

THE SONG AFTER SILENCE

by

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One

Violet

“That sounded great, Selena. Let's take it from the top,” our producer called, twisting knobs in the booth.

Selena—my younger sister—flashed a thumbs-up and a grin from inside the soundproof booth. I've always called it the “isolation chamber.” The place felt more like a horror movie set than a recording room, the kind of space where you'd lock people up and throw away the key.

Dallas, our older sister, stood behind the producer. She watched like a hawk while Selena sang, her arms folded, her caramel hair flicked perfectly off her shoulder. Beside her, our manager, Jack Rackley, looked on. Selena's voice was smooth and low, perfect for the stripped-down sound of our upcoming album. We'd settled on something acoustic-driven, layered with harmonies and flashes of electric guitar. Alternative, officially. Limitless, really.

Vocals weren't even her greatest strength. That was dance. She'd been winning competitions since she was nine, all thanks to Mamá's influence.

Ten months ago, we mapped out our fourth world tour, *Viciously Precious*. Six months ago, the recording wrapped. Then everything fell apart.

So now they were rehearsing.

And me?

I was sprawled on the couch, earbuds in, watching football on my phone. The Dolphins were somehow leading the Patriots—probably thanks to that Alabama quarterback they'd drafted. I didn't follow the NFL much, but the Crimson Reign? That was religion. It was Papi's alma mater. He'd even played Defensive End before he started coaching. Football was his life. He made it mine, too.

God, I miss him.

Dallas yanked an earbud from my ear. “Hey. Planning on singing today? Or doing anything?”

I glared. “No. But thanks for your daily inquiry. Try back never.”

She rolled her eyes toward Jack like, *See? Hopeless.*

Jack circled the table and sat beside me. “Violet, talk to me. What do you need? Want me to kick The Buzz off the tour? Would that help?”

Uf. The Buzz. Three brothers—Keaton, Shane, Nate. I'd dated the middle one, Shane. Predictable. Middle sibling of the band, the middle of mine.

And of course, I caught him cheating.

Flashes of it come back to me in a red blur: The Music Academy Promo Tour, his ex invited to perform a few nights, lights and screaming fans, awkward afterparties and meet-and-greets, one restless night to his hotel door, two feet in the air and endless gasping breaths and groans.

My fingers curled into fists.

Every time I relived the moment, I breathed fire for hours.

Now their band was opening for us. It was a brilliant idea when I was dating him. Now? Torture.

That betrayal, stacked on everything else, broke something in me. Rage won out over depression—but the poison was still there. I didn't want to sing, to feel. I just wanted to disappear.

"That's a start," I muttered.

"Violet, listen." Jack leaned in. "If you don't start singing again, this tour isn't happening. You get that, right? Three months until kickoff. You can't just tap out."

"One, I don't have a condition. Two, why can't the tour go on without me? Two out of three is still a show."

Jack scrubbed his face, desperate. Then his eyes lit up. "I've got it. Take a trip. You and your sisters. A week. Two, if you need."

Dallas clapped her hands. "Yes! Oh my God, yes. We need this."

"Count me out."

Dallas gave me that *sure, Jan* look. "Really? You don't want the first vacation we've had in four years?"

"Correct."

"So, where are we going?" Selena asked, stepping out of the booth, her cheeks glowing from singing. Her cocoa-brown eyes sparkled, her whole presence effortless. I envied it. She always looked radiant.

"Texas?" I asked. Not a bad option. Good memories lingered there.

"Not Texas." Selena's grin widened. "Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Back where Scarlett Violets began. We haven't been back in eleven years."

Dallas lit up. "Oh my god. That's it. We're doing it!"

They squealed. I groaned.

"Where do we stay?" Selena pressed.

"Vacation house?" Dallas mused.

"Mmm, I feel that's too big. What about a condo? They sell them right on campus," Selena countered.

"Y'all have fun." I pulled my phone back up. "I'm not going."

"*Sí, lo estás*," Dallas shot back. You are.

"Nope. I'll take Texas."

"Why don't you want *ir a casa*?" Selena asked softly. Go home.

"I have my reasons. And Alabama isn't a vacation spot. Bora Bora? Now *that's* a vacation."

Dallas crossed her arms. "We're going home, and you're coming. That's final."

"Excuse you? You can't make me."

"Watch me."

"*Buena suerte con eso*," I muttered. Good luck with that.

Jack cut in before the bickering escalated. "Alright, ladies, I'll scout condos. Anything specific?"

"Season tickets. Sideline passes," Dallas demanded.

"Updated appliances. Three bedrooms. Big kitchen," Selena added.

Jack scribbled notes. "Got it. Pilot and security too."

Laughter burst from my lips.

Stone. Our head bodyguard. Practically family. Recently, he'd disappeared—with Mamá. Together. Alone. Right after my public breakup. The timing was great.

"With all respect, we don't need bodyguards," Selena argued.

"That's insane!" Jack snapped. "The second anyone spots you—"

"Relax, Jack. It's a quiet campus," Dallas cut in.

"At least let me go," Jack begged.

"Nope. You'd ruin the vibe," I said flatly.

Dallas smirked. "I thought you were the vibe-ruiner."

"Do you really want another mood-killer up your *trasero*?"

Jack groaned. "Three bodyguards. Non-negotiable. Or no trip."

Dallas and Selena sighed.

"*Bien*," Selena agreed.

That night, sprawled in bed, I half-watched football. The Crimson Reign had crushed Western Carolina. LSU was dismantling Arkansas. In two weeks, LSU would face Tusk.

My mind wandered. How exactly were they planning to force me out of my mansion? The whole third floor was mine—bedroom, bath, walk-in closet. They'd have to drag me kicking and screaming.

As LSU scored again, my phone buzzed. Dallas. I answered with a groan. "What now, Warden?"

"Very funny. Jack snagged the condo. It's gorgeous."

"I told you, I'm not going."

"You are. I'll drag you."

"Security system, remember?"

"Doesn't matter. Flight's in the morning. The pilot's ready. Guards are booked. Keys are waiting. Everything's set."

"Good for you. I still don't care."

"Violet—imagine all the normal things you'll get to do."

"I can do normal in Bora Bora."

"There'll be hot southern guys."

"All the more reason not to go."

Her sigh was sharp. "What will it take to get the old you back?"

"Erase my memories. Or invent a time machine. Your pick."

She went quiet.

Then: "Either way, pack. Flight leaves at *siete*."

Okay. See you tomorrow." I smirked. "*Not*." And hung up.

Two

Violet

The sound of shuffling and zippers yanked me out of sleep. Instantly, I knew Dallas and Selena had invaded my house. I rolled over, glaring toward the closet doorway, where light spilled out and movement flickered inside. Dallas emerged, hauling my suitcase, which was already bulging at the seams.

“Morning, Violet! Sleep well? Great. Quick shower—bodyguards are waiting. Chop-chop.”

“I’m not going! You’ll have to kill me first.”

“Stop being overdramatic,” Dallas muttered, rolling her eyes. “But don’t tempt me. It’s too early for a murder.”

“I warned you! Don’t act surprised!” I snapped, burrowing deeper under my blanket.

“Sel, grab her luggage. You leave me no choice, Violet.”

Cold hands clamped onto my ankles and yanked. Dallas dragged me across the floor toward the bathroom.

“Dallas, I swear I’ll murder you!”

“As long as it’s in Alabama, I’m fine with that!”

I twisted, kicking hard. One finally landed, and she yelped, letting go. I scrambled toward the bathroom, slammed the door, tried to lock it—but she shouldered right through, knocking me down. She pinned me to the tile.

“Dallas, stop!”

“No! You’re coming whether you want to or not. It’s the least you can do since you won’t do anything else for this band!”

That one stung. I stopped struggling. Then, just for spite, I blew in her face.

“Fine. Get off.”

“Good. And brush your teeth—your breath is criminal.”

Shoving her away, I showered and dressed—angrily. Dallas waited at the door like a prison guard. With her arm locked through mine, she marched me out to the blacked-out SUV. Selena sat cheerfully inside with three silent bodyguards. The driver sped us toward Hawthorne Municipal, weaving sharp enough to slam me into Dallas every turn.

At the jet, Selena and Dallas practically skipped up the steps. I, on the other hand, dragged my feet. The pilot waved as I passed him.

“Morning,” I muttered.

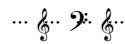
The Bombardier Global 7000 gleamed with absurd luxury—plush leather, polished stone counters, rich wood paneling, glass cabinets with china. I threw myself onto a couch and shut my eyes.

“Ladies, ready?” the pilot asked.

“Ready, willing, and able!” Selena chirped.

I raised a finger. “Not ready. Never willing. Completely able—still refusing.”

He smiled anyway. “Quick fuel stop in Dallas, then Alabama. A six hour flight.”
The jet roared down the runway at 6:59 a.m.



We touched down in Alabama around 1 p.m. As we stepped off with our guards, I spotted another jet nearby—a crimson “T,” tusks curling up from the bottom, a crown perched on top, painted proudly on the tail.

Put a madre. The University of Tuscaloosa’s jet.

Cold wind whipped my face as Selena signed confidentiality papers with the pilot. After last year’s gossip disaster with Shane, Jack had locked staff down like the military.

A private SUV carried us toward Tuscaloosa, the countryside glowing in gold and red. Leaves littered the ground. The road felt familiar—maybe the last we drove before leaving all those years ago.

Less than an hour later, we pulled up to the condo complex. Inside, the lobby gleamed: glossy tile floors, red leather couches, the Tuscaloosa Crimson Reign logo centered like a shrine. Across the hall, the gym smelled faintly of rubber and sweat.

“Whoa,” Dallas and Selena breathed in unison.

I craned my neck four floors up to the glass ceiling where sunlight poured in. So much for Sweet Home Alabama’s blue skies—they weren’t true. But the light here made me feel small in a way I didn’t hate.

Keys in hand, Selena herded us into the elevator.

“After eleven years, we’re finally back!” Dallas bubbled.

Barf. Barf on this whole thing.

On the fourth floor, we rolled luggage to 401. Inside, a long hallway split into three bedrooms. The first—mine, obviously—was a spacious master with its own bath. Past the hall, the condo opened into dining and living space. The kitchen gleamed with a bar and island.

“Nice! The balcony wraps around the side,” Selena called. “And—look! A football field view!”

That pulled me out. I stepped outside, the cool air brushing my face. Below, the practice field stretched green and perfect.

“Must be the practice field,” I muttered.

Dallas swept her arms. “So? Jack really delivered.”

I crossed mine. “Sure. Hideous wood cabinets, *de mierda* handles, cramped kitchen, and that tile by the stove looks like a crime scene.”

Dallas snapped. “There’s nothing wrong with any of that.”

“You asked. I’m giving feedback.”

“Remind me never to ask again. *Directa o indirectamente.*”

I smirked. “Besides, your favorite part is probably watching sweaty man-boys run drills.”

Selena laughed nervously. “*Vaya*, I think it’s perfect. Jack knows his stuff.”

Figures. Sel always sided with Dallas.

“Alright, who’s up for furniture shopping?” Dallas chirped.

The bodyguards lingered quietly, dressed casually—low profile.

“You two go. I’ll handle my room later.”

Dallas narrowed her eyes. “Got a hot date already?”

“Nope. I just want to relax.”

“Uh-huh.” She wasn’t buying it. “Fine. We’ll leave one guard.”

“No guard. You two are the ones going out. You’ll need them more than me.”

Dallas considered, then sighed. “Fine. We’ll probably be late coming back. Want us to bring you anything?”

“I’m good.”

When they left, I waited ten minutes, then slipped out.

Cold wind bit through my knit hat. Tears stung my eyes, partly from the air, partly from something deeper. My face numbed. Staring at the cracked sidewalk, I saw myself in it—weathered, stomped on, still forced to serve its purpose. It was the saddest truth I knew.

Left or right? Buildings or roads? I turned left.

My tourist eyes wandered, resentment simmering. Why had they dragged me here? Did they know what I’d done? This wasn’t about Shane—I was over that *gilipollas*.

I should just grab a taxi, head to the airport, and leave. But maybe. . . maybe I needed to face my demons. *Tal vez no*.

Somehow, I reached Silas Spire—a gothic tower with ivory tusk-shaped pillars and a massive clock tolling the hour. Papi once told me about this place. It’s named after a wealthy industrialist and Tuscaloosa native who donated funds to expand the campus in the early 1900s. The spire bears his name as gratitude for his generosity. Mr. Something Silas.

Mamá said she studied under these trees, waiting for something—or someone—life-changing. She smiled as if the thought pulled her back to a time and place where possibilities felt limitless and the thrill of the unknown was just that—a thrill.

Dead trees lined green, manicured grass, a few students scattered with books or friends. Bain Hall. Cooper. Ellis. The names whispered familiarity.

Where did you go Mamá? And without a word?

For a fleeting second, I wished I were just a student here. Normal. Anonymous. But maybe I never was.

Inhaling the crisp air, for once, I felt still. Then I saw it—the stadium, majestic against the skyline. My heart skipped. *Dios*, what’s it like inside?

And then I remembered what lay beyond it. Papi. A pull tugged me toward it.

“HEADS UP!”

A football spun at me. I’ve seen that one before. Instinct took over—I leapt and caught it.

A blond, muscular boy skidded to a stop, two others behind him.

“Nice catch. Guess you’re not afraid of balls,” he smirked.

I narrowed my eyes. “Thanks. I’m sure I handle balls better than you do.”

His smirk faltered. “Sorry—didn’t mean it like that. Quick wits, though. I’m William Shaffer.” He pointed at the redhead. “That’s Tanner—still working his throws.”

Tanner was massive, arms like bowling balls. “Yeah, looks like William needs to run faster if he wants to keep his first-string spot,” he teased.

I scoffed. “Actually, if you didn’t overthrow it, he would’ve caught it. Work on that arm.” I zipped the ball back—a tight spiral, right to his chest.

They stared. Tanner smiled. “Fair. No joke, you’ve got a great arm. Sorry about the near-face smash.”

“It’s fine. I’ve got places to be.”

I turned to leave.

“Wait—your name?” William asked.

Pausing, I looked back. “Violet.” *Why didn’t I keep walking?*

Tanner jogged closer, hand out. “Tanner McGrey.”

Hesitating, I shook it. His grip was surprisingly gentle—soft, not what I expected from a football player.

He gestured to the tall, scrawny, raven-haired guy. “This is Austin McNeal.”

“Hi,” Austin said quietly.

I nodded. “Like I said—I’ve got places to be.” And walked off.

Three

TANNER

Violet Adair stormed off toward the dorms, chin high, steps sharp. Everyone knew who she was. I hadn't meant to bother her—I just wanted to be polite.

"Mm. Violet Adair," William muttered, still staring after her.

That was William Shaffer—our first-string safety, grad student in Culinary, and world-class smooth talker. His eyes stayed glued to her like she might vanish if he blinked.

What's she even doing here? Alone?

"What?" I asked, suspicious.

"Nothing. Just. . . I can't believe she's here. Didn't even know she was visiting campus. Which means her sisters must be here too. Where, though. . ." His gaze swept the quad like he expected Dallas or Selena to materialize out of thin air.

We started walking again, a good half-mile behind Violet.

"I didn't know either. Maybe no one knows they're here," Austin said.

Austin McNeal—our backup quarterback. Good kid. Quiet, driven, and the one I'd been grooming to take the reins once I was gone. This was my last season here, and I couldn't imagine wearing any jersey but the Crimson Reign.

"That girl is so hot," William blurted, still watching her retreating figure. "And did you see that throw? Holy shit. I need to know more about her."

I scoffed. Classic William. Still, I couldn't blame him. She *was* interesting.

"Which is where you come in, my friend." He elbowed me.

"What?" I asked, already not liking the setup.

"I need you to get to know her for me. At the end of each day, report back what you find out." He said it so casually it made me twitch.

"William, I have football to focus on. So do you." I stopped and gave him a look. "Why can't you do it yourself?"

"I'm still in school. You're not." He grinned. "C'mon, Tan the Man. Be my wingman."

I arched a brow, glancing at Violet up ahead. She stomped like the ground had personally wronged her. She didn't exactly scream *approachable*. Well—at least Mary wouldn't care. My girlfriend was cool, secure, not the jealous type.

"She doesn't seem interested in much of anything. You sure you've got your sights set right?" I asked.

"I'm positive." His tone left no room for argument.

Slowly, I exhaled. ". . . Alright, buddy. I'll help you out."

"Wonderful!" William shoved me forward and smacked my ass like we'd just scored.

I scowled. "William, I'm hot and sweaty."

"That's what showers are for. Besides, girls like a man who looks like he works out." He smirked. "Now get going."

Growling under my breath, I dragged my feet toward Violet. Up ahead, I noticed two figures already arguing in the distance.

Four

Violet

I stumbled forward, nearly face-planting over a tree root. A man passing by slowed, gave me a head-to-toe scan, and whistled. A shiver ran down my spine.

“Hey, where you going, sexy?” he called.

Just keep walking.

“Hey! I asked you a question.”

Something in me snapped. “I’m not interested. Leave me alone.”

His face darkened. “What did you say to me?” He stormed forward.

I backed up slowly, calculating angles. *Okay, Violet, groin shot in three. . . two. . .*

His hand clamped my arm, his other hand gripped my chin. “Say that again.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Tanner McGrey strolling up, football spinning lazily in his hands.

Greeaaaat. What does he want?

“Is there a problem here?” Tanner asked, casual but firm.

The creep instantly let me go. “No problem.”

My jaw clenched. *Liar.* My leg shot out, connecting squarely with his groin. He collapsed, groaning.

“Stay down, *escoria*.” I shook my head and strode past.

“Touch her again, and you’ll regret it,” Tanner added before jogging to catch up beside me.

“Are you okay?” he asked, concerned.

“I’m fine. You can run along now.” I waved him away like a stray dog.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to be nice.” His tone was earnest, not sarcastic. “Nice kick, though. You really nailed him.”

Fighting back a smile, I almost laughed. Almost.

“C’mon, that was pretty good and you know it,” Tanner said, flashing those boyish, pearl-white teeth.

A smile anyone else would melt for—bright, playful, lopsided, innocent.

I turned my eyes to the trees, birds, and the pale blue sky. Pretending I was alone.

“You’re different than I expected,” Tanner said.

“Expected?” I asked.

“You are Violet Adair, right?”

“Yes. . . expectancies are usually a letdown.” My hair whipped in the wind.

“Right,” he murmured, still spinning the ball, keeping pace.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?” I asked.

“Yes. Toward my dorm.”

“Heading anywhere specific?” he asked.

“Wherever I feel like.”

