

Cece and Coyote

Cece

I'd had a hard time sleeping lately. Three years had passed since the last great battle against Catrina, and I thought by now, all of the pain from the battle would have faded into the past. But sometimes, I found memories and fears sneaking back up on me. Tonight, it was even harder to rest with the full moon hanging in my open window.

I stared at her cool, bright face with my crocheted blanket tucked up to my chin. My room was quiet—Juana had her own room since we'd made our own house. But sometimes I missed having my sister there with me in the darkness. Her warmth could dispel shadows like the ones lurking in my soul.

My insides always seemed to grow colder when I looked at the Moon. Not because of the glowing light, of course—she was beautiful. But it made me miss Metzli.

I sighed and turned onto my side, staring out the window. I needed to get some sleep. My sixteenth birthday was tomorrow, and everyone was planning a grand fiesta. It was so kind of them. And I really wanted to enjoy it. I needed to soak in their love and joy all the more after a night like this.

I squeezed my eyes shut and pouted. Right. I had to enjoy tomorrow. I needed to cozy up and sleep already—

Creaking moved along my roof. My eyes burst open, my heart thundering. I froze in my sheets, eyeing the window, as footsteps crept toward the open space. I clutched my blanket. What was it? A new enemy? It had been awhile, but I'd heard rumors of banditos—

It's just me, golden orange comfort wrapped around my soul.

I smiled, and all my fears washed away. "Coyote!"

He suddenly dropped into view, upside down. He smiled, his gold eyes nearly glowing in the night.

"You scared me," I whispered.

He grinned and landed on my windowsill right-side up. "Lo siento. Your soul was so noisy, I thought maybe you needed rescuing."

"Rescuing?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

He'd rescued me plenty of times before, but Nueva Esperanza was peaceful, even if it was small. I sat up, and my hair slid out of its ribbon, spreading sideways along my shoulder. It had grown a lot in the last few years, though it was still shorter than Juana's. I wanted to grow it out again so I could finally tie it back. It would be way more convenient.

Coyote glanced across the room, at my carved wooden door. Ocelot had carved it herself, with her claws, in the intricate shapes of waves. Turns out, she was a pretty amazing artist. Coyote tilted his head, like he was checking if anyone else was awake. The silence was warm and soft. So gently, he crept inside.

He came toward me, bare feet whispering over my wooden floor. My stomach fluttered as he moved closer, his broad shoulders outlined by the moon, the white patches of his curly hair nearly glowing. I played with my fingers under my blanket. I wish I didn't think about how handsome he was at times like this.

Coyote was my best friend. I told him all my secrets.
Except one.

It was too personal, and would change too much, if I shared it with him.

Coyote sat down beside me. My bed creaked with his weight—he was stronger than he used to be, taller too. I pulled a rush of pink feelings back into my soul, hiding them deep inside, where he wouldn't notice them.

He squinted at me, and his eyes winked like gold coins. "Rescuing," he said, nodding to my earlier question. He reached out. My heart thundered as he caught a piece of my hair between his fingers and tucked it behind my ear. "If your dreams aren't a safe place right now, let's go somewhere else."

I smiled and tried to pretend I wasn't blushing. "Like where?"

He grinned and offered his hand. "I'll show you."

I glanced from his smile to his hand. His eyes twinkled even more, and I muffled a laugh. For a second, it was like old times again, like we were sneaking out for an adventure that would change the world. I nodded and slid my hand into his. His familiar warmth wrapped around me.

"Vamos!" he whispered.

He pulled me out of bed. With my long nightdress blowing behind me, I rushed to the window hand-in-hand with him. We leapt out together.

Falling through the cool desert nighttime, he pulled me onto his back, and the moment we hit the ground, he used it to launch us into the sky.

