat, I hurt, I hardly slept and when I did it was fitful.

I don’t know how he came to know this, but somehow Connor had figured out that pattern and had taken it upon himself to wake up in the middle of the night to gingerly pull me out of sleep and feed me medication. I was not a gracious riser and even less so when I had woken up enough to realize all the feverish symptoms were because my cramps had hit, and they were coming on strong.

Normally, I was by myself for this part. I wasn’t strong enough to fully resist skulking over to Connor’s for comfort during my periods, but I had at least always had the decency to use the spare room when I knew I was going to be cramping. And while there always seemed to be a fresh bottle of pain medication or some random remedy ready by my bedside, Con had never outright admitted to knowing my cycle.

I guess that barrier was broken now too.

This time, he woke me out of my sleep as if he was waking a bear. And when I was coherent enough to prop myself up on my elbows, he gave me just one pain pill like that was going to be enough.

“More,” I’d groaned in my confused sleep grogginess.

Con just shook his head. “Try this tea.”

So confused, I started to pat at his hands in search of more. “More medicine, Connor.”

“No,” he murmured patiently. “Tea first. If it doesn’t work, pain meds.”

Then he held some nasty-ass tea to my mouth and made me drink the entire cup. I don’t know if it was the tea or the warm pack he laid across my lower belly that smelled like lavender and peppermint, but something had worked for a little while. Soothing me enough to let me drift off to sleep. Connor drifted too, but he slept sitting upright, his hand strewn across my belly to keep the pack in place. And when I’d groaned awake some hours later, he’d given me another pain pill saying at the very least we were able to space it out a little longer.

Even in my sleep fuzz, I realized what he was doing. Spacing out my drugs. Trying to wean me off them. Trying to find a remedy.

Call it hormones, but the gesture choked me up. It made me want to snuggle into him and never let go. It made me want him like in the park the other day. Like at his front door. It made me want all of him.

Half asleep I settled for playing dead instead. When Connor returned from refilling my water glass on the bedside table, he found me sitting slumped over with my eyes pressed shut. It was sort of mean to pretend to be asleep, especially when he had woken up twice in the night to help me, but I had been feeling needy and didn’t just want to outright ask for him to touch me.

My sneakiness was rewarded when he scooped me up in his arms and settled me back into the covers with a surgeon’s precision. He covered me up to my neck in blankets, smoothed hair out of my face and leaned in to kiss the very crown of my head.

“Why are you so good to me?” I asked. Or at least that’s what I meant to ask, although I think it came out sounding more along the lines of, “Why...are you...so good?”

I asked simply to hear his voice. To keep him near me longer. I thought maybe he'd make a joke or call me a smartass or something else familiar that would put me at ease and help me fall back to sleep.

But no. What Connor did instead, was kneel beside the bed and stare at me for long moments. The weight of his stare making the moments feel like hours as I laid there unable to open my eyes or even change my breathing in fear of giving myself away.

I guess I was a good actress. Because after a while, Con brought his head down to rest on my belly. An arm wrapping around my hip in a little hug. My instincts wanted me to reach up and touch him. To put my hand on his head and rub the smooth shaven hair there. I wanted to participate in this little moment he was giving me, but he already thought I was asleep, I didn't want to be caught being so sneaky.

“Celestia,” he started, his voice gruff with sleep, tone tired and worn. More exhaustion than one singular day could produce. It was this bone deep kind of tired that seemed to change the feel of him. Change his usual steady aura to something edgy and impatient. But I was still half unconscious, so what did I know? “You are infuriating.”

Woah, woah!

Was he picking a fight with me while I was sleeping? Was I allowed to respond? Because I had a response. But before I could, he was speaking again.

“Sometimes I wish I could just make you understand,” he sighed and seemed to gather me up closer, turning his head into my body so his words were muffled. So he could speak them into me instead of saying them outright. I heard them anyway.

“You're my world, Cee,” he choked. “You mean everything to me, and you're breaking my fucking heart.”

\* \* \*

I wouldn't be surprised if I had creases on my face by the time I finally peeled myself off the couch in my dad's office. I wouldn't know for sure though, because I had yet to make even a single move for hours.

I was in a bit of a conundrum. Connor had become my safe haven ever since we became friends. I was free to be anything with him. Any side of myself; happy, sad, broody, emotional, scared, anything. Therefore, I went to him about everything. Even when all I needed was a little peace and quiet, I went to him. But something new I was trying to navigate was, where the hell I was supposed to go when the thoughts I was warring with were about him?

I assume if I wasn't hiding my friendship with him, I could go to my sisters or even Fergy. But since that ship had sailed, I was falling back into old habits and squirreling myself away in Apá's office. The first place I'd learned to be still with my thoughts.

I had to have racked up at least three hours of face to couch time before I felt a large hand smooth itself over the back of my head.

"Aye, mija," my father's deep voice rumbled from beside me. "Es tan malo?"

"Sí, Apá. Muy malo," I answered without looking at him. "No te preocupes. Me quedaré aquí para siempre."

He snickered. Then I heard the movement of him settling into his reading chair. "Tell me what's wrong mija."

"How do you know something's wrong?" I asked, face still attached to the leather.

"Nothing else brings you to my office," he said simply. "Vamos. Dime."

Tell him? Could I just tell him?

Sighing, I slowly peeled myself up from the clutches of my leather solace and plopped onto my butt, facing my father for

the first time in... For the first time since the last time I'd been in his office.

I'm not sure if it just seemed this way because I had been hiding from him all summer or because it was reality, but he looked older somehow. His once taut skin I remember in childhood was now slightly looser with age. Creases framed his eyes and mouth in the beginning signs of wrinkles, and as he sat he seemed to sink deeper into his favorite chair as if being on his feet was more of a challenge than usual.

He was still healthy; I knew that. He still walked almost every morning around the property and played soccer on the weekends with that band of old men he loved so much. He read often and played boring games with Ox like Chess and Dominos. He wasn't old, and I knew that. But being away from him, even for a few months, was opening my eyes to the fact that time was still indeed passing, and I didn't want it to pass by with me being mad at my father. I could wake up any moment and he could be gone. Did I really want the time I spent being butthurt to stretch too long and later turn into regret? No. I decided right then that I didn't.

“Apá, am I missing something?”

“How do you mean?” he asked, looking at me with confusion in his eyes.

Shifting in my seat, I leaned forward to rest my arms on my knees. “Like... Is there something I'm not seeing? Because lately it just feels like I'm having two different conversations with everyone. Like I'm seeing one thing while everybody else is seeing another. It's driving me crazy.”

“Hmm,” he said as he leaned back in his seat. With one of his big free hands, he pressed fingers over his mouth as he looked me over. In the same calm voice he always held, he said. “When you were little you used to get teased and questioned about your red hair all the time. Mostly from your cousins. They taught you the word peliroja! All the time they called you that, remember? Well, you—” Pausing, he laughed and began to shake his head. “You loved that you were so different. So much that you stopped answering to anything



other than ‘La Reina Peliroja’. You made everyone call you the redheaded queen for at least a year. Those kids tried to tease you about what they thought was strange, but you saw things differently. And you didn’t stop until you made everyone else see it your way too.”

“Did I really do that?” I asked, not remembering this at all. Blowing out a breath I leaned back. “Sounds like you had your hands full with me.”

He scoffed in a sound that could only mean ‘you don’t know the half of it’, but he continued. “You have always seen what you wanted to see, Celestia. A lot of the time it’s helped you. You are confident and you don’t apologize for the way you view the world. But sometimes it hurts you just as well.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, when you have a head as hard as yours, sometimes it’s difficult to get through to you when you’re wrong. Not impossible, but very, very difficult.” He tsked. “Once you get something in your head, it’s like performing a surgery to get it out.”

“Is this the nice way of telling me I don’t listen?”

He smiled, “You could say that.”

I smiled too. “If I’m hardheaded, you know I could only get it from one place, Apá.”

“Your mother?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Aye!” an all too familiar voice said from the doorway. “You take that back Ronny, or I will make you regret it.”

“Ah,” he cooed. A smile I don’t think I was supposed to witness crossing his face. Reaching an arm out, he beckoned my mom forward. She obeyed. “Lo siento, cariña. I did not mean it.”

Cariña.

I bit my lip at the little reminder of my own guy who called me sweet things.

“You did and you know it,” settling on the arm of his chair, Amá hit his shoulder. Then she moved her loving gaze to me, and it got no less adoring as she looked me over. “Now. What finally brings my daughter back here to see us?”

A rushing sense of déjà vu passed over me. I had been in this spot before. But unlike the maddening indignant wave that had crowded me the last time I sat in this seat—one that made me want to run away as fast as I could, now I was willing to sit here as long as it took to get some answers. Because in some ways I felt further along than I’d ever been before, but in others, I felt completely lost.

I thought I wanted to ask my parents how they knew they knew when a choice was right for them. Or how did they realize what they wanted to do in life? But that’s not what came out.

Instead, my eyes alighted on my mother. Tracking her hand as it slid up my father’s arm and landed on the back of his neck. Such a familiar touch. So loving. And yet I touched Con like that without a second thought. All the time.

I zeroed in on the movement. My mouth growing dry as my body knew what I wanted to ask before I did.

“What do you think it’s like when something means everything to you?”

“Well that depends,” Apá said.

“On what?”

“On what this something is. There’s a difference between everything and everything that matters, mija,” he stated. I just blinked at him, and he straightened just a little bit. “Everything is, well, everything. Generic, mundane, everyday things. Everything that matters is the reason why we put up with all the other stuff.”

I shook my head, “How do you tell the difference?”

“Everything might as well just be anything, Celestia. You can take or leave it no matter how it goes,” he explained. “But when it matters to you, it’s wired to the core of you. Burned

there. And no matter how far, how wide, how often you try to push it away, it always finds you.”

“Is it the same for people?” I asked.

My parents looked at each other, not even bothering to hide their surprised expressions. I ignored this.

“It’s the same,” my dad said, blinking. “Maybe more—what young man is telling my girl she is everything to him?”

“Not a guy, Apá,” was my gut response because I was so used to saying it. But Connor was a guy. A man. I don’t know why I had never thought of him as anything other than this blob in the best friend category until now. But if anything, from his strong words and actions to the strong body he knew how to use, Connor was a man. And this was about him.

“What person is so in love with you?” Apá deadpanned.

“Love?” I squeaked. They both looked at me funny.

Ama got up and sighed. “We had better not worry about it. Whoever it is, she has probably already given them a run for their money if she doesn’t even know that they love her. It’s like she’s doing our job for us.”

I gulped. I didn’t know what the hell she was talking about. She was making a huge jump from being important to someone—which I didn’t doubt I was to Connor—to being in love with them—which I highly doubted he was with me.

He had been acting weird and saying a lot of stuff and maybe he had been a little bit handsy. But in love? That was a whole different ball game. A game that Con and I didn’t play.

I shook my head to clear the thoughts tangling there, and only stopped when my mom came over and smoothed hair away from my face. “Stop thinking so hard, mija. Just do what feels right, si?”

I nodded, though not completely convinced. It was hard when what felt right was being in Connor’s arms. Not when he was holding me like he would a friend either. What felt right was Connor’s lips and his body and his sweet, sweet words that were absolutely spoiling me rotten. What felt right was

everything I had been telling myself was wrong. What felt right was this overwhelming emotion that I promised myself I would never feel for him, because if I did, I could wind up losing him.

What felt right was against the rules.

She sighed and leaned down to place a kiss on my forehead. “Well anyway, I came in here because your brothers and sisters are home. All of you here, and it’s not even family dinner, ha! I think they want to talk.”

I just nodded again. Of course they’d hunt me down. “I’ll be out in a second.”

“Okay, mama.” she smoothed one last hand over my cheek before leaving the room.

I sat there for a while, just sort of looking at my hands, at the wall, at my father. Processing. Absorbing. Reasoning. Then finally, as my eyes began to clear and my dad came back into view, I saw that he was looking at me too.

Everything that matters...

I went to him. Wrapping my arms around his shoulders from behind his chair, I placed a kiss on his thin head of hair. Into his person I whispered, “I come in here when I miss you too, Papi.”

# Chapter Thirty-six

## CECI

I could have kicked the door to the shelter in, I was that pissed.

I could have, but I didn't. Not only because it was private property but also because it would have scared the already shaken people inside. The tension in the air could be cut with a butter knife, and me being *me* would not do it any good.

So instead I went with a simple, "What the fuck is going on here?"

"Lena!" my two girls shrieked when they saw me, running to me as soon as I crossed the threshold.

I wrapped my arms around their shoulders and accepted their embrace with a sigh. "It's Ceci—but, whatever. *What happened?*"

"We don't know!" Christine whined.

"It's the board," Nina said more quietly. Whispering really. "They had some big meeting and then all of a sudden we're getting notices that we're getting shut down."

"Shut down!" I echoed, pulling back and looking at two sets of fearful eyes. "What do you mean shut down?"

"Relocating," Chris clarified with air quotes and a bitter tone. "They say that Seaside isn't big enough for a shelter like this and we don't get enough donations or support to keep it running full time, much less fund the extra efforts the '*overzealous social workers*' take it upon themselves to orchestrate. The organization will move to Providence where there is apparently more help needed."

My face scrunched. I smelled a rat. “Okay, one: ‘orchestrate’ makes it sound like you guys are putting on a circus and not like your ‘overzelenation’ is the only thing keeping everyone from going fucking insane here. And two: what’s the quarterly budget?”

“Overzelenation isn’t a word, Ceci,” Christine pointed out in a pout.

“That’s what you’re focusing on?” I asked.

“We can’t tell you the budget, you know that,” Nina sighed, snuggling into me.

“You’re going to be out of a job and Seaside out of a woman’s shelter and you’re worried about the rules, Nina? Really?” I asked.

She flinched but then she pulled away from me to look nervously over both her shoulders. Her wet eyes met mine. “Fine, but not here. Maybe we can get coffee somewhere?”

“Nin, it’s ten at night. Coffee is closed,” Christine said, then with a bitter laugh her shoulder slumped. “*We’re Closed*. We were supposed to leave an hour ago.”

They both seemed to shrivel. Like they wanted to leave but didn’t want to at the same time. Like they weren’t sure when they’d ever come back here if they went.

I couldn’t take it. Instantly, I felt this wave of protectiveness rush over me. Making me want to pummel whoever the fuck was responsible for the sorry scene in front of me. Sucking in a breath I felt myself inflate with purpose. “Grab your shit. I have coffee at my place.”

I chose to ignore any and all comments about my car from the two girls who were sitting in it for the first time. I could see by the way their wide eyes trailed along the leather and their hesitant palms slid between their thighs, they were uncomfortable. It made me feel bad, like I had kept a part of myself from them by not telling them about my family and where I come from.

Plopping my cell phone into Nin’s lap, I pulled out from my spot on the curb and started my way home. “Call Connor

for me first, and then you can choose the music, okay? He's the one with the pancake emoji."

Something about the gesture loosened her up and before we all got too much in our own heads, Connor was answering the phone over the Bluetooth.

"Where are you?" he asked.

Even as anxiety plagued my forethoughts, the sound of his voice brought the corners of my mouth up slightly. "Just now realizing that I'm late, huh?"

"Yeah, I didn't feel my usual headache coming on and I realized something must be up," he said. "Where you at, Cee?"

"I'm headed home."

"Here?" he asked, and I peeked up at my friends' curious eyes.

"To my apartment," I corrected.

"Oh," he shifted on something, I think sitting up on the couch. "Something wrong?"

"I don't know yet. I went to the shelter because of a situation."

"By yourself?"

"Yes, I—"

"I told you not to leave there by yourself again. You were hurt, remember?"

"And I'm not alone. I have Nina and Christine in the car with me now. And, not *that I need your permission or anything*, but I wanted to let you know I might not be coming home tonight," I said. "And also, if you're free, I might need you to look into a few things. Something doesn't seem right."

"It doesn't?" Christine whispered, Nin just giving her an apprehensive look in response. "What would he even be looking at?"

The notion sounded innocent enough, but I knew to have Connor "look into" something was to have him digging into

the deep depths of someone's secrets. If Connor looked into the history of the shelter for us, he was bound to find something worthwhile. I assumed it was that implication that had him pausing, quiet and contemplative. I could feel his thoughts buzzing all the way from the beach.

Finally, his gruff voice returned. Gentle but cautious. "You're okay?"

"Perfectly fine."

"You'll tell me everything later?"

"Every last word."

"Alright then," he said. And then, still gently but less familiar, he said. "I'll send over some food. Be good ladies."

"Thanks, Connor," the two said weakly, with me echoing a softer, "Thanks, Con."

Almost as soon as the phone clicked off, Christine heaved a sigh. "So... Is he, like, railing you yet, or what?"

God bless Christine for breaking the tension and getting us to laugh all the way home.

\* \* \*

The awe picked right back up when we entered my apartment building. I could have blamed the climate controlled underground parking, the sleek lobby with its polished floors and quiet ambiance, or even the little mints we kept on every side table and entrance. But really I think it was Don the doorman who outed me.

"Hey, Miss Fernandez! Long time no see," he said as we shuffled out of the elevators and through the lobby.

I tossed a smile over my shoulder but didn't stop. "Hey, Donny! I've been pretty busy lately."

"I bet! I know you lot are always working! Hey, I don't want to take up too much of your time, but I've got some mail



we've been holding for you." Don met me halfway to hand me a huge stack of mail. I must have winced because he gave me an apologetic look. "I know it's a lot, sorry."

"It's okay, Don. It's my own fault for not coming around," I said, hiking the pile up on my hip. "Did I miss anything interesting?"

"Everything's ship shape on this end ma'am. You enjoy your night."

"Don't call me ma'am, Don. I'm young enough to be your kid," I said. And I would keep saying as long as he kept doing it.

He smiled. "Alright, Miss Fernandez. Have a good night."

"Fernandez," Nina said, tone eerily quiet. "I didn't know that was your last name."

"Hmm," is all I said to that.

Christine snorted. "Is that supposed to mean anything to you?"

The way Nina held my eyes for several seconds across the mirrored elevator put me under the impression that it did. Even though she eventually just shrugged and followed me to my apartment.

When we entered, I went straight to the kitchen after turning all the lights on, my little ducklings following close behind me.

Just because my family insisted on doting over me (and I didn't exactly fight them on it), didn't mean I didn't know how to do my own shit. Directing the two girls to sit, I got them a glass of water, poured each of them a shot and then began working on the coffee. The home espresso machine was a gift from Connor. He insisted it was more for him than anything, but he'd gotten it in baby blue and wrote out little instructions on how to use it when he wasn't here, so I never quite believed that he'd gotten it for himself.

*Everything that matters.*

Christine snorted, picking her shot glass right up and knocking it back. “You really know how to treat a girl.”

I tossed a smile over my shoulder, one cup of coffee down. I gave the first to Nina who did not look like she could do a shot with no chaser like Christine just had. She smiled gratefully and took the shot like a cap of medicine before raising the coffee to her lips.

Minutes later, everyone had a cup but we were all looking into them gravely, hardly drinking anything.

“Okay so, since no one else is going to say it,” Christine started as I finally settled against the counter with my drink in hand. “You’re fucking rich!”

“Beyond rich,” Nina pointed out, looking wary.

“Like *loaded* rich,” Christine agreed, head nodding like a bobble.

“Is this important?” I asked.

“Oh my God!” they both gasped.

“What?”

“You didn’t even say that cliché annoying thing like ‘*my family is rich*’,” they said. “So it’s you! You’re the rich one.”

“It’s generally all the same.” I shrugged.

“It’s not,” Nina said.

I sighed. “Is this going to hold up the actual purpose of our little meeting?”

They both nodded. I pressed my lips together, my heart giving a little stutter. I loved Nin and Chris. I really, really did. But part of the reason why they have been at arm’s length for so long was the fact of my family. It wasn’t an exaggeration or an illusion that people treated you differently when they learned where you came from. No matter if it’s good or bad, if they resonate with you or not. Generally, especially when you first meet them, a backstory changes you in someone’s eyes. But I’d known these two almost as long as I’d known the

shelter, and at this point if I wasn't going to tell them (at least something) then I don't think I ever would.

I cleared my throat. "My family owns businesses. I have a trust. My property is a part of that trust."

"Gotcha," they said in a way that said they didn't get shit.

I set my cup aside and moved forward. Raising my eyebrows, I looked at them. "Satisfied?"

"For now," Christine said, looking around another time and then sighing like she was suddenly exhausted. "Wow, Ceci. You being absolutely balls to the wall rich almost distracted me from the fact we're losing our jobs. But now it's all coming back, and it's somehow *worse*."

I frowned, her unhappiness going straight to my heart. "Don't do that. Just tell me what's going on. How the hell can there be no budget for the only resource for women in the goddamn city? Nin, the quarterly finances. You said you would tell me."

"When we were running smoothly? About one and a half million yearly," she said with a wince. I waited for her to continue but she didn't. I blinked, my face scrunching. That couldn't be right.

"That's it?" I asked. And I shouldn't have let it slip out, but it did.

"Oh, we're sorry, *Bill Gates*, we didn't mean to offend you with our chump change!" Christine guffawed.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and began to pace. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean, then?"

"I'm just saying, I've seen dogs who raise more money than that in fundraising, and I'm talking ugly dogs. There's no way in hell the budget's not being met if *that's* it. Especially not when—" I trailed off, my frustration morphing into an agitated grumble.

"Especially not when what?" Christine asked slowly.

I waved her off. “Nothing.”

“Especially not when she’s been donating almost double!”

Both Christine and I turned to look at Nina.

Nina who had a piece of my mail between her purple painted nails. I had set the pile on the island on our way in, not thinking she would go through it!

Shuffling over to her I snatched it away from her grip. “Give me that!”

She just swiped up another envelope and shook it in the air between us. “Celestia? *Celestia!*”

I frowned. *Dammit.*

Crossing my arms over my chest I grumbled, “Ceci. Just, fucking Ceci, alright?”

Christine’s glass clattered as she knocked a hand against it, pointing at me. “*Fernandez... Celestia Fernandez* as in the *Celestia Fernandez* on the donor checks?”

“*Fernandez* as in *Fernandez Incorporated!*” Nin added.

“*Fernandez Incorporated* as in...*everything*. Their name is on the leases of over half of Seaside.”

Wide eyes got wider as they continued in their realization. “*Your* property? I thought you meant you owned the unit, not the entire building!”

I groaned, but inwardly. Outwardly, I stood very still. My back straight but my stance a forced casual as I leaned against the counter. I was uncomfortable, and I was caught. “Are we done?”

They both swung gazes up at me, Christine’s more surprised and Nina’s sort of...angry. I felt my heart give a pang of regret. Especially when it was Christine who spoke next, quiet and unsure and guarded. “You lied to us, Sel—*Celestia*. Why?”

I pressed my lips together for a long time, and then with a long sigh I felt my armor crumble. This sucked. “At first it was for safety. I didn’t know you guys; I didn’t know what to

expect. But after a while, it just seemed too awkward to bring up.”

“And we aren’t worth a little bit of awkwardness?” she asked, her eyebrows pinching with obvious hurt.

“You are, I just...” I sighed. “I just didn’t want you looking at me like you are now. Like I’m suddenly a different person.”

“You *are* a different person, though. Different from who you said you were, at least,” Nina said with fire in her tone.

I nodded. “You’re right. I’m sorry for keeping it from you guys.”

“But that’s it, right?” Nina asked, a weird tone of incredulity taking over her voice. “*That’s* all you’re sorry for?”

“What else is there?”

“Oh, I don’t know? Maybe the fact that you’ve been running around *playing* charitable and concerned, all for an hour, or a day or two days each week before you run back to your fancy life and the rest of us are stuck in reality,” Nina said, and I swear *venom* could have hurt less.

“Nin—” Christine tried, but Nina wasn’t done.

“When we lose our jobs, it’s real. If you lose this, it’s just another plaything that you can replace, isn’t it?” she spat.

Hurtful words from a hurt girl. I knew it; she knew it; Christine knew it. But still, I couldn’t help the miserable feeling that washed over me. Miserable and prickly. It was like an icicle snaked down the middle of my spine. On top of pinning me up straight, it chilled me over.

Slowly, I lifted from my spot against the counter, moving over to my friend. She was hurt. I knew that. But she had lost her entire fucking mind if she thought I was going to sit here and take it. “Hey!”

She jerked at the snap of my voice, but her eyes held angry and fierce as she looked at me. I stopped right in front of her, holding her gaze with as much sincerity as I could. “You want to be mad at me for lying? Fine, yell at me about that. But you don’t get to judge me based on what I have. You don’t get to

loop me in some preconceived category in your head. Doing that just makes you a snob and a hypocrite. I'm sorry for lying. I really, really am. But just because I'm sorry, doesn't mean I won't throw your ass out for insulting me or my family. Got it?"

She glared at me, her eyes going all over my face. Her expression going from hard to contemplative to wary all in the same minute. And then she rushed me. My instincts told me to brace for an attack, but my mind knew Nina would never hit anyone. So what was she doing?

The mystery didn't last long. She shuffled right past personal space and wrapped her arms around me in a tight, tight hug. Hesitantly, I wrapped mine around her too, and then I hugged her back in truth, feeling my steely defenses melting and just leaving me with that sick sorry feeling I'd had before. For hurting my friends and for seeing someone else hurting them too.

"Is this what it feels like to be on the other side of your temper," she whined, both laughing and groaning. She hugged me tighter, her voice lowering to a whisper. "*I'm sorry*, I think I'm in shock. And I am so, so mad at you for not telling us, but mostly because we're friends and for a second there I felt like I didn't know you."