“You don’t know where you’re going, do you?”
 “Not a damn clue. But I’ll figure it out. Just trying to get lost.”
 He smiled, but stayed quiet after that.
 His presence wasn’t welcome, but at least he wasn’t yapping. I figured I owed him one polite line. “Congrats on winning the National Championship last year. You’re a promising NFL draft pick.”
 He blinked, surprised. “You watch me play?”
 I wagged a finger. “Nuh uh. I watched the championship. Doesn’t mean you’re on my fantasy roster.”
 He chuckled like I’d told a joke.
 My stomach growled.
 “Hungry?” Tanner asked.
 “Must be.”
 “Me too. Want to grab a bite? My treat.”
 I stopped, narrowing my eyes. “What do you want from me?”
 “I’m just being friendly. Ever heard of southern hospitality?”
 We stared each other down. We stared each other down—me glaring, him grinning like I was a puzzle.
 “I’ve heard of it. Haven’t seen it.”
 Inside, I almost smiled. Almost. But he didn’t need to know.
 “You’re something, Violet,” Tanner said. “So, yes to food?”
 “Make no mistake—it’s a sure.”
 We stopped outside Cooper Hall, its brick façade lined with windows, the name carved proudly across the entrance. Definitely a men’s dorm.
An all-men dorm no doubt.
 “You can wait in the lobby. I won’t be long,” Tanner said, holding the door.
 Warm air washed over me inside. Tuscaloosa’s logo polished into the floor, red couches, walls lined with Academic All-American plaques. Okay, fine—impressive.
 “Nice, isn’t it?” Tanner asked.
 “That’s one word for it.”
 “I’ll be back. Need anything?”
 “Nope.”
 He disappeared into the elevator. I sprawled on a couch, half-tempted to nap.
 “Uh, excuse me,” a voice jolted me awake. Another blond—thick-necked and built like a tank. “What are you doing here?”
 I steadied my pulse. “Tanner’s taking me to get food. And you are?”
 “Preston Dove. You?”
 “Violet.”
 “Pretty name. You know Tan the Man?”
 “No. I was forced into acquaintance after an overthrown football almost smashed my face. Tanner, Austin, and William.”
 Preston smirked. “Anyone else joining y’all?”
 “Like who?”
 “Mary. Tanner’s girlfriend.”
 I perked up. “Cheerleader, right?”
 “Nope. Golfer.”

“Interesting.” I tucked that away.

The elevator dinged. Tanner reappeared—showered and dressed sharp. Too sharp. Frat-boy chic, down to the Louboutin loafers. *Seriously?*

“Hey, Preston,” Tanner said. “What’s up?”

“Just meeting the new girl. But, hey, I’m late for the gym. Catch ya later,” Preston said, flashing me a grin before heading out.

“I think I might actually like the people around here,” I said, letting sarcasm drip.

“Don’t tell me I’m losing your charm already,” Tanner teased.

“I said *might*. Sometimes I’m wrong about these things.”

Outside, he led me to a sleek black Land Rover.

“Impressive,” I said, circling it. “Not following the Range Rover herd. Nice choice.”

“Thanks,” he said. “So—what do you want to eat?”

“Barbecue.”

“Now we’re talking.”

Soap and cologne lingered faintly in the car as he started it. My lips almost curled at the scent.

“Ever been to Buffalo Wild Wings?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“Perfect.”

A short drive to the parking lot, the place was packed. Tanner opened the door for me. Inside, TVs flashed with Sunday NFL and loud voices filled the restaurant. I bit my lip. Too many eyes.

The hostess greeted us, her eyes locking on him instead of me.

“Two,” I said, waving a peace sign. *Hello, I exist.*

She blinked. “Right this way.”

Every step through the restaurant drew stares. Because of me or Tanner? Hard to tell.

At the booth, she slid menus down, still gazing at him. “Enjoy.”

Tanner nodded at her. “Thank you.”

“My *pleasure*.” Her eyes lingered before walking away.

“*Gracias a dios*,” I muttered. “She’s practically drooling.”

Tanner laughed.

“You don’t come here much, do you?” I asked.

“What makes you say that?” he said behind the menu.

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe the people staring, the hostess trying to flirt with you while ignoring me. . . I have a growing suspicion that our waitress will flirt with you too. Just a hunch.”

“I think you’re starting to enjoy yourself a little bit.” He looked at me through the top of his menu.

“Me? Enjoy myself?” I smiled slyly. “Come on now, Tan the Man. You know me better than that.”

The waitress arrived. “Hi, I’m Christina, I’ll be your server. Drinks?” Her eyes never left Tanner.

Tanner glanced at me as I smirked.

“Water,” Tanner said, baffled.

“Water too,” I added.

“And appetizers?” she asked—again, to him.

“Dynamic Sauce Trio. Boneless,” I cut in. “Before you give Mr. Heartthrob here more special treatment than your other paying customer.”

Christina scribbled, shot me a glare, then beamed at Tanner.

“Twenty-four traditional wings,” he said, handing back the menu.

She flounced off.

I shook my head. *Unbelievable. He has a girlfriend for crying out loud. I guess she doesn't know that. But I mean, c'mon. . . look at him.*

Wait, what?

“What was that about?” Tanner asked.

“I don’t appreciate being invisible just because this is Football State.”

“So. . . you think I’m a heartthrob?” he teased.

“Calm down. I’ve dated actual heartthrobs.” The words came out harsher than intended.

“Ooo, that one hurt even me.”

Tanner laughed.

Hiding a giggle with the clear of my throat, I toyed with his straw wrapper.

Then the food came, and banter flowed.

“Not every girl can throw like *that*,” Tanner said.

“Not every guy can either,” I said. “What’s your point?”

“Most women enjoy the sport, but it’s uncommon to see them throw a football like a man.”

“Well, I suppose you’re looking in the wrong places then.”

“Did you learn from your dad?” he asked gently.

I clapped sarcastically. “Congratulations, Sherlock. You solved it.”

He just grinned. “Getting you to talk is like pulling teeth.”

“And yet you’re surprised?” I sipped water. “Teeth don’t budge. Unless they’re knocked out. Hard.”

“Sounds like a challenge.”

“A challenge of what kind?”

“I’m going to get you to warm up. Have some fun. Maybe even like me.” His eyes gleamed mischievously.

I scoffed. “Good luck.”

“I won’t need it.”

Later, he paid as I left a quarter tip.

“Violet—really?” He reached for his wallet.

“She didn’t refill our drinks and spent more time batting lashes at you. She earned a quarter.”

I slid out of the booth, leaving him shaking his head.

The car ride back was silent. Peaceful.

At Silas Spire, I told him to stop.

“You sure you don’t want me to drop you at your place?” he asked, concerned.

“And tell a stranger where I live? Think again. Stranger danger, remember?”

“It’s dark, Violet. It’s not safe.”

His concern was surprisingly sweet, but unnecessary. *The university’s campus is the safest place to be.* “I’ll make it. Thanks. . . for food and stuff.”

He smiled, fighting laughter. “No problem.”

I flicked a lazy salute and walked away.

Gracias a dios that's over.

Five

TANNER

I pulled into my usual parking spot and shut the car off. My Range Rover sat neatly between the lines. As I stepped onto the sidewalk, I looked back at it. *I'm impressed. Not following the Range Rover herd. Nice choice*, Violet's voice echoed in my head.

In the elevator, I leaned back, watching the numbers climb. Upstairs, I unlocked the door to my dorm.

The guys were exactly as expected—William and Preston glued to *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* on the Xbox, shouting, swearing, laughing. Austin sat nearby, spectating.

I smiled. Same old.

"My bud!" Austin grinned. "Back from dinner with Violet?"

"Yeah," I said, dropping my bag. "Interesting night. Got something for you, Will."

"Hold on, hold on—zombie ass to kill," William muttered, hammering the B button like his life depended on it.

I changed, then sank into the chair next to Preston while William finished the round. Austin leaned back, casual.

"So, Preston—what'd you and Violet talk about in the lobby?" I asked.

"Not much. Just introductions before you showed up," he said.

William finally paused the game, swiveling toward me. "Alright. Spill."

I told them the story—starting with the creep who grabbed her, ending with dropping her off. "She's insanely rude, man. You sure you want me wingmanning this?"

"Of course." William grinned. "That's all surface. Underneath? Warmth waiting to be uncovered."

I raised my brows. "Poetic, Will. And how exactly do you plan to uncover that?"

"You'll figure it out." He smirked. "I believe in you."

I rolled my eyes. "Easy for you to say. But don't you think it's weird? You knowing everything about her while she knows nothing about you? She'll think you're a creep."

"That's one of my secrets," he said, turning back to his zombies. "Boo-yah!"

Austin spoke up, thoughtful. "Maybe she's dealing with something. Being a celebrity's tough. We're not global-famous, but we know the pressure. Could be something personal."

I paused. *Hadn't thought of that*. "Maybe. Either way, she keeps people at arm's length. A hundred yards, actually. You sure you're not changing your mind?"

William didn't look up. "Nope. Kick in that southern charm. Court the lady and show her a little bit of fun. She'll open up."

I rubbed my chin. ". . . Been a while since I've had girl friends. Guess I'll try. I'm heading to bed. Night."

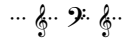
In my room, I shut the door. This needed a game plan—like football. Strategy.

Violet would kill me if she found out I was running recon for William. But maybe, along the way, I could help her loosen up too.

I thought of Mary, pulled out my phone, and called. No answer. She was probably with friends. She'd call back.

Glancing at the whiteboard over my desk, I grabbed a marker, and started jotting: ideas, places, things to ease Violet up before looping William in.

Perfect. Paintball tomorrow.



Sunlight sliced through the blinds at 5:14 a.m. I rubbed life into my eyes. Too early, even for me.

The daily routine: Water. Groom. Computer. Homework. About an hour of online classes.

I'd earned my bachelor's in Sports Marketing in three years. Now I was grinding out my master's with online classes—flexible enough to let football stay first. Redshirting freshman year had its perks, even if I hated sitting out back then.

Done with schoolwork, I pulled on gym gear, earbuds, and grabbed my phone. Stretched then jogged out the door.

Music: The Scarlett Violets.

Halfway through the quad, the memory of yesterday's run-in with Violet crossed my mind. I needed to figure out where I'd "accidentally" bump into her again.

The sun crept past the trees, blinding me. I collided hard into someone. Grass cushioned the fall, but I hit like a sack of potatoes.

When I blinked my eyes open, Pacific-blue eyes stared back into mine. Gold flecks in them, impossible to look away. *I've seen those eyes before.*

Then the weight shifted off me.

"You should really watch where you're going, *amigo*," a stern voice said.

I sat up. Violet. Of course.

Her sour expression softened to shock.

"Oh. It's you," she said, catching her breath. "You okay?"

"Well, I'm still alive, if that's what you mean." I grinned. "You should've been watching too, you know."

She rolled her eyes with a smirk. Sports bra. Leggings. More toned than most students on this campus.

"You should play strong safety with a hit like that," I said.

Violet crossed her arms. "Dammit, Tanner. How do you always manage to ruin my schemes?"

I laughed. "What're you doing running alone out here? After yesterday, I figured you'd have four bodyguards in formation."

"Well, I do," she said, pointing to a bald guy jogging fifty feet back. "They give me 'levels of privacy.'"

I stared. It's hard to imagine living like that. "Wow."

"Well, gotta run," she said quickly.

"Since we're both jogging, mind if I join?"

She sighed dramatically. "...Fine."

We fell into pace.

“So, why do you jog?” I asked.

“Stay in shape. Helps with endurance for performing.” She smirked. “Unless you want a juicy answer like running from my problems.”

“Are you?”

“Please. I have no problems. Perfectly perfect. What about you? Why so early?”

“Warm-up for practice.”

“Makes sense. By the way, is there a dance studio on campus?”asked.

“Yeah, I’ll show you.”

Speeding ahead, I led her around until we stopped at a small building with painted dancers across the windows. “Here it is. Open to anyone once hours start.”

Her skin gleamed with sweat, but she still looked annoyingly composed. “Cool. Thanks.”

We jogged back.

“You don’t look like your sisters,” I said. “Adopted?” The words slipped out too blunt.

She stopped dead, breathing hard. “¿Y si sí? ¿Y si no? Why would I tell you?”

I blinked. “Wow. I didn’t know you spoke Spanish. But I thought it was worth a shot.”

She smirked. “You’ve got a lot of determination. *Me gusta eso*. But you’re on a dead-end road, McGrey. Turn around while you can.”

Six

Violet

— ✕ 13 Days to LSU Kickoff ✕ —

Stepping into the condo, I stopped.

More changes since last night. The living room had been split into a music space: a beautifully polished ebony Steinway & Sons by the sliders overlooking the practice field, plus three Gibsons—acoustic and electric—on stands. Two beige leather couches faced a 55” plasma TV.

The kitchen leaned earthy-minimal: little rustic buckets of herbs, viney plants, and gold accents on sandy walls. Wooden dishware in the cabinets. Copper pots, pans, and steamers. The silverware had a tree-bark texture in the drawer. I hadn’t clocked how put-together it all was until now.

Bedrooms: Dallas went Old Hollywood—glam enough to make me jealous. Selena’s walls were splashed with pacific blue, lime, lemon, and crimson, with script-handwritten quotes covering the once-white ceiling. Mine? Victorian-themed furniture (they do know me). I loved it. I didn’t show it.

They also stocked Tuscaloosa Crimson Reign appliances and barware: serving tray, 4-piece pilsner set, seven cute Tuscaloosa cups, four coasters for the balcony high-top, and a crimson 3-burner 46,000 BTU gas grill. Because of course.

Selena passed waters around. Dallas stood on the balcony, openly watching the sweaty men on the practice field. I told them about the dance studio I’d found; Jack had already called and snagged us a two-hour private block. Dallas grabbed the mini karaoke machine for choreo + vocals (I was not partaking. Entertainment and its awful people could miss me today.). Our bodyguards filed in from the condo next door, in workout gear, waiting to trail us. A vacation for them too, I guess.

“So, how was Buffalo Wild Wings last night?” Dallas asked, face unreadable.

I froze. “What?”

“We know,” Selena said, pulling up a photo on her phone—me and Tanner at BWW, posted for the world.

Carajo. “Great.”

“We’ve got shopping photos too,” Dallas said. “So even if you’d stayed in, the cover was going to crack. But Jack called this morning—very unhappy you were with a random guy and not a bodyguard. Also, you lied. So you’re not going anywhere without a bodyguard. *Punto.* Jack’s rule.”

“You told him I didn’t have a bodyguard, didn’t you.” Not a question.

“We were worried,” Selena said, sincere.

“It’s not like I was alone.” *I wish I had been.*

“Ah, *sí*. Who’s the mystery *tipo* in the picture? I can’t see his face,” Dallas prodded.

“No one. A guy who almost hit me in the face with a ball and paid for my food to apologize. Can we go now?” I motioned to the door.

“This conversation isn’t over,” Dallas warned as we headed out.

Down the stairs, out the front doors, two guards behind us, one ahead—standard formation.

“*¡Qué emoción!* This is extremely exciting! I’m about to see the University of Tuscaloosa for the first time!” Selena practically vibrated.

“Well, actually, just the quad and the dance studio,” I said.

While they chatted, my brain drifted to Tanner. Practice had to be electric. Watching great plays always sparked something in me. I wondered if fans felt that watching our concerts—if that was their version of my stadium high.

“Are you doing something different?” Selena asked.

I blinked back to earth. “No. Why?”

“I don’t know. . . something seems different.”

My sister is losing it. “I’m the same.” I checked myself.

Dallas rolled her eyes. “Oh, goody.”

I glared at her. *And yet you dragged me to Alabama.*

Inside the studio: half the room was a giant blue mat with *barres*, the rest rows of chairs facing it. We stared, a little awed.

“This is so *increíble y lindo!*” Selena squealed.

“Let’s get started!” Dallas clapped and rubbed her hands.

They hit the *barres* to stretch. I stretched out across a line of plastic chairs, wiggling into a comfortable sprawl. One guard posted inside, two outside. Honestly? Relaxing.

About an hour later, the music paused. Our inside guard said some visitors had arrived—claimed to know me. Name: Tanner.

I shot upright, heart hammering.

“I don’t know a Tanner,” Selena said.

¡Mierda! I slapped my forehead. I forgot he’d know where we were. My sisters’ crossed arms and tapping nails said everything. My face probably did, too. Didn’t mean I couldn’t try. “I have no idea who these people are.”

“Sure, Violet. Sure,” Dallas said, “Let them in.”

The guard murmured a code into his earpiece. The doors opened. In walked Tanner, William, Austin, Preston—and a girl our age.

“Violet! It’s us! From the quad!” William waved like we were old friends.

I pressed my fingers to my forehead and sank back down. *Carajo, estoy jodida.*

My sisters drifted to my “nest.” “Violet, why didn’t you tell us you made some *nuevos amigos?*” Dallas asked.

“*Francamente*, because they’re not my *amigos*. And also, it’s not your business.”

The crew reached us.

“Well, well, well. Fancy meeting you here,” Tanner said.

Heat scorched my face. This. Is. Mortifying.

Introductions all around. The girl was Mary Rampell—Tanner’s girlfriend. Preston looked at Dallas like she was a sunrise.

Puke.

“Mary, this is Violet,” Tanner said.

“Hi! Tanny sometimes forgets I can introduce myself,” Mary joked. Dark hair, hazel eyes, perfect smile.

She looked up at him; he smiled at her, in the special way that he did, and gave her a kiss. *Barf.*

But at least they seem committed to one another. Must be nice.

“Violet, let’s step outside for a moment in private,” Dallas said, scooping Selena with her. Groaning, I followed. At least the guards would witness my murder. Or stop it. Probably.

“¿*Qué diablos?* Of course it’s our business,” Dallas fired. “If something happened to you, we need to know where to start. This is why Jack wants bodyguards with each of us if we’re not together.”

I chuckled. “Whoa, Olivia Benson. One: they’re harmless. Two: nothing’s going to happen. Three. . . I never have a third reason.”

“Get your shit together and grow up,” she snapped.

“I am grown. You stop sticking your nose into other people’s business,” I shot back. “Besides, I think *elephant-neck* was checking you out.”

Dallas looked past me, then fought a smile. “You think?”

I side-eyed Selena, who was delighted by all of it. “Always works,” I said, tapping my temple.

“Fine. You’re off the hook—for now. *Pero más te vale:* bodyguard. *En. Todo. Momento.*”

Back inside, Austin lifted a hand. “I’ve got class in thirty. See y’all.”

“Don’t be afraid, Austin!” William called, then actually winked at me.

My eyes widened. *Did he just—?*

“Agreed. I have class too. Don’t you, Will?” Preston told Dallas, “*Very nice to meet you,*” and slipped out.

She blushed.

“Yes, I do! We’ll see y’all later!” William said, trailing after him.

Mary beamed. “So nice to meet y’all! I’m late for a golf meeting or I’d join. Don’t be too rough on my baby.” She kissed Tanner’s cheek. “Talk later!”

Joining us? Rough? ¿Qué?

Tanner stepped closer. “So, I’m guessing you didn’t tell your sisters you’d met—”

I held up a hand. “Please, Tanny, we already argued about this. Let’s not resurrect the past.”

His glare was immediate. “Please don’t call me that. Only Mary does.”

Oh, a button. “Right, my bad. So what’s this ‘joining us’ Mary mentioned? And ‘being rough’?”

Tanner grinned and raised his voice. “Who’s ready for paintball?”

“Paintballing? You’re taking the three of us. . . paintballing.” I deadpanned.

“Yeah! You’re on vacation—let’s actually have fun.”