The wind rushed over my bare feet and ankles. I squeaked, grinning, beaming, as Coyote's arms anchored me onto him. The stars flew by us on either side as he leapt from rooftop to rooftop. There weren't as many houses as there had been in Tierra del Sol, not yet. But one day, I hoped we'd have many more friends and allies join us in our new home.

Across the navy blue and purple sky, Coyote took us until we landed on the curved rooftop of the new Academia de Curanderismo. Coyote's warm hands still anchored me safely to him as we perched on its very top, overlooking the rest of the young city.

Ciudad de la Nueva Esperanza's walls were pretty much done at this point. They'd taken the most time, but we had to prioritize them so we could always protect those who trusted enough to come inside them. We had a fine main street coming along—we'd even started a library because Axolotl had demanded it, and we'd all thought she was probably right, even if we didn't have many libros to fill it yet. The capitol building was nearby, but a bit closer to the entrance of the city, seated in the town square. It was probably the biggest building in the area, even bigger than the one we stood on now. But it wasn't finished yet. Mamá said it would probably take a while.

But the Academia de Curanderismo didn't need to be huge. It sat at the center of the Nueva Esperanza in the middle of the lake we'd created out of the hole to Devil's Alley. Juana had taken to calling it the heart of our new city.

Which, of course, is what made me so nervous about it. It was so important. And unlike the capitol building and all the political structure of the city that Mamá and Santos and the adults were handling—this one was mainly up to me.

A gust of wind made my dress snap and flutter. I shivered. Coyote squeezed me closer.

"Are you cold?" he asked. I felt his voice through his back.

"A little," I said, mostly so I had an excuse to rest my head on his shoulder.

My plan backfired as he tried to put me down. "Let's get you inside then," he said. "The building's empty, but it's probably still warmer out of the wind—"

"No!" I gripped his shoulders.

He paused. "Why?"

I hesitated. There were a few reasons. I loosened my grip on his shoulders and cleared my throat.

"I just don't want to go inside," I mumbled. "I want to look at the city. It feels less . . . lonely. You know?"

"Does the Academia de Curanderismo make you feel lonely? You were so excited about it."

"I'm not un-excited about it *existing*," I said. "The curanderas worked so hard to establish curanderismo in the past. It's incredibly important to me that we carry that on. I just . . . don't want to look inside the Academia right now," I mumbled into his shirt's neckline.

"Why not?" He tried to look over his shoulder at me. It was kind of awkward in his position, though.

I picked at the shoulder seam of his shirt. "It's so . . . empty."

He laughed a little. "You've never been scared of filling empty things before."

"I've never been the only person who could fill the empty thing before," I whispered.

Coyote stayed still and quiet for a few moments, as the wind blew and ruffled our hair. He listened, and I felt his soul's orange shades turn to a softer, seeking blues, and reach for my soul.

"Is that what's made your soul so loud tonight?" he asked.

I nodded slowly and looked up at the Moon that reminded me always, always of Metztli. I knew she was happy where she was now. But I also knew part of that was because she trusted me to carry on curanderismo for her.

And I was only . . . me.

Sure, I'd been a curandera the longest out of the known ones today. And I'd done some pretty cool stuff, if I said so myself, mostly thanks to all my friends. And I loved curanderismo. I loved it so, so much.

But there was a difference between loving something and knowing how to bring it back from the dust.

Coyote nodded, like he'd been listening to all that.

I know how that feels, his soul whispered. *To have it all on your shoulders.*

I nestled my face into his neck. I knew he did. And that was one of many, of a thousand, reasons why I felt safe with him.

"You know what you taught me to do when I feel that way?" he asked.

I straightened up and leaned over, so we could look at each other. He smiled. I winced.

"Face it?" I asked.

He nodded.

I sighed. "Yeah. You're probably right."

"Well, *you're* probably right. Because it's your idea."

I laughed a little. He had me there. He gave me a look asking for permission, and I nodded. In one swift move, he slid us down the curved roof, down the tile, and landed on the

ground in front of the Academia de Curanderismo's doors. Gently, he set me down. But took my hand. I squeezed it and faced the doors.