"*You know me*," I said. "My name doesn't change who I am."

She laughed, "I realized that when you ripped me a new one just now."

Another body latched onto us and we absorbed Christine into our hug right away. We were all sad and confused, but we were sad and confused together.

"What are we gonna do?" Christine groaned. "I can't drive to Providence every day!"

"What happens if we get the money?" I asked.

"You can't pay any more, Ceci. You've done enough plus, if you've been donating as much as I think you have, then we don't really know where that money's going anyway," Nina

said, her angry voice returning. “They’ve been telling us our budget was decreasing for the better part of a year now and really it should have been increasing since you started donating.”

I hummed thoughtfully. “I was actually thinking something more public, or community based. If the public is involved there will be eyes on the shelter and people will be more invested in what is being done with the money.”

“Oh,” they both said.

“And if we can establish it as a big enough event, we may be able to make it annual, securing a constant donation pool to fundraise yearly,” I said. “And if we do it right, it’ll compound and get bigger and bigger each year.”

“I think she’s speaking rich,” Christine whispered.

I elbowed her. “I’m speaking *long term*. Whoever the fuck is in charge is not worried about sustaining our place for another year let alone a decade or two. We’ve got to make sure it becomes immovable, and I think I have a few ideas on how to do it.”

I felt electrified as plans began to take shape in my head. It was like the opening of a curtain or a fastening of a latch. These feelings of certainty and belonging coming into place and revealing themselves at the same time. Revealing me.

I was not going to let the shelter go down without a fight. And I realized that, while lately I’d been learning how to physically spar, I’d always known how to fight for the things I cared about. For others, and for myself. The SWWS was no question a part of that now. Seaside *would* still have a women’s shelter by the end of this.

So help me, we would.

“You look so murderous, Ceci,” Nina pointed out apprehensively.

I blinked, and for the first time I felt my scowl as it loosened on my face. Shaking my head I spat, “I’m getting so sick and fucking tired of people taking my money.”

Curious eyes questioned me, and I just sighed. “C’mon. Since you know who I am now, I can tell you the full story of how Con and I became...us.”

Us. Not friends or besties, but *us*. because I wasn’t sure the other words were even right for us anymore.

*Everything that matters.*

For the rest of the night, we sat around my living room sharing stories, brainstorming ideas, laughing, crying a little at our current situation and wolfing down the dinner, dessert, and extra dessert Connor sent over for us.

We all deduced it would be best if they stayed with me for the night and while the girls showered, I messaged Connor all the details he would need to start his search. Thanking him for the food with a promise of a proper thank you of pancakes soon.

“Hey?” Christine asked as we huddled up in my bed well past the latest hours of the night. “How did he know exactly what we all liked for dinner?”

I cracked a smile. Unprompted, Connor had sent over a veggie bowl for Nina, pasta for Christine, and my belated burger and fries for my post-period binge. Going through the trouble of personalizing each meal and getting it exactly right.

Speaking into the darkness around us, I said, “Because he’s my person. And he knows you guys are too.”

And maybe it was time for me to drop the best friend part for good.





# Chapter Thirty-seven

## CECI

“You’re not gonna like it, Cee.”

The clang of whatever was in the box I was trying to put away, clattered through the stillness of the garage. I had set it down too fast.

Cutting a glance my way, Con reached over and picked it up. Bending in the other direction, he slid it easily into its rightful place on the tall storage shelves along the wall. I was supposed to be handing the boxes to him assembly line style, but the onslaught of bad news was starting to weigh on me.

It was a Saturday night, and we were cleaning out his garage. Why? Because he had two other ones and this third one that he was previously using for storage and at home gym equipment, he was now turning into a boxing room.

For me.

Yup. So much for the fucking rules, huh?

I’d come home to find him clanging around in here, apparently on a mission to do this all himself. In the corner he’d stacked a large boxing bag, floor pads, reflex bag, and other useful but totally unnecessary equipment for the project.

When I caught him with a sheepish look on his face, it had taken some hard pressing to get him to admit that he’d wanted it to be a surprise but lost track of the time. The fact that he was setting up a little boxing gym in his garage for me in the first place was setting me on fire, emotion clouding me from my head to my toes.

When I asked him why he was even going through the trouble of doing any of it, his simple answer was, “Because you love it, and you know how I feel about you.”

Um, no I didn't...But I sure as hell knew how I felt about him after *that*. To mask the bleeding my heart was doing all over the place, I had rolled my sleeves up and got to work too.

Over the next few hours, we organized his stack of old deconstructed laptops, argued over if he should just throw away the permanently tangled ball of wires or not, and ran to the store to get a ton of plastic storage bins and buildable garage shelves to store everything in.

It was around then that it dawned on me to ask him about the shelter in which he promptly answered with a hiss.

“What?” I’d asked.

“It’s not looking so hot,” he’d started. “You’re not going to like it Cee.”

And here we were. I tried to resist the urge to tell him to ‘*spit it out*’ as I listened, but I think the look I cut him might have done the job for me. He took the hint.

“The SWWS isn’t a government run entity. It never was. It was put into practice as a lobbying effort from the mayor, whose campaign catered largely toward women. His whole thing was geared towards women’s voices and choice. Seaside is small, and the city never got approved for solely a woman’s shelter especially when there’s one in Providence not two whole hours away. So the shelter is privately owned and funded as a nonprofit running off of donations and sponsors alone, no city funding,” he explained.

“And? What the hell does any of that mean, Con?”

“Mayor Collins was renounced of his title and position for the misallocation of campaign funding last year,” Con said grimly. “He’s got no reason to keep the shelter open and every reason to liquidate.”

“It can’t be because of underfunding like Nina and Chris said, right? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“You’re right, it’s not. Or at least it’s not *really*,” he said. “From the outside looking in, they’ve been overpaying bills and vendors. Racking up huge invoices for stuff that doesn’t make any logical sense.”

I felt my ears getting hot and my heart starting to beat hard and angry. Agitated, I hefted the next box up and slid it onto the shelf myself.

“I don’t understand,” I grumbled.

“It’s fraud, honey,” he said. “Or at least that’s what I’m suspecting. Those businesses they’ve been paying crazy money to are all owned by Collins or people close to him. Some of them are part of the board, but most of them are a part of his old party. They’re pretty crooked.

“To anyone who doesn’t have a clue, he’s just paying off his expenses and cutting his losses with Seaside. But he’s actually funneling his money out and sacking the whole damn operation.” He at least had the intuition to sound remorseful. Gingerly he added, “I wouldn’t be surprised if they were lying about Providence too. It doesn’t seem like they’re planning to keep the shelter going at all, let alone in this city or the next one. They’re just taking all the money they can get from it until they let it crumble.”

Three more boxes were hefted onto the shelves by the time he’d finished that statement. I was basically throwing them now. Enjoying the slight sweat I was working up and the burning distraction my muscles were giving me from the slightly sickening, mostly pissed off feeling growing inside of me.

The next bin was either too heavy or the shelf was too high because when I went to lift it, I couldn’t get it past shoulder level. Storage bin tipping me off balance, I probably would have fallen on my ass if it weren’t for the big body that materialized behind me.

Con caught the storage bin on either side, covering my hands and then wiggling the thing out from my grasp like it was a box of kitchenware rather than the heaviest box of computer scraps I’d ever held. Leaning forward he reached up to slide the box onto the shelf, his warm front pressing into my back as he did.

Sighing, I did something I knew I shouldn’t, not if I actually wanted to stop breaking my own rule. I leaned

backward into his warm body, letting my weight and my worries sink into him. He would hold me up, I knew he would. And if this resulted in another appearance of the handsy, mouthy, *touchy* Connor that was so frequently around lately, then so be it.

I was already fighting my ass off not to rage at everything happening to a place I loved. I didn't have the strength to fight whatever this feeling was between me and Connor too.

Sensing my surrender, Connor wrapped big arms around my shoulders and squeezed me to him. I felt his lips press gently into the top of my head as he rocked me slightly in his arms. Not exactly the kind of touching I had imagined but just as welcome. His comfort was all I'd wanted.

Him. Always him.

"If you're not careful, you'll break everything in here with your little tantrum," he murmured into my hair.

"I'm okay with that," I said. "Then you can throw me away with the rest of it, where I belong."

"Oh no!" he said, suddenly pressing a palm to my forehead. "Call the doctor, I think your arrogance is broken."

I elbowed him in the stomach and he shook with laughter, loosening his grip on me and turning me around in his arms. When his eyes landed on me, they weren't as grim as I thought they would be and I don't know why, but that lifted my heart.

Now instead of miserable, I was just depressed.

Lowering myself to the cold garage floor, I laid back. The bite of the cool cement against my back was punishment for being so stupid.

Twice. This was twice now I'd gotten money "misallocated" right from under my fucking nose. My family still hadn't found out about the first one, but the family accountant handled all of our taxes, and Ox handled the family accountant. I was sick just thinking about the lashing I'd get when he found out about this.

A sneaker clad toe nudged at the heels of my shoe. I peeked up to see Con looking down on me.

“Get up,” he said.

I threw an arm over my face, shielding my eyes and refusing him silently. I heard him sigh and I’m pretty sure that shifting noise was him taking a seat next to me. The feeling of his hand running over my head confirmed it.

“You’ve been such a sad sack lately. All irritated and on edge,” he said.

“I thought I was always irritated and on edge.”

“You were *irritating* and *edgy*. There’s a big difference. The other way was much more fun. This is just depressing.” Moving his hand to my shoulder, he shook me like a kid trying to wake up their friend from a nap to play. I wanted to laugh at the motion, but the urge was quickly swallowed by my mounting worries. “What happened to my carefree girl, huh?”

*His girl.* I snuggled into the warmth of that statement, even as I sighed. “She’s dead, Connor. All I ever do now is worry about what’ll happen if I don’t figure my life out before the end of the year. And deciding to donate to a money-grubbing scam organization is not helping my case.”

“It’s not your fault, Ceci. You didn’t know.”

“If it happens once, it’s an accident. I can accept that. But twice, Connor?” I shook my head. “What are the odds of that?”

Slow fingers snaked their way around my wrist and pulled my arm away from my eyes. Hazel brown with flecks of green assaulted me. His eyes held conviction as they met mine. That and a sort of pitying look that made me feel pathetic and stupid. “I’ll admit, it was unlucky. But not impossible.”

I groaned, my eyes closing as I banged my head backward against the concrete of the garage floor. I only got in two soft hits before a hand slid underneath to cushion the blow. I just laid there. Eyes closed, head in the hand of the one who could hold me together the most. Savoring it, because without him I was convinced I’d be falling apart.

“Remember when we met?” I asked after a quiet moment.

“Yeah,” he said cautiously, like it was a loaded question.

“What did you think of me, then?”

He scoffed, “When I first met you, I thought you were ridiculous.”

“No, not then,” I said, unable to help the smile that spread across my face when I thought of the wedding or even the funeral where the Ferguson’s and the Fernandez’s were all thrown together like this for the first time. There had been some growing pains between our two families for sure. But that wasn’t what I was talking about. “No, I mean when we *really* met. When we became friends. Remember that?”

His eyebrows pulled together. “Yeah, of course. Why?”

“What do you remember about it?”

He looked at me for a long time, as if trying to determine if I was serious. Then lowering my head to the ground carefully, he took his hand back before raising it to his neck, “Well... I was shocked when I found you in my sister’s bed. And when I saw your face all scraped up like that, I got a little worried—I found out quick how normal those were, though.”

I laughed and used my knee to knock into him gently. He smiled too, slipping one of his big hands over it and running his thumb absently along the inside seam of my leg. Sobering, he looked at me seriously again. His expression wasn’t readable. He was just *looking*.

In a lower voice than you might think he added, “I remember thinking ‘*holy shit. She’s actually like this all the time*’.”

“Like what?” I asked, thinking for sure he was going to call me a ‘*little shit*’ or a ‘*pain in the ass*’ like he always did.

He didn’t.

Instead, he said something that warmed me from my toes to my head.

“Strong, fierce, *crazy*.” He smiled. “Loyal too. Once you decided you loved Tine, you’ve never looked back. Once you decide to love anyone you don’t look back. You take them and you protect them like your own... You also annoy them like you’re theirs too. You kind of don’t give anyone a choice.”

“For what?”

“But to love you, Ceci.”

My mouth decided to grin on its own. Nope. No permission from me. It just fell victim to the charms of this sweet man’s eyes and what I knew to be behind them.

“Trying to tell me you’re in love with me, Ferguson?” I joked.

“Every damn day, Fernandez,” he said, and you would think he was joking if it wasn’t for this look in his eye. I had seen it a few times, now more recently than ever. But I was able to pinpoint it now as the look he got before he kissed me that last time.

My throat stopped working, making breathing pretty difficult. So I closed my eyes again, ignoring the warring feelings that look caused within me. “Know what I remember?”

“What?” he asked and it could have been my imagination, but his voice sounded hoarse. Choked.

“I remember when you said to me, ‘You’re not stupid. You know what this life is like’,” I said.

“Okay.”

“Well, sometimes I feel stupid. Or at least, I feel like everyone else thinks I am.” He was quiet. He didn’t get it. He wouldn’t. He wasn’t like me. He was smart and put together and had known himself for a long time rather than having to stick makeshift pieces together as a last-ditch effort like me. I was convinced that’s why he could deal with the mess of me. He was the stable to my not so much. “You were the first person to tell me that I wasn’t.”



“Your family calls you stupid?” he asked, sucking in a breath.

“No, of course not.” I waved him off. “But they don’t really call me much of anything. I’ve never had to be much around them. And stacked up against those guys, it’s sort of implied, you know?”

“No.”

“Con, I’m being serious.”

“And so am I. *No*,” he said. “And I’m getting sick of this not good enough bullshit you’re spouting all the time. You’re just about the most confident person I know, Ceci. You can walk into any room and fucking own that shit. You can look at me, a stranger at the time, with a split lip and smile like you just won the damn lottery. You can simply show up and take the breath out of a place.

“You own everything you do. *Everything*. Good, bad, and ugly. It’s hard to watch you be so cautious and unsure and unlike yourself. I thought you would eventually work yourself out of this funk, but I guess you aren’t, so I will. *So what* if you don’t know exactly what you want to do exactly at this moment? So the fuck what? You’re trying, and you’re doing a damn good job at it if you ask me.”

I frowned.

“Take a breath, Ferguson,” I said. Tilting my shoulders, I turned away unable to face the words he was saying. “Just because I picked up a few hobbies, doesn’t mean I’m any less directionless than I was before all this started.”

Connor wasn’t having this. Using both hands, he turned me back on my back, pinning my shoulders down so I was watching him. Unable to move. “Why do you like boxing, Ceci?”

He asked it in such a confrontational way, I was afraid to answer, especially after that last speech. I didn’t think I was ready for the second helping of Connor candor. I didn’t think my heart could handle it. Avoidance wasn’t an option, though. Before I could make another move, or even another sound,

Connor was leaning into me, his chest pressing down against mine as his mouth fell to my ear. “Why, Cee?”

Pulling up just enough for me to see his face clearly, I could see he was serious. He wanted an answer. I bit my lip. “I like to hit things?”

Connor’s hands began a slow slide down the line of my arms. He squeezed periodically, at my biceps, my wrists, and then my forearms and damn if that little pressure didn’t send jolts of delicious warmth to the apex of my thighs. I didn’t have to imagine what those hands would feel like on other parts of my body. I’d felt them before, and I guess I was being overly honest with myself today, because unlike usual, I wasn’t shying away from the fact that they’d felt good. And maybe I wanted to feel them again.

Finally, Connor’s large hands slipped into mine and breath was stolen from me as he suddenly raised both my arms above my head, sending my thoughts racing somewhere other than our current conversation. “Tell me for real, or you get it.”

“Get what?” I asked, breathier than I would ever admit. My eyes trailed from his eyes down to his lips and lingered there.

He returned the gaze, his hazel eyes looking dark in the muted light of the garage. They flicked over my face, lingering slightly on my own lips before he returned them to my eyes. Leaning forward he brought his mouth close, close, closer to mine but hovered just over my lips as he finally whispered, “*Tickle torture.*”

My heart stung as the realization of his words washed over me.

Was he just teasing me? And was I mad about it?

My mind said no that was crazy, but the way I shifted my face, hiding the distinct blush that I felt rising along my cheeks said yes. I decided to answer before he could touch me any further and cause any additional crazy girl thoughts.

“I guess I like it ‘cause it makes me feel strong. After *that* happened to me and all the strength I thought I had before was proven useless, self-defense wasn’t enough for me. I needed to

be able to do more than just react. I needed my power back and I think I took it through the gym.”

I saw him nod through my periphery. “And why do you like the shelter?”

I expelled a breath, thinking before I answered. “All women deserve to feel safe, but the women who make it into that place... They’ve already been broken down so much. So much that it’s unfair to expect them to be any stronger than they already are. They deserve to have someone else being strong for them.”

Connor grunted, a finger slipping under my chin. Pulling, he moved my head and made me look at him. I saw sincerity in his gaze. Sincerity and...pride. It did swirly things to my chest. “That doesn’t seem directionless to me, Cee.”

I sighed. “Okay, sure. I’m a feminist, I guess. But what do I *do* with that?”

“You don’t have to know right now, Ceci,” he said. “You think I knew more than the fact that I liked computers and cyber security was kind of cool to me before this year? I didn’t. It all just sort of fell together that way. And now I’m flailing to put the pieces together. But they are—coming together I mean. And yours will too.”

“What do you want me to say to that? What do you want from me?” I asked looking into his eyes partly because his hand was still forcing me to and partly because I didn’t want to leave his familiar assuring gaze.

His mouth quirked and his fingers seemed to grip my face tighter, his body moving closer. “I want so much from you. So much *for* you, Cee. You don’t even know the half of it. But right now I just want you to understand. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said solely because I was realizing how hypnotizing he could be up close.

Trailing my eyes over him, I shamelessly took in his well-defined jaw, his clean-shaven face, his incredibly sculpted cheekbones. That brown skin that literally glowed in any light setting, smooth and soft and beautiful. And those eyes that

were so much more than a color. They were a man, *my* man. Quiet, sure, loyal, dependable, and always there. Always fucking there. For me.

Looking at him, I knew that crack in the rule book, in my heart, had just cracked a little deeper. It was sharp and dizzying and intoxicating in a way that made me want to touch him. It had me repeating myself dazedly even though he hadn't asked. "Okay."

He gave me a look that had *'bullshit'* written all over it, his eyes narrowing at me suspiciously. "Okay *what?*"

"Okay, I..." I peeked at him. "I understand that I'm getting somewhere. And my impatient ass just needs to ride it out and see where things take me."

He smiled and his barely-there dimples came out. They only appeared when he smiled *really* big.

"*Such a good listener,*" he cooed sarcastically.

I couldn't help it. I laughed. Connor freaking Ferguson. I never would have guessed the boy who hardly talked would be the one who could talk me down from anything.

He watched me as I laughed, eyes going all over as if he wanted to commit the sight to memory. As I came down, a ghost of a smile continued to pepper his expression. "She's not dead you know?"

"What?" I asked, giving him a look. "Con, you know I'll hide a body for you but—"

A nip to my jaw shut me the hell up. The press of Connor's body was warm and heavy, reminding me that he still had me pinned to the garage floor as he leaned over me.

"I mean *you*, smartass," he said. "The old Ceci. The *real* Ceci. She isn't dead, and I can prove it."



# Chapter Thirty-eight

## CONNOR

I tried to keep from feeling ten feet tall as the excited squeal filled the space of my second garage. Verdict? It was impossible. Not when the girl bouncing up and down in front of me was the girl of my dreams and she was smiling so wide it looked like it might be hurting her face.

And it was all because of me.

“Like it?” I asked as I finished uncovering the small vehicle, the tarp I had been keeping it under sliding to the ground beside it.

“*Connor,*” is all she said as she began to circle the ATV four-wheeler. Her eyes were alight with mischief and wonder, her mouth pulled up at the corners in excitement. “It’s beautiful! Where? When? How?”

I laughed, and moved over to the front of the vehicle, peeking my head around the handles to see if the key was where I’d left it. It was, as was something else I’d left.

“Cee, it’s an ATV, not a wedding ring. Chill,” I said. I was bluffing. I loved that she was freaking out. I loved that she had that smile on her face that crossed between goofy and wicked and delighted. I loved that I knew how to make her smile that way, even when she was having a rough day. And I wanted to put it on there over and over again. “C’mere.”

She practically sprinted to me, bouncing as she stood there and waited, like I had candy for her or something. I shook my head and scooping her face up into the cradle of my hands, I couldn’t resist rubbing my thumbs along her smiling cheeks.

Such a quick change between the worrying girl from before and this eager thrill seeking one. Both of them Ceci and both

of them right. Both of them a layered part of her others had to work to see, yet she gave them to me willingly.

“Go get some better clothes on. Long sleeves and pants,” I said.

“You have to let go of me first,” she replied.

“Right,” I breathed and removed my hands from her soft skin. As I did she grinned and tore through the garage in a sprint to get back into the house.

I huffed. The memory of her body under mine making its way to the forefront of my mind. She looked so good with her arms above her head like that. Her surprised expression parting her lips and reminding me what it felt like to have her mouth on mine. To have her tongue on mine. Not to mention the slight rise of her shirt as it pulled upward past her belly button. Or the soft dip of her tank top as it scooped just low enough to show me the tops of her cleavage. And don't even get me started on the legs. Whenever she was here, she was either drowning in my clothes or walking around in those little compression shorts that drove me crazy. Not the ones from the bathroom that I'm still convinced were fucking panties, but still, pretty damn small ones that outlined her ass just as perfectly as any boy short panties would.

But all that was normal. I was used to Cee teasing me with all her smooth skin and her smart mouth. What I was not used to was her looking at me like she was waiting for something. *Expecting* something.

I'd seen her eyes linger on my mouth and I don't think I was imagining the hunger there. The wanting. But, aside from at the park when I all but told her I *needed* her to kiss me back and the one other time when I think I caught her so off guard that I just stunned her—she had never responded to my touch in that way. So willing, so wanting.

I knew a lusty look when I saw one, but I didn't want to be wrong. I don't think I could take being wrong. Not again. So I had gone for the tease instead. Her disappointed expression gave me the impression that I'd made the wrong choice.

When Ceci returned wearing black leggings and a tight black compression shirt, I had the distinct thought that maybe this outfit wasn't much better. The way the tight fabric clung to her shape would be good for bouncing off any sand that happened to whip at her on the buggee, but damn.

"How's this?" she asked as she materialized in the same spot I swear she'd just left. That may have been the fastest I'd ever seen her get ready.

Looking down at her, I tried not to peek at her ass in those leggings as I inspected her outfit. I failed. It looked too good, all rounded and toned from her working out recently. I wanted to run my hands along it. Squeeze it like I'd done before. But as open as she'd been to me pinning her down, I wasn't so sure about blatant fondling.

...And now I was blatantly staring, Ceci catching me with her eyebrow raised in a mixture of smugness and surprise.

"Were you just—"

I cleared my throat and reached into the vehicle before she could finish whatever she was saying. Pulling out the equipment I'd ordered way in advance for her and presenting them to her like a prize. Her eyes seemed to forget my ogling and widened in amusement.

She snorted. "We're not going mountain biking, Con. I don't need full headgear."

I smiled. "You'll wear whatever I say you'll wear. Now, hold out your hands."

She did, and I slid the blue motorcycle gloves onto her small hands, strapping them up tight. The snort she produced was even bigger when I brought the big blue helmet down over her head. She giggled and bounced the entire time.

"Stop moving," I murmured through my own smile. Finding the bottom strap, I worked at securing it underneath her chin.

When I was done, she flipped the eye shield up so she could look at me. "Do I look cool?"



It was my turn to laugh as I flipped her shield back down. “You look like a dork. Let’s go.”

“Can I drive?” she asked, already trying to work her way into a driving position.

Using her hips, I guided her up onto the seat, and then using a hand on her low back, I slid her forward. Making room for myself behind her. “No way in hell, Fernandez. Nice try.”

I couldn’t tell what her face looked like but I could hear her laughing. God, it was like a drug, that sound. I’d turn myself into a fool for her just to hear it on repeat.

After getting my own helmet on, I lifted myself and eased on after her. Spreading my legs around her, I swallowed as my groin settled against the swollen back of her, my thighs closing in tight beside hers.

“All set,” I said.

Wind licked at my arms and legs as I pulled out of the garage and around the back entrance of the beach. My stretch of land was large, but I did share it with the spread of neighbors surrounding me. They were old, usually only coming out on the beach in the mornings to walk. Now it was sunset. The big ball of fire somewhere off on the other side of the house, not currently visible but casting a sherbet hue along the coastline. A lingering blue mixing with pinks and yellows and oranges over the lapping waters. Out back, the beach was clear.

In front of me, Cee was doing that buzzing thing again. The one where she bounced and looked around like she’d never been on a Seaside beach a day in her life. I rubbed at her thighs, wishing thick gloves and thin cloth weren’t separating my skin from her skin.

“*Stop squirming,*” I said through a laugh this time. Leaning into her back, I asked, “Ready?”

“No.” *Bounce, bounce, bounce.* “I want to drive.”

“You’ll drive us straight into the ocean just to see if we’ll float.”

Giggle. “I won’t!”

I leaned into her even further, mesmerized. “You’ll go a hundred miles an hour.”

Another giggle. “I won’t, I promise Connor! *Pleeease?*”

My heart pinched, and I caved like I always did.