“I’m going to stop you right there, Tanny. Guns in our feisty hands? Maybe not. Rock climbing? Roller-skating?”

“No! That sounds amazing. I could really take some shots at somebody,” Dallas said—staring at me.

“*Yo también,* let’s go!” Selena cheered.

“Didn’t we just make peace?” I asked.

“Yeah, but letting things slide has me on edge,” Dallas said.

“Like you haven’t been on my last nerve since before we got here.”
 “Well, let’s make it interesting,” Dallas proposed.
 “Sure. I accept.” We were literally squared off, faces inches apart.
 “Do y’all want to shower and change first?” Tanner asked, hovering between referee and hostage.
 “Good idea,” Dallas and I said together.
 “Okay, let’s go,” he said, ushering us out.
 Bodyguards in tow, we headed back. Tanner looked weirded out by the protection triangle. *Odd—he should be used to escorts on game days.*
 At the condo, Tanner made himself at home. Dallas and Selena dove into their showers, leaving me and quarterback-boy with the guards.
 “This is nice,” Tanner said, taking it in.
 “Thanks. I didn’t know what to expect.”
 “I did—amps, guitars, piano.” He grinned.
 “How was practice?”
 “Great. Major improvements on the plays. Plus, time on Coach Sayers’s new strategy plays.”
 “Which are. . .?”
 “You’ll see.” He smiled.
Ah, I see. A secret. Cute.
 “How long are you here?” he asked, spinning in the barstool.
 “Two weeks,” I said. *Gracias a dios I’m escaping this hellhole soon.*
 “Only two?”
 “We tour in two and a half months. Gotta finish rehearsals.”
 “Excited?”
 I shrugged.
 He turned toward the balcony. “Wait. . .” He stepped outside. I followed.
 “That’s Baker’s Field. We practice there. You bought a condo overlooking our field?”
 Brow arched.
 “My sisters did. I had no say.”
 “Right. You—innocent bystander. A saint.” He laughed.
 “Exactly. I don’t make bad impressions.”
 “You trying to impress me?” Cocky smirk.
 “*Por Dios*, either you like me or you don’t. I’ll sleep fine either way.”
 “Agreed.” He was amused.
 We leaned on the railing for a quiet minute.
 “How come Austin’s so shy?” I asked.
 “He’s not. New girls—especially pretty ones—make him quiet.”
 I smiled. “You think I’m pretty?”
 A faint blush. “You know. . . from a friend’s perspective.”
 We cracked up.
 “Preston seems very nice. My sister thinks so,” I added.
 “Oh, Dallas? Yeah, I noticed.”
 He sank into a balcony chair. “So what are you here for? This doesn’t look like vacation for you.”
 “What makes you think that?”

“You don’t hide that you don’t want to be here.”

“You’ve been doing *so* superior so far—I think you’ll figure it out,” I said, a real smile slipping through.

“Right.”

I caught my reflection in the slider. “I’m going to change. One of them should be done.”

“I’ll be out here.”

I ransacked my closet for paintball-appropriate clothes. Simple. Good enough. A touch of makeup. Back out.

Tanner, Selena, and Dallas were in the kitchen. Fifteen minutes to talk about anything—including my childhood. I chose to trust—for once.

“Alright, let’s get this over with,” I said.

We followed the guards to the black SUV. Tanner’s Land Rover flashed through my mind. *Uf. Out.* Two guards in the way-back, the three of us in the middle, driver up front with Tanner shotgun-navigating.

Mistake: not leaving my sisters alone with Tanner—bringing us all together so they could roast me with childhood stories while I sat there. He smiled at every humiliating detail. I should’ve just agreed to Alabama the first time if I knew this was coming.

I sank lower, pressed a hand to my forehead, stared out the window.

“So instead of singing ‘o’er the ramparts we watched’ she sang ‘for the lamb that we caught’!” Dallas cackled—my first solo ever, the chapel anthem disaster.

Giggles. Then: “And that time the hot guy walked by?” Selena said.

“He was *cute*, not hot,” I snapped. “Stop before I strangle you.”

“Anyway,” Selena went on, “they lock eyes, she turns around to walk backward to keep the look going, and—*pum!*—she nails a pole.”

They howled like dying hyenas. I mock-laughed. *Dios.* Worst car ride ever—even compared to the hypothetical with Jeffrey Epstein and a stalker. Tanner grinned ear to ear, enjoying the horror-reel of my life.

We pulled into a dirt lot: Splatzone Paintball. My heart skipped—nerves and excitement.

Inside the shack, we approached a glass counter with gear behind it on the wall.

Tanner stepped up. “Reservation under McGrey, sir.”

My sisters traded glances I couldn’t decode; I gave them confusion back.

“Ah, there you are,” the middle-aged guy said. “Welcome back, Tanner. Making practices count?”

Tanner leaned on the counter. “You know it. Working hard like everyone else.”

“What kind of markers?” the man asked.

What’s a marker?

“Four Planet Eclipse Egos, please,” Tanner said.

Ah. Gun type. Someone’s a regular.

The man set four sleek paintball guns on the counter. “Sizes? I know Tanner’s. You three?”

“I’m 5’8”, Dallas 5’9”, Selena 5’6”,” I answered.

He vanished and returned with four camo jumpsuits. “76” for Tanner, 68”, 69”, 66” for the ladies.” Then masks, belts, and vests. “You know where the changing rooms are, Tanner.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll show them how the guns work.”

“Good fella. Those three men ain’t playing?” He nodded to the guards. They shook their heads.

“Right. They’ll hang here,” I said, chuckling. “Not much can happen to us out there.” He looked puzzled, then shrugged. “Which course?”

“Mini Town,” Tanner said, finally glancing at us. “It’s the most fun.” I narrowed my eyes. Home-field advantage.

“Let me know when you’re ready; I’ll drive y’all up.”

We headed to the trailer-style changing stalls, Selena bouncing in giddiness. The guards waited outside.

“Vest first, then jumpsuit. Over your clothes. Belt after. Masks last—and not until we’re on the field,” Tanner explained.

“What about the gun?” Dallas asked, a glint of competitive seriousness in her expression. “I’ll teach that on the field.”

Sel and Dallas ducked into their stalls. I opened mine.

“Violet.” Tanner’s voice from the next door.

I side-eyed him. “What.”

“You got this?” An amused grin in his voice. He was up to something.

“Sure do. And don’t think I don’t know what you’re up to, Señor McGrey.” I shut the door.

Seven

Violet

The suit was on within minutes of his instruction.

Dallas and Sel were already outside when I came out. Almost at the same time, Tanner stepped out too.

“We ready?” he asked, holding up the gun.

We nodded and headed back to the shack-like office, guards attending. Inside, Middle Man clocked that we were ready and led us to his golf cart. Tanner hopped up front with him; the rest of us piled into the back. We waved goodbye to our guards as we raced off into the woods.

On the way to the Mini Town course, Middle Man—apparently *Scott*—talked to Tanner about football. Nothing else. Not Splatzone history, rules, safety spiel—just football. I wondered if it annoyed Tanner, but they were laughing, so I guessed not. I love football, but I like other topics too.

After a weave of trees, we reached a field framed by fences, barrels, and wooden shields, all splattered with paint. *¡Guau!*

“Here we are,” Scott said. “There’s a lookout nearby, so if y’all run into trouble, he’ll assist.”

“Thank you, Scott,” Tanner said. Scott sped off.

“Okay, simple stuff,” Tanner said, flipping instructor mode. “Pull the trigger to shoot. When you run out, pop the hopper—” he unclasped it “—take a paintball can from your belt, unscrew, pour, close.” He clipped the can back on.

“Got it,” we said in unison.

“Teams,” he grinned. “Since we’re shooting *at* each other.”

“I’m with Sel,” Dallas declared, locking arms with Selena and shooting me a revenge look. Of course.

“Alright then, Grace, I’ll take Tanny-boy,” I said in my best British accent, locking arms with Tanner. He looked confused at “Grace.”

“Bring it, Shannon,” Dallas fired back in her own accent.

I threw on my mask and bolted for a wooden shield. Tanner followed.

“What was that about?” he shouted through his mask.

I put on my game face. “A thing we do—British accents, British names, like we’re from England. For fun or when we’re bored.”

“That’s cute,” he chuckled.

I blinked, unsure how to process *cute*. “Thanks.” I peeked around the shield—paint cracked past my face. I snapped back. “They mean business.”

“I can tell. Is Dallas mad at you or something?”

I didn’t answer. “Ready?”

He nodded. We dashed from cover and lit up my sisters’ position. Paintballs whipped past as we dove behind another shield.

"I have a question for you, Mr. McGrey," I said, gulping air, adrenaline turning on all my lights.

"Shoot." He peeked over at me.

"Doesn't talking about football ever get annoying?"

We rose at the same time and hustled for the trees. Crouched, creeping, I led.

"It's my life," he said.

"That's not what I asked."

He looked at me through his mask; I looked back through mine. He cocked his head, about to answer—

"*¡Dios mío!*" A sharp sting hit my arm. I dropped, clutching it.

More shots came in; Tanner slid to my side. "Move your hand," he said gently.

I did. Yellow paint splatter. "You'll be lucky if you don't get a welt, but you're fine. Not close range," he said, grinning to reassure me.

I popped up. "Thanks, Tanner. Ready?"

He nodded, mischievous. We sprinted closer to Dallas and Sel, sliding behind the nearest shield to their fence.

"You never answered my question," I reminded him, eyes on the fence.

I felt him looking at me. "No, not really. It's my life. I love it, so it's fun to talk about. I'm a guy, after all."

"It's about time you answered."

He smiled. "Don't forget—I still have paintballs."

A thud shook our shield. "*Uf*, let's end this. Shall we?"

"We shall." He mimed cocking his gun. I smiled despite myself.

We ran the long way around the fence, dodging paint, and at one point I pulled a beast somersault that popped me back to my feet—movie-style. We still took hits (they hurt), but adrenaline helped.

On their flank, we tagged them clean. They squealed. Paint everywhere—on them, on us. Tanner and I laughed and high-fived. Dallas scowled; Selena laughed at herself and high-fived us too.

We played for two hours. By the end, all of us were walking canvases.

"Hey, Tanner—pic?" Selena said, handing him her iPhone.

"Sure," he said. Shot one: Sel in the middle, gun aimed at the camera; Tanner and I on the sides, guns up, helmets on. Shot two: helmets off, tucked at our sides, guns slung, steel expressions like a magazine spread.

"You guys are crazy," Tanner chuckled, handing the phone back.

"You just now figured that out?" Dallas said.

"Nah," he said. "Violet was the prep warning."

I *might* have glared. Jokingly. Maybe not.

Scott rolled up. "Y'all have fun?"

We agreed in our own ways.

"Sir, could you take one more?" Selena asked. We all gave her the *another one?* face. "One with Tanner in it." *Duh*.

We huddled, arms hooked, Tanner and I in the middle. Click.

Back at the front, our guards stood right where we'd left them—relieved we were intact. We stripped gear and handed it to Scott. I paid—Tanner covered food last night (and probably slipped a better tip after I left, if we're honest). Then we headed for campus.

“*¡Estuvo muy divertido!*” Selena squealed.

“It was awesome,” Dallas agreed.

“It was. Best time I’ve had in a while,” I admitted. Tanner was good at this, unfortunately. He smiled, listening as we drifted between English and Spanish. It was one of the things that made him interesting—and a mystery.

“What about you, Tanner? Fun?” Selena asked.

“Lots,” he said, glancing back. “Y’all are fun to paintball with.” He sounded surprised to hear it out loud.

My sisters and I traded looks. “We should bring the other guys next time,” Dallas said. “Even more entertaining.”

Selena agreed.

Even though we’re only here for two weeks.

A short drive later, we rolled up to a side of campus I hadn’t seen yet. White columns, glass entrance, brick walks in soft off-white and pale coral. Tanner called it the Ferg—apparently a cafeteria. Inside: crimson-and-white floors and walls; photos and murals everywhere; clusters of tables; and, in the middle, two mics and a karaoke rig.

The place was *packed*. *Oh, mierda*. No one seemed to clock us, though. Our bodyguards hovered at our sides, visible, facing *us* so it looked natural. Instantly calmer. It’s nice when guards know what they’re doing.

“Follow me,” Tanner said.

We filed through the food line, shielded again. So many options—Italian, Chinese, Mexican, American. I stared like a starving raccoon at a buffet. Heaven.

“You guys seem hungry. Dig in,” Tanner said. “I got it.”

“I don’t want you paying for my food,” I said.

He eyed a tray of Chinese beef. “You got paintball, I got food. Even Stevens.” That smug little glance. Does he find everything amusing?

I gave him an unsure one back. “Fine.”

We told the lunch ladies our orders, and Tanner paid. I guess we were trading off. How he afforded it was his business; I could, obviously. Whatever.

We took a table diagonal from the “stage.” Most of the football team seemed to be there, plus a few new faces. I sat beside William; Tanner across from me. Selena beside me; Dallas beside Tanner. I left the seat next to him open for his girlfriend.

Guards sat at the next table, chatting while hawk-eyeing us.

Internally, I grumbled. *I’m a bird in a shiny, spacious cage.*

We ate. Like wolves—in a lady-like manner, of course. A few guys watched, entertained. Tanner ate like this was normal.

Ten minutes later, our trays were clean. The boys looked. . . impressed.

“Hey,” William said, flashing a cute smile.

“Hi,” I said to my tray.

“So, are you training for the military or something?” he joked.

I looked at him like he’d asked if water was dry. “I don’t know. Are you training to be the world’s biggest idiot, or does it just come naturally?”

He flushed and turned to his food. Across from me, Tanner laughed so hard his face went beet red—one of those silent, full-body laughs. I glanced right at the karaoke rig.

“So, why are there two microphones and a karaoke machine over there?” I asked.

Tanner wiped tears from his eyes, peeking back at the setup. “Karaoke nights, every Friday.”

Interesting.

Selena kept sneaking looks at the mics. She hates going a day without singing.

“I’m going to try it,” she said, leaning in. “It’s allowed during the day, right?”

“I think so,” William said with a shrug.

“Violet, wanna join me?” She gave me the *I dare you* look. We both knew the answer.

“We need to lay low if we want to stay under the radar.”

“Come on, you have to get back up there sometime. The tour’s coming,” she pressed.

Dallas backed her. “She’s right. You haven’t sung or danced since. . . you know.” She leaned in and whispered, “The incident.”

Shane. Mom and Stone. All of it slid back in. My fists clenched; heat crawled up my face. Tears, rage, and a thousand *why mes* threatened.

The table quieted. Two kinds of listeners were present: discreet ones and the ones who didn’t care if you knew they were listening.

“I’d rather not have this conversation right now,” I said.

Tanner and a few guys performed the *we’re-not-listening* act.

Selena rolled her eyes and rocketed up. “Whatever. Our cover’s already blown. Dallas, join me after my solo?”

Dallas looked at me. I stared through her. Judging me isn’t a right anyone has.

“Yeah, sure,” she said.

Selena headed to the mics. The guards’ eyes tracked her and swept the room, ready to spring. The machine was fancy—pulling instrumentals from the internet. She chose *Our Worlds Collide*, written by Dallas, from our first album, *The New Romantics*.

The guitar riffs hit and my knees melted to jello. Not concert-loud, but loud enough to raise your voice.

“*I wanna be your friend*,” Selena sang, “*but you’re a cigarette smile and half-laced shoes kind of girl*.”

Heads popped up. Students swayed. She owned it. “. . . even if they ask me, I’ll never admit that I’m so alone.”

My foot tapped before I knew it. I noticed. I didn’t love that I noticed. Humming came next. Then finger taps. I drew a line—hands over ears. This wasn’t going to get to me.

Selena worked the room—thank God for wireless mics. Dallas swayed, grinning.

The whole cafeteria woke up—clapping, whooping. Even our table. Even Tanner. Even the bodyguards. Mary appeared with a tray, resting a hand on Tanner’s shoulder. He pecked her lips and smiled.

For a fleeting moment, I wanted to hop onto our table and break into song and dance. The thought hardened me.

Cafeteria staff danced, mostly women, while I steeped in bitterness.

Selena’s voice was girly-light with that low-toned strength. People always think the high notes are the magic; I think the low notes hit truer. Raw. She made Jessie J’s song her own—slipping high when it felt right.

The three of us were different. Dallas: soulful soprano, wide range, four octaves; she drags feelings to the surface whether you want them or not. Selena: mesmerizing mezzo, move-y beats, soft-feminine tone, solid three octaves. Me: girly but edgy; five octaves with whistle.

“Lounging in clouds through a daydream,” one magazine said.

Empowering. Feminine. Raw.
If you can believe such ridiculous things.
When the song ended, the place stood and roared. Our table was the loudest.
“Thank you!” Selena said. “I came up on a deal: if I sang for y’all, then my sister and I would sing a duet. What do you think?”
The cheer answered.
“Alright! Come on, Dallas—deal’s a deal!”
Dallas stood and looked at me once more. She bent down. “Violet, are you sure you don’t want to—”
“Just go sing,” I snapped, slicing the sentence between us. She straightened and strutted up.
Tanner frowned at me, then shifted in his seat to face me. Mary did too. “Violet, what’s wrong?”
“I’m not in the mood to talk about things that are none of your business. Leave me alone,” I said, turning my back to him. Especially not with Mary sitting there.
Chairs scraped. I assumed he turned back to the crowd.
“Well, what song are we singing?” Dallas asked into the mic.
“What do you want to sing?”
“Why not one of ours? How about *Casablanca*?”
The song we wrote together about Mamà and Papi? I briefly turned my head in their direction.
Another cheer.
“Hands up for *Casablanca*?” Selena called.
A forest of hands.
They pulled the instrumental. Dallas and Selena traded a look; Dallas lifted a finger—verse one + chorus for her, verse two + chorus for Sel, then both on bridge and final chorus.
Dallas nodded to the downbeat. “*Her eyes, cocoa melting on liquid skies. She smiles, summoning the secrets from my heart.*”
When the chorus hit, she went full rocker—high notes with that P!nk edge. She worked the tables, singing to faces; they devoured it like a free five-course meal at a five-star. Her soul poured everywhere.
Grrr, I can’t take this stupid temptation anymore.
Selena’s turn—she dove harder. They flicked looks at each other: *out-sing me*. The spark raised the roof. She doesn’t reach as high as Dallas or me, but when she hits her limit, she *wows*.
They finished the song breathless. Dallas high-fived Selena. I turned back to my tray, to the exit sign beyond it.
Draw the line somewhere.
And I planned to head right for that line.

Eight

Violet

We spilled out of the Ferg. William tried to give Tanner a noogie, jumping to reach his neck; Tanner caught him and returned the favor. I tried not to grin. Failed. Why guys do that to each other is beyond me, but it's funny.

Our bodyguards cinched the circle as students filtered out, shooting stern looks. Phones whipped up with whispered commentary. No one got close.

Mary looked unbothered. No reactions to anything. I wished I could deadpan like that.
Uf. . .

"Well, I gotta go," Preston said, checking his watch.

"See you, man," William said.

Austin, Preston, and William split off. The rest of the team filed out with high-fives for Tanner and then vanished. Mary said goodbye with a kiss and strolled off.