I'd avoided this building for the last month. And for the last month, it had gotten harder and harder to sleep.

But Coyote and past-me were right.

It was about time I faced it. Shame and fear can only breed in the dark.

Facing fear brings it into the light.

Coyote

I didn't hear soul language the way Cece did. She heard it like ambient noise around her, she'd told me. The closer she was to someone, or the more time she spent with the soul, the better she was at grabbing hold of its words.

I felt Cece's soul like a whisper on the wind. The stronger her feeling, the clearer her words became, until they wrapped up around my heart and my soul reverberated with our shared feelings.

When we stepped inside the hollow Academia de Curanderismo, Cece's feelings spiraled around my soul like an ocean's tumultuous tide.

What if I'm not good enough to rebuild curanderismo? she asked herself, as we looked around the adobe interior.

My heart ached. I approached, softly, as she stared at the blank walls, at the tiled floor we'd finally finished laying, at the open space where she'd once said so happily that students would be able to practice their forms. She stopped at the back window, looking out to the garden she and I had planted together last summer.

"Cece," I whispered, and touched her shoulder. "I know you've always struggled to believe you can do things. Or that you're good enough. But you've already done amazing things. No one's asking you to bring it back perfect."

She turned to look up at me, with a glint of tears in her eyes. I brushed a thumb over her cheek. She closed her eyes. My stomach melted.

"Future curanderas are just asking for your best. And your best is pretty amazing if you ask me."

She held my hand to her cheek but couldn't seem to bear to open her eyes. "But I don't have the cantos de curandera codeces because they were destroyed in the castle during the battle!" she whispered quickly. "Metztli told me there was so much she'd teach me after the battle, so much I was still missing, but she didn't have a chance." She took a harder, shivering breath. "C-Coyote, I have to bring back this amazing, beautiful thing, but what if I ruin it?"

"You won't ruin it," I said, as softly as I could. I cupped her cheeks. She closed her eyes, bottom lip trembling. "Hey, hey. It's going to be okay. This is something you'll have to rediscover, just like the first curanderas had to piece it all together. It'll take you time, but you'll do a great job. Because you love this."

"I do." She nodded, eyes batting back open. Her river stone eyes shone even in the low light. "But what if that's not enough?"

She was clearly spiraling. She did that sometimes, like a hurricane inside her, throwing all the peace in her soul away. I understood what that was like. My problems weren't hurricanes, but I felt just as lost inside them. So this time, I knew what to do.

Without saying a word, I pulled her into a hug and held her there.

"Breathe with me, amor," I whispered in her ear.

Her cheek heated against my neck, but she nodded. In sync, we breathed in a long, slow breath. Her clothes wrinkled against mine, her hands knotting around my back. My heart sped up a little, being so warm and close to her. But I did my best to release a slow breath with her. We did that several more times, until I could hear her heart rate had slowed.

More importantly, her soul could speak again.

I'm scared of being in charge of something so important to me, she whispered.

I know. I pulled her in tighter, careful to make sure she still had plenty of breathing room. "We won't make something perfect," I whispered aloud. "But it's too important for us to wait for perfect, isn't it?"

"Better," she whispered, like she'd just remembered the word. Her face lifted, and she stared up at me, our faces only inches apart. "That's right. Sometimes . . . we just strive for better."

She looked to me with that vulnerable, brave smile, her hair falling over her shoulders in one black, silky waterfall. With gold and calm, steady blue rising back up in her soul.

And I wanted to kiss her so much.

I looked away, loosening my hold on her, with nervous squirms in my stomach. Now wasn't really the time, right? Especially since I hadn't even told her I liked her like that yet.

I glanced back at her, and Cece stared up at me the way she had when I'd been in her window earlier. My heart thumped against my ribs. Her hands still pressed to my chest, and I glanced down at them, suddenly terrified she'd feel it panicking at her touch.