“Okay, but listen up, psycho,” I started as I slipped my hands from around the handlebars and set them over hers instead. Pushing her hands down I gave her control of the gears that steered the buggee. “You can drive but we’re going to go slow and—”

Yeah right.

Ceci clamped down on the throttle and jolted us forward before we yanked abruptly to a stop. She tried again, this time kicking up dust as she spun the back wheels in place. I let her try one more unsuccessful time before I pressed my hands down over hers and took control, using my grip to position her hands where I wanted them.

“You see. This is why we *listen*.” This got me an elbow to the gut, and I laughed. Then, with control of both of our hands, I moved the throttle on both sides and sped us forward onto the beach, “Use both handles, honey.”

An excited puff of air left her, bordering on a squawk as we began to cut through the sanded area. Then she was howling, our speed increasing with her volume. I pinched her. Urging her to quiet down, but I’m pretty sure as soon as I put the helmet on her head, she had gone wild. I couldn’t stop her if I tried. And I didn’t want to.

The four-wheeler would have obviously worked better on a course or along some sort of dunes, but there was something beautiful about the way the flat horizon blended together in a blur of color and light and sound. Wind whipped around us, and Cee’s hair blew back into my face as she sped along the long stretch of beach. She tried to stick to a straight line, but oftentimes jerked suddenly to either side because she “thought she saw something”. Each time causing me to shoot hands out to her waist or legs or stomach going, “Woah, *woah*.”

And each time she'd say the same thing over her shoulder. "Calm down, I got this."

I knew I was smiling as I sat back and let Ceci take us over forty down miles and miles of beach. I couldn't help it. On top of seeing Ceci back to being herself, this was just plain fun. The truth was, I'd bought two ATVs after a passing comment from Cee while we watched tv. She'd thought they were cool and I thought making her happy was cool, so a couple weeks later they were delivered.

I could have brought the second one out too, but tonight I wanted to be close to her. Especially after such an emotional week—hell, an emotional summer, and it wasn't even over yet.

Wind whipping ferociously around us, Ceci tossed a shielded glance over her shoulder.

"Watch this," she said. Then she yanked the handlebars abruptly to the left. The cart swung swiftly across the sand, the back two wheels tail spinning before jolting to a stop. We were close enough to the shoreline that as she swung to a stop, sand and water sprayed haphazardly into the air, raining down over us in an elemental shower.

"Aghhh!" we both gasped out through laughter. And then—like kids, we both looked at each other saying, "Again!"

I felt sort of bad for the amount of tire tracks we left in the sand from all the tricks we attempted. But I quickly forgot about that every time I heard the melodic sound of Ceci's laugh. And when the sunlight finally started to seep from the sky, leaving the beach in this half-dark half-glowing yellow underneath the cover of clouds, we turned back to head toward my beach.

I thought she'd want to go inside after that. It was the warmest part of the summer here in Rhode Island for sure, but the water wasn't exactly hot springs temperatures at night.

But no. When Ceci parked the ATV just at the junction of the shore and the water, she started peeling off her gear with continuous buzzing energy. Gloves and helmet gone, she

leaned down to toe off her shoes and in a second she was jumping off the car and splashing into the water.

It wasn't deep. Not even shin deep, but she shrieked as the waves hit her legs at the exact time that she landed, sending her toppling over into the cool water.

"Jesus," I said, rising from my seat and pulling off my own gear. When I got to my shoes, I had barely pulled my second sock off when I felt a cold wet hand latch onto my wrist and pull. I groaned, but it was fake. I could never not want her hands on me. "It's like your birthday all over again."

"Which birthday?"

"You don't remember?" I asked, jumping down off the four-wheeler, my feet splashing into the cold water and sinking into the moving sand of the sea. "Let me jog your memory, then."

There were still slivers of light peeking through behind the dark clouds. They mixed together with the light of the moon and cast Ceci in enough glow for me to see all of her. Her reddish-brown hair, lithe and curvy frame, her big smile. I ate her up. And then, I *picked* her up. Swift and easy before swinging her horizontal in my arms and laying her into the water.

She jerked, screeching. "Connor!"

"Don't tell me you forgot your '*Arctic Baptism*' birthday already, you freaking weirdo," I said.

Fighting me and the cold water, she tried to get up, but I held her down by her waist letting her head rise above the splashing current but not the rest of her body. She shrieked again. "I remember! I remember!"

"Good," I said, not letting up. "You'll appreciate another one, then."

She yelped. But she was laughing. Gasping for air as she did. Then suspiciously she said, "Fine. If I get one, you get one too."

And before I could process what she intended, her arms were around my neck and I was plummeting face first into a wave as it broke the surface and buried both Ceci and I under the sea. I sputtered, flailed, and smashed Cee to the sand under us as I tried to orient myself. Salt assaulted my eyes, nose and mouth, and just as I thought I was pushing it all away, another wave came crashing into us.

I swore, but there was no maliciousness in it. There couldn't be when I was laughing so hard my stomach hurt. Cee had wriggled out from under me and was on her knees trying to pull me back under by a spider monkey hold on my back. I just grabbed her under the thighs, lifting her as I rose to my feet to wade us deeper into the ocean before it got too dark for safety.

We played like kids. Splashing and laughing and jumping and claiming the ocean as our own. My heart felt light in my chest. Like at any moment it would pick up and fly away, and I'm certain it was Ceci's laughter giving it wings. When I looked at her in the setting sun and rising moon, I looked at my everything, just as I'd told her when she was asleep.

As the moon reached its perch in the night sky, we started to tire out.

Slowing down showed us how cold it was. Our soaking wet clothes heavy and not doing anything to counter the cool night air. I stood close to the shore near the ATV wringing my wet shirt and hanging it on one of the handlebars. When I turned around, there was Ceci stealing my breath away for the second time as she stood there in a little triangular bra thing pulling her own shirt over her head.

My eyes didn't know where to go. To her smooth honeyed skin, to her perky breasts, to her little belly button ring with a blue star dangling in the middle.

Anywhere, everywhere.

My eyes drank her in so much, they almost drowned. And when they finally ventured up to her eyes—where they should have landed in the first place—she gave me a weird look. Guarded, maybe. Cautious, definitely.

“What?” I asked.

“I’m going to take these off,” she announced, her thumbs just inside the waistband of her leggings. That look studying me. “That alright?”

I shrugged even though my brain was saying, *no, no, not alright! Abort fucking mission!* My mouth just said, “Do whatever you want.”

She didn’t seem convinced, but she also didn’t seem shy about running her eyes along my body. She looked at me pointedly as if giving me a message. “It’ll be just like a swimsuit.”

Alright. I guess I deserved that, seeing as I was a complete and total horn dog the last time she’d been even remotely close to naked around me. She was laying down her law.

Like a swimsuit. Like a swimsuit. *Like a swimsuit.*

Only, the small barely-there thong that she wore was nothing like any swimsuit I’d ever seen her in. I meant to turn away as she leaned down to peel the wet leggings from her body, but I don’t think the devil himself could tear my eyes away from her after catching just that one glimpse.

She was petite, so it wasn’t like she was all long legs and modelesque features. But her body had grown stronger in these last few months of her working out. Defining the muscles of her legs, hips, and thighs. Plumping her already plump ass and toning her slight shoulders and back to an alluring shape.

The sight of her in the moonlight with the pool of the ocean at her feet was mesmerizing. Arousing. A vision that went straight to my groin and sent me standing up on end.

“You’re staring,” she said, not the least bit embarrassed by the fact. But there was something else in her voice. Tossing the leggings off to the side she turned to face me, her gaze rising to meet mine. “Why?”

“You’re beautiful,” I said simply before I could stop myself. “Hard to look away.”

She nodded, as if she accepted this answer. Then she took a careful step toward me.

“You know when you said don’t get mad at you that one time?” she asked. I knew instantly she was talking about the kiss in the park. When she let me kiss her and had kissed me back. “I was never mad. Not then and not in the bathroom either.”

I swallowed my breath as it racked hard and erratic and excited and *terrified* in my lungs. I could be imagining things, or Ceci could be talking like she didn’t regret our kisses. Our touches. *Us*. Like she wasn’t running away from this heady, needy pull between us anymore—or, at least not at that second.

I raised an eyebrow, testing her. “No?”

“No.” She shook her head.

“Then what were you?”

“I don’t know,” she said. Her voice going hoarse, her eyes going searching. She shrugged, but it almost seemed unconscious as her eyes stayed glued to mine. “Just...not mad.”

I’m ninety-nine point nine percent sure that I wasn’t imagining the look in Ceci’s eyes. Not the longing, or the wanting, or the desire in that look.

It wasn’t long since I’d seen that look in the garage just hours earlier. But could it really be real? Could she be ready? I still couldn’t tell for sure, and I wasn’t kidding about my heart not being able to take being wrong again.

The first time nearly killed me with guilt. The second time had almost taken me out just by how good it felt. This time could destroy me.

*Would*. No matter how it played out, I was realizing.

Cee had the power to absolutely destroy me. Yet still, as I looked at her with moon rays and dim fence lamps our only lighting. That strong and expecting gaze on me—waiting for

me to lead her, or invite her, or *something*—I couldn't help myself.

For the life of me I couldn't help but watch her, my thumb finding my bottom lip as I hesitated for only a second. Just one, before I said, "Fuck it."

Then I was moving for her.





# Chapter Thirty-nine

## CECI

Hands, lips, and Connor's big, big body were on me before I even blinked. I melted into the touch. Whimpered into it. Dove into him like I hadn't just spent the last few months fighting this very feeling. The feeling that I was falling with no net to catch me. Just Connor's arms to keep me upright.

We had been here a few times before. Touching like we weren't supposed to. Exploring like we weren't supposed to. Yet, this time Connor's kiss was different from before.

The first time was fast. Like a swirling rollercoaster that we were both riding and just trying to catch our breath. The next times were slow, almost too slow as if we were both too scared of something breaking to claim any definite feeling toward it.

This time, though. This time it was like two magnets meeting in the middle of an electromagnetic field. Connecting like they always should have. Joining like there was nothing and no one that could be more perfect for the other half. This time it was right. It made my heart shake in my chest. Forget beating. It was sporadic and confused and it felt like I was plummeting and flying all at the same time. All because of Connor's arms holding me close, holding me together as I melted to a puddle right there on the sand for him.

That's what he made me. A simpering, heavy breathing, puddle as he kissed me. His lips were doing their damndest to be good as he started off clean. Closed mouth, no tongue. It only took one moan, though. One sound and the soft push of a wave that knocked me closer to him for him to breathe me in. Sucking me into his mouth and parting mine wider. Roaming his slow tongue over the surface of mine. Nipping my bottom lip until he got another sound out of me and using his grip on either side of my face to angle my chin up for deeper access.

He was all over me, *inside* of me. It was all I could do just to keep up with him. He was devouring me with no mercy. I could only hang on, hands gripping onto his waistband or trailing up his back or touching something hard and ready in the front of his pants.

I gasped, not proud of how naive it made me sound, but holy shit. That was Connor, hard as fucking steel in my hand. And it was for me. I couldn't pass this off. *That* was for me.

I broke away. Backing up slowly, trying hard to catch my breath. But I didn't take my eyes off him. Not as I trudged my way multiple feet away from him and not as my back hit the side of the ATV.

He was staring at me too. His chest heaving, his features harder to see the further I retreated into the dark. He was breathing just as raggedly. His chest rocketing up and down, but his face seemed composed. He didn't seem surprised or afraid or any of the things I felt warring in my body at that moment. He just seemed hungry. I could see it in his eyes. Hungry... For me.

I had to look away. To clear my head and think about what was happening. I looked up at the moon, but for the life of me I couldn't think of anything other than getting back to Connor's arms. I tried, though.

"It's pretty out tonight." I said.

"It's pretty every night," he said, and when I turned, I found him looking at me. *Walking toward me.*

Like a sucker, I fell into his gravitational pull. Slipping into his orbit easily and the next thing I knew his hands were on my hips and we were body to body again.

Using his grip to guide me, he backed me up against the ATV once more. His warm body melding to mine as my back pushed into the cold machine.

Leaning forward he kissed my jaw. Trailing lips along the lines of it until he was hovering in front of my face, just far enough away to look at me with his ever calculating eyes.

His voice got softer, holding zero hesitation as he said, “So damn pretty.”

Searching hips pushed into me and I gasped, fingers going to his neck to hold on. I groaned, and he swallowed it up with a kiss, his hands moving from along my hip to explore the plains of my stomach, my back, my ass.

Moving his mouth to the other side of my jaw, he trailed kisses up a path to my ear before kissing the sensitive spot behind it. I shuddered, the sensation rocking me to my core and causing my hips to push forward and meet his this time.

I moaned again guttural and near primal, and I felt him smile against my skin as his mouth began a descent down the path of my neck. “Just like that, baby, I love that sound.”

“*Connor*,” I breathed, surprised by his mouth and what it was doing to me.

He kissed my neck. Tasting it and sucking it and causing an unmistakable heat to swell in my belly. I whimpered again. And he laughed, the sound going straight into my throat as he latched himself there.

“You seem surprised,” he said.

“Shouldn’t I be?” I asked through pants and groans.

He leaned in and pressed his body hard against mine. His chest smashing against my chest, his knee going between my legs, opening me wide and coming very close to my most sensitive parts. His hard erection was right there on my stomach, plain as day, and I was stretched to my tip toes just to be close to him. Bordering sitting on the cart behind me to get myself higher.

Teeth scraped along the shell of my ear before he sucked to lobe into his mouth. I’d never had anyone play with me like this before, but the way his teasing touch was driving every nerve to the edge of bursting, was making me lose my senses. Any and all reason evaporating from my head.

Con’s breath was hot in my ear as he said, “Is it really so surprising that I want you like this?”

“Not surprising,” I said, my head dropping and my lips falling onto his shoulder. “Just sort of scary.”

“Scary?” Connor pulled back, eyebrows pulled down low. “Why scary?”

I swallowed, my eyes going all over him. Plump lips, damp skin, lowered eyelids. Damn, I wanted him. And I wanted to smack myself for wanting it.

But then I let myself look into his eyes, and it was a mistake. They were so deep and familiar and inviting. Even when he had me like this. Even when we were crossing this line that we both knew was wrong and could end catastrophically, he still had the nerve to look at me with fondness and reverence and *love*.

He couldn't look at me like he loved me. I mean, I knew he loved me, but if he looked at me like *that* when he had me like *this*... who knew what kind of silly thoughts my mind would conjure up next. Thoughts like maybe he could be *in love* with me, too.

I didn't want to find out, I couldn't. So I ripped my gaze away from his and forced it to his shoulder instead. “It's scary cause it's something we can't take back. If it happened, we could never go back to the way things are.”

Strong fingers grasped my chin, angling me back in the direction he wanted me. *Back in the direction of him*.

Deep and sure and commanding, he breathed like he was answering a prayer, “I really fucking hope so.”

And then Connor was kissing me. *Consuming* me. All hands and lips and teeth once again.

His hands moved all over my body. Running along my shoulders to my back. Pulling me closer as they continued their path down to cup my ass, squeezing me hard in his big hands. In a slow slide he smoothed his palms over the front of me. Skirting them up my hips, to my ribs and stopped just under the bottom of my bra.

Pulling away from my mouth he just held me there, swallowing me up with his eyes as he admired me cupped in

his hands. “*Fuck.*”

That curse might as well have been an aphrodisiac. Reaching forward, I grabbed at his neck and pulled him back over me. He came willingly, his hands moving to squeeze me higher, getting a whole handful as his fingers pinched the sensitive buds peaking through the material of my bra. Twisting them in an agonizing torture that made me gasp and moan into his mouth.

Shuddering, I couldn’t stop my hips from moving forward to search for his. Needing sweet friction against the hardness of his body.

Instead of that part of him I’d grabbed earlier, I got that same knee he had parted my thighs with. Using it as a wedge, he pushed closer to me and I found myself giving in to the crazed feeling of lust and arousal, shamelessly moving my aching core against it. It felt good, but it was only a temporary stand in for what I really wanted.

I tried to get closer, needed to, but the difference in height was too much. And it frustrated me.

“What do you want?” he whispered against my lips.

“Get me on this thing,” I said. Without hesitation, he lifted me up so that I was sitting atop the wheel of the dirty sandy ATV. I didn’t care, because now I could finally feel him as he stepped between my legs and pressed that delicious heat into me.

I may have tossed my head back and moaned. And Connor may have leaned over me and sucked the last unmarked sliver of my neck into his mouth, pulling on me hard and causing me to curse as I bucked forward, my soft against his hard. Into my skin he asked, “What do you need?”

I flicked my eyes open, allowing myself one glance into his eyes before I focused on something less gut wrenchingly honest as I whispered, “You.”

He cursed again, long and groaning. His hips rocking into mine, again and again as he made a rhythm between us that only our bodies knew the tune of. His lips doing the same on

my lips. I was erratic and groaning guttural sounds I had never made in my life before he had the sense and control to move away. Just far enough for his hand to grip my thigh and spread me further, but not far enough for our lips to detach.

He caressed the sensitive flesh there, dragging his fingertips up the line of my inner thigh and rubbing slow circles into me. The gentle massage sending currents of desire racing straight to my clit. All I wanted was for him to touch me there.

“Can I touch you, Ceci?” he asked, so serious and needy it made me squirm.

“You’re already touching me,” I said, trying at levity.

He tightened his grip on my leg causing me to hiss and rock in search of more friction. “Don’t kid right now. Please. Just answer me straight.”

I chanced another look into his eyes and I felt my world tilt on its axis. The way Connor was looking at me, with worlds in his, I knew there was something different about this time. And still I couldn’t turn the other way.

So I just whispered, “Touch me.”

He didn’t ask again as he stroked up the innermost dips of my thighs and onto the soft middle of my panties. I shook.

Slowly, he felt me there. Running his fingers over my sensitive center. Holding me close as my legs jerked around him. Roaming his other hand all over my body. Palming my ass, gripping my thighs, angling my face as he continued to kiss and kiss and kiss me. Finally, he landed back on the curves of my chest, taking the left side in his hand and showering his attention on it. I bucked as the sensation of him surrounded me.

Slipping the fabric of my bra, his calloused hand connected with my sensitive flesh, and I seized, crying out only to have him capture the sound with his mouth. Ravaging mine.

When he successfully shut me up, dazed and wanting and a mess, he kissed a trail down my chest to my right side. Pulling my bra the rest of the way off with his teeth, letting me spill free from restraint. He sucked me into his mouth, his tongue

circling the peaks just as his hand pulled my panties aside and

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“Fuuuck,” he groaned at the same time I hissed the same word.

Strong, thick fingers dipped their way into my folds, sliding fingers all around my most sensitive areas. Slowly they began the slide up to the little bundle of nerves that seemed to be pulsating as if begging to be touched. He only teased me though, circling it one glorious yet unsatisfying time before sliding his fingers away.

“Don’t do that,” I panted, trying to rock my hips in a way that would get his hand back to where I wanted it. Needed it. He just dragged another languid slide up and down the length of me, circling me again at the top and then sliding away. I whined. “*Connor.*”

He nipped at the top of my cleavage, marking the swell and making me arch and moan at the pinch of it. Lifting his head to look at me, I gave his eyes another cursory glance before focusing on something else.

I know I sounded breathy and needy as I damn near growled, “I said touch me, so *touch* me.”

“No, Cee,” he said into my neck, kissing downward until his mouth was against my throat again. “You call the shots everywhere else. I call them here.”

“Connor,” I pleaded.

“*Baby,*” he cooed back. Taking his time, he kissed me long and hard and slow. Working my mouth until my insides melted and my jaw went slack from the effort. Breathless, he pulled back and rested his forehead on mine. “I’m gonna make you feel good, so just be patient and let me.”

And to his credit, he did. Spreading my legs open wider, he eased his shoulders back slightly, ducking his head so he could see me. Slowly, he let his fingers trace the lines of my most intimate features, his eyes tracking every second of it. Finally, when I began to writhe with need, he slipped a finger inside, both of us sucking in air at the sensation.



One finger and I was full. And then there was his voice, all rumbly and throaty and different than I'd ever heard it before. "Fucking perfect, Ceci."

My body tingled at the praise, my warm flesh gripping onto his finger as I savored the first seconds of him in me. But he wasn't moving and no matter how much of it he thought I had, I really was never good at patience.

Wrapping my hands around his big wrist, I held on and started to move my hips until I could finally feel the sweet attention I was begging for. Throwing my head back again, I groaned at the fullness of his finger brushing inside me. Connor's eyes went glassy as he watched me ride his hand.

"That's so fucking hot," he let out in a gruff whisper.

When he laid a staying hand on my hip, I thought he was going to stop me again, but instead he was holding me still, wrapping a hand around the top of my thigh to hold me open. And then adding another thick digit to the mix.

I was panting and moaning and begging in seconds. The need in my clit beginning to feel like life or death. And then all of a sudden he was touching me there too. Flicking me with his thumb and pumping me with his fingers and pulling at me with his mouth and I felt myself climbing and climbing this invisible ledge that I wanted so badly to be pushed off. My skin hot, my heart beating, my legs shaking.

I think I lost air when I felt the press of another finger at my opening. I tensed up, my arms tightening around Connor, limp and jellylike.

"Too much," I panted as I squirmed away from the stretch of his big fingers.

"Mmm," he hummed onto my lips. "Just two?"

"Yes, please."

"You're gonna need more than that to get ready."

"Ready for what?"

"For me," he said.

And then he was lowering to his knees in front of me. I was speechless as he lined his face up with my sex, no hesitation as he used his palms along my thighs to spread me out wide in front of him. I couldn't imagine what I looked like staring down at him from where I sat on a dirty tire wheel, but I could see what he looked like. And all I could describe it as was a man starved.

And that's how he tasted me. Like he'd been waiting his whole life for this one specific thing. His tongue enthusiastic as it lashed out at my flesh. Teasing, sucking, and lapping at my slit in unforgiving, unrelenting motions. His fingers finding their way back to my opening and filling me up so good and full that I didn't even hear myself as I cried out again for more, faster, harder.

Connor's hum reverberated through my whole body as he asked, "How about now, honey?"

"Okay," I whimpered and immediately cried out as that third finger entered me, joining the others as he continued pumping me and sucking me and cleaning me up as I spilled more over. I nearly fell apart right then and there.

"Connor," I said, my voice a warning cry as I felt a tightening, convulsing pressure settle over me. Building me higher, so high that I knew I was soon to be tumbling down. My next words were a plea. "Connor I'm about to—"

He doubled down. Sucking on my swollen, sensitive nub in a hard, sloppy pull as he speared me with his fingers in quick, slapping thrusts. I lost control of my whole body as tremors rocked through me and I cried out as I exploded. Warmth enveloped the entirety of me as I wracked with shudders, convulsing as I splintered all over him. The groan he let out was so deep and growly, you would have thought he'd just exploded too.

"Mmm, so fucking good, Ceci," he said as he stroked me down slowly from my release. "Good fucking job."

Giving me one last intimate kiss down there, he started to make his way back up to my level. Kissing my legs and my hips. Righting my panties and my bra as he did. Holding me

up as I started to sag in exhaustion and pure bonelessness. His mouth slanting over mine and kissing me roughly as his hands softened to coax every last residual shiver and shake out of me.

Slowly, my mind and my soul began to return to my body. I felt as loose as the sand underneath us, threatening to float away with the slightest breeze.

And it was nice...

Until the common sense I left suspended up in the air came slapping back into me like a fucking whip.

Me and Con had gone there. We had gone *everywhere*. His mouth, his body, his hands had been all over me and it all felt amazing and destined to be and *so damn right*. And that was so damn terrifying because it meant it could be all the more devastating with what this could do to us. Everything that happened before could be explained away or reasoned to some degree, but this? How did friends come back from this? How could "*friends*" produce something so atomic in the first place? It confused me how something so fundamentally wrong could feel so right.

Half-naked and panting, I clung to him. Not like before when I'd wanted his hands on every part of me, seeking the pleasure he was so readily giving. But in a near desperate sort of way, my face buried into his shoulder, my heartbeat never coming down for a break. I felt nauseous, felt nervous, felt dread.

Connor rubbed my back. "You okay?"

I squeezed him tighter, afraid to look up at him. Afraid to look into his eyes and see something I wasn't ready to see.

His slow hands moved in circles along my skin. Trailing up to my neck and then to my hair. I felt his chest rumble as if he would speak, but he didn't. That happened three times, him trying to find something to say but each time coming up short. Each time it solidified the dread in my stomach. The knowing that we had just made a horrible mistake.

Finally, he settled for something simple. "That was fun."

“The four-wheeler or the after?” I asked, my voice this squeaking thing I didn’t recognize.

He took his time answering. “Both.”

“Connor,” I wheezed. My fear and regret and anxiety mixing in a ball and washing away every ounce of goodness he had just poured over me with his attention.

“What, honey?” he asked, his voice soft and reassuring. His arms banded tightly around me even though he didn’t know what was wrong. And that’s why I loved him. And why I was so devastated.

Maybe not the second I let go, but eventually I was going to lose him because of the line we’d just crossed.

I tried to hold him tighter, but it was impossible. My arms and legs were already aching from squeezing around him so hard. I tried to ease up, but I couldn’t. This was my best friend. My everything that mattered. And while I could never guess how much more time I would have with him wanting to be that for me, I knew I must have accelerated the process after this disaster.

So used to just telling him what’s on my mind, I didn’t even think before I shuddered and vomited my fears all over the place. Speaking into his chest I croaked, “That...was a mistake.”