"I'm tired," Selena said out of nowhere. Just the three *hermanas* and Tanner now.

"Me too," Dallas said. "Back to the condo to relax?"

I didn't want to be trapped with them after the cafeteria stunt. They knew I didn't want to perform, maybe ever again, and still pushed. In front of baboons. "I'm not."

They stared.

"And why not?" Dallas asked.

"Because I'm still upset about earlier, and I don't want to say things I'll regret."

Dallas's disbelief was audible. "Oh, so you haven't regretted anything you've said so far? Is *that* what you're telling me?"

"Yes. Exactly."

Her arms flew out. "What is with you? Your attitude has been so shitty lately. I know you went through some stuff after Shane—"

I held up a finger. "Don't."

"Whatever." Hands up, she stormed off with one bodyguard.

Selena gave me a sympathetic look and followed our fearless dictator with the second guard. Tanner and my guard stayed.

"Why are you still here?" I asked him.

"I thought I'd accompany you. If you want company."

Great.

"Whatever." I drifted toward the SUV—nowhere else to be, really. My guard trailed.

Tanner stepped beside me. "Where exactly are you going?"

"Nowhere in particular."

"Mind if I show you something?" His eyes had that *idea* sparkle. I let him lead.

Back to the quad. He scanned tree lines like a treasure hunter until we reached the biggest tree in the whole space. Picture-perfect. He patted the ground beside him. I sat. My bodyguard chose a nearby trunk—close enough to monitor, far enough to give me air.

“Look up,” Tanner said.
 I did and saw endless blue and fluffy whites. “Why am I looking at the sky?”
 “For cloud shapes.”
 “You’re kidding.”
 “Do I look serious?” A whisper of smirk, otherwise relaxed. Eyes like caramel you
 skinny-dip in. Sharp, though.
 I bit back a smile. “Yeah.”
 He laughed. “Always wanted to do that.”
 “Dream one fulfilled.”
 “But seriously—pick something. It clears the mind. You need to calm down.”
 “I *am* calm.” *Maldita sea. . . mentira*
 “Just do it.”
 I scanned the clouds, tracing outlines, feeling ridiculous. Then—there it was. A perfect
 middle finger.
 “What?” Tanner asked, reading my face.
 “There’s a cloud—” I broke into laughter. “—flipping the bird.”
 He smiled. “What’s so funny?”
 I stopped. “There’s a cloud in the sky that looks like a hand shooting a bird.”
 “No way.” He squinted up and laughed. “Ha! I see it.”
 I snapped a photo.
 “Would you send that to me?” he asked. “You’ve got the better angle.” He took my phone
 gently, typed, then handed it back. *Tanner McGrey* with a smiley emoji.
 I snorted. Typed T-A, sent the pic. His phone buzzed.
 A moment later, we heard a buzzing noise. He pulled out his phone and saved the photo. *I*
mean, he could’ve taken his own photo. But this is fine I guess.
 “Thanks,” he said, saving it. We looked up again, then at each other. For no reason, we
 both laughed. I was still laughing at the sky.
 “You see that?” he pointed.
 I leaned closer, head near his arm, following his finger. A cross. Sure, God paints.
 “That’s awesome,” I said.
 “Not as awesome as your cloud,” he said, kind-of complimenting.
 I scanned the sky again.
 “You’re hard to figure out,” he said, studying me.
 “Other than my secrets, what are you trying to figure out?”
 “Your story.”
 “My story?” He wasn’t so easy to read either.
 “Why you are the way you are.”
 “Which is?”
 “Closed-off. You bottle everything.”
 True. I crossed my arms, facing forward. “Like what?”
 “You didn’t want to tell us your name.”
 I picked grass. “I didn’t want you figuring out who I was. We’re here secretly. I told you
 that. That’s one thing, not *all* my info—”
 “There was more than that,” he said gently. “And if not all your info is secret, what’s the
 ‘incident’ you and your sisters keep mentioning?” Arms crossed, serious. Cute, actually.

My jaw clenched. The reel played: Shane, Mom, Stone. I wanted to punch a wall. “I don’t discuss that with anyone.”

“Not even family?”

“No.”

He nodded slowly. Quiet. “Violet.”

We were both staring at the ground. I looked over. “What.”

“What’s going on? I didn’t know you before, and I still don’t, but there’s no way you’ve *always* been this crude.”

Anger fizzed. “Don’t act like you care. If you’re that curious, grab *Us!* Magazine in a few days. They’ll come up with something better than the truth.” I turned, back against the trunk.

“I’d rather hear it from you.”

I smirked at him. “If you’re not Mr. Keep-Things-To-Yourself, what’s the deal with your girlfriend?”

He blinked. “What do you mean?”

“Why aren’t you with her instead of me?”

“She has classes. I’ve got online work and football.”

“So the little time you *do* have should be spent together, no?”

He rubbed his palms. “I don’t discuss this with just anyone.”

“What’s wrong—don’t want to be open about your personal life?” I mocked.

He didn’t answer.

Lately, destroying other people’s happiness was the only thing making me happy. This time, it felt too far. His discomfort mirrored mine. I hated that. It wasn’t me—deep down, I knew that.

“Hey.”

He glanced over.

“You tell me your story, and I’ll tell you mine.”

He weighed me. “I’m sorry. I just. . . can’t.”

I nodded. “Then we have nothing to talk about.”

He smiled anyway and held out a hand. “Hi, I’m Tanner McGrey.”

I cracked up and shook. “Violet Adair. Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise. What do you do for a living?”

“Oh, I’m just an international singer. No biggy.” I shrugged. “You?”

“I play first-string quarterback for the number one college team in the nation. Not that interesting. I could show you how bored you’ll be watching me throw touchdowns all day.”

“Mhm. Could you now?”

“Oh yeah. Receivers can barely keep up.”

“Is that so? How about a football challenge?” I said.

His eyebrow rose. “I’m listening.”

“I challenge you to all positions. A full match.”

“*All* the positions?” He blinked. “Isn’t that. . . dangerous?”

“I think it’ll be fun,” I said, then the magic words. “Unless you’re too chicken to get beat by a *girl*.”

He chuckled. “Okay, Miss Big-Britches. It’s on.” We shook.

“So, what do you think of Will—” he started.

“Miss, we have to go. *Now*.” My guard grabbed my elbow and hustled me away before my brain caught up.

Behind us, Tanner got swallowed by paparazzi—flashbombs going off. My bald guard veered us behind a stately, plantation-style house and into bushes. We crouched low. Leading them to the condo would be idiotic. For once, I was glad for forced protection.

Fifteen minutes. Maybe less. Paps rushed past, some slowed, then moved on. My guard murmured into his mic: the SUV was en route.

Tanner slid in beside us through the brush, making me jump. Not the guard—he'd clocked Tanner coming.

"Here you are," Tanner whispered.

"How'd you find us? And ditch the paps?"

"You went right, not left. Hiding nearby was likely. I guessed this spot. Most followed you; one or two stuck to me. I shook them by Graves Hall. Through some bushes of my own."

I was impressed. "No idea where that is, but good job."

He laughed quietly. "I can't believe this is your life. How do you deal with that?"

I shrugged. "It's normal for me. I hate it, but it's the price. Depends on the person—some can't handle it and break; some lawyer up; some hide and face it when they have to."

"I see."

I realized then: they'd seen me with Tanner. They might not leave *him* alone now—at least until we fly back. "Look. . . you might get stalked while I'm here. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about me. I can handle it. You worry about your safety," he said.

Selfless. A pinprick of guilt. Then I snapped back. *What sorcery is this?* "You're popular here anyway. You must be used to it."

He grinned. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I shoved his shoulder. "Don't play dumb with me, Mr. McGrey." Amused—strangely. Like, *actually* amused.

He shrugged, scanning the perimeter. "It's. . . whatever."

Humble, apparently. And he honestly didn't seem to like being hit on.

"Hey, are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

I rolled my eyes. "One of the biggest lies on earth."

"Yeah?" He feigned innocence.

I tapped his cheek lightly. "Yeah. Don't lie to me."

"Okay. Don't lie to me either."

"Deal." I smirked. "So what's bothering your easily amused mind?"

"Different things."

"What kind?"

He smiled. I couldn't help mirroring it—contagious. "Personal ones."

"Ah. *Ya veo*."

He studied me again. "Something else. A pap said you were born and raised here, but you've never come back all these years. Why now?"

I sucked air through my teeth. "Sorry. Too personal." I made a face.

"Isn't *everything* with you?" A little annoyed.

He kept examining me, frustrated with my walls. I found it entertaining. Score: five hundred for me.

"Tell me this," he said. "How do people get to know you if you don't tell them anything?"

"Simple. They'd have to know me from the very beginning."

"I meant *new* people."

"I don't let in new people."

"Why not?"

I saw the trap. Didn't step in. "I just don't."

Disappointment flickered. Why did he care so much? "You're never going to know anything about me," I said. "You should give up."

He chuckled. "Never say never. Unfortunately for you, I don't give up easily. Now it's out of spite."

I narrowed my eyes. *Why won't you give up?*

He read me, barely hiding a smile. "Plus, I know some things. Non-personal."

I slid my tongue across my teeth, thinking. "How?"

"There's the internet."

I scoffed. "Of course. Be one of those people. Not even the internet knows me."

"Why don't you let people in?" he tried again.

"If you want to know so bad, figure it out."

The SUV screeched up. My guard and I moved.

"At least give me a hint," Tanner called. "One clue. It's the rules."

Hand on the rear door, I paused. I didn't owe him *anything*. But the game was fun. And he'd never figure it out anyway. "Maybe a little music will help." *Good luck with that.*

He frowned. "What's that mean?"

"You have a 4.0 GPA, remember? Figure it out."

He grinned. I bit my bottom lip to kill mine and turned to climb in.

"HEY!"

I turned.

"You're really fun when you're not so mean," he said.

I gave him a small grin and got in the car.

Nine

TANNER

The day wouldn't stitch neatly into a picture. Violet was defensive, sure—but capable of warming up and goofing off, even if the humor had teeth. Underneath, I kept sensing someone who used to be sweet until something cracked. This “Shane” rattled her; there had to be more than just celebrity pressure. If I could break through the wall, it'd help William. . . and, if I'm honest, I wanted to be the one who figured her out.

I liked a challenge. It's why I loved football. And Violet wasn't just secrets—she was sharp, widely read, and probably great company if she ever loosened up.

“What are you thinking about so intensely?” Mary asked, smiling.

“Huh?” I blinked back. “Oh. Strategizing how to get William and Violet together. Not gonna be easy.”

After Violet's SUV whisked her away, I'd swung by Mary's sorority. Now she was walking me back to my dorm before a study session. I'd told her about William's “mission.” She'd laughed—pretty reasonable reaction, given the odds—but I nearly got William's name into the conversation with Violet before the paparazzi detonated that moment. I'd try again, but not until I'd chipped more at that wall.

“Leave it to Will to pick a celebrity,” Mary said, chuckling.

“Leave it to him to pick me as his wingman.”

“You didn't have to say yes.”

“I know. He's my guy. Also, for the sake of campus women everywhere, he needs to be off the singles list.”

She giggled. I pictured the sarcastic reply Violet would've launched here and had to fight a grin.

“I don't know her, but she seems troubled,” Mary said. “One of my roommates is a massive Scarlett Violets fan. She says Violet's known as The Blue Queen.”

“The Blue Queen?”

“Media nickname—she only writes about pain. Never a love song. Most of their sad tracks? People say Violet wrote them. Sounds...troubled to me.”

Maybe a little music will help, Violet had told me. Listening closely felt like a good place to start.

“Or maybe she's misunderstood,” I said. “Happens with celebrities. You don't actually know them.”

We reached my dorm.

“The fair's in town,” Mary said. “Want to go?”

“Absolutely. When?”

“Next Monday night?”

“Done. Mind if I invite the guys...and the Adairs? Might be a good moment for Will.”

She smiled. “Sure. Then I get you to myself after.”

She kissed me goodbye at the door. Some weeks we only fit in one hang. She was juggling golf, classes, friends. I tried to keep her a priority around football and school, but most days it felt lopsided. Tonight felt like a win.

Inside, Preston and William were watching something.

“Tan the Man!” William said.

“What’s up?” I asked—and then saw Violet’s face flicker on-screen. Music video.

“We were gonna play more Cold War,” William said, “but we switched to Scarlett Violets. Then music videos. Shockingly good.”

Preston nodded. “Really good.”

“Troubled or not,” Mary added, grabbing her bag. “Alright, I’m out.” Quick peck, wave, gone.

“What’s this ‘troubled’ thing?” Preston asked.

I relayed the Blue Queen bit.

Preston whistled. “That’s bleak. Or she’s just better at writing pain than love. Maybe she’s never been in love.”

“Well, watch out, Miss Violet,” William said, pantomiming Cupid. “I’m coming in hot.”

I shook my head. ridiculous. Also, kind of funny. “You have no idea how hard it is just to get her to talk.”

“What do you mean?” Preston asked. William pointed at him: exactly.

“She talks,” I said. “She just won’t tell me anything. I don’t know how to open her up.”

“That creep in the quad—did she say anything about him?” William asked.

“Nope.”

“That’s kinda the point,” Preston said. “Trauma—especially under a spotlight—breeds walls. Rude is a defense. Hiding is survival.”

I liked when Preston slipped into psych mode. Useful now. Part of me sometimes wondered if I should’ve studied psychology. Then I remember: I like throwing a ball too much.

“So they’re just never nice at this stage?” William asked. “Do they ever go back to who they were?”

“Some don’t,” Preston said. “The ones who do show signs—tiny warming. It takes time and trust.”

“So it’s possible for Violet?” I asked.

“Could be. We don’t know what she’s carrying.”

“What builds that trust if you don’t know the wound?” I asked.

“Depends on the person,” Preston said. “But default: kill her with kindness. Be understanding. No judgment. No frustration. Be there. Keep her confidences. Be a friend.”

“So—prove you’re different. Be a great friend,” I repeated.

Preston nodded. “You can speed it up by sharing your own scars.”

“You hear that, Will?” I said.

He flashed an okay sign. For some reason, the idea of him getting there first annoyed me. Competitive streak, probably.

“The thing to remember,” I said, “is she’s actually fun when you’re not prying.”

William grinned. “Now that’s what I like to hear.”

I glanced at the TV. First time I’d really sat with their music. It was raw and unapologetic—hit deeper than I expected. The video was a masquerade: sixteenth-century ballroom, masks and sweeping gowns. Violet at an organ, singing like she carried a storm.

Cracked, sullen mask. At the end, masks off—pure faces, and the fancy crowd recoils. The song—“Masquerade.” It matched their lyrics perfectly. Did she write this one?

“She gave me a clue,” I said. “Listen to more music. I think theirs is the key.”

“Good start,” Preston said. “They write the bulk of their songs. If she’s the Blue Queen, her tracks map her headspace.”

“Should we watch her movie? Music Academy? I heard it’s good,” William said, backing out of YouTube and opening Apple TV.

“I’m in,” Preston said. “Her sisters have small roles. Also, I could look at Dallas’s face all day.”

“Girls are obsessed with Violet’s love interest,” William added. “Shane something.”

I paused. “Did you say Shane?”

“Yeah?” William said.

“You guys don’t remember the cafeteria spat about a ‘Shane’? That matters.”

“True,” Preston said, clapping once. “Even more reason. Game-tape party after. Austin’s not here yet anyway.”

The movie was free, so we hit play and raided the fridge. Violet’s character, Ada Caddel, ditched med school for the academy; Shane’s Colton Ash was a world-famous singer teaching there. I only made it halfway. I started digging into Violet and Shane in real life: two years together; he cheated with a famous ex. I shut the movie. Couldn’t watch her fall for that guy, fictionalized or not. Watching her act stirred something warm and weird—maybe because five hours ago I was cloud-hunting with her, and now she was lit for the screen.

“I’m gonna finish some online work,” I said. “See you tomorrow.”

They grunted bye without looking away. Fair.

In my room, I hit the grind: equations, Shakespeare, dates. Two hours later, my brain felt like oatmeal. I planned to study LSU’s tape next—bye week = double prep—but my thoughts drifted back to Violet. Instead I opened YouTube and kept watching their videos.

Surreal: the same girl blocks away looked hollow and guarded in person, but on screen she was vulnerable, powerful, real. Something happened. Maybe Shane. Maybe a pile-up.

Then one song grabbed me—“Proud.” It had to be about her dad. She told me at BWW he taught her football; the opening line was, “I remember tiny hands around a pigskin ball, learning at four what the boys grasp at seven.” The track was beautiful and brutal. My eyes stung. The thought of losing my dad made my chest tight. When did hers die?

Whatever she was going through, I didn’t want her to carry it alone—even if she insisted. Letting someone self-destruct when you could help. . . what kind of person does that?

I clicked back to LSU’s game tape, but the question kept pulsing: How do I be the kind of friend she’ll actually let in?

Ten

Violet

— ✕ 11 Days to LSU Kickoff ✕ —

I stood in a busy Starbucks line with my bodyguards, waiting for a wide-awake cashier to juggle an old lady's complicated order—scribbling on a venti cup while fighting the register. I needed an afternoon pick-me-up.

I towed two of them today. Bodyguards, I mean. They preferred the title: Executive Protection Agents—"bodyguard" has been tarnished. I get it. But "bodyguard" is faster to say and universally understood, so here we are.

Today I decided to go out alone for a while. Mall therapy. No sisters. No football players. Just me. Tanner amused me in ways I couldn't explain, but I needed distance from men—for the day, at least. I almost asked my sisters to tag along, then pictured the chatter, the questions. Not worth the frustration. Not today.

"Ma'am?" the feisty cashier said.

I blinked out of my trance and stepped up. I ordered three coffees—one for me, two for the guards.

"And your name?"

"Uh. . . Eliza."

"Right away, miss."

We grabbed a table in a back corner near the counter but out of sight. I tapped my fingers on the surface. Tap, tap, tap. The sound sparked something—an idea, a beat. Drums. A rhythm starting to build. I caught myself and let it die. No. Hoax. Fluke. Nothing will come of this.

"Eliza!"

We collected the coffees and drifted back into the polished corridors. The guards had already scouted exits and bathrooms. This trip was on a whim—rare for us. Vacation, not work, felt. . . different.

I slipped into Barnes & Noble and wandered Literary and YA—my old favorites before all *esta mamada*. Now reading felt like music: insufferable. Only football helped, and I knew why. I didn't want to admit it.

As I browsed, I clocked my guards picking up books, guessing subjects. I let a smirk escape, then tucked it away. The magazine wall pulled me in. Rows and rows of glossy paper lies. I snagged one with our faces on it and hid behind it, skimming for our spread.

Found it. Left page: me walking West 81st toward Central Park—my street style worshipped like scripture. A dirt-stained white tee knotted at the front, mid-waisted mom jeans over ultra-high-waisted yoga pants. The inset shot: an ultra-cropped rashguard with high-waisted bell-bottoms on East 12th. *Blue Queen's Street Style Gold*. . . *Creator of the Dirty-Boyfriend tee and Jogas*. . . *another gold look*. . . *signature braided bun*. . .