Cece noticed my look, and she laughed awkwardly, taking her hands back in a rush and stepping away, like she was embarrassed. My stomach flipped around again. Weird. I was pretty sure Cece hadn't noticed I liked her as more than a friend yet. But that reaction was . . . different, right? Like maybe she was noticing something different between us?

Or—I barely dared to hope—she was feeling it too?

"Lo siento," she said, and thumbed back at the door. "I—I guess I'll go then. Pero, um . . ." She smiled and met my eyes more confidently again. "Gracias, Coyote. I don't know what I'd do without you. I'm so grateful we're . . ."

For a moment, it was like she didn't know how to describe us. My heart raced, faster and faster, until I was sure even her human ears would catch onto it. Her eyes widened. Her cheeks flushed.

"Going, yeah," she said, and started inching back towards the door. "I'm going. I need to sleep or I'll miss my own fiesta!" She scuttled back to the door and nearly made to leave—then caught herself on the doorjamb.

Wait a second, her voice swam through the air, and I felt her trembling thought catch on my soul. *Did he call me . . . amor, earlier?*

Uh-oh. My cheeks heated instantly. I can't believe I'd slipped and said that out loud. She turned back to look at me—

And I leapt outside through the nearest window, grabbed onto the roof, and swung up to hide beneath the stars. My heart slammed against my chest as I listened to Cece's hesitant steps as she walked out of the building, across the makeshift bridge, and back toward home.

Phew.

That was a close one.

The next day, Kit and I sat together in Lion's room, across the hall from Ocelot's in the house we'd made together, as he packed to leave Nueva Esperanza.

"So you're sure about leaving," I said.

Little Lion had broken the news to us an hour or so ago.

"Have you told Juana?" Kit asked.

Lion's shoulders hiked up around his ears. "What? Why her specifically?"

Kit and I eyed him with matching frowns. It was pretty obvious he'd had a crush on Juana for years. To everyone except Juana, of course. For a smart woman, she seemed pretty intent on ignoring the signs. Lion glanced between us, cheeks reddening, and scowled.

"*What?*" he demanded.

I rolled my eyes. "Never mind. Where are you headed first?" I asked.

"Costa de los Sueños," he said, and immediately relaxed. "They've mostly recovered from the bruja's attack a few years ago, but the rebuilding has left them vulnerable to banditos. They need the help, and Santos thinks it'll help me get pretty similar police experience to what it will be like here in the future. He says it'll be essential to making me a great chief of police one day."

"That's good," Kit said. "Are you going to miss us?"

It was Lion's turn to roll his eyes. "I've been living in the *same house* with you and your frog-hiding pranks for years. I'm looking forward to going."

"Hey! I did that like *two* years ago, and only for a couple weeks!"

"The last one was wet and matted my fur—"

"Hair," I reminded him.

"Hair," he agreed. "That'll take at least another two years to forget. You're lucky I didn't eat you, baby fox."

Kit sighed out his nose but didn't argue. He'd gotten lankier this last year, and he lounged all that new length across the top of Lion's headboard, handing him clothes occasionally to sort of help him pack. I smiled a little. They bickered a lot, but it reminded me of their earliest past lives. Like they were a big and little brother again.

My heart ached, soft and mourning all at once. I'd missed that. I'm glad that in this, our final life, we got back to being familia, instead of scavengers and wild loners.

"Anyway, don't tell Cece yet." Lion looked at me over his shoulder. "I don't want to ruin her birthday. I'll tell her tomorrow morning."

I nodded. "Okay. But don't forget. She'd be heartbroken to hear it from someone else."

Lion's smile softened. "Yeah. I know."

I smiled too. I'd miss Lion, truth be told. But it was nice to see him finally happy, finally filled with purpose, after all he'd gone through. My heart warmed.

“Ugh.”

I looked up.