“A...mistake?” he asked, like he’d never heard the word before. He paused. Then he swallowed like five times before finally he cleared his throat and said, “Just look at me, honey. Let’s start there.”

Fear seemed to prick every nerve in my body, causing me to close my limbs around him and lock as hard as I could. I didn’t want to look at him. Partly because of the sound of his voice but largely because of the look I had been dodging in his eyes. I was scared.

He laughed, but it held absolutely no humor. “Didn’t take you for the shy type, Cee.”

He moved away from me, pulling me out from his embrace and looking down on my face. When I didn’t look up at him,

he used hands on either side of my cheeks to guide my eyes up.

And just as I suspected, just as I feared, I saw it all there.

All of his patience, and kindness, and tenderness, and protectiveness. All of our long nights and shared dinners and secret meetings and inside jokes. All of *us* were in the rounds of his light brown eyes. No mask, no filter, just us. And it paralyzed me.

What had I said? A mistake? That wasn't right. The only mistake here were those words. Those stupid, scared words that I wanted to take back immediately. Because the way he was looking at me now couldn't be the mistake. The way he was looking at me had to be love.

And fuck me, I felt it too.

"Fuck," he spat, bringing my thoughts back down to earth and to the man in front of me. The curse wasn't like the ones before—all hopeful and excited, like I'd given him the best present ever. No, it sounded more like someone was taking something from him. Like someone was hurting him. It sounded wrong.

He said it again, and I flinched.

"What?" I asked.

He took a step away from me, looking me over. He had long since covered me back up, but the way he stared at me made me feel like I was still naked. Just as bare and vulnerable as before.

And then he said words I always knew I wouldn't be able to take from Connor. Words that shattered me from the inside out.

"I can't fucking take this anymore, Cee."



# Chapter Forty

## CONNOR

Regret poured off her in droves. Rushing from her features in large suffocating waves. I felt like my chest was being crushed. Like I couldn't breathe, and the assailant drilling my fucking heart was a five-foot something redhead with the most stubborn resolve I'd ever seen.

And she was regretting me.

I moved away from her, trying to put distance between my battered heart and her fucking bludgeon. Retreating far enough to feel water dance along the backs of my feet, and then I remembered. Remembered what came before this devastating shot to the heart.

Perfection.

Things had been so damn perfect, from the way we'd laughed in the water to the way she'd come apart in front of me, crying my name in the best way possible. So why were they so messed up now, not five whole minutes following?

Blinking down at those regret filled eyes again, I faced her with the little, tiny strength I had left. I had given it all to her. Given her my heart *again*, and like I fucking feared, it was the worst one yet. Because this time she hadn't stopped or waved it off or ignored the magnetism between us. This time she carried through with it, begged for it, and now she regretted it.

And that shit hurt.

I looked around, my brain trying to register where I was and what I was doing. Anything other than my world turning upside down and inside out. My attention caught onto our clothes hanging on the four-wheeler. I grabbed my shirt, but instead of putting it on, I handed it to her. She pulled it over

herself immediately, then wrapped her arms around her middle as she alternated between looking at the ground and peeking up at me.

*A mistake.*

I shook my head as the words replayed through it. A fucking mistake?

I could lead her to the water, but I couldn't make her drink. I couldn't make her love no matter how much I convinced myself I had. No matter how much of the emotion I poured in from my side. I couldn't force this. And maybe we'd gone too far in that direction to ever go back now. If her scared, sorry eyes were any indication maybe we'd already broken things.

I knew of at least one thing that was broken.

Looking down at my hands, I cursed them for shaking. They had just been so sure, and now they were cowering with the mixture of fear and anger and sadness all swirling through me. I couldn't take this. I knew what this would do to me and I'd tried anyway and I just...

"Ceci," I said. My mouth was somewhere ahead of my brain, one seeming to know what the other wanted to say without the two consulting. "Cee, I'm leaving."

She stiffened, her back going ramrod straight, her steps bringing her paces closer to me. I fought the urge to take a step away from her. I would not be that man. I wouldn't be cruel, I just... I had to go.

"Leaving...the beach?" she asked slowly. Something in her voice told me she knew that wouldn't be the answer.

I rubbed a hand over my face, looking up at her. And there she was. Hair having dried in the mild summer night, bare legs peeking out from underneath my clothes, little toes painted her favorite shade of blue. And she was wringing the bottom of my shirt nervously in her hands, like she knew. She probably did, and it killed me that she was already hurting because of it.

But I was also hurting, and I had to think of myself now. For once.



“The country, Ceci,” I said. “For a little while. Mal invited me out to Oxford for a bit. He’s teaching there and there’s some award he’s getting and... I’m going.”

“When?”

“Day after tomorrow.”

“Did you... Did you just decide to go? Right now?”

I looked at her, but just her form, not able to meet her eyes before saying. “Yeah.”

Silence.

There was the sound of the ocean and the sound of my fucking heartbeat, but other than that, nothing. When I looked back up, she had the shirt balled tighter in her hands. Her shoulders were wound up so tight, and her jaw was locking. That terrible habit she had. I could see it from here.

I wanted to ease her troubles, ease her pain. But I couldn’t and I wouldn’t. I needed time to think. *That was a mistake.* The memory taunted me. Asking me what more there was to think about? Ceci had spoken, and it wasn’t what I was hoping to hear. It was time to give it up.

Looking up at me, Ceci’s sad eyes caught my attention. They were hurt and full of emotion and maybe a little wet, though that surprised me. The look in those eyes broke me. Still, I couldn’t look away.

She opened her mouth to speak but closed it immediately. Taking a deep breath and swallowing she tried again. Finally, she was able to squeeze out a small, defeated voice I’d never heard from her before. “Can I come?”

I pressed my mouth together, a pang of regret coursing through me, too. I wanted to laugh at her bluntness, but it also hurt. She couldn’t come, and her face as she realized that was my answer sent a knife-like feeling through the pit of my stomach.

She tried again in a weaker voice. “Can I visit?”

I said nothing, and her shoulders sagged dejectedly. Her voice breaking on the next line, “Can I call?”

She knew the answer and her shoulders hitched high as she took in a sharp breath, trying to calm herself. Heat and protectiveness surged through me, making me want to take it all back. But I knew I couldn't.

"Come here, Ceci," I said. And when she ran to me, I almost gave it all up. But I didn't. I just wrapped my arms around her, pulling her real close. Cataloging the feel of her body wrapped around mine. Memorizing this feeling for when I missed her or when I felt myself being weak. Leaning down I breathed in the smell of her. A mixture of salt and sand and that faint hint of me. Mine.

But not mine. *A mistake.*

I hugged her tighter. Bringing my lips down to the top of her head and saying. "We'll text sometime, okay? And I won't be gone forever. But you should probably stay away for a while. My family will be coming by to check on the house."

She didn't say anything. And I couldn't resist rubbing her back, hoping to ease some of the tension there. "I'll stop by your place tomorrow while you're at work to set up Lila's stuff, alright? Remember to feed her early, she likes to get up with the sun."

Nothing.

"And ask your brothers to pick you up from the shelter at night. Or have someone walk you to your car. You still shouldn't be alone there," I reminded her.

Still no reply.

I sighed, pulling back and looking down at her distraught face. I hadn't lied. She was so damn pretty, with her unusual eyes and unusual hair and face in between round like her mom's and angular like her dad's. Pouty lips that were always pink, and she had a total of seven little freckles that dotted the area around her nose. I couldn't see them in the dark, but I knew they were there. I'd seen them countless times before. I knew every detail of her, and I wasn't sure if that would help or hurt me when I was away, but I knew I wanted to hold onto them.

Pushing hair away from her forehead, I said. “Go on up to the house. Maybe start getting your stuff? I’ll drive this thing back to the garage.”

She held onto my sides loosely, hanging desperately onto my eyes as her fingers curled into my skin. “I-I want to go with you.”

I had the distinct impression that she was and wasn’t talking about going with me to the garage. It *sounded* like she’d go with me anywhere, but I just couldn’t guess anymore. I couldn’t keep assuming her feelings.

With gentle hands, I dislodged hers from my body and took a step away. “I’ll be back before you know it. Go on up.”

It took a minute, but finally, she took a step away. Then two. Then she was picking her way back up the beach toward the boardwalk that led to my back gate. Every few seconds she would glance back, first to her side like she was expecting someone to be there and then to the beach where I stood.

I realized then that Ceci hadn’t walked alone since the moment we became friends. I made sure I was there for her, and she’d been there for me too. Now, she kept looking to her side because she was hoping that I’d still be there.

And it broke my heart all over again that, this time, I couldn’t be.



# Chapter Forty-one

CECI

One, two, three, two.

Five, six, three, two.

One, two.

One, two.

One.

One.

One.

One.

“Stop!” Jenny’s voice cut through the quiet of the gym. I contemplated not stopping, but the seriousness in her tone stopped me from disobeying.

Turning away from the bag, I whipped around to look at her. She had a tight frown on her face, but her eyes were sympathetic. That had been her look for the past two weeks. Ever since I’d shown up the earliest I’d ever come to the gym and asked to just hit the bag. It had taken a few days of me hanging around the gym like it was my second home for Jenny to get the full story out of me. And ever since, she hadn’t said much about it. She stood by quietly as I took my anger and frustration and confusion and sadness out at the gym. But in my lessons, she was still holding strong to her hard-ass regimens. I appreciated it, even if sometimes I lost focus. “You’re spiraling again. Take a hike, cool your head.”

“Take a hike” to Jenny meant a sequence of sprinting suicides up and back along the boxing room, at least three hundred uninterrupted jumps on the jump rope, and a perfect round of shadow boxing before you could return to what you

were doing prior. I had been sent on so many “hikes” in the last two weeks, they’d stopped feeling like punishment to me. I welcomed the burn of the physical strain. I welcomed anything that would distract me from the Connor sized hole that went straight through my center.

I was back at the bag in less than five minutes.

“You’re starting to get too good at that,” Jenny mumbled. Then, pushing hair away from her face, she took a breath and said, “Alright, again. We’re doing sequences, remember. Keep your mind here, Ceci. In this room, on this task. Three minutes. Let’s go.”

I started again. Trying not to think of Connor. Trying not to think of the way he sent me packing with all my stuff like he never wanted to see me again. The way he looked at me, like I was everything and nothing all wrapped up in the same little bow. The way he hadn’t called me or texted me or so much as sent me a funny video online. The way he was attempting to totally forget me off in another country. The way he’d said he was sick of me. Or more accurately, he couldn’t do this anymore with me.

One.

One.

One, one, and more fucking one.

“Stop!” Jenny’s voice cut through my assault once again. When I blinked up she just looked at me with sympathetic eyes before she pointed to the floor beyond. “Hike. Double this time.”



# Chapter Forty-two

## CECI

My pride was officially being swallowed.

It had taken me a few weeks, but after settling back into my own apartment and my own life and realizing that Connor was seriously not going to contact me, not even to text me that he'd landed in fucking England, I realized that I still had things to take care of here. Alone.

Coming to terms with the fact that I would be taking care of them without my best friend was the real hard pill to swallow. But I'd swallowed it and now I was here. "Here" being outside my brother's office, not knowing who on earth else to turn to.

I knocked, and the door unlatched on its own, swinging open and slowly revealing Ox standing at his desk with his office phone pressed to his ear. He wasn't expecting it to be me. If the notch between his thick black eyebrows didn't give that much away, the cautious way he told the person on the other line, "I'm going to have to call you back," did.

"I need help," I said, getting right to it.

Ox's dark eyes moved over me, inspecting me for injury and then clouding with confusion when he found none. But just like my brother, he didn't ask any questions before opening an arm and waving me forward. "Shut the door behind you."

I didn't even sit. I barely had my bag set down in one of his office chairs before I was launching into the story of the shelter and how it was being shut down and my missing donations and our plan to fundraise for its rescue. I told him about the decline of supplies and resources, and staffing going on there and the mix of fear and helplessness we had about the whole situation. I told him everything I knew and everything I



thought to be relative. Only leaving out just how devastated I would be if I lost this place. If this would be the next thing to leave me, too.

When I was done speaking, I realized I had been pacing a hole into the carpet before Ox's desk. At some point he had pressed a bottle of water into my hands, and I sipped from it occasionally but was now gripping it so tight that it was distorted under the pressure of my fingers. Ox wasn't behind his desk anymore, but instead right in front of me, leaning against it with his hand around the bottom of his face thoughtfully. When I stopped pacing, he stared at me in that glaring X-ray vision kind of way that only Ox could.

"You identified the problem and found the solution. Aside from the money, what exactly do you need help with?" he asked.

Oh yeah.

Rushing over to my bag, I pulled out the thick file that was delivered to my apartment the day Con left for England. Inside was all the information he had been working on digging up about the shelter, the funds, and the dirty politicians that managed them both. There was so much data. He must have stayed up the entire day and night compiling it all. He must have really wanted to be rid of me before he left for Oxford. I wouldn't be surprised if the things I left at his house were all on the street or sold off by now. He was apparently *that* done with me.

But I knew that wasn't true. If the way he hugged me on the beach was any indication—so tight that my ribs ached afterward—he'd been just as broken as me at his decision to leave. So why did he?

"Ceci?" Ox's voice betrayed him, being cautious and almost soft.

I shook my head and turned to him with the file. I was leaking my problems out again. I needed to stop doing that and finish my job helping the shelter.

"What's this?" he asked.

“The shelter isn’t city or state owned. It’s private. Which means successful or bust, no matter how much money our fundraiser makes, they can keep siphoning off the money to cover whatever made up costs they’ve been paying all year—maybe longer,” I said. “With this information, there’s enough evidence for a convincing case of fraud. But if they’re convicted, the shelter gets condemned for God knows how long. The women can’t afford that. Seaside has nowhere else for them to go. The homeless shelter is small and already overrun, and the women they need—*deserve* a place to themselves. It’s not perfect, but Waterways is a specialized care facility in its own right. They have counseling, a career center, a daycare and security for sheltering trauma victims. If it’s destroyed, they are destroyed. They’ll either have to go back to whatever circumstances sent them running in the first place or have no place to go at all.”

As I talked, Ox alternated between looking at me and flipping through the information in the file. I don’t know which triggered him, but his mood seemed to be souring with every passing second. I swallowed a rough gulp and took a ragged breath. “I have all this information, but no idea what to do with any of it. *That’s* why I need help.”

“Hmm,” he said as he flipped through the pages. I must have been fidgeting in front of him because his black eyes cut up to me and narrowed before he pointed to the chair my bag was in. “Go drink your water, Ceci.”

I was feeling sick, so I did. Sitting down in the chair and taking four huge gulps before regretting it instantly. Now it felt like I would throw it all up.

“How did you find all of this?” he asked.

“I, uh, had some help,” I admitted.

“And where is that help now?”

“Gone.”

He stared at me. I stared back. I hated when he looked at us like this, like he was calculating every word spoken and weighing it against what lesson he was going to shove down

our throats next. But underneath Ox's base instinct to scold there was something else there. *Pride*. It confused me.

Snapping the folder closed, Ox turned slightly and set it on his desk. When he came back around, his arms were folded over his chest. I didn't know what any of these looks meant, but every one of them gave me anxiety. This was maybe the first full hour I hadn't thought about Connor and the absolute destruction he was causing me since he left. But compared to the feeling of anxiety from waiting to hear the fate of the shelter, I almost wished he was my biggest problem right now. At least that misery was familiar. This was new and terrifying.

I slipped to the edge of my seat, looking up at my brother. I couldn't even imagine my own expression. If it was as sick as I felt, it was probably not pretty. "Are we fucked?"

Ox's laugh caught me off guard. "Ceci Fernandez, everyone. The patron saint of women's safety in Seaside, Rhode Island."

"Ox," I whispered, not seeing the humor in any of this.

He just gave me a little smile before pushing off from the desk and coming to sit in the chair beside mine. Reaching a hand out, he patted my shoulder gently then gave it a little shake. "All will be fine. I'll take care of this."

"How?" I asked, but I couldn't deny there was a crashing feeling of relief spreading through me. Ox didn't really beat around the bush. If he said things would be okay, that meant he truly believed they would be.

"Why don't we talk about it over lunch? Hmm?" He peeked up, his gaze falling over his shoulder just as the door to his office opened and in came a beautiful reminder of the man who just left me.

His sister, dressed in a long sundress and the slightest bit of flour under her chin. I don't know why, but I wanted to hug her. So I did, getting up and curling myself under her tall, lithe frame and getting long skinny arms around me in return. I don't know if it was because being next to her made me feel closer to her brother or because this was the only comfort I

could take from her about the matter without spilling all of our secrets out on the floor, but it was just the hug I needed at that time. Just the right one.

In the end, I think it was just because I missed her. And I was tired of sneaking around the fact that I loved her brother. Loved him in more ways than I'd been willing to admit. But how did I tell her now, when he'd already run away?

“What’s going on in here?” Fergy asked as we finally pulled away.

Ox stood and floated around his desk to grab his suit jacket and his keys. “What’s going on is we’re going to lunch, and Ceci has just agreed to tell me every last detail about the day you two became friends. As payment for my help, of course.”

All I could do then was laugh.

\* \* \*

It was later.

After a lunch spent cracking up over Ox’s permanently scowling face—seriously, I don’t know how we didn’t tell him the origin story of Ferg and I’s friendship sooner—we said goodbye to Fergy and Ox brought me back up to his office to plan.

It seemed I had three options.

One was to let them close the shelter and see if the city or some other philanthropic group picked it up. Neither of us were crazy about door number one.

The second was probably the best one, or at least I thought so. Ox explained to me that Fernandez Inc and our family personally allocated a lot of funds toward the political parties of our interests. This funding was national, going as deep as being one of the biggest donors to the last presidential campaign, but it also ran locally. Ox assured that with a little pushing and the threat of the Fernandez name pulling their

backing and funding, the city could probably be persuaded to take a “harder look” at the needs of the local women’s shelter.

This was my favorite, but my brother disagreed.

The last option was the scariest and yet, Ox seemed to think it was the best out of three. He was crazy.

“Ox, a couple of months ago I didn’t even know what I wanted for lunch. Do you really think I’m the right person to be acquiring an entire organization? One that has hundreds that would depend on me.”

“I’ve never known you not to be dependable Ceci...or not to know what you want for lunch,” he said. I threw something at him. He just laughed as he caught it. “*And*, unbeknownst to us, a couple of months ago, you *knew* you wanted this. You just weren’t *telling* anybody about it.”

He was serious again, and he was looking at me in a way that made me itch. Expecting things of me. I turned away from him and paced his office. “Apá was very clear. He gave me a time limit and messing around with this isn’t going to help me with meeting it.”

“Apá gave you a time limit to spook you into choosing a *direction*. None of us knew you already had one.”

“I have other things I want to do now.” I groaned. Images of a fighting gym for women flashed in my head. With things like childcare and free self-defense education and advocacy programs and a plethora of other preparation training from simple awareness to the most intricate styles of fighting flashed in and out of my head.

The idea had only started to form weeks ago when my brain simply couldn’t process yet another rerun of Connor staring at me as I walked away from him on the beach. It was only a thought, but it was one that had wrapped around my heart in a way that all the things I loved did. Instantly, and with claws that dug in deep and wouldn’t release without tearing away a part of me in the departure.

I liked to protect women. Whether it was through a shelter that helped a certain group of them, or through a sport I’d

fallen in love with. That's what I loved to do. That's what I wanted to fight for. I could do both I suppose...But was any of it enough?

"Isn't it... Isn't it pretty different from what you all do?" I said, my voice getting quiet. "Abuelo never really understood non-profit organizations."

Ox stiffened. "Abuelo is not here, he isn't Apá, and most importantly he has nothing to do with you. You are free to do whatever you want, that asshole's opinion be damned."

I should have known not to bring him up. It was a sore subject for Ox, seeing that his wife was our abuelo's wife first. And that he'd done some less than perfect (or even decent) things leading up to his death. But the fact still remained that he'd started from nothing and had given our family the opportunity we had now from the work off his back. Even if Apá hadn't trained the rest of us like he did Ox to take over the company from an early age, he had instilled that history in us from the beginning. Who was I to veer from the path of family success?

Ox was like a mind reader sometimes. Call it a first child superpower or just the fact that he always had to be right, but somehow he knew exactly what I was thinking without even voicing it aloud. "It's not what you do, Ceci. It's how you do it. I think Amá and Apá would be just as worried if you chose something that matched the rest of us but made you miserable for the rest of your life."

I opened my mouth to argue, but he held up a finger and continued.

"And as for us? Your boring pencil pushing spreadsheet reading brothers and sisters, no. It isn't anything like what we do. It's better," he said. "We've got money for the rest of our lives, Celestia. Abuelo, Apá, and even I have made sure of it. You've never needed to worry about that. But you've always, *always* stood up for those you choose. You've chosen that shelter and the women that need it, presently and in the future. Are you really just going to leave them in someone else's hands?"

“Ox, please just—”

“We wouldn’t just leave you to figure it out on your own. We can help with the business management of it,” he continued, not knowing when to shut up. “But as for the rest of it Ceci, no one would be better at it than you. Not one of us has ever been better than you about caring all the way.”

“Are you done?” I asked, nearing the point of covering my ears.

“Almost.”

I narrowed my eyes and he narrowed his right back. I should have known by that look alone. Ox has always been the one not afraid to fight blow for blow with me.

“I can’t pretend to know all the details, especially since you’ve chosen to ostracize yourself for months but,” he cut me with knowing black eyes. “I know you’re going through hard stuff right now.”

“And how could you possibly know that, *Oaxaca*?” I asked, my neck getting hot and my body going defensive at his inclination.

“Because I’m older, *Celestia*,” he said, giving it right back to me. “I’ve been where you’re going and I’m going where you haven’t yet been. I’m not here to judge you or anything you’re feeling right now. I’m just here to throw a lesson I learned from my little sister back in her face.”

I gritted my teeth. “What?”

“You said it yourself. Love is difficult. Sometimes you give more than you take. Sometimes you take more, or even too much. Sometimes it’s far, far away and it seems like you’ll never be able to reach it again. But the bottom line is, it’s still love and it still exists. And the only thing you’ll care about when the other side of it is gone is the things you said and the things you wish you said. Or even, the things you did and the things you were too afraid to do.”

I wanted to smack him.

“Are we talking about the shelter, or something else?” I asked.

He raised an eyebrow. “Was there something else?”

Yep, I definitely wanted to smack him. But I also wanted to hug him for giving me an out. He was a bigger person than me. I would have never done that. I *hadn't* done it when it had been him on the other side of this talk.

Sighing long and deep I looked away from him. “I can't decide on it now... Any of it. I need a little time to think.”

He tsked but nodded. “Alright. Let's talk about your fundraiser then. I think I can help with that too.”





# Chapter Forty-three

CECI

“You’re fired.”

“What?”

“You’re fired, bimbosa. Get out.”

I blinked at Paulo who was casually wiping down the counter at the wine shop like he hadn’t just said the words he said. He didn’t look back up at me, just kept wiping at the counter and finishing his normal closing activities. I don’t think he would have ever looked at me again if I didn’t go straight up to the counter and put my hands over his, stilling them.

“What did I do?” I asked, looking up into brown eyes I now had the attention of.

“Pssh, what did you do? Besides changing hours constantly, running in and out whenever you feel, and getting everything wrong still to this day?” he asked with raised eyebrows, but after a second and a fluttering look around my face, his own softened and he scooped one of my hands up in his. I held on tight, feeling suddenly unanchored and cast into yet another open current. “Aside from all that... It’s about time, no?”

I shook my head slowly. “No. I don’t think so. I know I’ve cut down hours, but I can still help.”

“It was never about help, Ant. You know this,” he said. “You show up here day after day, but your mind is somewhere else. Perhaps it is where you should be as well.”

“You’re...” I stopped, noticing my voice was cracking and the haunting image of Connor on the beach just fucking watching me walk away floated into my mind again. It was a recurring nightmare by this point, haunting me during both

sleeping and waking hours. I blinked at Paulo, determined to stay here and not go back to that night. “You’re tired of me too?”

A soft swat on the hand is what that got me. “I’ve been tired of you since the moment I met you, but this is not why. I only mean that you’ve found a reason to stop working at someone else’s dream now that you have your own.”

It was hard to describe the feeling that washed over me. Relief mixed with sorrow mixed with the purest form of pride. And also dread. Here was another person seeing something in me that I had yet to see in full color for myself.

In the back of my mind, I wondered if that’s what happened with Con and I. If he had loved me long before I had even thought about loving him and he had finally had enough of it. But that was pointless to think about now. I always suspected he’d get enough of me at some point. I just wished I hadn’t realized what these feelings I had for him were before he did.

“Pau, you can’t go,” I said, feeling the slicking cool of panic slipping in. Yet another thing was changing, something else leaving me. Moving on without me. I couldn’t let it go.

He just clucked his tongue. “You still do not listen. I am not *going* anywhere. I’ll be right here, come by anytime. I still expect you to show me photographs of my darling Lila whenever you can.”

“And what about you? What will you do?”

“I will manage. I’m old, I’ve lived my life and I’m still living it the exact way I want to. I want to see you do the same. Yes?”

My eyebrows pulled down. “I guess I *have* to say yes. It’s your store.”

“That’s right.” He nodded, then he flicked his fingers at the air. “Now leave. I’m done with you.”

“Pau?” I asked.

“Hmm?”

“You’ll still hold a booth at the Women’s Festival won’t you?”

“Yes, *bimbosa*,” he said. “Now go. You have much work to do. Just not *here*.”

“Pau?”

“What is it now, Celestia?”

“What did you mean?”