Absurd. Garbage. I threw on whatever was over my workout clothes because I was late. The “dirty boyfriend” tee belonged to an ex who’s tee I never burned. The rashguard kept me cool. Meanwhile my sisters’ profiles boasted about the lyrics they wrote for our album. *What the carajo? I’m the Blue Queen for lyrics—and my spread is fashion?*

My hands curled, paper crumpling underneath them. I flung it back; pages fanned and fell crooked. I stormed out, guards towing behind.

In a Tuscaloosa football store, I weighed a shirt for Selena when one of our songs piped through the speakers.

*“‘cause if this is where it starts
pulling yourself apart
until it’s considered art
i don’t want it
i don’t want my heart”*

I froze.

Don’t Want My Heart—from *Crass + Callous*, our second album. My song.

It always made me feel forty—still haunts like a shadow in a dark house. I wrote from the inner war: anger, resentment, the cage everyone kept me in. Music soothed the tears and kept me from exploding.

Hearing it now, the pain bloomed into anxiety, ballooning to burst. Heat flooded my face. I ended up in a bathroom stall, crying hard for a hot minute. If music was taken from me—what helped me now? Who am I without it? What’s my worth? What’s *wrong* with me?

Pulling myself together, I rejoined the guards at the door. Masks are easy in Hollywood—masquerades feel safe. But being here, in my roots, felt like ice cracking in spring.

I didn’t like it. I didn’t like what I knew I had to do. Where I needed to go to actually put things behind me. I wanted to be brave, to face it—if I could.

Glancing at my phone, it was 3:00 p.m. One more store. My hands were full—five bags each. (No, not all for me. I found Crimson Reign gear my sisters wanted.) Final stop: Tiffany & Co.

Two suited men welcomed us. I browsed while the guards spread out at a respectful distance. I watched people more than jewelry: couples marveling at rings; families glowing over watches; kids playing with display scarves; a dad with his little girl on his shoulders, pointing at sparkly things like joy was the only currency.

A lump burned my throat. I blinked fast, swiped the tears away before anyone noticed. Rings, earrings, glitter everywhere—pretty, but nothing caught. At the necklace cases: a sterling palm frond; a gold flower; a silver “mom” necklace with a rose-gold heart as the “o.” Perfect for Mamá. Navidad. The thought stung. She chose to vanish with Stone, leaving us without a word. I wanted her here. Another piece in my emotional wreckage.

A stylish saleswoman, late thirties, little black dress, rounded the corner. “Hello! Can I help you find something?” Full Alabamian lilt.

“Yes, I’d like the mom necklace,” I said.

“Absolutely!” She unlocked the case.

While she boxed it up, a necklace snagged my eye: a heart inside an infinity symbol.

“Can I see that one?” I asked, already seeing it reflected around my neck.

“Aah, *l’amour éternel*. From the *Écoutez Votre Cœur* Collection. First piece they launched.”

“Oh yeah—I remember the commercial when I was little.”

“In one month it turns ten. Then it’s discontinued,” she said, half-smiling.

“Aw, man. It’s beautiful.”

I loved it, but didn’t feel deserving of it. I’d been rotten lately. People didn’t deserve my wrath—even if I had reasons. I handed it back and said goodbye to it in my head. I knew I’d regret not buying it.

“Anything else?” she asked.

“No, thank you,” I said, giving her my card. My guards drifted close, ready to peel out.

She handed over the Tiffany bag, then lowered her voice. “You’re Violet Adair, right?”

Appreciating the discretion, I whispered, “Yes.”

She exhaled, relieved. “Would you sign this poster of you and your sisters? My daughter’s birthday—she adores y’all. An original would mean the world.”

Sweet. Professional first, then the ask. “Of course.”

She passed a Sharpie. I signed. Happy Birthday. . . “What’s her name?”

“Ally.”

Happy Birthday, Ally ♥! Love, Violet Adair. I scanned the whole poster and frowned. “Mrs.—” I glanced at her tag “Stacey. I can’t let you take this without my sisters’ signatures. Mind if I take it to them and bring it back?”

“Oh my, of course!”

“Tomorrow? Same time?”

She nodded. I rolled the poster, gave back the Sharpie, and we said goodbyes. 4:03. Time to head back.

In the SUV, I unrolled the poster. Our first promo shoot. *Dios*, the memories. I was the nervous one; my sisters made me brave. Life wasn’t easy, but it was. . . less. Doing this for that sweet lady felt right. I love our fans, even if I can’t give them what they want right now. The mall had brightened my mood, even after the dip.

The lobby was quiet—another perk of living here. We waited for the elevator; it opened, people poured out, we rode up.

The condo door opened without a key. We slipped inside. I headed straight to my room to drop the bags.

“I’m back,” I called down the hall. “You guys will not believe all the amazing clothes I found—”

I saw him. Tanner. On the couch. Selena and Dallas stone-still beside him. There’s only one reason for that stillness: secrets shared. A fuse lit.

“What’s going on?” I asked, calm enough to be dangerous.

“Violet, I swear this isn’t what it looks like,” Dallas said, inching toward me.

Son puras mamadas. “Yeah, right. The only reason he’d come talk to you is to find out personal things about me. And my own sisters would willingly tell him? You have no right.”

“Whoa, don’t accuse us of things you don’t know,” Selena said, rocketing up.

I clenched, head to toe. “Whatever.”

I yanked the door. A strong hand caught my wrist. I twisted free and spun—Tanner. The guards closed in; I couldn’t tell if they were protecting me from him or keeping me from bolting.

His mouth opened—no words. Worry in his eyes. Distrust flooded me.

“I know what you’re thinking, and it’s not true,” he said finally.

"I'm thinking you came to get information I refuse to give you, and *mis cabronas hermanas* handed it over."

"No. Absolutely not. I came to see you. You weren't here. They were. I waited."

"I don't believe you. Why else would you be here—interrogate me some more? Huh?" My thoughts were wildfire. If I stayed, I'd say something I couldn't take back—or worse.

"I don't want to ask you any more questions. Honest. Not about you personally."

"Lies. If you can't accept that I don't want to share, then screw all of you. Leave me alone." I bolted for the stairs.

Out of the building. Running toward anything familiar. The quad. Silas Spire. I knew the guards would be after me, so I cut through bushes, ducked between buildings. The quad would be their first guess, so I veered. Voices called. I kept low and quiet.

I ended up at the stadium. I stared at its enormity, tracing the steel spine along the gates, cooling down in the shadow of it. Toward the end, the graveyard. One of two places I'd avoided like plague—and the only place pulling me. Time to meet my past.

I pushed through the gate and searched. Five rows back. MÁXIMO ADAIR. The capital letters I remembered. I stepped closer. My hands flew to my face. I reached out; the stone was ice. I brushed the carved name and allowed myself to remember—fairs, vacations, snowmen, snowball fights, campouts, touch football, late-night scary movies. All of it. Even the bad.

Tears roared. My fists and throat closed, choking me from the inside. I slammed my fist on the stone. "Why did you do that to me? What in hell was going through your mind? Do you know what you put me through? Do you? I was just a kid and you made me do the most horrible *mierda* a child could imagine!" I shook, yelling at a dead man like I'd lost it. I dropped to my knees, forehead on the slanted edge. "Why?"

Warm tears on freezing cheeks. Everything felt cold—blood, bones, breath. The memory I'd locked away flooded back.

A dark, cloudy day. Mamá at work. Papi wasted away in bed, his disease stealing breath and strength. Arms limp. It was still nice just knowing he was there; I checked on him the most. Dallas helped Sel build her first fort; I snuck to him.

His door was cracked. He sat half-propped, comfort shows whispering. He turned his head toward me. Exhaustion in his eyes, and still a spark.

"Violeta. . . come here, *cariño*. I need you to. . . do something for me," he croaked, breathing shallow and fast.

I came to his side. "*Sí, Papi?*"

He struggled to lift an arm, pointing to his drawer. "There is an orange. . . bottle in the bottom. . . drawer under my third. . . shirt. Can you get. . . it?"

I slid open the game-day shirts—Alabama galore. Lifted the third on the right and found an orange prescription bottle. I brought it; he set it down on the nightstand. "Can you bring. . . my favorite. . . beer?"

"Yeah!"

I ran to the fridge for a Sol—his favorite. Doing things for him made me feel important, special. Like I was his secret favorite. The bottle stung my fingers cold as I carried it back.

"Here you go!"

"*Gracias. . . mi niña*. Now, hop up here. I wanna tell you. . . something." He patted his lap.

I climbed onto the bed. He tried to sit up more, couldn't, and wrapped me close. His lips were dry on my forehead. "You know I. . . love you, right? *Mi pequeña calabacita*."

“*Sí, te amo también, Papi.*”

He chuckled, thin. “*Bueno.* You know I’d . . . do anything for you. Absolutely anything for . . . you and Dallas and Selena. . . and Mamá. To make y’all . . . happy.”

“Will you take me roller skating when you get better?”

“*Sí, calabacita. Un día.*” His eyes glossed. “Promise me you’ll keep growing into . . . the strong, amazing, talented young lady I know. . . you’ll become.”

“I promise!”

He hugged me as tightly as he could. “Don’t dwell in the past. You’ll get stuck there,” he whispered.

“Yes, sir?” I was confused.

“Tell Dallas and Selena I . . . love them very, very much. Okay? Go play. Go.” He nudged me off gently.

I darted to the door. “*Violeta.*”

I turned. “Yes, Papi?”

“I want you to. . . look through my drawers. . . in a few days. *Muy atentamente. ¿Bien?*”

Head-tilt. Shrug. “*Bien.*”

When Mamá came home and I told her how emotional he’d been, she went to check on him. Life was never the same again.

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I opened my swollen eyes. My heartbeat pounded in my skull. “You were supposed to be there for me. There was supposed to be more time.” I kicked grass at the stone, ripped at the turf, and threw clumps. “You never cared. Not about me, or Mamá, or Dallas, or Selena! Selena doesn’t even remember you! Are you proud of that?”

I kicked and missed, landing hard on my back. Rage emptied. For a few seconds, no air. Then my breath returned.

I lay there and cried again. I thought of Tanner. Of what he’d said. I felt unhinged.

What did I do to deserve this? If everything happens for a reason—what was it? Please come back, Papi. I love you. I need you now more than ever.

Eleven

TANNER

The guards swerved block to block, trying to find Violet. Selena and I were in the back with windows cracked, heat blasting. My stomach had dropped the second Violet sprinted for the elevator. If I'd known how raw things were under the surface, I never would've pushed. God—I felt like a jerk.

We searched everywhere: streets she knew, buildings she'd seen, corners she might favor. My phone shattered the silence. Dallas. "Hello?"

"Tanner! Did you find her yet?" Edge in her voice.

I'd suggested one sister stay at the condo in case Violet came back. I wasn't exactly on a hot streak with Violet; bringing the calmer sister (Selena) felt smarter. I still wanted to help find her—badly. Dallas and I had swapped numbers for updates. "No. We've searched everywhere. Any place she might go? Somewhere familiar?"

"No! I don't—" Her mind was racing.

"Dallas, please. Think." Time was not our friend; every minute added risk—fans, paparazzi, stalkers.

Selena suddenly sat forward. "Wait. I know where she went."

"Where?"

"Evergreen Cemetery. Left side of the stadium."

The driver whipped a U-turn. We grabbed for the handles.

"Why would she go there?" I asked.

Selena went quiet. "That's where our father's buried. We haven't been yet. It's hard. . . for all of us. Especially Violet."

Halfway there, we scanned sidewalks, hoping to see her coming back. Prayers answered.

Violet was running in our direction—cold, wrecked, chased by a swelling wave of paparazzi and a few not-right fans. We screeched to a stop. The front guard jumped out, shielded her, and muscled her into the SUV while flashes detonated. Door shut—gone.

"My God, Violet! We've been looking everywhere for you," Selena said gently.

Violet shook her head, shivering head to toe, arms wrapped around herself, chin quivering, eyes rimmed red. I yanked off my jacket and held it open behind her.

She shook her head.

"Put it on," I said softly.

She wanted to refuse again, but her teeth chattered. She slipped into it, and I took in the rest: puffy eyes, tear tracks freezing on pink cheeks, dead leaves stuck in her hair. I plucked them out, tossing them out the window. Selena did the same. I checked her cheek with the back of my hand—lukewarm now. Soft. Human.

Our eyes met. A brighter blue against paler skin from the cold.

I looked away. Something in me shifted.

"Feel better?" I asked.

“Yeah. Thanks,” she muttered, staring anywhere but at me.

“I know you don’t want to talk to me. You have every reason. I didn’t ask them about your personal stuff—promise. But I’m sorry anyway. I won’t bother you about anything like that again.”

She narrowed her eyes, then glanced away. “It doesn’t matter. Things I didn’t want you to know—you know now.”

I exhaled.

“Violet, we didn’t tell him anything. *Lo juro*,” Selena said—right hand up, left over her heart.

“Whatever.”

“We’re serious,” I said.

“And why should I believe you?” she shot back—sharp.

“Just because you find me annoying doesn’t make me a liar,” I said. “But you’re right not to trust easily. I don’t blame you.”

Her eyes sparked with thought. I looked away again.

“You’re right,” Violet said—like the words tasted bad. It surprised us both.

“I’m sorry,” I said, again. I meant it with every fiber of my being.

She didn’t respond—just stared at the dash, distant.

“Did something happen out there?” Selena asked. “I bet it was the paps.”

“They flocked to me,” Violet said. “Like I was birdseed and they were manic birds.”

“We should be grateful they haven’t found our building yet,” Selena murmured. “They will soon enough.”

The rest of the ride was silent.

At the complex we parked—and got hit with another barrage. More flashes. More shouts. Each guard grabbed a sister and rushed us through a back door with a special key. I slammed it behind us while a dozen faces mashed into the glass slivers. Nuts. They’re nuts.

We reached the condo; the door flew open. Dallas pulled Violet into a crushing hug.

“Don’t you ever do that to us again,” she said, voice shaking. She clocked the exhaustion. “Couch. I’ll make tea.”

I started to follow, but Selena blocked me gently. “I’m sorry, Tanner. I think you need to go. Just for now. Until she’s rested and in her right mind.”

I nodded. It was the right call.

“Wait,” Violet said.

Selena turned, startled. I paused as Violet came over. She slid out of my jacket and handed it to me, those eyes leaving a mark.

“Here’s your jacket.”

“Do you have a heavy one with you?”

“Well, no.”

I wrapped it back around her shoulders and gave a small smile. “Keep it. You’re gonna need it.”

Too tired to argue, she mustered the tiniest grin. “Thanks.”

Twelve

Violet

My mouth scorched on the hot orange-peel tea Dallas brewed as I snuggled under a soft throw blanket on the couch.

“Violet, are you alright? Do you need anything?” Selena called from the kitchen.

Sniffing, I set my cup down. “You guys, stop hovering like I’m dying. I’m fine.”

Dallas rounded the bar, jaw dropped. “Fine? Your face looks like you just crawled out of an episode of *Lost*.”

“Okay, so maybe I’m *un poco* on edge,” I admitted.

Selena plopped beside me and forced a hug. I actually hugged back. “Just so you know,” she said, eyes locked on mine, “we really, honest to God, didn’t tell Tanner a thing.”

Her stare was creep-level sincere. “I know.”

“How do you know?” Dallas asked—and blushed. “I mean... because it’s true.”

I laughed. “You’re my sisters. I know when you’re lying.”

They nodded, relieved my brain was back online.

“Well, I’m wiped. I’m going to bed,” I said.

“What about dinner?” Dallas asked.

“Not hungry.”

“Sleep well,” Selena said, trying to stay sunny.

I shuffled to my room, remembered the shopping bags, grabbed the one for them, and tossed it into the living room. “These are for you. Hope you like ’em.” Lights out. Face first onto the bed—straight into Tanner’s jacket.

It was five sizes too big and smelled like him: dense forest, a spruce of cologne—expensive, restrained, oven-warm. I loved it. I hated that I loved it.

He seemed too interested in my business, but he also felt genuinely sorry. I wanted to know why he cared—maybe he’s a crazy stalker and that’s why he won’t say. Still, step one: forgive, as long as he doesn’t do it again. I could’ve been nicer. A smidge.

Danger zone: thinking. Those caramel eyes. Tall, stocky. Strangely soft hands for a rough sport—where are the calluses? Nails clean, clipped. The freckles—perfect number to connect on a lazy day. Right over that smile. I smiled. Okay, Violet, tighten up. No boys policy, remember? He has a girlfriend. You’re not that kind of girl. Mary’s lucky, though.



I shot upright, heart sprinting. Lights everywhere.

“Holy crap, are you okay?” Selena asked.

I covered my eyes. “More blinding, *pinche* lights.”

“What?”

“Nothing. What time is it?”

“Ten-thirty-two. We let you sleep in after last night.”

For a second I blanked on last night. Then remembered. Guilt crawled in. If I was serious about not being miserable—and not making everyone else miserable—I had to start somewhere I didn’t want to. Big step: visit our old house.

I stumbled up, surveyed the room. New clothes on the far side. And the poster. THE POSTER. I grabbed it and shoved it at Selena, who was still snooping.

“You and Dallas sign this. A jewelry saleswoman wants it for her daughter’s birthday.”

Bags went back on the bed.

Selena shrugged. “Okay. Also—after you shower, Tanner’s here to see you. I think he’s just here to say goodbye. Maybe explain himself. He said he’ll leave you alone.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Jack’s handling the media,” she added. “There’s fake gossip about you and Tanner, and mental-distress-escape-to-hometown nonsense.”

“Great.”

Picking an outfit, I headed to the bathroom. In the mirror, an exhausted ghost stared back at me. *Am I just an understudy of myself now?* Deep breath. Hot shower. Goosebumps.

Drying off, I changed at lightning speed and shrugged into Tanner’s jacket.

I threw open my door dramatically—giving myself no chance to second-guess leaving my room for the day.

Tanner sat on the couch holding a cup of coffee, the smell lingering.

He stood and handed it over. “Dallas told me how you take it.”

“Oh. Thank you.” I sipped. French Vanilla tingled all the way down. “So. . . why are you here?”

Guilt washed his face. “Just wanted to check on you one last time.”

My stomach dipped. Maybe I’d overreacted last night. Reasons aside, accusing my sisters was unfair. And while I still didn’t know why he cared, I did like his company more than I let on. Also: I needed a ride to our old house to find what Dad told me about—the hidden thing in his dresser. Mamá and I swore to keep my involvement in Dad’s death secret from everyone, even my sisters. Much as I wanted them there, I couldn’t break that trust. Tanner was the perfect cover. I could lie and still get what I needed.

“I’ll go now,” he said.

Reaching, I caught his hand. “Wait.”

He froze, looking at our hands. I let go. “Do you want to come with me today? I have to return a poster to a woman at the mall. You could tag along. Or whatever.”

He grinned. “I’d be delighted. Besides, I don’t think I’ve seen the best of you yet.”

I uncaged a weird little smile. “Right. Good.”

The guards came in from across the hall; my sisters emerged with the signed poster.