Lion’s nose wrinkled as he looked at me. “You’re feeling all marshmallow-y again,” he said. “Aren’t you?”

Kit grinned widely. “You were thinking about how much you loooove Cece.”

I bristled. “I was not!”

At least, not this time. I did that a lot, sure, but not right then. I cared about my brothers too.

“Suuuure,” Kit said, and his ears popped out suddenly, perked up and interested. His ears came out less and less as he got older, but whenever he was excited or nervous, they still made an occasional appearance.

I threw a pillow at him. “Put those ears away.”

Lion finished tying up his travel bag. Looked like he was done for now. “Are you still planning on surprising Cece tomorrow with the grand reveal?”

I scratched the back of my neck. Lion and Kit were fully focused on me now, eyeing me almost without blinking. I’d told them about an idea I had—about confessing my feeling to Cece on her sixteenth birthday. She’d have been a grown woman for a full year, and we’d have known her officially over four years, and I just thought I could put together a cute reveal or something. They’d both given their thumbs-up on the idea. Well, specifically they’d said, “About time.”

But now I wasn’t so sure. She’d been really upset last night. And today was about her having a good time and forgetting the stress of the Academia de Curanderismo. It was about her remembering she wasn’t alone. I didn’t want to throw more confusing feelings on her. I didn’t want to pull away as her friend, to pitch myself as more, when she needed support more than ever.

She was my best friend. I loved her too much to let my romantic feelings hurt her.

Lion folded his arms and glared. “Why does that look like a ‘no.’”

Kit sat up straight. “You’re not backing out again are you?”

I frowned. Okay, so I’d tried to tell her a few times before. Five times at most. Maybe six. But there were always good reasons. One time, Juana had been sick. Another time, we’d had a big bandito scare. And sure, once it was only because she’d looked so pretty with her hair down that I hadn’t been able to speak, but the rest were almost all for really good reasons.

I sighed. “I’ll get there. Eventually.”

Kit scrunched his nose at me. “Wait, why aren’t you doing it this time?”

“She’s really stressed about the Academia de Curanderismo,” I blurted. “She has the weight of an entire people on her shoulders. I think she just needs some time to enjoy herself tomorrow, not more stress.”

“You’re not asking her to *marry* you,” Lion frowned at me, and tossed his bag to the end of his bed. “You’re just telling her you want to court her. It’s not that big a deal.”

I growled at him. “Like you telling Juana you like her?”

Lion whipped around and snarled. “I do not!”

Kit rolled his eyes. “Why am I the most emotionally mature one?” He pointed at me. “Cece already likes you. It’s obvious. Be brave and tell her so you can enjoy being together and supporting each other when you’re both stressed. If you wait for a perfect moment or until

you're all fixed, it'll never happen, and that's not fair to either of you." He pointed at Lion. "And you need to be more honest with your feelings."

Lion's eyes nearly bugged out. "With Juana? She'll pulverize me."

"I meant generally, not just with her. But that's fair." Kit leaned back against the adobe wall and closed his eyes serenely.

Lion and I looked at each other.

"When did he get so confident?" I asked.

"It's like you two think I'm still eleven." Kit curled back his top lip to reveal a fang. "I'm fourteen already, you know."

Lion pointed at Kit but looked at me. "He has a point about Cece, though."

"But if Cece doesn't feel the same way, then it won't help me support her, my feelings will just make her feel more stressed. I don't want to hurt her—"

Lion pointed at me. "No. This is the same problem you always had, thinking you had to take care of everyone but never consulting them. You're making assumption about how Cece feels. You don't get to decide if Cece's ready for your feelings. Cece gets to do that." He tilted his head down, red eyes glinting. "The question you have control over is whether *you're* ready or not. If you're scared, that's your problem. Don't put it on her."

I dropped my hand from my neck. Oh.

He . . . had a point.