“You will have to be more specific.”

“That one time when we first met, you said that I was nothing like my family, not even a little bit. What did you mean by that?” I asked. I don’t know what had gotten into me—masochism probably—but I was a glutton for punishment lately. “That I’m not as smart as them or something?”

Pau gave me a look that soured his entire face. “You are such a silly girl. You know this, yes?”

I didn’t know how to answer that, the old asshole.

“I did not mean you were stupid. Or that you are so unevenly matched in your family as you seem to believe yourself to be,” he said, his hands going to his hips. “Little Celestia, when I look at you—from the *first time* I looked at you, I saw fire. You have so much heart you burn hot and bright and bigger than I think you see for yourself. You do not throw your fondness around at just anything. You pick your passion carefully. You are not like them because you aren’t afraid to be *unlike* them—to be different. Or at least this is what I thought. Was I wrong?”

“Pau.”

“What is it, Ant Girl?”

“I’m going to give you a hug okay?” I said.

He scowled but opened his arms up wide.

Squeezing me tight, he said, “You are not like everyone else, Ant, and that is not a bad thing. So, stop doubting and make your choice. I know you have one in mind by now.”



# Chapter Forty-four

CECI

One, two.

One, two.

One, two.

“Woah tiger!” a peppy Nina said as she came up to me in the back room of the shelter. “Put the guns away. We’re supposed to be *convincing* the ladies to join this, not scaring them away.”

Straightening, I threw a fake smile over my shoulder. Fake only because I was trying to convince myself to stop moping around so much. I’m glad she stopped me. Three more hits and I was afraid I would be spiraling back into a cycle of mindlessly pummeling yet another bag. It was a miracle Jenny had been so patient with me lately, seeing as I could only keep my focus when there were students on the other side of me. When I was the student, my head was one place and one place only. Back on that beach.

“Sorry,” I said to Nina as I ran a hand over my hair. It felt like a mess, so I started redoing the ponytail.

Nina went straight up to the heavy bag and gave it a weak punch, testing it, before looking at me. “What’s this thing doing here anyway? I thought we agreed on self-defense lessons.”

This made me smile for real. “I brought this in for the future. We’ll start with self-defense but I’m willing to teach more if and when anyone is interested.”

She eyed me. “The future, huh?”

I had yet to tell Christine or Nina about any extra information I'd found out regarding the shelter. All of that information would just serve to stress them out and I didn't want to burden them with hopes if things turned out to be different from what me and my family were planning. So I kept the girls focused on the fundraiser (a Woman's Festival that was growing into an outright carnival with the help of my brother) and told them to worry about their regular jobs while I worried about the rest.

In the meantime, I was commandeering event night. It was high time we axed the movies. Well, okay—movie night was still an option, but this (low stakes self-defense lessons) would be an option too. And tonight was my first night teaching it.

“Are you okay, hun?”

“I'm good,” I said looking at her with a tired smile.

She gave me a sympathetic look in return. “Has he called?”

At the mention of Connor, a pulse started in my head. It was doing that lately. This throat closing, head throbbing, body altering pain overtaking me and making it hard to function with my mind anywhere near where his memory touched. The next breath I took in was shaken and raw. “No.”

“Have you called him?” she asked.

“He asked me not to.”

“And?”

“And this is all my fault. So I've got to respect that, don't I?”

“Not necessarily,” she said as she eased her way to my side. Taking my hand she said. “You both are responsible for where you are now. He had every opportunity in the world to just speak up and say it clearly. You may have been deliberately ignorant, but he was intentionally not forthcoming, not to mention he enables you. He enabled you to continue to hurt him thinking he could take it, and in the end you both just hurt each other. All you need is an olive branch to start forging a bridge.”

I huffed a laugh, and she gave me a look. “What?”

“*I hate olives,*” I said and laughed even more when she pinched me.

“You are so stubborn,” she said with a shake of her head. Turning my hand over, she rubbed her fingers across the red of my knuckles. I had only meant to throw a few punches, but I guess I got carried away without the proper protection. I was doing that lately too.

Sometimes I’d wake up at night and just want to hit something. I had this mini bag I bought myself in my apartment that I would use for exactly that. And sometimes when I stayed late at the gym to get a few extra hits in I wouldn’t always glove all the way up. Needing to feel the sting of something other than my heart for once. The soreness it brought was just another distraction from things I didn’t want to think about. It was welcome. But I could admit the bruising over my skin was not a nice side effect.

Nina’s concerned face had me regretting it marginally. “And I’m worried about you, Ceci. Maybe you need to rethink your stance on olives. Or at least their branches.”

Before we could get any deeper into the conversation, Christine was at the door with a grand total of five women trailing behind her. More and less than I thought we’d start with. More than I thought, less than I’d hoped. It was still a good start.

Nina gave me a ‘*we should talk about this later*’ look and I gave her a look that said ‘*maybe*’ in return. But before she left, I said, “Nin, you got the metaphor wrong. An olive branch is just a sign of peace. You don’t build anything with it.”

She laughed.

“And since when have you ever done anything peacefully? This way suits you better.” She smiled sympathetically, but there was something encouraging in her eyes. “This way, you can use your branches to build him a bridge back to you.”



\* \* \*

What Nina said stuck in my mind. Wrong as she was about the metaphor, the idea of building a bridge, a reason for Connor to come back home, seemed a little devious but a lot my speed. And I knew exactly what I'd do to make it happen.

My only real hang up about it was the same hang up that had stopped me from calling, texting, or trying to contact Connor at all in the now four weeks he'd been gone. Even though I'd opened messages and typed in his number. Even though I'd rehearsed what to say and how to apologize and how I would beg for his forgiveness. Even with the clearest vision of hindsight, I couldn't get past this one thing.

The beach.

After pulling my head out of my ass, I could see clearly all that Connor had put up with for me. All the times he'd said I love you in so many guarded words and all the times he'd said it with his actions alone.

It was clear as the sky was blue that I loved him. Long before this summer, when I'd been going through too much of my own shit to comprehend that he was confessing to me in a million little ways. Long before even this year.

I'd fallen in love with Connor the same way I'd fallen into friendship with him. Like an airplane landing on a runway. Going a million miles an hour at first before settling into a slow glide, and finally, eventually, reaching the right place at the right time and just being there. Grounded, steady, homebound.

I got that now, I really and truly did, but what I didn't understand was the way he looked at me on the beach.

One minute it was like all that love I feared was going to break us was filling me up instead. Making me bold and helping me to see clearly. And the next, Con was telling me he was leaving. I hardly had time to process what I was feeling before it was all being ripped away from me like some kind of

gotcha prank and I still couldn't see why. Had he really gotten tired of me directly after he had his hands down my pants? And did I really have to ask that question? I knew Con, and that couldn't be the case. But then again I knew nothing for sure that he wouldn't tell me.

Right now the only thing I had to go off were the last words he'd said to me on the beach. The last words that mattered at least.

*I can't fucking take this anymore.*

*I'm leaving.*

Not to mention, don't call, don't text, don't visit in so many unsaid words. So no matter how true his declarations of me being his person or being everything to him were at one time, the same could be said about those last words at the beach. And I would never know for sure unless he told me.

So I had to bring him home.

Once a lover of a full ten hours of sleep, lately I was lucky if I was getting four. It was about two in the morning when my spinning thoughts finally brought me to my decision to just go for it. I'd build my bridge, and if Connor wanted to cross it, it would be up to him. If he didn't, then I guess...I guess I'd have to love him as unselfishly as he'd loved me for all this time. Either way, I was done with waiting around.

"Hello?" a groggy, confused voice said into the receiver from the other line.

"Are you sleeping?" I asked.

"Of course I'm sleeping, brat. It's two in the morning," Ferg grumbled.

"Aren't you like an insomniac or something?"

"Why are you whispering?" she asked.

"Isn't Ox sleeping?"

Shuffling from the other line indicated that she was getting up and moving to another room, the bathroom from the sounds of the fan. After the distinct sound of a door closing I heard

her in my ear with a warning tone cutting through her sleepiness. “Yes, I have a form of insomnia and yes he’s sleeping. He doesn’t ever sleep until I do, so you better make this fast before he wakes up.”

“Okay,” I said, deciding not to get into the details. “Real quick. You know the big cliffs in North Seaside, the really popular ones?”

“Mhmm,” she groaned as if she wished she was doing anything else.

“What’s the name of them?”

“Um,” she thought about it for a second. “Froth’s Edge, I think.”

“Is that the big one or the little one?”

She paused, probably wondering for the first time why I knew about a cliff in her part of Seaside in the first place. “Big—Why do you need to know this all of a sudden, Ceci?”

“What’s the little one called, Ferg?” I asked, feeling this twinge of urgency prick me. Something about this just felt right.

“Spindrift,” she said after a while. “Spindrift Drop or something like that.”

“Thank you! You’re the best, go back to sleep alright,” I said.

“Yeah, thanks,” she huffed a little humorlessly, but she didn’t hang up right away. “Hey, Ceci?”

“Yeah?”

“You get some sleep too, alright.”

“I’ll try,” I said, even though I knew how unlikely that was until a certain someone came home.



# Chapter Forty-five

## CECI

SCTA.

Spindrift Cybersecurity and Technical Analysis.

If someone would have told me on my birthday that I would acquire an entire nonprofit organization, be opening a tech company, and still have other dreams tucked away for the future all by fall of the same year, I would have choked. But here I was sitting in my car one week before my first fundraising event with all of those things on my horizon.

After the insistence from both Paulo and my brother, I'd decided to just humor Ox and see what acquiring the shelter would look like. How I would do it and what benefits I'd be able to offer if it was under my (and my own board of directors') control. Ox had done more than humor. He'd given me a detailed outline of the first three years. The first being the most formative where he'd take me under his wing and use Fernandez Inc. to help teach me what I needed in order to oversee something of this scale. The next two being more independent for me as a president, where I could do more vision based work and implement some of the ideas I had in mind for the organization's growth.

The prospect was terrifying, but also the more I learned about it the more I fell in love with the possible reality of it. *And the more I wanted it.* So as of yesterday, the SWWS was mine. Not Ox's or Fernandez Inc's. *Mine.* It was all mine, and our first event was now my first test as president.

This could and should have been great news. But for one, I still couldn't shake this feeling that what I was doing was too far off the carved path that my family had made. No matter how much Ox told me it didn't matter, it felt silly almost.

Maybe because I hadn't told the rest of my family yet, or maybe because I hadn't told my dad. But I wanted the fundraiser to go off without issue first, to know I could actually do the shelter some good as its president before taking it public to the rest of them.

And for two, I had another business to worry about.

I imagine Nin had something less precarious and more nurturing in mind when she'd given the advice to *'build Connor a bridge home'*. But if I was building anything, it was going to be a plank that he was walking whether he wanted to or not.

I knew I hurt him. I knew I had used fear and fractured reasoning to justify ignoring the way he was pouring himself into me. I let myself float in this state of denial because it felt safer to have him somewhere I had already won him instead of diving into the unknown. Into a space where I could possibly lose him. It wasn't fair to him, and I'd ended up losing him anyway so what was even the point of all that strain?

Yet even though I knew I hurt him and I knew he didn't deserve that, I still wanted to smack him.

He hadn't even given me a chance that night. I said a stupid thing. Calling what we did a mistake was dumb and I didn't think before I spoke, I just let my terrified emotions get the better of me. But *he knew me*, and he didn't even give me a chance to breathe in the knowledge that he *loved me*—he didn't even give me a chance to settle in that realization before he up and left me and told me not to bother him while he was gone.

Con was my ground. The foundation I had walked on for two years. Before I even knew what was happening, he'd become my beginning, middle, and end and he decided to snatch that away without even talking about it candidly with me. He decided to leave. And since he'd chosen to take my feet out from under me, I was dragging him back by his feet in turn. Or at least I was setting out to try.

Spindrift was the tech company he had always wanted to open. It didn't have any of his intellectual property, any of his

programs, or much of *anything* at all, really. But it had his name. Both the one he'd always wanted to name a company of his own and his actual name plastered all over the company publicity. He also had his first client. One Seaside Waterways Women's Shelter Planning Committee had hired him to be the technical analyst on contract for the woman's festival. All it took after that was planting a few seeds around the Fergusons about their missing brother being the proud owner of a cyber security company. My hope being that the information would get back to him and bring him home.

I was an evil genius, because it all worked.

Connor was on his way home. *Here already.*

And I was terrified.

Not only by the niggling prospect that Connor could very well return home and not want the same things he'd wanted before. But also terrified of the lingering worry and doubt I had with my own circumstances and the fact that I'd been missing a best friend to lean on throughout those fears.

I had a headache. The kind that felt like your skull was cracked open right behind your eye. I'd only ever had them in passing, but lately, they had become an everyday thing. It was a buzzing, throbbing, pulsing sensation that only really let up when I slept... Which I wasn't doing often. Actually, I'd had less sleep, appetite, or peace of mind lately than ever before. That added onto near exhaustion and raw knuckles from taking all these frustrations out on a heavy bag, and I was near sick.

But Connor was home. The fact had been solidified by Fergy's invitation to this "Welcome back" dinner at my brother's place.

I had been too nervous to go over to his house and see him before dinner without an invitation—or maybe just too scared to apologize to him just for him to possibly not forgive me. So instead of confronting and talking to him about this when we were alone, I would be seeing him for the first time here in front of our families with all of this unsaid, unexplained, unresolved energy between us. And even though I knew I was

supposed to be sorry right now, for the life of me I couldn't stop the beach from playing a taunting loop in my head.

His words.

His hug.

His goodbye.

And me walking away alone after all of it.

Despite my throbbing head, I still banged it against my steering wheel as I cowered nervously in my car. At the moment, the brave girl I always thought myself to be was nowhere to be found. I'd rather stay in my car and hide than have to face Con around our families and pretend that everything was okay. Pretending like we weren't friends was only fun when there was no danger of it actually being true. Now the notion that we could have lost that friendship or even more, was enough to make me want to throw up.

A knock on my window caught me off guard and I pulled my head up from its resting place on the steering wheel to see the wrong Ferguson on the other side of it. I swallowed. I wasn't even able to say anything witty or normal. I just rolled down my window and said, "Hey, Clay."

"Hey, Pip-squeak," he eased out cautiously. His Ferguson hazel eyes slid over me with wary apprehension before he raised an eyebrow. "You doing alright?"

Cutting the engine I forced myself to take a breath and then exited the car. Headache or not, it was time to face the music. "Fine, thanks."

He just looked at me grimly, reaching a slow hand out to shut my car door behind me. "Dunno, Fernandez. You seem a little off."

"And you seem a lot annoying, as per usual," I said, rolling my eyes at him. I didn't wait for him to respond, just making my way up the sandy driveway of Ox's home. "Let's go, Ferguson."

He didn't say anything, just followed me up the drive. But before we pushed into the front door we both knew would be



unlocked, he tapped me on the shoulder. Turning, I was immediately met with clanging metal in front of my face.

My keys. Dammit. Had I left them in the car?

“I’m really hungry,” I said by way of explanation, throwing on as grateful of a smile as I could muster as I snatched my keys from his hand.

Clay didn’t press any further, just leaned in and opened the door wide, letting me go in front of him before following me inside. But to Ox, who had gravitated to the foyer to greet us, he mumbled under his breath, “Yo something might be wrong with your sister—”

Ignoring the fact that I was concerning even the least worryable Ferguson, I pushed straight on into the living and dining room where I found more of my family.

Ferg was in the kitchen pretending to help as Alta really did all the cooking. Lis was at the dining room table with her computer out, typing away with a tight frown on her face. Clinton Ferguson was somewhere around. I hadn’t seen him but I noticed his sleek sedan in the drive when I pulled up, and Mattí was lounging on the couch bothering Sylvie, Ox’s housekeeper, as she tried to clean up and go home. Everyone was there but the one I wanted to see the most.

I couldn’t help but feel disappointed by that. He had to know I’d be here tonight, and if he wasn’t here yet or God forbid he didn’t show. What could that mean?

To distract myself from the thick clogging feeling in the back of my throat, I thought about what it would be like to see Connor after such a long time. I’d never gone so long without seeing him and definitely not this long without speaking to him. What would he look like? Would he be bigger? Smaller? Would he have facial hair or have grown out his curls? Would he wear the same calm features I was used to or would he hold resentment toward me in that strong face? Would he still be my Connor? Or will he have changed somehow?

“Hey, Ceci,” Alta called from the kitchen almost as soon as she saw me enter. “Can you grab the rice and the salsas and

take them to the table?”

“Sure,” I said. Setting my keys down on the counter, I peeked around the room and into the living room one last time, searching for that big body. He wasn’t here. Trying to keep my voice casual, I asked, “Where’s Connor, Ferg?”

“Oh, he’s coming. Just running a little behind with the jet lag,” she said, scooting around the kitchen like it was her job. “He ended up staying a few weeks longer than he was supposed to. Something to do with friends over there.”

“Huh,” is all I offered. Scooping up the appointed dishes, I walked them over to the dining room table.

Logical reasoning told me that Connor had many friends at his alma mater. He had told me himself that he was going over there to support Malcolm as he won an award of some kind. But what my illogical brain told me was that the friend he stayed for had long brown hair, deep russet skin and looked at him like he hung her own personal moon. I know I was reaching to still be jealous of Ria, I mean she was there because she was friends with Malcolm too, but I couldn’t help being a little jealous that she was there with Connor when I wasn’t allowed to be.

I refused to be jealous of somebody Connor loved, though. Or at least I tried not to be, but it was so incredibly hard when she was there with him and not cast away or forgotten back thousands of miles away. *Like me.*

I tried to swallow the sick feelings rising up in my gut. Dread, nerves, or apprehension weren’t feelings I was accustomed to. But they had all moved into my body, taking up what felt like a permanent residence. And for whatever reason just being here was amplifying them tenfold.

Returning to the kitchen I peeked up at Ferg again. “Is he excited about his new business?”

She popped up from the oven with a steaming pan in her hands and passed it along to Alta. “He seems sort of... apprehensive about the whole thing. Maybe a little hesitant.

Seems weird since it's his own business, but we think that maybe it's just nerves."

"Huh," I said again as I took another pan from Alta. I was going for casual, but my heart was hammering, blood roaring and bringing a pounding to my ears.

In the kitchen I was handed one more dish, this one shallow and full of nothing but warm tortillas. I barely saw them. My movements feeling slower and slower as my subconscious attached to the fact that each minute here was a minute closer to his return. I must not have been thinking clearly, or maybe I was just thinking of one thing because instead of asking something new, I opened my big mouth and asked, "Where did you say he was again? He is coming, right?"

The way Ferg and Alta both stopped what they were doing to look at me said it all. I was losing it. Spiraling. Hitting the bottom of the barrel. I was tired and emotionally exhausted and physically exhausted and stressed and I just missed Connor so damn much. I wasn't making sense anymore, and it was beginning to show.

Al trained a kind but focused look on me, "Why don't you sit down after you take those over, alright? We've got the rest."

I wanted to argue, but I couldn't. Instead, I made my way over to the table, or at least I was going to until I was intercepted by Melissa who was just closing her laptop as she made her way into the kitchen. When she saw me, she paused.

"Oh good, you're here. I need to talk to you about something," Lis said. Shuffling things around in her arms, she slipped a bright blue folder from under her pile and handed it to me.

Taking it I peered over the folder to find the bright smiles of five to ten happy models as they walked around some college campus. I blinked. Then raising my eyes to my sister, I blinked again. "What's this?"

"You'll be a little late to start, but I went ahead and enrolled you to RIU to start your MBA this semester. It's about time,

don't you think?" she said, moving past me and into the kitchen like she had said or done nothing important. "You'll start online and then you can head to Kingston in the Spring."

"Huh," the sound slipped out of me, sounding stunned.

You know the moments before a complete disaster? The almost silent stillness of a storm before it all comes pouring out of the sky.

It only took a second for my ears to start ringing. This sudden and powerful wave of emotion hitting me. Blinding me. Making me see red.

I might have dropped the folder. I'm not sure because aside from the muffled, white noise that pressed against my eardrums and the inside of my head, I felt nothing.

This was my unfortunate calm. Unfortunate because it quickly snapped.

Almost like a switch flipping, I felt hot, and angry and sad, and stupid and a million other fucking things all at once. I felt too many things. Way too many to hold onto or control.

Like a rushing tide all of my fears and my worries came flying at me at once. My neck prickled with hot irritation. My skin feeling itchy and warm. I could feel my jaw start to tighten, my teeth grinding in the back of my mouth, my muscles constricting into a tight pull that hurt. Finally, my vocal cords worked their way back from being frozen, everything else still a blur.

"Melissa, what the hell is wrong with you?" I asked.

"What?" she said, sounding caught off guard.

"What. The. *Hell*. Is wrong with you?" I repeated. "Why would you do this without asking me?"

Straightening her shoulders she had the nerve to look at me like she didn't expect me to ask this. She crossed her arms over herself and jutted her entitled fucking chin into the air as she said, "You've wasted this whole summer aimlessly. I thought this would give you some direction."

I just looked at her. Around me I vaguely registered that the boys had gravitated toward us, and the girls had stopped their tittering in the kitchen to listen on.

Lis fidgeted under the sudden attention. “We’ve all been Ceci. If you don’t like RIU you can transfer somewhere else later.”

Aimless. Waste. The words felt like little knives in my gut. Stabbing me right where I’d tucked the hope that my family would actually accept my chosen future. Leaving me bleeding any aspirations of ever living up to the rest of them dry.

Blinking, I realized it wasn’t the folder I dropped earlier, but the tortillas. The dish now on the floor in small, fragmented pieces all around us, the rest of our family alert and cautiously watching the scene in front of them.

I watched the little blue folder as it shook in my already shaky hands, whispering hoarsely, “I’m going to fucking kill you.”

“What?” she asked again, like I wasn’t speaking English. That just made me madder.

“I’m going to kill you!” I said again, louder. Charging straight over the broken glass I stomped toward my sister as I pointed the little folder her way, launching the papers at her chest. “I should take your fucking grad school and shove it down your throat!”

“Agh!” Was Lis’s only response. Sliding around the island in her stocking clad feet, she scooped up a big flat pan to protect herself.

I scanned the kitchen too, clocking the fruit bowl in the middle of the island and picking up the little round orbs inside without a second thought. Lis looked horrified. She backed away from the kitchen slowly, holding her hands and the pan out in front of her placatingly. “Ceci. Let’s use our words. Calm down and we’ll talk about this.”

I threw the first piece of fruit. It bounced off the center of the pan and thudded down to the wooden floor with a thump.

“What? Like we talked about grad school?” I asked, an apple flying from my hand next.

“Ceci!” someone roared. I couldn’t care less. I was angry. So angry. And I was sick and fucking tired of this, dammit. I threw another fruit.

“Was it not enough, Lis? Is it not enough that you fucking hate your job and your life on your own? Did you have to try to drag me into it too?”

“What!” she squeaked. Lowering the pan, she flicked an anxious gaze to Ox. This left her exposed, and I chucked another fruit at her, knocking her shoulder in a perfect hit. She yelped and scuttled a few more steps backward. “That’s not fair! And it’s not true!”

“Nothing’s *ever* fair for you!” I said, tracking her out of the kitchen and throwing more fruit as she backed away. She regressed into the main living area just as I ran out. Dropping the fruit bowl on the kitchen counter, I stared at her but I didn’t see my sister. I saw all the insecurities of the summer just piling up into one shitty mess. “You’re always judging everyone else and when someone gives it back, you run away! You always want what everyone else has. Well here, Lis. I want to fight, so you must want it too.”

She paused, dread in her eyes. I paused, fire in mine.

It only took one step forward before she was turning and running. Opening her lungs and screaming, “Ox!”

We were no strangers to a fight between us sisters. This reminded me of when we were kids and would get into it over almost everything. Lis was always the runner, Alta was the one to stay and fight, and Ox was always the one to break us up. But unlike those times, we weren’t kids anymore. I knew I should probably know better, but she should know better, too.

I chased Lis, determined to catch her and (if not deliver on my promise) at least shake her a little for being so *mean*! I know sometimes I could get mouthy or even a little rough around the edges, but I had never been so careless as to dig my salt stick into my sister’s wounds. She was my big sister, and

maybe she didn't really know how much she'd be hurting me with the gesture (*I* sure didn't until just now) but she could have just asked. God, *both* of them. They could have just come straight out and asked me.

Now talking was out the window. As I chased her around, dodging my brothers and ducking the Fergusons, talking was *way* out the window. I was so mad. So, so mad. And I had developed blinders. Literally chasing her down like I was on a hunt.

As me and Lis played cat and mouse, the rest of them wised up, getting two steps ahead of us without us even knowing. By the time I ran Lis into a hallway and to a dead end, Clinton Ferguson was already waiting there. At which time he simply hooked a finger into the back collar of Lis's button-down blouse and pulled, stepping in front of her and slipping his hands into his pockets as he guarded her there—an unenthusiastic expression on his face. Mattí had slid between them and me, blocking me from the front while the rest of them were standing behind me, closing me in. Everyone looked horrified.

“Ceci, stop it,” Mattí said as he tried to reach out to me. I jerked away from him before he could touch me. He grumbled, “Just take a walk and calm the hell down!”

I didn't answer.

“Ceci, quit it.” Fergy tried to sound menacing with no luck. Al following up with a weak. “Ceci don't be mean.”

Mean! Me? It had come down to me being the problem once again?

Great.

Fine.