“Thank you,” I said. Lump forming. “Also—I’m sorry. I may have overreacted last night. I’ve been. . . a lot, for months. I can’t promise it won’t happen again, but I’m going to work on it.”

Shock all around—even Tanner looked floored. *Uf, this sucks.* But pride won’t fix me.

"I forgive you," Selena said, grinning.

"So do I," Dallas said.

I looked at Tanner.

"I don't think you owe me an apology," he said. "We weren't talking about you last night, but I didn't realize how hard I was pushing it with the questions. I thought we were joking and I—"

"I forgive you if you forgive me," I cut in. "As long as you don't interrogate me again."

"Deal. I promise."

"Thanks." I turned to the room. "Tanner and I are making a quick trip to the mall. We'll be right back."

"Um, okay?" Dallas said.

"Since Tanner's coming, I won't need a guard for such a short trip," I added—eyes at the guards: order.

"Yeah, what if you get mobbed? Tanner isn't trained," Dallas added.

"It's midweek, people are at work or class, and it's freezing. The mall was dead yesterday; it'll be dead today. I'll be fine. Right, Tanner?"

He glanced at everyone. "She'll be safe. I'll make sure nothing happens."

They stayed wary, but no one could stop me.

"Be careful," Dallas said. "Call if there's trouble."

"I promise." I looked at Tanner. "Ready?"

"Ready."

A guard handed him the SUV keys. We headed for the stairwell door. Tanner peered through the glass—quiet, which meant they were hiding.

He unlocked the SUV. "You first, fast. Then I'll jump in."

I nodded. He wrapped my upper body and face in his jacket and hustled me to the car. I kept the jacket over me as flashes and shouts rose. He covered his face with a hand and pulled away. I lowered the jacket once we were clear.

"Thank you," I said.

"For what?" he asked, genuinely confused.

"For coming with me. For the help." I glanced at the jacket. "And this. It's warm."

"Anytime."

"Also, we're not going to the mall. Not yet."

"Oh? Where to?"

"My childhood home," I said, pulling up directions.

"Okay. Tell me where to go."

He didn't ask why. He promised. The respect made my chest loosen. "Straight down the highway, I'll call the turns."

"Sounds good. Mind if I put on the radio?"

"It's okay," I said, smirking. "I promise."

Guitars, harmonica, fiddle filled the car. "*Ay, dios*," I said aloud.

"What?"

"This song. 'A Country Boy Can Survive,' Hank Williams Jr."

"You can take the girl out of the country..."

"Wow, prejudice much, Mr. McGrey?" I teased.

"Not at all. You're the one who thinks athletes are stuck-up jerks."

“Hey—not anymore. The athletes I knew were that way. No one proved me wrong. Until you, I suppose.”

He straightened, puffed his chest. “We’re not all bad. We’ve got a great group—especially Will. He’s a good guy.”

“I see.”

“What do you think of him?” he asked, eyeing me.

“William? He’s. . . interesting. Harmless.”

We neared my old neighborhood; the blue GPS dot marched closer. Anxiety, the silent killer.

Hank ended. Blake Shelton started. Tanner switched to pop. Katy Perry’s ‘Part of Me’ hit. I hummed under my breath, soft enough he couldn’t hear.

“How’d you get into old country?” he asked. “Oh—no questions, sorry.”

“I never said I knew it. I could’ve just heard it,” I said, then relented. “My Papi loved Hank. Weekend records on the turntable. My mom hated them, but they’re what she held on to.”

“I gotcha.”

“She was devastated when they got ruined in the move to Texas.”

“Where in Texas?”

“Buckingham. Near Richardson.”

“Ah. I was in Duncanville.”

“That’s not far. Let me guess—you went to Duncanville High. Go Panthers.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, how’d you know?”

“You guys were becoming a big deal. Especially your quarterback—amazing consistency—but I never knew his—” I looked over, eyes widening.

“Judging by that look,” he said, “you’ve connected the dots.”

I’d never seen a man blush. I should be the one blushing. “I didn’t know. I never saw your face.” Beat. “You were really good. Amazing, actually.”

“Are you saying I suck now?”

“No. You’re obviously better now. I’m saying you were amazing for high school.”

His chuckle rose, warm. “Kidding. Thank you. Honestly, I could’ve been better.”

I rolled my eyes. “Better? Only six losses, first in county for passing efficiency, clean play-action, four picks and three fumbles in three seasons. Yeah, you should’ve quit.” *Dios. Am I a stalker?*

He slipped a half-grin. “Well, thank you.”

“It’s like saying, ‘I nailed the high note—mind-blowing—but I could’ve done better.’ Sometimes that’s it. And that’s okay. It’s amazing as is.”

He smiled to himself, wide. We let the music fill the rest. My heart collapsed in tiny increments while my brain flipped through questions like a magazine. What if the house is occupied? Is the dresser there? Did someone toss it? Will they let me look? *¡Dios mío!*

“We’re close,” I said. “After this house, turn right.”

He turned onto a newly paved road. It wasn’t paved before. I opened my mouth to say *wrong street*—then saw it.

The shell I once called home. Safe escape from school torture. Cinnamon in the walls. We rolled to a soft stop. I got out without taking my eyes off it. Sweet, cruel reminder.

“So this is it?” he said, stepping beside me.

I couldn't decide if new things were comforting or distressing, or if the old things were worse. Maybe I asked him along not just as cover, but because I didn't want to be alone. My sisters couldn't know. A promise is a promise.

"Yup. The safe haven."

His hand landed on my shoulder. I flinched.

"You okay? You seem tense."

Focus on the positive. Closure, closure, closure. "I'm fine. Really."

His face said he didn't buy it. A shiver shook out anyway.

"We can leave," he offered.

"Nope. I need to do this. You ready?"

"Oh—you want me to come in?"

"Yes, of course. I wouldn't drag you out here just to sit in the SUV." (Don't make me go in alone.)

We climbed the steps. I remembered wanting a front door key so I could feel like the kids in movies instead of punching the garage code. Dallas had one and bragged. I begged for ages. Then I lost a little-league game—dropped what would've been the winning touchdown. I cried in the backyard campground my parents built. Papi found me, coaxed me out of my self-imposed timeout, and pressed a key into my palm. I still carry it on the ring with all my house keys.

I took a breath and knocked.

Thirteen

Violet

Two cars in the driveway. How did I miss that? People live here. *Dios mío*. Don't hyperventilate. A 1986 electric-blue Dodge and a '89 midnight Ford Bronco 4x4. Interesting taste.

The door swung open. A pretty older teen—sixteen, maybe seventeen—stood eye-to-phone, thumbs flying.

Without looking up: “Yes?” She finger-combed caramel-streaked hair, wearing a light-blue spaghetti-strap and rolled gray Crimson Reign sweats. *Ay, mierda*.

Tanner and I traded a glance. “Um, could we speak to an adult? Your mom or dad?” I asked, choking on dad.

She yelled over her shoulder, “Ma!” then, still texting, “Names?”

“Violet Adair and Tanner McGrey.”

“VIOLET ADAIR AND TANNER—” She finally looked, clocked us, and added, “—McGrey.” Jaw to floor. Her phone slipped.

I caught it and handed it back. She stared—mostly at Tanner. *The stud quarterback of Alabama; fair. Did I just think stud quarterback?*

“Oh my god. Tanner McGrey and Violet Adair are at. My. Door!” she squealed. “Such an unlikely pair.” She spun. “I’m grabbing my Polaroid!”

She vanished as a woman approached, pushing reading glasses onto her blonde hair like a crown. “What’s the commotion?”

We got mom instead of a polaroid. Good.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m Violet; this is Tanner. I lived here eleven years ago and haven’t been back. Could we take a quick look around? Just to see how it turned out?”

She set a hand on her hip, eyes narrowing—then pointed at Tanner. “Tanner McGrey. Well I’ll be. You on my doorstep.” Her finger moved to me. “And you look familiar. Where have I seen you?”

The daughter reappeared, a giant vintage Polaroid bouncing on her chest. “Ma, how do you not know her? She’s one of the best singers in the world. The best *band* in the world.”

A small grin spread across my face. *Thanks, Crissy*.

Mom shrugged; the teen rolled her eyes.

“Well, come on in,” Mom said, stepping aside. “I’m Julie. This is my daughter, Crissy.”

Inside: same layout, different everything. New appliances, lights, wood flooring where carpet used to be. Brick fireplace. Sport pool with hot tub. Wealthy much? They did a full number on this rock pile.

“So you used to live here? How long?” Julie asked.

“I was raised here until I was ten. Then we moved.”

“Oh? Why?”

“You know—change of scenery. My parents grew up here.”

“Where’d you move?” she asked.
 “Dallas. Just outside the city.”
 “I hear Dallas is very high-class,” she said.
 “It’s definitely that, ma’am,” Tanner chimed in.
 Julie tilted her head. “And what brings you, Tanner?”
 “I’m with her.”
 “Ohhh, of course,” she said, a smirk and a hint.
 “So y’all are, like, dating?” Crissy blurted. “Is it a secret? ‘Cause the magazines I’m subscribed to have said nothing about it.”
 Tanner and I looked at each other, then away. My face, on fire.
 “No,” he said quickly. “I have a girlfriend at the university. We’re just friends.”
 “Sorry! You just look so cute together,” Crissy said.
 “It’s okay,” I laughed. “Everyone thinks I’m dating everyone.”
 “Crissy, show them around,” Julie said, disappearing toward the back.
 Crissy turned, Polaroid swinging. “Is it true you’re staying on campus?”
 “It’s true.”
 “CGCU says you checked yourself into rehab. I told my friends, ‘No way. Violet’s too strong for that.’”
 Tears pressed up. Hold it together. “Thanks for not believing lies.” And for believing me.
 “They couldn’t at least pretend I’m on a beach in Europe?”
 “I shouldn’t tell anyone you’re here, right?”
 “I’d appreciate it,” I said. “Thank you for asking. I know my biggest fans keep promises.”
 “Of course. Anything for you. Can I post pics after you go back to California?”
 I laughed. “Of course. Let’s take one.”
 She wedged between us; we smashed smiles. Whirr. The square slid out. “Thank you! I won’t say a word till you leave.”
 I took her phone for a second shot, snapped it, signed both with a Sharpie. Handed the pen to Tanner; he initialed the trio photo, too.
 “Okay, where first?” Crissy asked.
 “Your call.”
 “Then let’s start in the boring places.” She swept an arm. “The kitchen.”
 My hand trailed over granite. New cabinets, new appliances. All the nicks and dents scrubbed from existence. Every trace of us was erased. Not promising for Papi’s dresser.
 “Nice work in here,” I said.
 “Yeah, it’s cool,” she said.
 We moved to the living room: brown leather set, glass-topped square table with sun-ray design under the pane. Familiar. I bent, slid a few decorations aside. *Dios mío*. The etching’s still there—tiny scratches: Violet, Selena, Dallas.
 Crissy squealed. “This is your table? I own a piece of Violet Adair’s furniture! How did I never connect the names? Stupid, stupid, stupid.”
Thump, thump, thump.
 I chuckled. If they kept this ugly thing, maybe they kept Papi’s beautiful dresser. “Dallas had the genius idea to ‘make it prettier’ by putting our names in it. We tried to lift the glass—too heavy.” I pictured it and laughed. “So Sel got a hammer and smashed it.”
 Crissy stared like I’d confessed to a felony; Tanner chuckled with me.

“When Mamá and Papi came home they set drinks down and—thud—spilled everywhere. Mom furious, Papi trying not to laugh. We got grounded and spanked. Took months to save for new custom glass. Until then, cups lived in the crater.”

“Badass at birth,” Crissy said. “If this table’s yours, wonder what else is.”

I seized the opening. “Do you have a tall black dresser—five drawers, silver knobs, maybe six feet?”

Crissy squinted. “Yeah. Kind of basic but really pretty?”

“That’s it.”

“Follow me.”

Down the hall. Slow motion. Suddenly I was eight again, skipping to the cracked door. Reality slid back in as we stopped there. Hard to breathe.

Tanner clocked me and stepped closer. Whispered, “Hey. You okay?”

I shook my head. “Just. . . hard.”

His hand landed gently on my shoulder, cautious, like I might bite. “If it helps, hold my arm.”

Managing a grateful smile, I squeezed his hand once—quick, dangerous trust. It helped. I felt. . . safer.

Crissy pushed the door. I flinched like the room would stab my eyes. Nothing stabbed. The energy was different; that helped.

There. Far-left corner, angled: the dresser. Tall, daunting, a relic of what used to be. My grip on Tanner’s hand tightened. He followed my stare.

I approached. ridiculous to expect answers from furniture, but my body did anyway. I slid a palm across the top—dusty. Someone needs to clean.

Fifth. Drumroll. What if there’s nothing? I’ll look like an idiot.

I rested fingertips on the knobs. For a second I saw my tiny hands doing the same thing. You can do this, Violet. I yanked the drawer, hands shaking, felt every surface like a creep. Nothing.

I sagged. “Whelp,” my sigh said. Got my hopes up again.

Tanner crouched beside me. “Nothing?”

I shook my head.

He thought for a beat, then slid the drawer off its runners and lifted it out. His eyes said: go on.

I reached under the cavity and touched a small square. I pulled it free.

A blue box with a white bow. Silver letters: Tiffany & Co. Tiffany? What would he have gotten me sixteen years ago?

“Well? Open it!” Crissy urged.

I glanced at her, then the box. Tugged the ribbon—clean release. Lifted the lid; a black box dropped into my palm. Tanner nudged me. I opened it.

The necklace from yesterday—the one being discontinued—gleamed back. Amour Éternel. A folded square was wedged in the lid. I fished it out, hands shaking, eyes burning.

Papi’s handwriting.

Mi pequeña tarta de calabaza. . .

I couldn’t. Not now. The box snapped shut—about as dramatic as a tiny box can. I crumpled the letter and threw it across the room.

And ran.

Fourteen

Violet

The sliding glass door thudded hard enough to make it rattle as I bolted for the opening past the pool, into the trees. Twigs and dead leaves cracked under my shoes like bubble wrap; for once the noise felt. . . liberating. I hurdled roots, clipped a branch, stumbled when tears blurred everything. Someone called my name—wind or human, who cared. I ran until the woods opened on our old campground.

Half a mile in: the clearing. One log left beside the fire ring; the other three gone. I clenched the black box so hard my palm ached, then pitched it at the woodpile.

All those years thinking Mamá and my sisters got letters and I didn't. I had one. Hidden. Why hide it?

I kicked dirt. Not enough. I snapped sticks against my thigh; pelted trunks with rocks. Still not enough. I found a heavy branch and swung at an oak. It cracked. Better. Another swing—harder—grunting through each hit.

A hand caught my arm. Instinct: spin and swing. I missed. The figure vanished. I raised the branch again—

Arms cinched my waist from behind, lifting me off the ground.

“NO! LET ME GO!” I thrashed, tried an elbow; reality doesn't obey movie physics. “LET ME GOOO!”

“Shhh. It's okay. Violet, caaalm down. I've got you. You're safe.” Warm breath in my ear. Gentle, low, patient. The words washed over me until my body slacked. He lowered me; I collapsed to my knees and sobbed.

Folding in on myself, face in my hands, a palm moved slow circles between my shoulders. Tanner (Unless Julie or Crissy suddenly decided to adopt me; doubtful.). A shiver racked through me; I punched the ground on reflex—rage back—then lost it again.

Tanner turned me by the shoulders, his brow knit with worry. He brushed hair from my face. “Hey. Breathe with me. Slow.”

I nodded and did it—count in, count out—until I could stand and sink onto the lone log. Elbows to knees, hands at my temples. Footsteps, then Tanner dropped beside me, mirroring my posture—patient, quiet.

“You've got a mean swing,” he said at last, like he'd saved the line for when I could laugh.

“What?” I blinked.

“When you swung at me with that stick? One more second and my head's a souvenir.”

A reluctant grin escaped. “I'm sorry.”

He flashed that ridiculous innocent smile. “It's fine. Ever play baseball?”

I shook my head.

“Mm. You'd be good. I can see it—walk-off homer, you round the bases while Tanner's poor head rolls past home plate.” He pantomimed like a deranged sportscaster.

I snorted into full ugly-laugh. It felt like a person lived in me again for a whole second.

“So,” he said, softer. “How are you feeling?”

“Upset. . . and a little embarrassed.”

“What happened back there?”

“Nothing. Seriously—nothing.” I swiped a sleeve across dried tear salt, sniffed gracelessly.

“Right. Which is why we’re in the woods and you’re beating an oak with its own limb in a sea of tears. Checks out.”

Ay. “It’s. . . complicated.”

“Say it plain. It’s not that hard.”

“I just can’t.” A beat. “I can’t tell you.”

“Why not? Whatever you say won’t leave this log.” He patted the trunk. “Bench. Thing.”

“It’s not that I don’t trust you. I can’t tell anyone. Not even my sisters. It would destroy us.”

He scooted closer; our legs touched. My heart did a half backflip and face-planted—on brand. He looked out at the trees, inhaled.

“My parents have been together almost thirty years. They met here. He was a center fielder; she studied Music Composition. Unlikely pair, best friends. I idolized that. With Mary. . .” He searched for words. “We get along, but her priorities—and mine—shifted. Sometimes I feel like a Ken doll she brings to events. We had a connection. Maybe we both changed. I want a partner. A family someday. Divorce isn’t an option for me. I want to get it right the first time.”

The woods felt windless. He’d just handed me his softest center. “Have you told her that?”

“Some. She says she’s serious, but I don’t know if she’s serious about us or the picture of us. I’m not trying to get married tomorrow; I just don’t want to waste time. Where do I fit? What’s expected of me?” He exhaled. “I don’t know.”

“So, if you want more than you’re getting. . . why not leave and go find it?” He shrugged. “I’m afraid.”

“Of?”

“Starting over. My college years are almost done; my friends seem happy. The search is. . . a lot.”

“It’s okay to be scared. But you don’t grow if you don’t take risks. Lord knows I wouldn’t be here if I’d let stage fright win. First stage, best shot, never looked back.”

He side-eyed me, amused. “Look at you being sensible. Good head on your shoulders.”

I smirked. “Once a quarter I have a thought. But really—think about it. Don’t stew in misery. And maybe talk to her before you go full scorched-earth. I wish my exes had.”

Something unclenched behind his eyes. “Thank you.”

I stared at the ground. He trusted me with his. I could give him mine. I shut my eyes. “My Papi died when I was ten. Drug overdose. Suicide.” More tears, quieter ones. “I’m so mad. I know he had ALS. I know he was in pain. But he ended what time we had left. He stole our goodbyes.”

Tanner slid an arm around me, pulled me into his chest. I tucked into his neck like it was designed for my forehead. “I’m sorry, Vi. He was sick. Maybe he thought he was sparing you more hurt. In a really messed-up way.”

“You don’t understand. Nobody does. Nobody knows.”

“What?”

I sat up, the words burning. “I killed him.”

His head tipped. “You what? You just said he—”

“With my help.” The guilt tasted like pennies. “He asked me to get a secret bottle of pills—bottom drawer, under shirts. Then his favorite beer. He said strange, crying things and told me to go. I told Mamá when she got home. She checked on him and...” I couldn’t finish. I stared at the dirt like a hole to hell would open.