I mean, I did want to protect Cece. But maybe I'd been trying to protect me all of this time, too. I didn't know what I'd do if I lost her. She hadn't saved me, exactly, from the hopelessness and bitterness I'd gotten stuck in—but she'd inspired me. Her example had reminded me that it was worth crawling out of the darkness myself. So I had, over and over again, even when I wasn't always sure if I was worth it.

Cece had become the closest friend of any of my lives. And I was totally, completely, in love with her. I wanted to marry her. I wanted to cherish and protect her the rest of this precious, complete life I finally had.

What would I do if she didn't want the same?

Kit seemed to notice the shift inside me and lowered himself down on Lion's bed, across from the chair I was sitting in, and leaned forward on his elbows.

"Hey, Legend Brother," he whispered.

I looked up reluctantly.

Kit smiled. "We'll be here for you if anything goes wrong. But I meant it earlier—Cece's definitely in love with you too. I think it would be good for both of you, if you could be there for each other in a new way. You both need each other, you know?"

I smiled as the thought brought some relief. Maybe he was right. But it was hard to tell with Cece. She gushed with love for just about everyone, so I couldn't tell if I was special in that way or not. She'd buried her face in my neck last night and I'd nearly melted into dulce de leche, but she hadn't even been shy about it, like I could have been Kit or her Mamá or anyone else she cared about.

But then, there'd been the way she'd looked at me when I'd appeared in her window. For a moment, her eyes had brightened, and a pink spark had floated in the air between our souls.

Pink could be any kind of love, sure.

But it could also be the kind I was hoping for.

My heart fluttered at the thought.

Yeah. I could hope.

Lion grabbed Kit in a headlock and rubbed his hair. “What was that speech? Why *are* you the emotionally mature one? It’s not fair! You’re still the youngest!”

“Gah!” Kit kicked his legs out but couldn’t break Lion’s hold. “You realize complaining about it makes you even more emotionally immature, right?”

Lion rubbed his head harder, until Kit slapped his arm for release. I laughed. They settled down.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ve decided what I’m going to do.”

They both looked at me in rapt attention, waiting. I grinned.

It was time.

Cece

My birthday was a wonderful fiesta. We ate dinner together, a whole feast Mamá, Santos, Juana, and Damiana put together. Alejo came over to tell us stories about Isla del Antiguo Amanecer hundreds of years in the past, and Mamá played her flute. Axolotl laughed as we all tried to dance to Santos’s guitar as Juana and Lion cleaned up inside (it was their turn). Ocelot tried her best to give me dancing lessons, but I just wasn’t a dancer like my sister. Alejo told me that was okay—his daughter hadn’t been either, but she was still wonderful. Eventually Ocelot and I switched out, and she danced with the others while I sat down on the stone bench next to Coyote, where he’d been waiting.

“How’re you feeling?” he asked as I settled down beside him.

I met his seeking eyes. Slowly, a real, full, peaceful smile swelled up my chest. It was funny how just being near him could do that to me.

“I’m happy,” I whispered. “I’m grateful.”

He smiled, and it sent my stomach quivering with mariposas.

“And I’ve decided,” I said, dropping my head so he didn’t see the blush filling my cheeks, “that even though I am scared, I’ll be okay. Because, even if I can’t get all the curandera stuff right, it’s better to try than to let it die. I have to try.” I watched everyone dancing and playing around us. “We wouldn’t be here at all if we didn’t all do a bit of that, right?”

Juana had taught me that. And Coyote had shown me how.

Coyote’s hand slipped around mine. Warmth raced up my chest and swelled in my soul.

“That’s mi chica,” he whispered.

I lifted my head. “What did you say?” Had I heard that right? Had he just called me his girl? Like—*his* girl?

“That’s the Cece I know,” he said, in a rush, and glanced sideways really fast. “That’s what I said.”

I squinted. I caught just the edges of a little white and yellow coming off his soul before they vanished. Was that nervousness? So had he said what I thought he did, or was he nervous that he’d misspoken and didn’t want to give me the wrong idea?