*Whatever.*

Breathing deep, I tried for a calming breath. It was ragged instead, cutting and sharp as it pierced my lungs. I couldn't think of anything to say. I wasn't even sure I wanted to fight my sister anymore. I just wanted something to take this frustration and this terrible whirlpool of bad feelings away.

“Guys she’s not listening,” someone from in front of me said. Voice concerned. “She’s never been like this.”

Then, like a pen through a piece of paper, I heard the words that finally struck through my rage.

“Call Connor.” It was Ox who said it.

“What?” both the Ferguson boys asked in unison.

“Connor, your brother. He’s on his way right?” Ox went on, his face not happy in the slightest. “Call him and tell him to get here now.”

I felt my head swimming. Processing information like an overfilled funnel. Everything I heard coming at me all at once but only being fed to me in bits and delayed pieces.

Not listening... Call Connor.

Clay got someone on the phone in a matter of seconds. My heart pumped wildly at the possibility that it was Con. Quietly, I watched Clay through blurred eyes as he spoke into the receiver. “Hey boss, we got a bit of a situation in here. We need you... The Fernandez sisters are fighting... The little one... Alright, thanks.”

He hung up the phone and looked between everyone in the room. “Someone want to tell me what’s going on here?”

“Is he coming?” I heard myself ask, slow and hoarse.

“He’s on his way in,” Clay answered slowly.

I felt sick, my stomach curling over and my heart continuing to beat hard in my chest. I stepped toward Clay, a scoff slipping from my lips. “One fucking call and he’s coming? Just like that?”

“I guess—”

“Where the hell has he been in the first place, then?” I said, my tone disbelieving.

Clay blinked and blinked again. And then he turned to Ox as something seemed to register in his mind. “Yo man, what the hell am I missing?”



Ox didn't get a chance to answer, because in the distance the front door slammed, causing everyone to jump. Ox pinched the bridge of his nose on the other side of the room. Clay and Fergy took a step in the direction of the door and I fell a step back.

Connor.

Connor was coming. He was here, and it wasn't right. I was supposed to be apologizing to him but how could I when I was just so mad?

It had only taken one call. One fucking call from his brother, when I had been waiting for weeks, near months for him to come back. *When I had begged to go too.*

"Celestia!" a voice boomed, followed by the telltale rumble of Con's large footsteps.

I sucked in a breath. I wasn't ready to see him. It wasn't supposed to be like this. All mad and stressed and breaking apart. I had done nothing but break apart in the months where he'd told me he loved me and I wanted to be full and together when I told him I loved him back. But I couldn't do that now. Not with everyone watching and this entire mess that I had made all around us.

Melissa had the right fucking idea. Maybe I should run. Maybe sometimes it was best to just retreat and try again. I wanted to, but then Connor appeared.

Had he always been so tall? So muscular? So beautiful? Had his hair ever grown out long enough that I could see the slight ripple of curls as they waved flat along his head? Had he always been so in charge that as soon as he entered the room, he sucked the air out of it?

Almond skin, chiseled face, and hazel eyes all bore down on me, gifting me with the fact that he was here and he was safe and he was still willing to come inside to face me even if it had been his brother to ultimately bring him here. And yet...

Yet had I ever been so fucking mad at him in my entire life? At that point, I didn't think so. Not when one look at his healthy seemingly perfect form pissed me right off. Because I

was not healthy and I was not alright. Not since the beach. Not since the moment he'd said those words to me.

*I'm leaving.*

I'm fucking leaving! Are you kidding me?

I looked back at him ten times on the way up the beach that night. Ten! I counted. And every single one of those times he had been in the same exact place. Standing there in front of the waves, staring. It would have only taken his big ass like four steps to catch up to me. To stop me and just *talk* about it. Talk about things instead of leaving and kicking me out and telling me not to contact him while I was at it.

But instead he'd left and the sight of him suddenly made me so mad. Madder than I was at Melissa.

Con's eyes tracked me. Sliding up and down over my form, all over my face, and only after he'd taken stock of every other part of me, did he meet my eyes. And what do you know, he was pissed off too.

I felt my nostrils flare.

"What, Cee?" he asked, picking up on my mood as soon as our gazes connected. "*What is this?*"

I shook my head, heat rising up my neck, chest heaving as I tried to cool my angry breaths. What was this? Shouldn't he know? Did he not understand that this was me falling the fuck apart without him?

Apparently not. He took an angry step forward and pointed at the ground. "Explain this to me, Ceci."

Explain it to him? *Oh hell no.* He was not telling me to explain something when *he* had yet to explain a goddamn thing! I just continued to stare into his eyes—his angry, disappointed eyes—trying to calm my racking breaths and the rising anxiety in my chest.

"*What?*" he hissed this time, clearly angry and frustrated if he was raising his voice. It made the knife in my gut twist further. *It wasn't supposed to be like this.* "What?"

My eyebrows pinched together as I tried to determine if he truly hated me. If what I remembered about the beach was right and he was really through with me. His tone suggested that he was and I couldn't lie, that hurt. Connor just tossed his head back and groaned.

"*God dammit, Celestia,*" he sighed, running a hand over his face. He looked around the room, taking in everything from the family around us to the fruit on the floor. Hands falling to his hips, he breathed down at the ground for a countable number of seconds before looking back up at me.

I breathed in a sharp breath that felt more like pointy knives than air. In that short reprieve, his hard eyes had changed into something different. Not back to the Connor I had been friends with for all this time, but to the Connor on the beach.

Connor was looking at me like he loved me. Me, who was causing all of this mess. Me who had broken his heart over and over again and who was now botching the job at apologizing too. He was looking at me like he loved me still through all of it and I don't know why, but that look washed all the anger clean from my body. It was like a drain plug had popped loose and all the unnecessary feelings filtered away, leaving just the one that mattered.

I missed him.

I missed him so much it hurt. I missed him more than just in my mind or in my heart. I felt like there was something stolen from my body that day on the beach. Like he'd taken something of mine with him when he left and I hadn't been the same ever since.

As my chest continued to heave and I stared at Con like a raging grizzly, I felt my eyes start to burn. This horrible welling feeling starting from the pit of my stomach and moving into my chest.

Connor watched it all on my face and when he saw the miserable emotion building there, he took a step forward. Against my normal instinct, I took a step away. He tracked that movement, confused and hurt by it.

Holding my trembling eyes he asked, “Mad at me?”

Staring at him, my nose and throat burning like hell, I nodded my head. But slowly the nod morphed into a shake, betraying me. I wasn't mad. I was something else for sure, but I missed him way too much to be mad anymore.

Con took another step forward, his voice lowering. “Then tell me what's wrong. What is all this?”

My chin trembled, and I sucked in another harsh breath. Somewhere, I found the strength to ask the thing I needed to know most. “Are you?”

“Am I what?”

“Mad at me?”

I wasn't asking because of this. Melissa was on my shit list, and if anyone had a problem with that they could take it up with someone who cared. I was talking about everything else. Everything I realized in the time he was gone. Every misstep and heartbreak I had put him through. I was talking about our backlist, and every wrong move I'd made in creating it.

In his eyes, I saw that he knew what I meant. That he still knew *me*. And in those eyes I saw that he meant it when he shook his head slightly and said, “Not anymore. Never for long.”

I couldn't help it. I sobbed.



# Chapter Forty-six

## CONNOR

I don't think I'd ever seen a more heartbreaking sight than Ceci breaking down into tears.

"God dammit," I hissed as I watched the pieces of her shattering in what felt like slow motion. First her chin moving, then her eyes welling and then her shoulders hunching to her ears like they would somehow hold her together.

Nothing could hold that sudden burst of tears inside, though. It was like crumbling rock falling with gaining momentum. As soon as the first drop of moisture left her, the rest came tumbling down.

I was next to her on her second sob. Scooping her up close and laying a hand on the side of her head. My heart shattering along with hers at the sight and sound of her crying. She wrapped her arms around me instantly, locking them and pressing her face into my shirt. I thought it would comfort her, but it seemed like the embrace only made her cry harder, shaking as she puffed into my body.

"God dammit, God dammit," I said absently. I tried to smooth her hair down with one hand and the other rubbed long slides up and down her back. Still, it felt like my touch wasn't doing anything for her. It seemed like it was actually doing the opposite, causing her breath to hitch and her shoulders to rack more violently with her tears. I leaned into her and spoke in a low voice. "Baby, calm down."

She wheezed.

"Fuck."

Blinking up I looked around us. Clint was leaning along the wall in front of us, a red-faced Fernandez girl beside him.

Mateo was standing in front of Cee and I, switching between an expression of worry and amused surprise. Clay was on the other side of us gaping. When he met my eyes he mouthed *'what the fuck?'* And Ox was at the edge of the hallway, leaning against one of the walls with his arms folded, a mouthy Tine hanging onto him and asking him a million hushed questions. I focused on them.

“Is there somewhere we can, uh...” I looked down at the crying girl wrapped around me, my train of thought faltering. Had anyone ever shaken so hard from just crying? I know I yelled at her, but damn. Rubbing at her back some more, I tried to calm the tremors. “Shhh, honey. Stop crying.”

“There’s a guest room down the other hall. Here, I’ll show you,” Ox said, pushing off the wall and walking alongside Tine as they started down the space.

I moved to follow them, but the little fire-ant dug her feet in and pulled against me. She hadn’t looked up at me once since her fire breathing anger had morphed into this. But this resistance seemed more instinctual than intentional. My eyes trailed to our nosey family around us as I asked, “What?”

“Don’t go,” she said through all her hoarseness.

I moved again and this time she broke away, pulling on my arm and my shirt, speaking quickly and desperately. “No, no, no, Con don’t—”

I moved suddenly. Slipping a hand to the back of her neck and the other to her wet cheek. I tried to ignore the electric sensation her touch sent through me. I’d come back to both give Ceci a piece of my mind and get a piece of hers in return. I never thought I would be getting this. This wounded baby deer state which was so foreign for Cee. It felt wrong on her. I hated it and I wanted it gone immediately.

When my fingers slipped into her hair, I tugged a little at the roots, coaxing her to look up at me. I watched her eyes only. The rest was a mess of tears and under eye circles and redness, but her eyes always told me the truth, and her amber irises were clinging onto me like I was her only lifeline. I

swallowed, speaking to her in a low voice. “I’m not leaving. We’re just going to a room, okay?”

She shook her head rapidly, her eyes streaming, her chest racking up and down as if she had run a marathon. *She was hyperventilating.* And it was scaring the shit out of me.

Pulling on her neck and dipping my head simultaneously, I brought our heads together. I tried to control my voice, to keep it low, just between us. But honestly her family seeing us was the last of my priorities. The first was getting through to her.

“Hey, hey now,” I cooed. The feel of her head was cold against mine. Her huffing ragged and hitching along with her tears. I ran my thumbs along the tense veins in her neck, trying to ease the tightness there. “*Breathe, honey.*”

“I can’t.”

“You have to, baby,” I said. “Breathe for me and listen, okay?”

She sucked down a long breath before she nodded. She let it all out on a sob but that was okay. It was progress. “Good, keep that up.”

She did.

“I am not leaving you,” I said again. “I don’t ever want to again.”

“But you said—”

“Fuck what I said,” I growled. It was the wrong move because she racked another sob, causing me to curse and rub soothingly at her cheeks. Softening my voice I said, “Forget everything I said when I was upset, Ceci and remember who I am. *It’s me.* I’m here. I’m *staying* here, and I just want to talk to you, alright?”

Her pink lip poked out slightly and she looked devastated, but like she was listening. Finally. “Okay.”

“Okay,” I said, and then I was pulling her into my side as we walked down the other hallway and into the guest room.



I immediately walked her over to the bed, sitting her down on the edge of it. Even sitting, she continued to cry. Her shoulders bunched and her hands working to wipe furiously at her constantly falling tears. Easing down beside her, I placed a hand on her back. “Talk to me, honey.”

“I don’t wanna talk,” she whimpered.

I couldn’t help but smile slightly as I moved a curtain of hair off the side of her face, tucking it behind her ear. “What, you just want to cry then?”

She nodded, her face crumpling even more. I swallowed the pain twisting on my heart. “You can cry all you want, just tell me what’s going on.”

“What do you mean what’s going on!” she asked, hiccupping and hitching breaths. “You disappeared and were mean to me and then she was mean to me and everyone wants something from me and all I want is for this to be over and for you to be done being mad at me.”

“Is that it?” I asked softly, rubbing a thumb along her jumping temple.

Her lip poked out again as it trembled. Tears ran down her face so fast they slid right off her chin, landing on hands that were smashed together in her lap. She sniffled. “What do you mean is that it?”

“I mean I’ve seen you sunburned to your toes, scratched in the eye by Lila, sick with the flu *and* food poisoning twice, and hiding in a cellar. If you weren’t crying then, you aren’t crying because someone was *‘mean to you’*.” I said, and I meant it. I didn’t know what the fuck happened here, but I was suddenly murderous with the thought that someone had done something to her. I lowered my voice. “You know I’ll fight for you, sweetheart. Just tell me what’s up.”

Her tears were slowing and she sniffled. “Lissy was mean to me. She hurt my feelings.”

“Your sister?” I asked, and she nodded. “What did she do?”

She shook her head absently. “You too, Con.”

“I hurt your feelings?”

She nodded.

“I’m sorry.”

She shook her head, those tears threatening to work their way up again.

“Will you talk to me?”

“About what?”

“About the beach.”

“I...” she started but stopped. Flicking her gaze up to me she looked for a second before sniffing away. “I dunno.”

“We need to talk about it, Cee. Ignoring it is not really an option for us.”

“Us?” she asked, looking up at me, her eyes searching. Hopeful.

“Us,” I said firmly.

She stayed quiet for a little while, staring at the floor as her breath hitched and her nose sniffled. Then she floated soft worn eyes up to me again and I wondered if I had really done this or had something else happened. Nodding, she said, “Okay, but get rid of the peanut gallery first.”

I followed her cutting gaze to the door. It was ajar and all around it were the nosey-ass shapes of our siblings leaning their heads in. Even Clint and Ox could be spotted leaning against the wall as they looked on shamelessly.

“For fucks sake,” I grumbled, pushing off the bed and crossing the room. Grasping the door in my hand I moved to shut it, but not before I got the commentary of our audience.

“Did she say she had feelings?” Mattí asked.

“Did she call me Lissy?” Melissa asked in a wobbly voice.

Clay was staring at me with wide concerned eyes, “Dude. Since when are you two a thing?”

“I told you,” Clint said from his perch on the wall. “Girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend!” Tine squeaked along with Alta. “*Ceci?*”

“What happened in a cellar?” someone asked.

“Who’s Lila?” asked someone else.

“What happened on the beach?” they all seemed to wonder at once.

“Literally, all of you just—please shut up,” I said before shutting the door on them.

When I returned to Ceci she was still leaking tears. I could tell she was trying to hold them back because they welled in her eyes and poured over in heavy streaks down her face. She didn’t look up at me. *Wouldn’t*. So, I eased down onto a knee in front of her.

In her lap, I noticed her hands. Her knuckles a mix of ugly bruised colors. When I touched them, running my fingers along the top of them, she winced. I cursed, an unexpected rush of emotion crashing into me and enveloping my heart like a punishment chamber.

I know she just said so, but for some reason seeing the evidence really drove it home for me.

She was hurt.

I wasn’t so conceited to think it was all my fault, but I knew I played a hand in it.

“Cee, I’m sorry—”

Small hands shot out to grab mine. “Please don’t apologize. Don’t let me off the hook like that, please?”

I grit my teeth, speaking through them. “*But you’re crying.*”

“I know,” she gave a watery laugh. “Dramatic right?”

Still crying, I noted. Sliding my hands up her arms to reach her shoulders I looked at her. “Tell me what happened.”

She shook her head.

“Tell me *something*.”

“I missed you.”

“That it?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Mhmm.”

“I want to talk about it, but not like this.”

Looking her over I nodded. “I’m starting to think that’s a good idea.”

“Is there really still an us?”

I pressed my mouth together as I stared at the top of her head. I missed her eyes. So reaching forward, I grasped her shaky chin in my fingers and lifted them up to meet mine. “I’m here on my knees for you again, honey. How many times do I have to lay myself at your feet for you to understand me?”

“I understand.”

I searched her face for a lie or at least a misunderstanding in those words, but for the life of me I couldn’t find one. And I don’t know why, but that made me nervous.

“Okay.”

“But we can’t do anything about it until you understand me, too.”

“Okay.”

“And you can’t do that until my face stops leaking,” she huffed, her smile just a wobble at the corner of her mouth.

My sigh was deep as I groaned. “Any way you could speed that up? I’ve been waiting a real long time, you know.”

Another tear slipping out the side of her eye was my answer. I just caught it, wiping it away with my thumb.

“Alright, not yet then. Can I at least get an explanation for this? Who are we fighting?”

She laughed again, which turned into a whimper, a sniffle, and then more tears. Shaking her head, she just snuggled into my hand and whispered, “*I missed you so much.*”

\* \* \*

I was starting to see why the girl never cried. It was impossible for her to process anything else when she did and impossible to get her to stop when she started.

Whenever I thought I was starting to make progress, sudden bursts of tears told me that talking about anything sensitive was out of the question. Anything about England, the shelter, boxing, the cat, or her family set her off. Literally nothing could get her mind off of crying. So instead, I'd spent the better part of an hour simply holding her. Stroking her hair and saying silly things whenever she would start to get worked up again. My only goal being to make her smile.

At some point she dozed off, and that's when I untangled myself from her arms, kissing her head and breathing in the scent that seemed to be missing something, before I stepped out of the room.

I found my sister and her husband sitting together in the living room. Him leaning back with his ankle crossed over his knee and his chin resting on his fist. Her leaning in close to his ear as she held onto the arm of his chair. To anyone else he might've seemed rigid as he listened to his wife speaking quietly at his side, but to those of us who were used to him, we saw the way he was zeroed in on her. Listening intently and speaking in murmured tones back to her.

Tine's eyes caught onto mine as I entered the room. I simply inclined my head in the direction of the French style doors behind the living room and sauntered out knowing they'd follow.

I felt the assessing gaze of the rest of our family, but I ignored it. Clay, of course, didn't care about that. "Where's your girlfriend?"

"Resting," I said. Sliding a look in the direction of the Fernandez sisters I added, "And not taking visitors."

Keeping my attitude in check, I tried not to tell her sister not to go anywhere fucking near her, *like I wanted to*. But I think I still said it with my eyes judging by the way she shrunk away from the door when I caught her going for it.

In the garden, I waited until the couple settled onto the little stone bench along the house before I asked. “What happened? She won’t tell me.”

They looked at each other with grim faces before looking at me with the same wary expression.

“What?” I asked. “She’s really upset. More upset than I’ve ever seen her. I just want to know what happened when I was...gone.”

Ox leaned back, kicking his legs out and extending them in front of himself as he crossed his arms. “Melissa signed her up for grad school without her permission.”

Oh. *Oh, no*.

“That was stupid,” I said thinking of how Ceci would react to that on a good day. It wasn’t much better than this. But today was a bad day. No wonder this was the result. I shook my head. “That can’t be it, though.”

Ox looked at me through the corner of his eye for a long second. And then he looked at his wife almost remorsefully. “No one knows yet. She wanted to keep it a secret, but Ceci owns the shelter now. She won’t admit it, but she’s really scared, and I think she’s battling some strange thought that there’s a competition between all of us. And she thinks she’s losing. She loves the shelter, but she doesn’t think it’s good enough for us to love it for her. That along with Lis’s meddling and...*other things* may have been too much for her tonight.”

“She—” I started, but my sister picked it up for me, springing from her seat and looking straight down on her husband.

“What!”

Ox winced.

“Why didn’t you tell me, Oaxaca?” she gasped.

“Lu, sweetheart, come here,” he said. She did, sitting. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but she wanted it to be a surprise. She was going to announce it at her fundraiser.”

“Oh,” she said, her shoulders slumping. He ran a hand down her long braid and patted her back. “But she must be so scared doing it all on her own.”

“She’s had me,” he said, but his eyes slid over to me. I went quiet, feeling sick. I picked the absolute worst time to leave. And he was letting me know it. I didn’t blame him. I would do the same for my sister. “But I get the feeling she wanted someone else by her side instead.”

“Yeah,” I nodded, beginning to pace. “I was supposed to help her, I just...we just—something happened.”

Ox held up his hand. “I don’t need details.”

I looked at him, and for the first time I realized his complete and utter calm over the situation. Relative to the rest of our family, he was the calmest. I narrowed my eyes. “Was it your idea to call me?”

“Yes.”

“How did you know?”

He shrugged. “I had a feeling that it wasn’t just about grad school.”

I hummed. Looking him over, I nodded. So, he *had* known. My mind flashed back to the way Cee broke down in tears, and I winced. Guiltily grateful that he did. “Thank you.”

“So, just how long has this been going on?” Tine asked, her arms crossed over herself, her gaze focused on me.

“A while,” both Ox and I said in unison.

She looked at him, “And you knew the whole time?”

“I guessed,” he corrected. “I mean, it’s hard not to notice how she looks for him in every room. How they look at each other.”

Tine’s quiet eyes moved to me, picking me over with a fine-tooth comb. It was hard to tell if she was angry, or upset,

or just surprised. But after a while she just nodded, murmuring “You’re good for her, I think.”

Hell if that didn’t fill me up. But my smile was sad, “She’s gotta have me first, Tine.”

She looked over her shoulder at the hallway we’d all just been in. Probably remembering the scene, “She will. You don’t cry like that for something you don’t want with all of you.”

“I hope so,” I said absently.

Ox rose. His tall, lean frame coming up a bit higher than normal, making him look bigger as he moved to stand in front of me. He held my eyes, and it was different somehow. Almost threatening. Without turning toward her, he addressed his wife, “Clementine, would you give us a minute?”

Tine didn’t move, “I’m not going anywhere. That’s my brother and Ceci is my friend. I’m playing both sides.”

He nodded like she had a point and said nothing else. I swear she could tell him to dance on his head and he would. But then again, wasn’t it the same for me?

Squaring his shoulders toward me, Ox leveled a hard stare, “Do you love her?”

“Don’t you already know the answer?”

He nodded thoughtfully. “You know, as her older brother I’m required to say something like, ‘if you hurt her I’ll kill you’...”

I couldn’t help it, I laughed. “If I hurt her, *she’ll* kill me.”

A corner of his mouth twitched.

“And that isn’t necessary. This was a mistake. I don’t intend on it ever happening again,” I said seriously.

He narrowed his eyes, “How so?”

Looking at my hands, I remembered what it felt like to have her in my grasp after going without for way too long. And I would gladly cut them off before giving that up again. I would go through this whole painful summer and another two years



of loving Ceci in secret all over again if it meant I could keep being near her. In any capacity.

That would be kind of weird to say to her brother, though. To him I just sighed. “She’s got all the power here, man. She’s got me.”

Ox’s eyebrows raised, and he slid a single look to his wife before looking back at me. “And you’re okay with that?”

I tipped my chin decisively. “I’m okay with anything she gives me.”

“Then you had better get ready,” Ox said, peeking up past me to the door. “You have a visitor. And she looks like she’s ready to give you hell.”



# Chapter Forty-seven

## CONNOR

“Hi.”

“Hi,” I answered the form leaned up against the frame of the open door, her arms crossed over her body a little defensively. I felt my eyebrows pinch. “What’s wrong now?”

A tear had slipped down the side of her cheek, even as the rest of her face seemed normal. Her voice was not as it broke immediately upon use, “You weren’t there when I woke up. I thought you left again.”

My stomach curled. Regret hitting me straight in the heart. I pressed my lips together to keep from frowning.

Here stood the girl of my dreams. *My girl*. And she was looking at me like I had broken her heart.

Reaching my arm out, I beckoned her to me and she came without hesitation. It never stopped pleasing me that she always came when I called.

Ox and Tine watched with rapt attention as Ceci tucked herself under my arm. I didn’t pay them any mind, though. Just rubbing long soothing lines up and down her shoulder. My other hand going to the side of her face and angling her vision up to me. She shuddered into my touch and opened her eyes to reveal those pure honeycomb golds I fucking loved.

I thumbed away a tear, taking care to be gentle, at least with my hands. Because I knew I couldn’t be so gentle with my words. Not right now. Not if I wanted this time to be any different.

And I *needed* this time to be different.

“It’s time, honey. Alright? No more waiting,” I said. “No more hiding.”

She sniffled but nodded. Her voice was watery as she said, “Okay.”

Tucked into each other, we made our way deeper into the garden for more privacy.

Breaking away from me she began a slow pace. “Just do it then. I’m ready.”

I eyed her suspiciously. “Just what do you think I’m going to do, Celestia?”

This brought out her attitude just a little bit and I never thought I’d see the day I was grateful for it, but I saw a little bit of herself in the flash in her eye.

“I don’t know, Con. Yell at me? Call me a bitch? Cuss me out? We both know I deserve it.”

She sort of did. But I shook my head anyway. “I’m not doing that, Cee.”

She whirled around to look at me. “You’re not?”

I shook my head.

“Then what?” she asked.

I looked at her. Standing there strong as hell even after she’d just broken apart. For me. As horrifying as seeing that side of Cee had been, it was hard to forget that it had all been for me. It was my goal for that to never happen again, but in order for that to be a reality I needed to know what did happen.

Inclining my head to her I said. “I want to hear it from you.”

She stopped moving. Looking at me with her own narrowed eyes. “You what?”

“A lot obviously went on. You’re obviously upset. I need to hear what happened from you,” I motioned toward her in a *‘let’s go’* sort of way.