He waited, then, gentle but firm: “You were ten. What did you know? If anyone’s responsible, it’s your father. And that doesn’t make him a monster; it makes him a man who made a terrible choice in pain. The only way through is forgiving him—and yourself—and leaving it in the past.”

“I don’t know how.” Barely a breath.

“If you’re ready, it’s practice. Set your mind toward forward. Smile more. Therapy helps if you want a guide.”

“Um. Okay.” I closed my eyes. I am worthy of happiness. I am worthy of forgiveness. I am worthy of love. I forgive you, Papi. I’m moving forward. No regrets. I forgive myself.

“Out loud,” Tanner said, touching my hands. “It helps.”

“*Ay, mierda.*” I repeated it anyway, voice shaking but intact.

It wouldn’t be instant. But the air felt thinner, cleaner. Tanner felt like a tree to lean on. My big oak in the quad.

“Remember,” he said. “Letting go doesn’t delete him. He lives in you, your mom, your sisters. And...tell them. I think keeping it is eating you alive.”

“*Ay Dios.* . . I don’t know if I can.” Panic clawed up; hands on my head.

“Okay, okay. Breathe. Baby steps. It doesn’t have to be now. I’ll be there when you are, if that helps.”

Tears threatened again, but I breathed like a grown-up. “I’ll try. But not yet. I want to be okay with me first.”

“Good plan.”

For the first time in forever, I felt good. Not great. But good. “Thank you, Tanner. Really.”

“No thanks needed. Friends help. You helped me.”

Most of my real smiles lately had been with him. That meant something. “Where’s the box?”

He pointed. “In the woodpile.” He jogged, retrieved it, then produced the crumpled letter from his pocket and set both in my hands. “Figured you’d want it back.”

I opened the box. The necklace glowed—clean, simple, forever. From Papi, to me.

“It’s pretty,” Tanner said.

“Sixteen years old, basically. They’re discontinuing it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Can you put it on? My hands are still shaky.”

He fastened the clasp. “There. Beautiful.”

I managed another smile, skimming the letter’s first line, then folding it and pocketing it. “Ready to go? I’ve caused enough drama for one backyard.”

We found Julie and Crissy on the porch, said our thank-yous and goodbyes. At the SUV I rested my forehead against the metal, palm on the handle. The front door shut behind us.

“How are you?” Tanner asked, stopping beside me.

"I'm good. I'd be better never seeing this crap-hole again." I lifted a brow. "Also, I'm not a charity case. You don't have to ask if I'm okay every ten seconds."

"There's the Violet I know and love. At your request." He half-bowed, keys dangling. I snorted. "To the mall, Vi?"

I paused. Nobody calls me anything but Violet. Vi. I liked it. A new edge, but only with him.

I looked up. The trees seemed louder in color behind him. Maybe they always were. "What?"

"You called me Vi," I said. "No one does."

"Really?" He opened his door. "Guess I've got the special privilege then."

"Whoa, don't get cocky." I slid in, zipped the necklace back and forth on its chain, and watched birds ribbon past the window. He U-turned out of the neighborhood, merged onto the highway.

We sat in a thin silence that didn't scare me.

"So what now?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"What's your plan?"

I fingered the pendant. "Figure it out. It's new. I can't believe I told a stranger my worst."

"We know each other," he said, a touch defensive.

"Not much."

"And whose fault is that?"

I shot him a look that could cut steel. "Fine. From now on I'll be an open book. I'll tell all my secrets and say '*¡al carajo!*, that's me!' Do whatever I want with zero thought!" Sarcasm, yes; but power snuck in with it. "Happy?"

He laughed. "Honestly? Yeah. Live a little. You deserve it."

The smile spread over my face like smooth peanut butter—easy, ridiculous, delicious. We were a PB&J of a duo. He was the sweet goo, obviously.

"Listen, Mr. McGrey, that doesn't mean I'm going to start telling you everything."

"Why not?"

"Where's the fun in that? No mystery, nothing to bicker about."

"Fair point." He drummed the wheel. "I'm happy for you, though. Real shades of you are peeking."

"Whoever those are."

"I don't follow."

"You build walls to protect what's soft. Stay behind them long enough and you disintegrate into a shell of who you were. Coming out means relearning sunlight. Finding purpose again."

He whistled. "You're deep."

"That's what he said."

His jaw dropped. "Holy crockpots, did you just steal my dirty brain?"

I squinted. "Did you just say crockpots? Also, you—dirty thinker? Mr. Goody Two Shoes?"

"Oh, I see." He put on an impish face. "We really don't know each other yet. We'll fix that."

Whatever his world was, a gate had cracked. I'd already stepped through.

We lip-synced the drive—'90s-'00s pop. I Want It That Way (don't judge). Then he flipped to dramatic country. With most people you don't full-send goofiness on day two. But sometimes you find someone who invites it.

By the time we parked, the mall was quiet again. I burrowed into his jacket; we grabbed Chick-fil-A to go and bee-lined for Tiffany's.

"Ms. Stacey!" I called softly when I spotted her. "Your daughter's poster."

Her eyes glossed when she saw the signatures. She hugged me like I'd handed her a cure. (Should I give her fifty grand? Kidding. Mostly.)

"Ready to go?" Tanner murmured at my ear. A whisper and goosebumps sprinted up my neck.

Stacey blinked. "I'm sorry—are you Tanner McGrey?"

"I am."

"Can I get your autograph? Big fan!" He scribbled something kind and we hustled out as phones lifted. Pace up. SUV. Gone.

Thirty minutes later we eased behind my building. The Tanner & Violet Show: end of episode. Paparazzi popped up like groundhogs. I hid in his jacket; he hid behind his arm. Inside, we ducked into the empty ice room.

"Thanks for today," I said. "You made a nightmare a...mild disaster."

"For a friend? Anytime. It was fun."

We leaned on opposite sides of the archway, hands braced behind, like the only thing keeping us from doing something stupid was physics. (Maybe that was just me.)

He grinned. "The guys, Mary, and I are hitting the fair Monday night. You and your sisters want to come?"

My head tilted. "Really? I haven't been since I was a kid. I could use stupid, sticky fun."

"Sweet. You'll get to know Mary. She's nice."

I didn't love that sentence. That was a me problem. Women support women, Violet. Do it for Tanner. "Great. Awesome. Fantastic. Can't wait."

"Six o'clock. I'll text you the address or Preston will hit Dallas."

"Works."

He jogged for the door; I bee-lined for the elevator because stairs are for people with functioning coping skills. I knocked—no fishing for keys.

Selena opened with her sunshine smile. "Hey, Violet! How'd your date with Tanner go?" Giggles. The audacity.

I flopped on the couch. "Not a date. A friendly excursion. It went...well."

"Uh-huh." Eyebrows wiggling, tongue peeking, starving for details.

I buried a smile. "Where's Dallas?"

"She left with Preston—to his dorm." Spin, spin on the island chair. "Those two are hitting it off."

My eyebrow ascended into space. "And you're not with anyone?"

Selena blushed. "No."

"Mhm." I resettled. "Maybe Preston told her the plan."

"What plan?"

"Saddle up, Sel. Monday night: the fair. And Tanner's girlfriend will be there."

"Ooo, someone's jealous."

"I am not." Even if every time I remembered she existed I wanted to head-butt a brick.

The front door flew open, slammed shut like a cymbal.

“Who’s ready to get their freak on at the fair Monday night!” Dallas sang, hand on hip, pose loaded.

“Freak or the latter. Who told you?” I asked.

“Preston asked me—obviously I said yes. Then Tanner invited me. Clearly the people demand Dallas.”

My heart hiccuped at Tanner, then I fed it denial like a good girl. I pointed at Dallas, making the Dallas + Preston sitting in a tree face because eleven-year-old me deserves some joy.

Dallas stared. “He made that exact face. What is that?”

I honked like a semi instead of laughing.

“It’s creepy how y’all do that,” she said. “You’ve been hanging out too much.”

I flung a hand. “Preposterous.”

Fifteen

Violet

— ✕ 8 Days to LSU Kickoff ✕ —

“Do you think we should eat dinner now, or after, or during the fair tonight?” Selena asked, still in her loungewear.

Dallas, her, and I relaxed out on the balcony enjoying the day, my sisters savoring glasses of wine. Cold air lingered, sure, but with no wind, sweats, and the sun blazing, the chill felt almost friendly. Plus, the view: sweaty man-boys grinding through drills on the practice field. Kind of cool watching Tanner in football-mode in real time, practice uniform and all. Saturday’s LSU game—watching him and the team kick ass in person—couldn’t come fast enough.

“Well, are you hungry?” I asked.

“Mmm, not really.”

“Then we’ll either eat at the fair or after,” Dallas said, chiming in.

This weekend carried an echo of old times and a shock of new. On one hand, last time here we were kids with sore hearts, leaving without him, wondering about a future that didn’t include this place. It felt like leaving him behind. On the other, here we were—grown, tucked into a lavish condo, expensive wine in hand—hanging out as if nothing had changed. As if I hadn’t changed. As if some alternate me—one whose father didn’t die—had quietly kept growing here. All those what-ifs I’ve been chewing since forever. Still, no bickering, no noise from the outside world; peace with my sisters actually felt...good. Barf reflex tried to fire—gut reaction—but shame had no place here. Blessings were blessings.

Thoughts kept circling the truth I owed them—how Papi really went, by my hand. Accidentally. Unknowingly. Innocently complicit. Readiness never arrives for that kind of confession. No perfect time, place, or mood. The best you can do is jump when the mind says jump.

“Okay. I’m gonna start getting ready around five. What about you guys?” Selena asked.

My phone said close to five. Usual ritual timing spun up. “I’ll start at five-thirty. Maybe five-forty-five.”

“Not gonna dress up much?” Dallas asked.

“It’s just the fair, you don’t need to, unless you have dates.”

Selena wagged her finger—fair point—and bounced. “Very well, I’m gonna go get ready then.” Glass drained, stool abandoned, room claimed.

“So, you and Preston are hitting it off quite nicely.”

Dallas’s face beamed. “Yeah, we’re just clicking, you know?”

A chuckle slid out. “Dallas, you realize it’s only been a week since you two have known each other, right?”

Her posture stiffened. “So?”

“Just saying, it’s a little fast. No?”

She scoffed. “God, Violet. I’m just going with the flow, nothing super serious, yet. Have a romantic bone in your body *por una vez*.”

I crossed my arms. “Hey, plenty romantic over here. Romantic and realistic. Also—going with the flow, or going with the bone.”

Dallas’s face twisted. “Ugh, I don’t know why I tell you anything!” She popped up and stomped to her room, wine orphaned.

So close to a bicker-less weekend. “I don’t know why either! You’d think you would’ve learned by now!” The laugh sat warm in my throat.

Thirty to forty-five minutes stretched ahead like gum. What to do?

Inside called. The piano waited. Fingers found the necklace—Papi’s gift—and memory fast-forwarded to Dallas’s first lesson. She was six, I was four, both caught in the magic of keys while Mamá cooked. Pre-dinner trios, post-dinner drama on ivories. Simpler times. *Dios*, those days.

Toes carried me closer like I might spook a ghost. The bench stared back. No teeth—fine—so down I went, a breath dragged deep. Thighs rubbed for courage. Keys gleamed; child-hands flashed in my head; panic snapped; hands flew off; feet fled to my room.

Skinny jeans. Plain cropped black tee. Old-school vans. Layers upon layers—necklaces, rings, cuffs, bracelets. A jacket—not Tanner’s; Mary would be there, and lines mattered. Thirty-second French braid. Ten-minute makeup: brows, mascara, gloss.

Exiting the room in a hurry, Dallas and Selena were sprawled on the couch, bodyguards posted.

“Everybody ready?”

Agreement all around. Mental checklist ran—phone, keys, wallet. Check, check—check phone: no address from Tanner. A tiny disappointment pricked.

“I have the address,” Dallas said, wiggling her phone like the golden ticket. Mind-reader.

We marched out single-file like Seven Dwarfs clocking in. Guards surrounded us as we hustled out the back. Cameras flared, questions barked, fans swarmed; guards formed a moving wall. Why always questions fishing for lies they hope are true? And wow—more fans than over the weekend? *Ay, Dios*. If Mary didn’t like me already, the optics weren’t helping.

Fifteen-ish minutes to the fair felt like thirty with anxiety playing DJ. Parking done, my sisters and I strolled; guards lagged thirty feet behind. No paps, no fans. . . yet. At the entrance, Tanner’s arm draped Mary like a sash; the guys clustered nearby. A tiny flame sparked deep. Old ways tried to tug forward; new ones pulled rank.

“Tanner. Wonderful to see you again, Mary!” I hugged her instinctively.

“Oh, it’s really nice to see you again too!” Genuine smile—points to Mary.

Preston, Austin, William got their hellos.

“Hey Will!” I said, hugging him.

“Hey Violet, how’ve you been?”

“Great, how about yourself?”

“Never been better! You look radiant.”

Heat rose to my cheeks. “Oh. Thank you.”

A throat cleared somewhere.

“Okay, is everyone ready to go?” Tanner called over the chatter, hands up for attention.

Tickets, wristbands, done. Dallas even covered the guards.

We funneled down a narrow path: food trucks smoking meats, fryers hissing dessert sins. Lemonade with a little water in it; BBQ parfaits like fever dreams. William glued himself to my hip, peppering with ride opinions. Like them? Hate them? Fairs? Fried Oreos?

Out in the open, choices exploded—food, rides, petting stalls, illusion jungle. No landing gear in sight.

“Eat then ride or ride then eat, someone make a decision!” William rubbed his hands.

“I’m ready for the rides!” Adrenaline voted for me.

Shock rippled like they’d just discovered I knew language.

“Alright, you heard the Queen. Move out!” William declared.

A discreet grin snuck free. *Queen?* Not the Blue kind, the other kind. Maybe reading into it, but the label warmed.

“Awesome! But before that, Tanner promised we’d see that illusionist show, so after we’re game!” Mary said, chaining herself to his arm.

He grinned down at her, crow’s feet winking. “Indeed. I did promise that. So we’ll see you guys afterwards.” A playful shoulder-bump nearly toppled her; she giggled and ran; he scooped her like soft-serve. My eyes wanted to look away but couldn’t; a feeling brewed anyway.

“We’re joining them. We’ll catch y’all in a bit,” Preston said, towing Dallas by the hand. A guard drifted after them.

The remaining survivors looked to William for brave-heart energy.

Soon we were sprinting around the fair like we owned the grounds. The guards surely loved us for it (they didn’t). Night fairs beat day fairs—mystifying lights, humming possibilities. Magic slipped under the skin; warmth returned after a long winter.

Lines, rides, repeat. The Horror Drop—slow rise, trapdoor fall—lit up every nerve. The Fire Ball spun and looped; felt like what love probably is. The Haunted Mansion: weird, creepy, still a letdown—thanks a lot, Disneyland standards and adulthood. A mirror room tried to swallow me—like my last relationship. Guards rode everything with us; saints or prisoners, hard to tell.

The Zipper rolled up next; William’s turn to ride with me. The coin-toss beast—oval track, cages like mini jails, bodies slamming like dice in a cup. Screams everywhere. Guards huddled near.

“So, Violet. Are you from Tuscaloosa or are you just here on vacation?” William asked.

“I’m from here. I moved when I was ten though.”

“Ahh, so visiting. When did you last visit?”

“Eleven years ago.”

“Oh, wow. Been up to no good, huh?”

A small laugh escaped. “You know it. But really, after we moved to Texas we just never came back. Especially when we got discovered and started going on tours and stuff. Life just got busy.”

“Ahh. Well, I’m glad you’re back. I’m especially glad you’re here tonight.”

Gratitude warmed me. Spicy cologne stung sweet; curiosity leaned me closer and—he caught me. My heart attempted to escape through my ribs.

“Sorry, I smelled something and I had to know if it was you. You smell really good.”

He smiled, teeth bright in carnival glow. “No worries, I liked it. And thank you.”

His smile said more than his words—open book, comedian at heart. For once, being around people didn't itch. Wanting company didn't feel like betrayal. Grief still hovered, of course, but magic threaded the night.

The gate clanged after we loaded the cage. The operator locked us in. A barred rectangle framed the world; my guard claimed the exit like a hawk.

"You ready?" William asked, eyes mischievous.

"But of course."

The lurch came fast; the door met my shoulder, bang. A muttered curse—not fatal.

"You alright?"

"Yeah. You'd think. . . they'd give you a . . . warning. . . before they. . . start it up."

His laugh skittered unevenly in the dark. Bodies slammed; at one point he launched into me, caging me with his arms so he didn't crush me. Foreheads almost touched; hot breath grazed my neck.

"I didn't hurt you. . ." Another slam tossed us the other way; I hit him; he caught me. ". . . did I?"

Our eyes met for a sweeping second. "Um, uh, no, I'm alright."

He leaned in; the ride yanked him away; my back clipped metal—"OW!"

"Where did it hit?"

"My back."

Seven minutes can feel like an eternity when metal boxes try to kill you. Seven Minutes in Hell: terrifying, kind of thrilling, not optional.

The ride slowed; the door opened; freedom. My guard waited dead ahead.

"*¡Dios mío!*" A stretch tried to unkink my spine.

"How are you doing over there?"

"I'm alright, just tons of bruises to wake up to tomorrow."

A lemonade stand flashed yellow and mercy. "I just need some lemonade."

Orders placed; wallet moved; guard declined. William insisted on paying; fine by me.

Antsy energy radiated off him—heel-to-toe rocking, darting glances.

"Something the matter, William?" I asked.

A grin tugged sideways; eyes studied grass. Finally, he looked up. "I have to tell you something, and maybe this is a little straightforward considering I don't know a whole lot about you, but I like you. I hope, maybe after we get to know each other a little better and become closer friends, it will progress to something more."

Wind punched my lungs for a beat. "Oh. Um. Well, I—"

"And I don't mean to put you on the spot like that at all. You don't have to answer right now, obviously. You can answer whenever. And I also didn't mean for that to come out controlling or bossy sounding either. Did it? Let me start over."

The poor guy derailed adorably. A fingertip to his lips; a giggle to break the spiral. "Can I get a word in?"

Pink climbed his cheeks. "Yes, I'm sorry. Go ahead."

"I'm flattered, really. And I think you're truly a unique guy." The image flashed—clearing in the woods, log bench, birds, stupid jokes that steadied me. Not an ocean for once.

A shift slid through me. "But I want to think about it then get back to you, if that's alright."

"Yeah, of course. No pressure."

A small, encouraging grin answered him. Sorting could wait—but a conversation felt necessary. With Tanner.

Sixteen

TANNER

Quiet in my seat, the hypnotist snapped people into animals, jazz players, dancers. A glance at Mary—smiling at everything—reminded me why we worked when we worked: she loves even the tiniest bit of spectacle. Cheering, clapping, whooping... that's my girl.

She slipped off for a refill, drink in hand. Unexpected tension rode in tonight. William finally getting a shot with Violet felt good—mission progress!—and yet a pinprick of... something... pulsed under the ribs. Jealous of Will? ridiculous. We were all having fun. Violet's quick, sharp, smart—and yeah, gorgeous. Will and she will click and that will be that. That. Will. Be. That. Except each time the thought landed, a swell pressed at my chest like something trying to get out.