I smiled a little. Hah. Off course he didn't want to give me the wrong idea. I relaxed and squeezed his hand. Right. I needed to just be grateful for what I had. I shouldn't think about too much more.

After we finished with the felicidades, Axolotl wanted to see the forges. Juana was onboard, so we all went touring the new area. They were even better than I remembered. That lasted for about an hour, and the sun went down on our way home. I was getting ready for bed when Juana suddenly charged into my room.

"Cece!" she said.

I froze, with my nightdress stuck around my neck and shoulders. Juana snorted.

"Lo siento," she said, and helped me pull it down. "Before you go to bed, I need your help. Can you meet me in the garden behind the Academia de Curanderismo? The one you and Coyote planted together?"

I straightened. "Why? What happened?"

I reached out for her soul through the air, but Juana didn't feel worried. Well, there seemed to be some underlying blue grief in her somewhere, but it didn't feel connected to the situation. It was so quiet, she might not even be totally aware of it herself. She smiled at me softly.

"It's important but not bad," she said, and poked my stomach. "Just meet me there in like ten minutes, okay? I need your advice on something there."

I nodded. "Okay."

Juana tweaked my cheek kindly before flying out the room. I blinked. Strange. But I changed back out of my nightdress into the blue dress I'd worn earlier, keeping my hair down because I wasn't about to braid it again, and put on my shoes. I headed out, wondering what Juana had in store for me.

Coyote

I stood in the garden behind the Academia, mouth open, as all the decorations Juana had helped me put up blew up in literal smoke.

I'd never seen anything like it. A stray fox—a real fox, not Kit or another criatura— had leapt up on the wooden table we'd set up and knocked over the candles Juana had helped me light. He'd been trying to get at the food I'd laid out, but when I'd tried to shoo him gently away, he'd accidentally dragged the flaming crocheted tablecloth around the area and set fire to—well, everything. The papel banner, the flowers, the small letters I'd written. Everything.

I had just managed to put it all out, and it was a mess. A crunchy, charcoal-smelling mess.

Footsteps crunched behind me. My stomach flipped as I turned. But it was just Juana, holding the rose she said she'd get me. Her eyes widened as she looked from me to the mess I'd just made.

"I left like *five* minutes ago," she said, and pointed to everything. "How did you even mess this up so fast?"

"It wasn't me—"

"Coyote?"

We both spun around, toward Cece's voice. She was just coming around the Academia. I waved Juana away, and after throwing me the rose, she sprinted off mouthing, "don't back out, coward!" at me. I frowned but smoothed my shirt down. It had burns on it now. Ugh. Could this have gone any worse? I clutched the rose. At least *it* was still nice.

"Coyote!"

I whirled around and nearly came chest-to-chest with Cece.

Her cheeks flushed. I stiffened, insides going soft. She quickly skittered back and laughed.

"I thought I felt you! But Juana told me to meet her here to get advice on . . ." she paused and looked around for what seemed the first time. Her eyes widened. "Oh."

I died about three times in three seconds as she stared at our surroundings in something crossed between horror, humor, and confusion. She lifted a finger like she'd figured something out.

"Ah," she said. "So I'm guessing you and Juana were sparring or something?" she looked around. "Where is she? She said she wanted advice." Her eyebrows pinched in thought. "I think my first suggestion would be to not spar in a garden . . ."

I died a fourth time before summoning all my courage. I couldn't back out now. Juana had actually helped me—which had taken persuading—and I'd decided I had to really go for it this time. Cece turned back to me, and I lifted the rose. Her eyes widened on it, deep and dark and sparkling like the lake to our right.

Peace and strength filled my soul along with a rush of pink.

I nodded to myself. Sí. I wasn't going to run this time.

Cece

"Coyote?" I asked.