She looked horrified, like she wanted me to bail her out and talk first, but I wouldn't this time. As an unnamed party on social media told me through a messenger app, I had been enabling Ceci by sparing her feelings and by holding back my own. I was done doing that. I would get and give it to her straight from now on.

Inclining my chin at her, I said, "I've talked all summer, Ceci. It's your turn now."

She stared at me from her spot a few steps away. Her eyes held mine, searching them for answers she did not find. So she continued to probe. "You want me...to tell you what I've been going through?"

"That's what I said." I smirked.

She ripped her gaze away from me and resumed her pacing. This time shaking her hands out like she was shaking something off of them. Nerve-wracking energy dripped off of her and after several moments of her not saying a goddamn thing, I grunted.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I don't know what to say."

"You don't know what to say to me?"

"No."

"*To me, Ceci? Are you kidding me?*" I sounded disbelieving to my own ears.

"No—I know! I just," she sighed. Her eyes squeezing shut as she continued her up and back movements in the garden path. "I just, I don't know what to say. I had a plan, but now it's like there's so much to say that nothing wants to come out at all. I'm stuck."

Easing up to her, I stopped her by the shoulders. "What did you do when I was gone?"

"What?"

"How did you work through it, honey?"

"Boxing rounds."

“Boxing rounds.” I nodded. “Okay. Then do it like that. Tell me what you’re feeling for one three minute round. If you need more time, we’ll reset the clock for another one.”

She blinked, but I didn’t give her a chance to continue on with whatever thought was brewing behind those eyes. “Don’t argue, baby. Just do what I tell you to do. You’re on the clock.”

“Okay…” she broke away from me and started her pacing again, this time in longer, quicker strides. “Okay, okay, okay. I guess—Okay.”

“Is that all you’re going to say is okay?”

She cut me with a glare, before pulling in a deep, deep breath and letting it out slowly. When she looked at me again, I had to admit I momentarily regretted giving her so much power. Maybe I should have set some parameters of what exactly we were hashing out here.

But it was too late now. She was turning to me and opening her mouth to speak. Hesitantly at first. “I want you to know that I’m not stupid okay?”

“I’ve never once called you stupid.”

“Hey,” she clipped, her eyes boring into me. “You said it was my turn, so let me talk.”

I shut my mouth.

“I know you don’t think I’m dumb. I’m saying that because I did notice, okay? Maybe not right away but I noticed at some point that there were starting to be these feelings between us.

And you might think I was taking you for granted, knowing and not saying anything. But I wasn’t trying to, I promise. I was trying to preserve this thing we had as long as I could. Because I knew if I admitted my own feelings to myself, that would be the end for me, and you—”

Air came in jagged through her mouth, her breath hitching momentarily. Resetting, she started again. “I’ve known from the very beginning what I have with you, Connor. You’re perfect, you’re amazing, the best friend I’ve ever had. And I

guess I didn't want to ruin that with the possibility that this was just some kind of phase for you when for me it would be...real."

The look I gave her must have spoken volumes, because she puffed out air, huffing.

"I was scared," she said. "That's why I ignored it up until I couldn't anymore, and that's why even after the beach I said something stupid."

"I shouldn't have said what we did was a mistake. That was stupid and cowardly and I wanted to take it back right away. But I couldn't because you left and then I was all by myself without you and..." she paused, her face taking on that miserable expression she'd been wearing all night. Her mouth wobbling again and her voice going just as unstable. But she sucked in a deep breath, righting herself and staying strong. And to me she glared. "And now I'm so mad at you, because while I was a coward, you were a coward too."

*Oh, okay.* I narrowed my eyes, my neck getting hot. Some apology this was. I almost wanted to laugh.

"I'm a coward now?" I asked, crossing my arms and looking down at her.

"Yes, Connor *you*," she announced, throwing her arms out at her sides before letting them drop. "You should have just talked to me."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Instead of leaving on your little European expedition, you should have stayed and talked to me, Connor. But you left."

"I had to," I said, breaking my silence.

"You didn't have to. You could have stayed and talked to me about it. About us." She grew more animated, more into herself the more she spoke. More passionate, and I couldn't help the warm feeling I got as she spoke so vehemently about me. Even though she was talking crazy. "Because it was one thing for me to *think* I knew how you felt or to guess what your little whispers and one-off comments meant. It was one thing to be kissed by you and be scared to death to hope that it

meant what I thought it meant. But it would've been a whole other thing to be wrong about something like that. I couldn't take it if I was wrong. So I never tried to be either. I tried to keep us the same because same was good and the rest was unknown. And subconsciously I think I kept waiting for some kind of sign that it was okay to love you, that it was safe to want you as more than my best friend but still have that part of you too, but you never said anything. You never told me. How did you expect me to know for sure if you wouldn't tell me, Con?"

"I was scared too," I said. "If you thought you couldn't be wrong about me, I thought I was nothing *but* wrong about you. It felt like every time I put myself out there, you shut down or ducked away or blew me off. It felt like rejection, Cee. If you thought you couldn't take it, how did you expect me to take it over and over again?"

She was quiet for a second, her timer still ticking.

"I get that now. But I can't help but be mad at you," she said. "And I know it's unfair but I am."

I hummed. That's all I did. A grunt at best, but she whirled on me. Eyes fully back to normal, all fire and sunset and golden hues of light.

"You could have said something then, the last time. You went and kissed me, and you acted like you wanted me and we did that on the beach, but you never *told me*, Connor. You just *left*." She looked like she was still trying to wrap her head around it.

"Just when I finally thought I might be turning onto the same page as you, you flip to the other side. Everything happened so fast, and I was trying to catch up and then you were gone. And I've never been more fucking miserable and scared in my life. Like I was missing an entire half of myself because you were gone."

"Yeah?"

"Yes."

I scoffed, "*Okay*."



She popped a hip out, her hands falling to them. “You don’t believe me?”

I shrugged, and she nodded.

“Okay. Well, I’ve been making dinner all by myself and you know what? *It sucks*. I’m a terrible cook.”

I laughed. I already knew that.

“But now I can make that chicken you like.” She shrugged, adding with a mumble. My eyes flared as they snapped to her. She kept going, not even giving me a chance to land on that. “I’ve also been watching our shows on rerun and they’re not as funny without you... Plus I can’t watch any new episodes without you, so now the recorder’s full.”

She’s been waiting for me to watch our shows? My heart ached, but I still shook my head.

“I had my stupid period and ate a burger and fries just to spite you,” she said, sounding really mad. “I threw up, you asshole.”

I tried to tell her, but whatever.

She held her jaw tight for a few long seconds before she blew out a heavy breath. Her voice shook on her next words, and I could tell she wasn’t really looking at me anymore by the way her eyes glassed over. “I had to take Lila to the vet all by myself.”

My skin prickled. I tried to keep my hard demeanor but found it slipping at that sound. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” She nodded, and I don’t think I was imagining the sniffle she took. “She got sick and was throwing up everywhere and when we got there they said I couldn’t go back with her. I really wanted to call you, but I was scared you’d tell me you didn’t love me anymore. So, I waited there alone.”

I paused, momentarily feeling guilty but letting it seep out in a long sigh. I hated that in leaving for my own reasons, it meant I couldn’t be there for her in times like that. But there

was nothing I could do about that now. “I’m sorry you had to do that, Cee.”

She wasn’t really listening, though.

“And I went to Ox for help with the shelter because that’s what I always do, but I wanted to go to you,” she said, her voice tampering down to a watery whisper. “His opinion was fine, but I wanted yours. I always want yours.”

I swallowed. If there was one thing I felt bad about it was leaving her when she needed me the most. I enjoyed putting her first. I liked knowing that she was taken care of, but when she really needed me to put her over my selfish need to be loved the same way I loved, I’d disappeared. I’d hurt her and that wasn’t the kind of love I strived for. The kind that got even or only gave what was given in return. My base instinct wanted to give her everything. All of me. And I’d let the fact that she hadn’t been ready to accept it yet get in the way of our trajectory. Even though I was right to take a step away and allow myself time to heal from what felt like heartbreak, I was wrong in the way I’d done it. I recognized that, and I was sorry for it.

A bell rang from one of our phones, maybe both. It was louder than I thought it would be, and it sounded like it echoed through the still of the night air in the garden. Wind blew, rustling the tall greenery around us, and we stared at each other. That same gold on that same brown. Here in the same spot for the millionth time—hearts intertwined yet still a beat apart. Yet, something was different. Something was new in the air between us.

I could see the notches on her throat work as she swallowed. Her eyes blazing into mine became a little wet again, and she damn near whispered, her voice got so hoarse. “It was so dark here without you, Con. There’s no sun when you’re gone. You’re my everything and my everything that matters. My entire fucking heart, and I don’t know if you’ve heard, but you can’t live without your heart, Connor.”

Silence.

The bell had stopped ringing and Ceci wasn't saying anything else, just breathing, and my mind was racing along with my heart at the reverence of her words. I wanted to kiss her right then. But I also wanted to strangle her.

Unaware of my disposition, she leaned over and picked up her phone. I watched as she reset the timer on the little bell and then walked over to me and handed me the device. I looked at it, before flicking eyes back at her.

"My turn?" I asked, and she took another step closer, holding the phone out further as she nodded.

I shook my head, "Put that away."

"What?"

"Put it away, Ceci, we don't need it anymore."

"Why?"

I scoffed. Taking the phone she still had extended between us, I pocketed it.

She had needed her time to get out all she'd pent up over the past months. She had needed to explain her side of it—where she was coming from, and how she was feeling. I got that. But I didn't need the same. I was done beating around the bush. It was time to make this *very* clear.

Looking at her again I huffed. "Do you think I need three minutes to tell you how I feel about you?"

"I dunno," she said, eyes tracking the way I was stepping toward her. "It worked for me."

I shook my head. "I don't need three minutes to say three words, Celestia. *I love you.*"

She blinked, looking stricken. Even after that whole speech of hers, she looked shocked by the candidness of my words. I continued to step toward her.

"You want another three words?" I asked, raising my eyebrows. "*You're my person*—no, not my 'best friend person', *just* my person."

She swallowed noticeably, her eyebrows bunching like this was hard for her to believe. I continued, my assault different from her verbal punching, but just as hard. All the words I'd failed to say to her for way too long falling like a waterfall from my lips.

Settling in front of her I put hands on her hips and pulled her into me, my voice lowering. "Another three? *Be with me.* Another? *Stay with me.*"

Small, cold hands came up to touch my face. The touch was like water in a drought. Even just her fingertips on my skin shook me. I had missed her too. Just because I loved her as more than a friend, didn't change that she was my best one. And having to stay away was probably the hardest thing I'd ever done. Now that I was back, I couldn't help but lean into her touch.

She pulled my face toward her, moving up to her toes to reach me. She only made it to my chin, her head nuzzling into the crook of my neck. I slid my arms around her, my heart seizing at the innocent acceptance she was showing me. My voice went down to a whisper and my previous strength faltered in the absence of her reply.

She hadn't said anything yet, and I guess I understood where she was coming from before. Still, I needed her to say something, validate this limb I was jumping out on.

"Another?" My voice broke as I pleaded, "Love me back... *Please?*"

"That was four words, Connor," she said, mock scolding. *The brat.* "Counting is kindergarten stuff, c'mon."

I laughed, and then I groaned. "*Ceci.* Please, baby."

Pulling back just slightly, I caught the devious little smirk on her face before she inclined her head and pressed the sweetest, softest kiss to my lips. Then she opened those flaming eyes on me and said, with all her Ceci surety, "I love you too. I just wanted to hear you say it a few times."

Hearing those words was like light spilling into my soul. Like my world, and my future, shifting into its rightful place. I

smiled, bringing my face close to hers, my lips hovering over her lips. “How long were you going to let me go on before you said something, you little shit?”

She chuckled and I could feel it from her body to her breath. I loved every second of that laugh. And I couldn’t help my own when she said, “As long as I could swing it.”

And then she was mine. Really mine this time. Kissing me, holding me, laughing with me as this surreal but somehow inevitable puzzle piece popped into place. She’d always been my girl, but now with our future bright in front of us, she was my whole world.

I could have stood there in the middle of someone else’s garden and held her for hours. Kissed her for just as long, but the noise of a cheering audience broke us away. I thought we’d moved far enough away from the doors for some privacy from our family. But like the nosey asses they were, they had all spilled out into the garden, hiding behind large plants or urns as they spied on us.

My groan mixed with a laugh, my face burying into Ceci’s neck as I did, embarrassed. “Must you have an audience all the time?”

She pulled back and waggled her eyebrows at me.

“Were you planning on taking this much further in a *family household*, Connor? I’m learning so much about you—” I nipped her lip, and she smiled.

“I take it you’re no less of a smartass as a girlfriend, then?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“*More,*” she whispered conspiratorially.

I hummed. “I guess I can handle that. *However*, we really need to work on your apology skills. Because *that* was deplorable.”

She laughed, “That wasn’t my apology. I organized this whole grand gesture and I still want to go through with it.”

“You don’t think launching apples at your sister was grand enough?” I asked in a disbelieving whisper, flicking my eyes

up past her at the victim herself. Ceci's shoulders shook with her laughter, and I smiled, my lips falling to her temple. "Seriously, I leave you alone for a second and—"

She shut me up with a kiss. A kiss that turned hot and heated and needy and breathless, now that our hearts were done spilling. I really hoped our families took a hint and left us alone. But before we even really started, me leaning into her just slightly to let her feel what her little mouth was doing to me, she was pulling away. Peppering me with soft quick pecks like she didn't want to let go but had to. When she leaned back and met my eyes, I could see a familiar determination in them. That and the surprising sight of moisture.

"Are you still crying?" I asked, using a finger to wipe her stray tear away.

"Once I start I don't stop," she admitted with a sniffle.

I leaned down and pecked her lips, "I can make you cry in a much better way if you leave here with me."

She bit her lip. In her eyes I could tell she wanted to say yes, but I could also see something was stopping her. Softly, she asked me, "Can you wait?"

I wanted to say fuck no. I'd been waiting for a long-ass time. *Too long*. But then I remembered all that she just said, all that she'd admitted, and all that I knew already.

I felt my heart pull in a familiar squeeze of admiration and respect. While waiting for her wouldn't be so hard now that I knew she was mine, I also knew that I'd wait for her even if I didn't know.

History was fact, and the facts didn't lie. I already had a pretty good track record of waiting on Ceci. How much could a short while longer hurt?

So leaning in again, I kissed her cheek, her nose and then her mouth, already addicted to the way she tasted now that she was mine.

And on her lips, quietly, I whispered my truth. "I'll wait forever if I have to, honey."

# Chapter Forty-eight

## CECI

“Is someone bothering you?” I asked as I eased up to Connor. I was just coming down off the big stage set up along the Seaside Beach. The Woman’s Festival was still in full swing, but it was nearing a close. Donations had been pulled, a speech had been given, a turnout beyond mine and the shelter’s wildest dreams had occurred. And now it was time for me and my A-team to turn in, Christine and Nina getting just about as little sleep as I had over the past few weeks.

Now, as the mid-October sun began to go down, I got to walk toward the tall, handsome as fuck man who was standing there waiting just for me after a long successful day—my heart couldn’t have been fuller.

“No,” Connor answered as I settled in front of him, his eyes following me intently as I approached.

Looking up, I studied his face. “Then why do you look so grumpy?”

Dark eyes collided with mine. “Because you look amazing and you haven’t let me touch you yet.”

A familiar heat immediately formed in the bottom of my belly, curling all the way down to my thighs. My brilliant response was, “Oh.”

The word curled a smile from his lips. Different than I’d ever seen. Boyish in a cocky sort of way. He knew what he did to me, and he liked it. But he didn’t make a show of it, instead just reaching for me and running his hands along my shoulders as he looked me over. When he finally, (and I mean *finally*), made it to my eyes I raised an eyebrow.

“Checking me out, Ferguson?”

“Fuck yes I am.”

A burst of laughter fell from me and still, I felt that hot arousal slick down my spine as I savored his hands on me. I don't know how he managed to make me laugh *and* lust, but he did it.

It wasn't like I was depriving him or teasing him or anything. It had only been a handful of days since everything had blown up and came back together. Days in which we had both been busy. Me with festival preparations, meetings, announcements, all between fielding freak outs about the gravity of my new reality. On the other hand, Connor was busy with setting up his one and only client with proper cyber network security and technical equipment as opposed to the hand-me-down junk that stupid politician was using before I took over the shelter.

On top of all that, the little sneak somehow found the time to get my whole family out here, including Amá and Apá at the exact time I had to go out on a huge stage and thank everyone for coming and supporting the new SWWS mission. I wasn't originally going to invite them. Ox knew about it because he had helped me put the damn fiasco together. My brothers and sisters finding out about it in bits and pieces, but I hadn't wanted them to see me out here before I even knew what to do.

But just like always, Connor had been right. Ox too I guess (mental eyeroll). There was absolutely no reason for me to have these aspirations of complete success and all-knowing wisdom off the jump. My family didn't care if I lived up to some crazy standard I'd created in my head. They only cared if I was living up to me. Up to all the things I'd promised myself, and consequently them, I would be. They'd seen me through the thickest and thinnest and they were still here. They just wanted the best for me, and even if they had to live through the worst with me to get there, they would.

They would always. Just like I would for them.

And just like with my siblings, I didn't know I was missing it, but the look of pride in my father's eyes when he took in the



fundraiser had been a weight of anxiety and uncertainty lifted off my shoulders. I almost sobbed with relief when he wrapped his arms around me and said, “I’m proud of you, mija.”

“Apá?” I asked, surprised. “What are you doing here?”

“You think I would miss out on my daughter’s big day?” he scoffed. “Never.”

“How did you even know about it?”

He directed a look over his shoulder, his gaze going to a large shadowing figure momentarily before returning to mine, knowing. “From that young man over there who loves you, and you mean everything to.”

I looked past my father at Connor, my senses clogging with emotion as I hung onto his stare. I put all my effort into thanking him silently with that stare. It paid off as he simply nodded, mouthing, *‘I love you.’*

And suddenly, it was all okay. I was relieved.

Even if it all went up in flames right that very second, I felt relief. Because I’d made them proud.

Now, Con must have noticed me getting misty eyed again, because he took a step toward me and dropped a kiss near my temple before saying, “Stop that. You’re getting *so soft* on me, Fernandez.”

“You’re just perfect,” I shook my head, whispering up to him. “And I can’t believe this. Any of it.”

A deep rumble came from him as he hummed, then he pulled away, laying a big palm on my waist to keep me close. Looking down on me he pursed his lips, “I’m starting not to believe this so-called grand gesture you have for me. I think it may be an urban myth.”

“That’s mean,” I breathed on a chuckle. It was watery at best.

“Lord,” he murmured in a sigh, but he pulled me close, rocking me a little. “These tears break me, sweetheart. I was

just kidding. But I'm dying here. Just tell me already, okay? Grand gesture me, for Christ's sake."

I laughed, swiping my annoying eyes and taking a breath. "Okay."

"Alright," he said, kissing me one more time and stepping away hastily as if he'd be tempted to steal more. He watched expectantly as I straightened.

"You must know what I did by now, right?" I asked, referring to the whole starting his business without his permission thing.

He raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms over his chest. "You mean the fact that you're my boss? Yeah, I've noticed."

There he went being a smartass. I smiled. "Well, I thought it would be weird to pay you—"

"I know a way you can pay me," he said, his eyes raking down my body again. I never thought a sensible white summer dress and matching sneakers would be the thing that did it for him, but here I was being stared at like I was Con's next meal. My stomach did another flip.

"Down boy," I said, ignoring the way my body reacted to his stare. When he continued to stare I raised my brows at him and lowered my voice as I insisted, "*Later.*"

He blinked at the promise, the lusty haze lifting at least a little. His gaze followed my hands as they reached into the pockets of my dress and pulled out a set of keys. Here, his gaze turned curious, eyebrows pulling together in question.

"I know I've been pretty self-centered lately. Always going on and on about myself, but it doesn't help that you're like obsessed with me Connor, really," I started.

His smile crooked, and he shook his head disbelievingly, "Your apology skills still need some work, honey."

"*But...*" I said, tossing the keys to him. "Here."

"What's this?"

“Do you really think I can run a tech company, Con?” I asked.

“You can do anything you set your mind to,” he said, his mouth wobbling. It was the expression I gave him that clearly called his bullshit that had him grinning again. “And the day I tell you you’re in over your head might be my last day on earth. So, like the smart man I am, I’ve decided to wait for you to say it first.”

Funny how my glowering just made him laugh more.

I pretended to pout but really I watched the way he smiled down at me. He had been exceedingly gracious with me about this whole thing. And I guess that’s what love was. Grace when grace was needed. Forgiveness when wrong was done. Loyalty, even when the heart was wounded. But I didn’t want to take advantage of the fact that he loved me. Which is why I wanted to wait until after the fundraiser to, shall we say, “finish” our reunion.

Still, that didn’t keep me out of his bed. For sleeping purposes only, but it was becoming more difficult to keep our hands to ourselves. Too much kissing often led to too much touching, then panting and moaning until we were ripping away from each other and stacking pillows between us in order to sleep. He hadn’t once asked me why I wanted to wait even though I could tell how eager he was.

“Now,” Con started, causing me to blink up to find him in front of me again. Grabbing onto my hands, he pulled me closer. “What on earth are you thinking about with that look on your face?”

“You.”

The corner of his mouth kicked up. “You’re not done with your gesture yet are you?”

“No.”

“Finish up, baby. We have plans.”

“We do?” I wrapped my arms around him. “Well, as long as they don’t go past Monday when you officially start as CEO of your own company, then I guess that’s fine.”

He looked down on me with serious eyes. “I’m pretty sure legally you have to sell to me, Cee.”

“I’m selling for a dollar. Take it or leave it,” I said snuggling into him.

He leaned back. “Don’t you want your dollar, then?”

“I already took it,” I said.

“When?”

Patting his ass, I reached into his back pocket and grabbed his wallet, pulled out the one dollar bill I’d planted there last night before returning his wallet to its glorious resting place. “Just now. Pleasure doing business with you.”

He laughed. “What about a contract, Ceci?”

I shrugged, and he looked down at me for long beats, reading me until he understood. “The paperwork is done too, huh?”

I nodded.

“Did you forge my signature?” he asked.

“Who wants to know? You or your legal team?” I asked.

“*Celestia*.” It was a mix between a groan and a disbelieving laugh. It made me smile too.

“I only signed the last name,” I assured him. Then with a peek up to his eyes I said, “I figured It wouldn’t be that much of a problem if someday it wasn’t a lie.”

Like a curtain lowering, he changed. I could feel his energy shift from relaxed and happy to something excited and charged. His hands splayed out on my back, one resting nearly on my ass and squeezing. “Fuck later. We’re leaving now.”

“Connor!” I laughed. “I didn’t even get to the apologizing part.”

“Fuck that too,” he said as he started to pull me away from the dwindling crowd and toward the beach behind the festival. “Say it when you’re on top of me, I don’t give a damn.”

“Geez,” I said but couldn’t help the jolt of excitement as I followed him. When we passed the turn to the parking lot though, I slowed. “Where are we going?”

A swat to my ass got me moving again. “Keep up, you’ll know it when you see it.”

I guess excited Connor was bossy.

*Sometimes, I have to play hardball with you.*

It was a while ago now that, he’d said that and it still brought this tingly feeling to my body. I followed him quietly along the outer edge of the beach until we reached a certain point, and he began to cut across toward a figure in the distance.

The sun was setting both beside us and on the other side of the world. We were on the very edge of fall, the air starting to cool for the night earlier than it had in the summer, the sunset less pink and more of a warm yellow and orange. I know it probably made my hair look like fire and my eyes look crazy in the almost identical glow.

Connor stopped, and yanked me up toward him, scooping hands underneath my butt and dragging me into the air against his body.

“Con!” I tipped as I wrapped my arms and legs around him. My dress riding up. “Why are you carrying me?”

“I want to look at you.”

“You should be looking where you’re walking!” I said looking behind us to do just that. He was walking straight enough though, so I returned my gaze to his to find him staring straight at me. He wasn’t smiling anymore. Not laughing either, just looking at me with this hard serious expression on his face.

“What is it?” I asked him.

He moved his eyes over my face, sliding them like a caress from one end to the other. Doing the same to my eyes and then my hair. “You’re like the fucking sun.”

“If this is some kind of red hair joke—”

“It’s not a joke, Celestia,” he said, cutting me off. “I always thought your name was fitting. I never understood why you don’t let people call you by it when it’s so clear that you’re heaven-sent. I always thought it would be a star or something, but no. You’re the sun, baby. Mine anyway.”

“Watch out world. Connor the poet is making his comeback,” I said. But my damn emotions betrayed me as Connor slowed his gait and set me down on something. Leaning over he wiped my eyes before moisture had a chance to fall, then he tilted my chin so I could look up at him.

My heart squeezed and I let out a sigh.

“I’m sorry I made you wait so long,” I said, finally getting the words out of my clogged throat. “I’m sorry I got scared and hurt you. And I’m sorry I drove you away. This summer you’ve seen some pretty bad sides of me, but I think that side was my worst. I’m so sorry, Connor.”

Soft lips pressed even softer onto my own. “It’s okay, *cariña*.”

“Why do you call me that?”

“What?”

“Honey.”

He smiled. “Because you’re sweet like it.”

I scoffed, “Bullshit.”

He smirked. Then those soft lips came down hard on me now, his hands going over my body. Working into my hair and dragging across my scalp down my neck to rest along my collarbone. His lips moved like silk over mine, coaxing me open so his smooth taste could work inside and remind me what he could do with just a kiss alone.