He'd been strangely quiet since I arrived. But all of a sudden, he straightened up, his broad shoulders set, and smiled at me with a single rose clutched in his hands. It was that kind of smile that made me want to cover my face so he wouldn't see how absolutely sunny it made me feel inside. I bit my lip and couldn't look away from the rose. That was . . . suspiciously romantic. But then, it was my birthday. Maybe it was just a present. Yeah, that made sense.

"So, this wasn't about me and Juana sparring," he said.

He cleared his throat, grabbed something from the table behind him, and lifted up a badly burned sign in his free hand. Through the charred marks, I just spotted the word, "Cece." I squinted at it. Coyote seemed to realize it no longer said what he was hoping, so he put it down in a pile of ash.

Coyote smiled at me with obvious, awkward embarrassment. "Well. . . this was all an attempt to . . ." He rubbed the back of his neck. "To tell you that I . . ."

I waited, but he didn't speak. His gold eyes connected with mine, and the moon glowed behind him, softening the light on his face. My heart suddenly picked up speed. Pink and white battled in the air around Coyote. Wait—it was almost like he was nervous. Like he was about to say . . .

My heart raced like a horse across the cerros. I held my breath. No, it couldn't be. I looked at the rose again. No, I shouldn't get my hopes up. Maybe he was going to tell me something else. Yeah.

But what else could it be?

Coyote stepped forward. All my thoughts vanished in a moment as he gently placed the rose in my hands, and tilted his head down toward me.

"I love you, Cece," he said.

For a moment, my mind exploded in colors like fireworks. He loved me. He said it! He loved me! My toes tingled, and my soul swelled with a geyser of gold and pink. Then I rushed to catch and hold it down.

Coyote had told me this before. I'd told him I loved him too. It didn't mean what I thought it meant. I smiled to cover the cacophony of colors inside me. I couldn't get my hopes up. He was clearly trying to tell me something important if he was leading with this. I had to focus.

"I know," I said, with my softest smile, so he didn't think I was looking for more. "I love you too. What is it you want to tell me?"

He scanned my face. Then gently, took my free hand. He placed it on the center of his chest, over his soul. I clutched the rose in my other hand as my breath vanished again.

Slowly, Coyote cupped my cheeks. My eyes widened. He brought our faces closer, closer, until our foreheads pressed against one another's, and we were breathing the same air. My skin warmed from my toes to the crown of my head. My lips tingled, even though he hadn't touched them. I even felt my cheeks flush beneath his gentle palms.

No, Cece, his soul language reverberated through his skin, into mine, and hummed in my own. *Te amo, Cece*.

My heart raced, thundering between us.

Te amo?

But that was a different kind of love. That was the kind of love that people proposed to each other with. It was the kind of love that had made Señor Santos ask Mamá to marry him a year ago. It was the kind of love that made families and built lives together.

My body trembled. Coyote's eyes opened, and for a moment, I could tell his golden eyes shone with fear. Not fear of me. The fear of being—so completely, totally, vulnerable.

He meant it. He really meant *te amo*, with his whole soul.

I tightened my grip on his shirt. His cheeks blushed deeper, and the colors of his soul shook around me in nervous yellows, fearful whites, and deep, committed pinks.

"Coyote," I whispered. "Te amo."

He hesitated. He stared at me, like he wasn't sure he'd caught that right, even though he had some of the best hearing in the city.

I smiled. The realization bobbed up inside me like high tide, and I laughed. Coyote straightened, and I nodded, dizzy, happy, grinning.

"Te amo, Coyote!" I launched myself at him.

He caught me in his arms effortlessly and span me around. We laughed, both of us shocked, delighted, and dizzy with the truth of it. He squeezed me to him until he set me back on my feet.

And then, he kissed me.

Coyote kissed me the way the sunrises. Gently, in soft pinks and a feeling like pure gold that filled my soul slowly and inevitably with warmth.

"Te amo," we both whispered.

And we did. The kind of love that weathers storms and battlefields, prejudice and fear,
and blossoms into joyful forever.