In moments he had me moaning, *melting* into him, wishing my clothes would just burn off so I could be closer to him, feel him. But all too soon he was pulling back, bringing our noses together and rubbing his along mine.

“So fucking sweet, baby,” he said, then kissed me again. Long and hard and slow until I was outright whimpering.

When he pulled away again, he was smiling. My eyes were glued shut, but I could *feel* it. “Only for me. *My* sun. *My* honey. *My* Celestia. *Mine*.”

“Oh,” I said again, the word apparently a new addition to my vocab favorites list.

“You ready?” he asked, lips still on my mouth.

My eyes popped open. “*Here?*”

He laughed, his hand squeezing on my collarbone. “Get your mind out of the gutter, Ceci. I meant are you ready to leave?”

Looking around us, I realized that we were out in the middle of the beach and I was sitting on top of a baby blue four wheeler ATV. Gloves and a helmet sat on the seat beside me and to my left stood another more familiar cart. I gaped.

“We’re driving these home?”

“We’re racing,” he said simply as he began to work me into the protective gear.

“You had one for me the whole time?” I asked.

He just shrugged. “I can’t spoil you all at once. We both know you have no problem taking me for all I’m worth.”

“Not like you ever complained,” I grumbled.

“That’s right,” he said. Lips touched the tops of my chest, and he leaned over me to trail them up my neck until he was speaking into my ear roughly. “But now I’m collecting. We’re on these things because we’re finishing what we should have the first time we rode them. And you are going to pay me back every last ounce of exasperating effort I pour into you. I plan on taking all you’re worth too, and then I’m taking some more.”

I couldn’t say a goddamn word. I was too hot, too turned on, too ready for the drive home to be over before it even started. Con’s place wasn’t that far, especially if we took the beach, but it was still far enough away from me to want to say fuck it and rip his clothes off right here. But he insisted we do

this the right way. The way it should have been done that original night at the beach.

Even so, I was a little apprehensive about going back to the very spot where last time we'd fucked everything up.

But Connor made sure to wash all those thoughts away as we finally parked at the back of his house, and I dismounted to see a large blanket laid out on the sand with meat and cheese and wine crackers and even some little desserts that told me a certain someone had a hand in setting up our little date.

“And here I thought chivalry was dead,” I said.

Big warm fingers wrapped around mine and pulled me toward the blanket. “C'mon. Let me feed you. I know you're big on treats.”

\* \* \*

I woke up with the moon in the sky and my back pressed against the hard plain of Connor's chest. A feeling of safety and belonging deeper than any career path or fundraising could ever give me. A feeling of home, right in Connor's arms. I could cry right that second. I was trying not to get too emotional, but the fact that this man I admired admired me right back was heart moving.

I didn't remember falling asleep, but I was slowly coming awake to the melodic motion of Connor's fingertips over my body. I don't think he was trying to, but the gentle pressure he was applying to secretly sensitive areas of my person, was waking me in more ways than one.

“Mmm,” I hummed as I stretched back into him. Relaxed, I tipped my head back. “I didn't think I'd fall asleep, sorry.”

“It's fine,” he murmured, his finger running lazily down the center of my chest and tracing the rounded outline of it. “I don't mind when you rest. It makes me happy when you're this comfortable with me.”



“Haven’t I always been?” I asked, not able to think of a time when I’d been shy around him.

Running that hand down my stomach he continued his stroking. “Not always.”

Oh yeah. I guess my selective memory had tuned out the countless times we’d gotten close like this just for me to get nervous or jumpy.

Well, I definitely wasn’t feeling that now. Not as I felt Connor starting to grow against my back and I could do nothing but lean heavily into it, adjusting ever so slightly to get my ass pressed up against him tight. He dragged me closer, anticipating my wants as we moved, we both let out a sigh at the contact.

That hand of his drifted down even lower, crossing my hip and gripping my thigh before sliding up it, slipping underneath my dress. I took in a sharp breath when his finger grazed the front of my panties ever so lightly before moving back to my leg.

In my ear he rumbled, “Awake now?”

“Getting there,” I said.

His fingers seemed to graze the tippy top of my panties again but skirted away to rub up the flat of my belly instead. I groaned, “Connor.”

He laughed. “Want something, honey?”

“Are you waiting for me to beg you?” I asked.

“Absolutely not,” he said honestly. Slipping his hand underneath that thin scrap of fabric, he found me wet and waiting. I moaned and leaned back into him, my head falling into the crook of his neck. He pulled me close to him, banding a strong arm around me as he worked a slow, sweetly steady circle around my most sensitive parts. I spread further involuntarily, and he hummed nicely in approval. Kissing the spot just before my ear he said, “Ask me for whatever and I’ll give it to you.”

“Oh?” I asked and shivered under his touch.

“Mhmm,” he said. “I was just making sure you were okay with what’s about to happen.”

“And what is that?” I asked as I sucked in a sharp breath of air. Big fingers invaded me, sliding right in and going deep in a way I didn’t know I missed until right then. I tightened around him immediately.

“I told you,” he said, deep and low near my ear. “I’m taking my pay back.”

“Well then take it already,” I whined, grinding myself down on his hand and moaning at the pleasure the angle brought. His hips moved, and I felt that long package move against my back, his air seeping out in a hiss along the back of my neck.

“You’re not going to rush me, Cee,” he said. Sliding his opposite hand up my rib cage he grasped the top of my dress and pulled it down. I could tell he appreciated my bralessness as soon as I sprang free, allowing his hand to swallow my breast in one tight squeeze. We both hissed. In a headier breath he said. “You seem to freak out when things move too fast. So we’re going to take this slow.”

“I can’t take slow, Con,” I said as I moved my hips in the same way again, working myself on his fingers and moaning as he simultaneously pinched me and sucked my neck. I tried to get up, but Connor’s ankles wrapped around mine and locked me in place, spreading me open and immobilizing me there. I whimpered. “I need you.”

“Shhh,” he said, but he was effectively pumping those fingers into me now, and it was impossible for me to stay quiet as his hands used every part of me right on up. Even his fingers were making dirty sounds as they slipped around me.

“Connor, I’m close, I don’t want to—”

“Loud as you can. Just let it out.”

“But we’re on—” he kissed me, tongue invading me in a way that just drove me closer to the edge, only stopping when my whimpering turned frantic. I jerked in the palm of his hands, straining against the restraint of his body.

I felt myself reaching this place of bliss, climbing brighter and higher until I felt like all my nerve endings were rocketing off. Pressure and heat building up and overtaking every possible muscle in my body until I was bursting into a shriveling whimpering mess.

Con wrung me out, using his fingers to strum every last drop of my release until I was jelly against his chest, panting and scraping for breath as I came down.

When my soul finally returned to my body I noticed that he was cupping my breasts with two hands now. His lips playing at my neck, sucking the skin there. Like a beacon, I felt the hardness straining against my back as if each little thrust released some sort of strain. I hummed, wiggling myself back against it.

“Don’t play with me until you’re ready to do something about it honey,” Con’s velvet voice said against my skin.

The way he kissed the back of my neck made me want to foolishly say, ‘I’m ready’, but my brain cleared just enough for me to ask, “Ready? There’s more?”

“There’s more.” He sounded so sure. So confident that I could take more, I didn’t want to disappoint him by telling him I’d never successfully reached that place twice back-to-back.

“I could taste you. If you want,” I said. Secretly, I wanted to. To return what he’d now given to me twice, but I didn’t want to sound too eager either.

Con groaned in appreciation but grasped steady hands onto my shoulders instead. “Not yet. Sit up for me.”

I did, moving onto my knees and turning to face him as he leaned back on his hands on the blanket. He was still fully clothed in shorts, that crisp white shirt and a gold chain he wore whenever he dressed up hanging around his neck. Through his pants I could see the outline of a way too big part of himself. It raged against the restraint of fabric, wanting to come free. Con was watching me, but I was watching him as he reached down and adjusted himself. Palming that big thing

in his hand and stroking a little as he moved to a more comfortable position.

“Fuck,” I let slip out, licking my lips. My eyes flicked up to his and I must have smiled because he grinned too. I guess I was ready to do something about it.

Connor seemed to agree. Blinking down at me he asked, “Can I take your clothes off?”

“Can I take *yours* off?”

“Yeah,” he said. Before he even answered I was working the fabric of his tee up his torso, removing it in seconds. I couldn’t wait, my hands found his chest and his abs immediately. Running soft lines from one to the other. He was so hard with such soft, smooth skin. He had this tattoo on his ribs. Cursive words from his favorite books. I wanted to kiss them. So I did. I kissed all around him. His ribs, his stomach, lower... “I said not yet, Cee.”

He hissed the words as my mouth touched the very bottom of his waist. I may have licked him there, where the waistline of his boxers began. His hands on my shoulders brought me upright and away from the tempting area like he didn’t trust me to follow directions. He brought us both up to our knees, watching me as he reached below me and pulled my dress up from the hem. I lifted my arms above my head and only when he had me in my lace thong alone did I realize.

“Are we okay out here?” I asked.

He was staring at me. All he did was nod.

“No one will see us?”

He shook his head.

“Or hear us?”

“No baby, turn around,” he said.

I smiled, feeling worshiped under his appraising stare. “I thought you were undressing, too.”

“Just for a second. Let me see,” he said in a chaste whisper. And before waiting for me to do so, he directed his hands to

my hips and turned me by them so he could see my ass.  
“*Damn.*”

I giggled.

Big thumbs looped into the strings of my thong and started to slip it off. I let him get me naked. Completely freaking naked on the beach and I didn’t even care. The only thing I cared about was him doing the same. “Your turn. Fair is fair.”

He didn’t fight me as I undid the button of his shorts. Not when I pushed them down either. At some point he stood from his knees and let them drop to the blanketed ground. In front of me was the sight of a god. Thick muscular thighs carved by years of training and effort. Large hardware tucked in tight and straining against the black fabric of his boxer briefs. I didn’t ask. I slid them right down.

“Holy fuck.” I didn’t mean to say it out loud—really, I didn’t, but *holy fucking shit*.

Con got down to his knees again, that boyish look of confidence covering his face. Pulling me against him, he laid us down. Kissing me until what I had just seen was on the edge of my mind, but not forgotten. He laid back, pulling me on top of him and ravaging my mouth so much that I was rubbing myself against his long, hard length like I was in heat. I was slippery with need and becoming addicted to the way the bare length of him felt. Reason almost flew out the window, lust clouding my brain and making me want him now.

Right now.

“Hold on, baby,” he said. Reaching behind him into his pants, he pulled a condom out of his pocket and handed it to me. “Put it on.”

I licked my lips and sat up over him. I could tell he wasn’t looking at what I was doing. His eyes were on me, drinking in every part of my nakedness as we lay on the beach. The ocean at our backs, the four-wheeler our only shield from the rest of the world.

I, on the other hand was focused on the task at hand. Using steady fingers, I rolled the thin rubber down.

And down, and down, and down. When I finally got to the end I expelled a breath.

“Are you kidding with this thing, Connor?”

“I’m not. Come here,” he said, dragging me up to him and using one of those big hands to latch the back of my neck, the other gripping my ass and sitting me over him.

His lips were hard against mine. Punishing, coaxing. But as his soft licks and sharp nips started to make me hot again—making me grind down against him so hard I could feel his tip at my opening, I realized those kisses were readying.

He pulled away when that thick head dipped the slightest bit inside me and we both groaned into each other’s mouths. Meeting my eyes, I knew what he wanted. I shook my head. “Too big, Con.”

“No honey, just right,” he said.

“It won’t fit.”

“It’ll fit just fine,” he said, lips chasing mine. Holding my eyes, I got the feeling that he was serious. So fucking serious. His features hard and strained against his arousal, begging me for release. His voice was harder, stern even. But his hands still floated around me softly, begging for permission to enter. Waiting for me to give the okay. Speaking directly into a kiss he begged, “Please, Cee. Work me in, baby.”

“Okay,” I said softly. And lining him up with my opening, I did just that.

Slowly, I lowered myself over him, stopping when the thickness got too much and sliding back up before starting again. It took three before I was panting and six before I was seated on him. Connor filling me all the way up and murmuring curses as I worked over him.

I’d splayed my hands over his chest for leverage and continued to use it as I kept going. Working myself over and over him, this delicious fullness drugging in a way that I wanted to keep chasing, even as I felt him deep within me.

He’d filled me entirely and somehow I wanted to feel more.

Pushing down harder I ground my hips down at the base of us and felt it against my clit. It had me letting out a long moan as rockets of sensation shot through my entire body, causing everything to clench and tighten. I rasped another loud gasp as tight walls gripped him making the next long slide rough and hard.

“Fuck baby, you’re doing so good,” he said on a growl. Reaching up and around me he grasped onto my shoulder and pinned me to him. “So fucking good. I can’t take it.”

He pushed up and into me hard, his arms keeping me exactly where he wanted me. I whimpered. He did it again and I moaned. I tried to meet him, but he had me locked in, drilling up into me with a force that made my legs shake.

“Connor,” I said, a warning as I felt my senses being overwhelmed. I was clenched so tight I thought I was going to break, but he kept going. Using me like he was possessed. Grunting into my neck and moaning as he lost control with every new thrust.

It was his hands on my ass, hard and sure as they pushed me down and pressed my clit against him, rubbing it as he moved inside, that sent me.

I burst. Shattering on top of him and falling over as I shook and taking his punishment as he went wild beneath me.

“Look at me, baby,” he said. *Begged*. I did, taking in those strong features as they were pulled tight in tense concentration. We didn’t have to speak as our eyes met. He knew me like I knew him. That’s how I knew we were both saying “I love you” somewhere in the cosmos as he came apart.

Connor, my Connor, was quiet when he let go. Holding me so close as his motions turned jerky and moaning softly into my neck as he stilled under me before his release spilled and spilled and spilled. Little mindless thrusts pressing into me as he rode it out, all the while he whispered words that were just for me. “So fucking good, Ceci. Goddamn. I knew you’d be perfect. *So damn perfect.*”

I hummed, feeling boneless against him as we both fell onto the blanket. We were sweaty and still breathing hard, but Connor pulled the blanket I slept under over us anyway, a trickling of sand dusting us as he did. We didn't care. We just clung to each other, coming down from a place above the clouds.

Laying my forehead against his chest I shook it slightly. "Connor Ferguson. I never would have thought."

This is all I said, but what I didn't say, Connor understood.

With a hand on my cheek, he guided my face up. As I looked at him, he gave me a smile, lazy and languid and my heart squeezed tight. Looking at me right back, his voice came back to him, no longer a whisper, but a low private murmur. It rumbled as he said, "I knew all along."

"You did not!" I said with a laugh, remembering the way he'd tried to back out of Fergy's room that first day we'd become friends.

He nodded, "I did."

"Since when?" I asked.

"I'll tell you one day," he said, wrapping his arms tighter around me and tucking me in close.

We spent long minutes just lying there, my eyes getting heavy with satisfaction and exhaustion. The best kind of ache present already in my thighs and along other warm parts of me too. Con's breathing was slow and deep. The way he breathed when he was sleeping, but his big hands still played at my back, making long strokes along the curve of my body.

When I opened my drooping eyes again, my vision caught onto patches of white particles along Connor's body, and I chuckled. "Con?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you going to take me to the beach every time you're in the mood?" I asked, brushing the sand from his shoulder. "I mean, I appreciate the spontaneity, but there's sand *everywhere*."



He chuckled too, his chest moving as he pulled me in close. Happy. Nuzzling my neck, he started pressing kisses there. I was starting to realize what those neck kisses meant, and I didn't think my poor satisfied center could handle it. But then he was kissing my mouth, opening me up and rubbing hands along that warm, sore part of me. My body responded immediately, coming to life and becoming ready for him again. He fucking purred his approval, only lifting up when I was panting.

The smile he gave me was beautiful. All slow and roguish and satisfied. I think I returned it. "I was thinking we should try it again in the shower. And then my bed. Maybe on the couch too."

He kissed me between every suggestion, and I swear I melted inside. On my lips I felt his smile as he whispered. "But if you're really *that* into exhibitionism—"

He laughed as I pinched him. And later, he reacquainted me with his shower, his couch, and his bed all in the same night.

The next morning when I woke up and ventured into the kitchen, to find Connor showered and shirtless, a stack of pancakes smack in the middle of the island, I grinned. "Am I being rewarded for something?"

"Yes."

"For what?"

I sat gingerly. I didn't want to admit it out loud, but I was sore to the point of aching. Still, though, my center warmed excitedly at the memory of what we'd done last night. What we'd done over and over and over again. I licked my lips and cleared my throat, trying to get it together before I got sucked back down that road of thinking. Wanting.

Like a hawk, Con picked up on it, his smile smug as he watched me. Instead of commenting though, he just slid my ready plate of pancakes across the table. A little bowl of mixed berries following after it.

"A lot of things," he said finally. The words holding weight and innuendo.

I took the offered food and started to dig in immediately, situating my pancakes how I liked them. Connor slid away from the island, leaning back against the counter opposite me with his arms crossed. His eyes lingered on me as I ate, a little smile visible at the corner of his mouth.

“Want a picture, Ferguson?” I asked, swallowing a big bite of berries. “It’ll last longer.”

His small smile grew into a big one as he said, “You want to know what I really thought when I first met you?”

“Sure.”

“It was after that breakfast when you wouldn’t shut up about my sister saying ‘ass’ and you put your pancakes in the shape of a mouse—” he paused, peeking down at the cartoon mouse pancakes in front of me. “Yeah, just like that.”

Rolling my lips into my mouth I hid my smile and blinked up at him. My amazing, beautiful man. “Is there a point to this, *Jellybean?*”

He grinned. “As soon as I realized how funny and goofy and one of a kind you were, my first thought was that I was going to keep you one day.”

My own grin spread across my face, his words both tickling me and warming me up. “*Like a dog, Connor?*”

“No, smartass.” He threw a blueberry at me and I caught it in my mouth. The next thing I caught was his kiss on my lips as he came around the island and leaned over me. When he pulled up he was looking at me, his mouth smiling but his eyes serious. “*Like a wife, Celestia.*”





# Epilogue

## CECI

Years later.

“Lila you little tramp!”

Yes, this is the first thing I said to my cat as she greeted me at the door after returning home. And yes, if the little irritated ‘*meow*’ she let out was any indication, she took offense to it.

But I took offense to having to wake up at the butt crack of dawn scared to death over a retching cat, only to be retching myself five minutes later from the smell. And of course this had to happen on a weekend where Connor was gone. Flown off to some conference in San Francisco for the week while I’m stuck at home wishing I was with him. But the two classes a day I taught at my training gym, four hours a day in the office, and any free hours leftover put into the organization was not something I could easily pull myself away from. It was balanced chaos, and if even one edge of it slipped, I feared it would all come tumbling down.

My heart lurched, and I looked at my phone as I laid it on the counter. I know it was still early on the west coast, Connor might still be keynote speaking or maybe having dinner with fellow Silicon Valley warriors.

Which meant I shouldn’t call him... Right?

Biting my lip, I bent low to meet Lila at her kitty level. When I met her eyes, she tilted her head like she’d been doing since she was a kitten.

I huffed. “Don’t you dare give me that look like you’re innocent. I know what you’ve been doing with the neighbor’s cat, Li.”

Another head tilt.

I chuckled and shook my head. After Lila scared me half to death in the morning and I *did* call Connor to chew him out for always being gone when she got sick (something he tried to say wasn't his fault, but I'm sure he planned) I was both relieved and sort of horrified to learn that it wasn't some kind of virus that was making my cat sick...and fat.

And upon hearing that, I had a realization of my own. A period missing for over a month type of realization.

My heart panged again *hard*, and I longed to pick up my phone. But Connor was off doing important things. I hated interrupting his important things. He'd worked so hard to get where he was and he was doing so well. Six expansions across the states in six years. Multiple investments. A real name for himself. Everything he'd ever wanted, and I think a whole lot more.

He hung out with little ol' me all the time. Through kissing and fighting and crying and making up, he'd stayed my best friend through it all. And I was so grateful for him. We could wait a week until we told him. We could.

Scooping Lila up I got to my feet, a wave of nausea hitting me as we righted ourselves with gravity.

"Woah," I muttered, bringing my little cat up to nuzzle her nose. I brought my forehead down to hers, pressing my skin into her soft fur as I sighed. Was it bad that I still wished he was here? So much so, I actually felt my throat burning a little bit. I sniffled. "Li. I can't believe we're pregnant."

The sound of something heavy slapping against the floor pulled me out of my little moment with my fur ball and had me whipping my attention around to the kitchen entrance.

To Connor.

What was he doing home? He wasn't supposed to be home for another four days, gone three already. Looking down at my watch I checked the date just to be sure I wasn't missing anything.

Nope. It was still day three of seven without my husband. Or, it had been. Before he just appeared in our home out of

nowhere.

“What did you just say?” Con asked. It was the way his voice wobbled, the way his face looked pinched and unsure and concerned and hopeful and excited and terrified all at the same time, that told me he had heard me just right.

I bit my lip as I held onto his eyes. I tried to shrug, but it was shaky. “There’s going to be a third little shit running around here pretty soon.”

“Holy fuck,” he said. And then he was on me. Crushing me to him, kissing me, laughing with me, picking me up and spinning me around. “Holy fuck, Ceci!”

I laughed right along with him. Kissing him, hugging him—almost puking on him when his excited spinning started to make me nauseous.

Setting me down on my feet, he waited all but a second before he was fussing all over my person. Pressing his hand to my forehead, checking me for God knows what, asking me if I needed to sit. I refused it all, just liking the feeling of being pressed up under him. Simply reveling in this feeling of *him* that’s never wavered, or changed, or dulled, or lessened. This electric shock I got when I simply existed around him. And this sense of home that he brought, evident as ever upon his return.

Reaching up to my tiptoes I pressed my forehead into his much like I’d done with Lila a few minutes ago. The lump in my throat had grown to the size of Texas as I watched as genuine joy overtook Connor at the news. I didn’t know before, but a crazy part of me thought that maybe he wouldn’t be happy. That fucking smile he’d yet to wipe off his face proved me so damn wrong. But it also proved me right.

I really did have the best man on planet earth.

“Why are you home?” I asked.

Leaning down with his hands on either side of my neck, Con nuzzled me too. Pressing his forehead into mine. Running his nose along my nose. Laying his mouth over my mouth.

Just existed there with me in this moment. In every moment. Here with me.

“You were sick.”

“So you flew home?”

“Of course.”

“What about your speeches and conferences?” I asked.

“Not important.”

“What about that big—”

Slow lips pressed down gently over mine. Familiar and warm; perfect and totally mine. Against my cheek, I could feel the coolness of the titanium that made up his black wedding ring from over three years ago now. Against my front, I could feel the hardness of not just his muscular body, but the reason we were in this position in the first place. Against my heart, I could feel the imprint of him. The one he made on me that very first day where he looked at me and cocked a slow smile that had me addicted on the spot, and the new ones he continued to give me every day he was this perfect man I loved.

Pulling away, Connor stayed on my lips, speaking over me as he rubbed at my wet cheeks and under my eyes. “Not important, honey. Nothing is more important than you... *Than us.*”

And as he said “*us*” I got the feeling he was already including the little, tiny baby growing inside of me. And that might have been when it really hit me.

Trembling slightly, I tried to hold back my happy tears. But the gentle way he was touching me, rocking us from side to side in a melodic sway, was sending more and more streams down my face.

Finally, I was able to open my eyes and gaze up at the man I’d given myself to body and soul. And as he looked down at me his eyes pinched.

“Tell me these are happy tears, Celestia,” he rumbled, not daring to let me go.



Sniffing, I blinked at him. Another tear slipping over the edge of my eyelid, cascading down my cheek. “You want her, right?”

Those eyebrows climbed his face, but he rumbled a laugh. “Her, huh?”

“You know I’m good with these things,” I whispered, and to his credit he didn’t even argue.

What he did do was pull back just enough so I could see his whole face as he answered. “There hasn’t been a single fucking day since I found you in that bed that I didn’t want you and everything that you bring, Ceci. You are mine. She is mine. The damn cat is mine. And I want every last bit, every waking second until the day I’m gone. Understand?”

More tears slipped, now tempered with laughs and sniffles as my heart filled up and up and up. And after he kissed me and cleaned me up and walked me over to the couch to sit me down like it was suddenly too much for me to do myself. After all of that, when he gathered me up so close to him, I could barely feel where I ended and he began, I remembered what he said and huffed a laugh.

“What?” he asked into my skin, mouth permanently attached to my temple.

Looking up at him, I smirked. “*Her*, huh?”

The sound of his laugh was as good as the very first time I heard it. But even better now that I could feel him lean into me, pulling me close and holding onto me as that wave of humor passed through him. Like he wanted to take me along for the ride with him.

Looking down on me he just gave me his own smirk as he whispered, “I’m guessing you’re no less of a smartass as a mom, huh?”

I couldn’t help but grin at my husband, my best friend, my everything and everything that matters all wrapped into one as I leaned in and whispered against his lips, “*More.*”



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# About the Author

Adorabol (Dori) is an avid lover of romance. She's a chronic binge watcher of TV dramas and loves curling up just about anywhere with a good book (preferably on the floor). The only thing she loves more than seeing a good love story, is creating one.

Dori has spent most of her life playing out stories in her head. She started writing in grade school, where she would pass her notebook around to her friends during lunch as they begged her for more chapters. Now, she hopes to pass her stories along to even more eager readers.

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You can find more of this author in her debut novel, and the first installment of the Seaside Mergers Series, [Terms of Inheritance](#).