Mary slid back down the aisle, dropped beside me, fresh drink.

"Hey you, how's your drink?" I asked.

"Amazing, thank you," Mary said.

Hand-in-hand, we watched the finale. A quick check over the shoulder found Dallas and Preston going full make-out two rows back, her guard posted like a statue behind them—annoyed? Stoic? Hard to tell with those guys.

"Thank y'all for coming, I hope y'all have a blessed evening and have fun at the Tuscaloosa Fair!" the hypnotist bowed.

We stood, clapped, and funneled out. Preston and Dallas (plus her guard) waited at the aisle's end, and we drifted toward the midway to find the rest, Mary's fingers lacing mine.

"I have to admit, that hypnotist guy was good," Preston said.

"He was! What did you think, Mary?" Dallas asked.

"It was wonderful, I enjoyed it. Didn't you, Tanner?" Mary asked, peering up.

"I did, it was very amusing."

Preston chuckled and scanned, hawk-eyed.

"I see them!" Dallas said, happier than usual.

Smoke cleared, lights hit—there they were: William and Violet, laughing at something he said. If he'd wooed her, my wingman duties had an end date. Relief and... something else... couldn't agree whose turn it was.

"Hey guys! Did you like the show?" Violet asked, brighter every time I see her.

"It was great! So much fun!" Mary said, shaking her drink. "Excuse me a moment, I'm going to go find the restroom."

"Me too," Violet said.

"I second that!" Dallas chimed in.

Two bodyguards fell in; William called, "Hurry up, ladies. We're burning the nightlight!"

"Where is Selena and Austin?" I asked.

William scanned. "I haven't a clue. Lost them somewhere in the midst of fun."

“So, I take it things are going well? With Violet and all,” slipped out before I could label the nerves.

“Never better, Tan the Man! Pretty soon, William Shaffer will be off the market,” he said, eyes closed, collar popped, grin to match.

“Right, right,” came out neutral.

“If she even feels the same way dude,” Preston said.

“Oh, believe me. She’s digging on me,” William said, then to me: “You’re off duty for the night and if you’re lucky, for the rest of your life now.” A gentle fist-bump—amped.

Supposed to be thrilled, right? Maybe? A little?

The girls returned with their guards, and the group hit the Meteorite, Cliff Hanger, Sea Dragon. Feet turned to bricks, eyes sand-dry from the wind; William and Violet kept getting tossed into each other. Preston and Dallas rode the hangtime like a honeymoon. Mary drifted dreamy now and then, but overall seemed good. One ride paired Violet with me when we shuffled partners.

“I swear I was slipping off the seat!” she said, high on the Sea Dragon. Fists clenched, eyes lit by ride lights—fireworks, somehow, without the sound.

“Nahh, I would never let that happen,” I said.

“Right, because you’re my guardian angel, huh,” she shot back, sarcasm center.

“Of course,” mostly joking.

We regrouped; Mary slid to my side as Violet rejoined William. The shift felt real—explainable? Maybe not.

“Let’s do the ring tosses!” Preston shouted, arms out.

Consensus formed fast. We trailed behind Violet’s guard, who shadowed her and William. Laughter floated back. What had them synched so quick...?

“It appears to me William has really pulled it off. Guess that means you’re off the hook, huh?” Mary said.

Gaze snapped from them. “Huh? Oh, right. Yeah, who would’ve thought. And so quickly.”

She nodded. “Very quickly. She doesn’t even seem like the same person as before. Guess you really warmed her up for William with all the time y’all’ve spent together.”

A hairline of accusation? Maybe. “I suppose?”

“Look, I know you hung out with her for wingman duty but it’s very disheartening reading all the rumors and gossip about you two on social media and such. And the pictures. . .”

Social media hadn’t seen me in weeks—the football brain stays cleaner that way. The impact on her, though... “I’m sorry, Mary. I didn’t know. I didn’t realize how that would affect you. You know none of that garbage is true, right?”

“I know. But I can’t unsee those photos. I just feel like y’all have gotten close. Maybe lil too close. And I’m not saying it’s your fault, but like I said before. Violet is known to be troubled and I’m afraid she might latch onto you or something.”

“Violet’s not like that. She’s not a ‘homewrecker.’ Troubled she may be, but not in the way you’re thinking.”

Her lips twisted, thinking hard. “So y’all really have gotten pretty close, huh?”

What answer even works? “I mean, kind of I guess. It’s like you said, just to soften her up for William. Those pictures make people think what the paparazzi wants them to. Nothing more. I promise.” My hand covered hers on my arm.

Her eyes searched mine; a smile opened. “Good.”

The woods flashed in—what I told Violet about Mary. Talk to the girl before making any haste decisions. Time to live it. “There is something I wanted to talk to you about though.”

Mary lifted her head, guard up. “Okay?”

“I’m very happy and proud of everything you’re doing and becoming as a woman. But I do want to talk about our relationship and where you see it going in—”

“Aw, jeez. Not this talk again.”

That stung. “I know we’ve kind of talked about this before, but there are some feelings I have that—”

“Yeah, talked about it until we’re blue in the face. I told you before, Tanny. I’m serious about us, but that doesn’t mean I want a ring on my finger tomorrow.”

That nickname always hits wrong. “Right, I know that and I agree. You know I’m in no rush to get married, but I just want to make sure this is what you want for us in the future. You know my heart’s intentions. If we get married, I want it to be forever. But I want to be sure you’re in it with me for sure. But sometimes, with your actions around other people, I feel I’m a different purpose in your life.”

“I don’t understand where this is coming from. Can’t we just enjoy where we are in this relationship? Why do we have to talk so seriously about the future right now?” Venom edged the words.

A breath let go. If not now, when? “You’re right. We’ll continue this conversation later. Let’s just enjoy tonight.”

“Agreed,” she said, head dipped. “I’m really happy I’m here with you tonight though. I hope you know that.” She was trying—fighting her own stuff, just not naming it. Empathy needed to win.

Crowds thickened at the games. We split into smaller clusters as everyone chased different prizes. William offered Violet his hand; after a few seconds she took it. They aimed at the ring toss near where Preston, Dallas, Selena, and Mary were bricking attempts. Guards orbited.

Austin and I peeled to the basketball rims. Between shots, my eyes drifted—Violet and William tossing rings, laughing—maybe the most I’d seen her laugh since we met.

William finally landed one. Cheers, a giant stuffed tiger, a half-shake refusal from Violet, more convincing, then acceptance. A hug that lingered past “friends.”

“I tell you what, he really likes her. They’ve been joined at the hip ever since we got here,” Austin said.

The ball in my hands hadn’t moved in minutes. Felt like watching a backyard royal wedding. “You think she likes him too?” he asked, missing wide.

“I don’t know, and I honestly don’t know if I really care that much.” My shot clanged out. “What do you think?”

Austin smirked. “Mmm, I don’t know. She seems to like him, but I think it’s too soon to tell.”

The conversation itched in a way I couldn’t scratch. Anxiety balled in the gut. No angle to hang out with her anymore landed wronger than expected.

He glanced over, shook his head, sank his last shot, then faced me. “Come on, man. You like this girl. And don’t you try to deny it either because I can see it.”

Another miss. “I don’t like her, we’re friends. She’s not my type.” Ball after ball—deny, deny, deny.

Austin tracked the bricks, then me, amused. When the game died, frustration buzzed.

“Bro, I see the way you look at her and I see the way she looks at you. And clearly one or both of y’all are oblivious or denying it. Body language does not lie, my friend,” he said, palm landing on my shoulder. “I mean, you keep missing shots because you’re so tense about all of this.”

“Austin, I’m with Mary. I love Mary. What you’re saying is just not true. Look at how much fun she’s having with William.”

“Yeah, and look how much fun you’re having watching them two flirt. It’s the same way I’m sure y’all two flirt.”

“Are you done?” came out sharper. “I know what I feel and don’t feel. I don’t feel for Violet in that way, and the only reason we hangout is because I’m trying to set her and William up. You know that.”

He chuckled, patting my shoulder. “Okay, man. We’ll see.”

He drifted off just as Violet jogged up, eyes spotlight-bright, breathless, hoisting the massive tiger like it weighed nothing. “Look at what William won! For me apparently!”

William joined us.

“Very awesome! It’s huge,” came out a little too formal.

“Yeah, I got lucky. Those rings didn’t stand a chance against these mad skills,” William said, thumbs at himself, smiling at Violet.

“Well, we’ve been here for about three and a half hours. Think we should call it a night?” I asked.

William checked his watch. “Yeah, it’s getting late. It’s past nine.”

“Wait! Not yet. There’s one more ride I want to ride,” Violet said, wrestling the tiger up her body. A quick look flicked my way, a micro-nod right—so small William missed it. I barely caught it.

“What ride?” I asked, watching her.

She turned to the giant white wheel easing the sky.

“Let’s go ride it then!” William stepped forward.

Violet sprinted with the tiger; her guard paced after. William started to follow until I touched his arm. “Hey, Will. Mind if I ride this one with her?”

He blinked. “We can both ride with her, there’s plenty of space. It’s a four-person carrier.”

“Of course, but I want to talk to her alone for just a few minutes. If that’s okay?”

“Yeah, sure! I’ll just go find everyone and tell them we’re heading out soon then.”

“Cool, thanks.”

A jog caught me up to Violet already settled in a carriage, petting her faux tiger. Her guard posted at the exit for space, not crowding the cart. How she scored a seat that fast—mystery for later.

Hand cupped to the operator’s ear. “Can I make a special request to stop our cart at the top? My friend here would love that.”

“Anything for Violet Adair!” she said.

A thank-you, then into the seat across from Violet. That little signal earlier meant something bothered her; time to listen.

The wheel hummed us up.

“So, how was tonight?” I asked.

She smiled like there was another secret behind it. “Tonight was, I don’t even know the right word for it, but I’ll stick with incredible.”

Softer every time—eyes like fall leaves now, not winter icicles; posture more at ease than escape. Whatever she did over the weekend, it took.

“You and William seem to be hitting it off. What’s that about?” teasing, but curious.

Violet fidgeted with the tiger’s fur. “He’s a great guy. So sweet, and he’s got that southern-boy charm that all the ladies love. And all the boys seem to have around here.”

“Yeah, that’s true. I sense a ‘but’ coming.”

“I’m not sure there is a ‘but.’ William’s fun, bold, and a pretty-blond-boy.”

A chuckle escaped; posture straightened; lips pressed. Awkward? Uneasy? Something. She definitely glowed talking about him—or maybe my brain made that up. Did Mary glow like that for me?

“Okay, so what’s the problem?” I asked.

A shrug. “There’s no problem. I’m just not certain I want to get back in the dating-arena just yet.”

“Why not?”

She puffed her lips in thought—adorably dorky. “I don’t know what it is I guess, a gut feeling? I also feel like I just now started finally having fun, feeling okay in my own skin, still figuring out this new-self I’m developing. Just a bunch of reasons I suppose.”

“I hope you don’t mind me asking, but how are you not ‘snagged up’ already?”

“All my previous relationships have been unfaithful on the other side.”

“They all cheated on you? That’s ridiculous.”

“Why? What’s so ridiculous about that?”

“No, I just meant that, um. I think you’re a great person and I just can’t believe someone would do that to you. Over and over again.”

“It’s not exactly rare in Hollywood. But we all have flaws. I know lately I haven’t been the person to be around.”

“Still, no one deserves that.”

“If you would’ve told me that a few days ago, I would’ve disagreed with you. But you’re right. It still happens though. Just like my last one.”

“Your last boyfriend?” Pretending not to know.

She nodded. “Shane. I caught him in the hotel room down the hall from mine, making out with his recent ex. I told myself that was the time. But honestly, we only broke up six months ago and. . . I don’t know. Everything is fragile right now.”

Poor girl. “Your face with nature’s own hand painted, which steal’s men’s eyes and women’s souls amazeth,” I offered—part of a sonnet, clipped before it got weird about boys playing girls’ roles.

An eyebrow rose; a giggle. “Shakespeare, huh? Is this what we’ve resulted to?”

“But of course.”

“Quite the educated, Squire. Give me the translation.”

“‘Your face with nature’s own hand painted’ means your face was colored by nature. ‘Which steal’s men’s eyes and women’s souls amazeth’ means because of your beauty, you catch the attention of men and amaze women’s souls.”

She listened, chin in palms. “Wow, that was sweet. You always try to make Mary feel better with Shakespeare?”

The smile dipped. “No, actually. Shakespeare’s not really her thing.”

Her mouth skewed; eyes dropped. A beat. “Do you want to know why they all cheated?”

“What?”

“Do you want to know why they did it?”

“Oh, um. Only if you want to disclose that information.”

The cart thumped to a gentle stop—top of the world. Moon, stars, cloud-glow, treetops, the fair spilling neon across the dark.

Violet shifted to her knees, arms folded on the railing, chin on wrists. I mirrored the pose beside her.

“Wow,” she breathed. “This is just beautiful.”

“Yeah,” stayed with the view, still wondering why the cheating.

“I wouldn’t have sex with him.”

Head turned. “What?”

“The reason he cheated and left, the reason they all did, was because I wouldn’t sleep with them.”

A swallow. “Oh.”

“Does that bother you?”

“How would it?”

“I’m a virgin. Most guys either get weirded out by it or find it the biggest turn on. That’s creepy in its own respect.”

“What? I didn’t know that either.”

She nodded.

“I find that kinda cool,” came out honest. “I’m also so confused.”

“What part of any of those sentences was cool? And why are you confused?”

“All of it. There’s no shame in being a virgin. I find it respectable.”

“So, where’s the confusion?”

“You’re just so attractive I never would’ve... you know.”

“Mmm, I see. Pretty girls can’t be more than just surface, huh?”

“No! No. Not at all what I was saying!”

She tried to hold the laugh in; tears leaked anyway. “Man, it gets easier and easier every time!”

A nudge. “You tiny jerk!”

“You can’t say that you wouldn’t have done the same if the roles were reversed.”

A chesty breath held, then out. “True.”

“Just don’t. . . tell anyone. Okay? I’m serious. Not a dog, not a tree, not even Mary. Promise?”

The world sort of fell away up here; maybe that’s why this felt safe. “Of course. I assume nobody knows?”

She shook her head. “Not even my sisters. And, for once, I’d just like something nobody knows about me. One less thing for the Media to mock me about or twist around somehow.”

For the first time, she felt normal to me. Relatable. The woods moment, and now this, kept peeling back armor to someone admirable. Loveable.

A pinky lifted; her eyes found it, then me; a grateful grin; pinkies locked.

“I’m not saying this just to say it, but if you were dating any of the guys, they would never do that to you, no matter what you do or don’t do.” Full stop.

She smiled like she was alone.

The wheel eased down; we stepped out and hunted the group. Her guard rejoined her flank. William and Preston stood nearby; Dallas shivered inside William’s jacket. Austin, Selena, and Mary got themselves booted from go-karts for ramming each other.

“How was the Ferris wheel? Fun, right?” William asked.

“Yeah, it was nice,” I said.

“Is everyone ready to go?” Preston asked.

People drifted toward cars, guards in tow. Hugs went around. William pulled Violet aside, whispered with her longer than “see ya.” Curiosity spiked. When they split, she headed to me; a hug happened—strong, too strong—released fast before anyone could misread. Mary already felt us loosening; no need to fuel it. Pretty sure that was the first hug Violet and I had ever shared. Too nice.

We watched their SUV pull away, then walked to my car.

Seventeen

Violet

— ✕ 6 Days to LSU Kickoff ✕ —

Tanner: Hey you, be ready by nine. I have a surprise for you 😊

A surprise? ¡Dios mío!, can't wait to find out!

Me: Okay 😊

With zero clue to what kind of occasion this was, wardrobe roulette was risky. Light ripped jeans and an oversized, one-shoulder sweater seemed safely cute. In the bathroom mirror, the Amour Éternel necklace caught the light—never taking it off, a reminder to be the best version of myself for me, for the people I love, and for Papi. Daily-light makeup went on—just in case.

About thirty minutes before Tanner's ETA, Selena hovered in the living room grilling me about plans.

"It's out with William isn't it? Oh my god, you guys are *saliendo juntos* now, aren't you?"

A chuckle escaped. "No. William and I decided to remain friends. Tanner said he has a surprise for me and to get ready."

"Ohh. Now I really see."

An eye roll plus a smile answered that. Selena skipped to the kitchen in glee. My bodyguard waited in a chair; fidgeting carried me through the next few minutes until a knock landed on the door. Heart rate spiked like a thriller soundtrack while steps were counted down to the handle.

Three, two, one—door swung open. Tanner: dark blue jeans, white Alabama tee, gray Vans, and a baseball cap with what looked like his high school mascot.

"Hey, Vi," he said—our private nickname.

"Hey, Mr. McGrey."

That innocent smile made a cameo. "Ready to meet your surprise?"

Meet? So—the surprise was a person? "Duh! Let's go!"

"Have a good time! Keep it in your pants!" Selena yelled, door shutting behind us as my guard fell in.

A head shake answered her. "She loves being *un dolor en el trasero*, I swear."

Tanner laughed. “I’m not entirely sure what you said, but it sounds annoyed. But that’s what siblings are for, no?”

“Yeah, I’ll say. Do you have siblings?”

“I have an older brother. Brian.”

“Oh, nice! What does he do?”

“He’s a reliever for the Texas Rangers.”

“Damn. Strong arms run in the family. Huh?”

“Yeah, I guess they do.”

Tanner chose his Land Rover this time. My bodyguard rushed me into the passenger seat to dodge paparazzi and fans—swarming, as expected. You’d think they’d stalk someone more important. The paps anyway. My guard climbed into the back; Tanner slid behind the wheel and peeled away fast.

From his pocket, Tanner handed over a black wrap. “I need you to cover your eyes with this.”

The fabric received a raised eyebrow response. “What for?”

“So the surprise isn’t ruined.”

“I see, this surprise must be epic,” came out as the bandana tied softly around my eyes.

With the area unfamiliar, the other four senses weren’t helping—no helpful smells (other than Tanner), no hints from touch or taste. Pure mystery, and of course he wasn’t going to spill.

After what felt like five minutes, the car stopped. Someone guided me out and along.

Only hearing to go on: jingling keys, the screech of...gates? “Can I take the bandana off now?”

“Not yet.”

“Okay.”

Hands released, then rejoined—larger, softer, warmer, gentler than before. Footing stayed firm, then softened after twenty steps. Scuffing and a tearing feel under shoes—grass, but not ordinary grass.

Roughly a hundred feet later, we halted.

“Okay. You ready?” Tanner asked, thrilled.

“Yes! The suspense is killing me!”

Fingers loosed the knot. Fabric fell; eyes opened to Tanner’s expectant face—then the view.

Stadium seats. Turf underfoot. A jaw dropped of its own volition. So many seats. A sea of gray and crimson accents; spotlights blazing. Imagining every seat pulsing crimson, glittering with phones and flashes—goosebumps. Papi must’ve felt this here. My bodyguard sat high in the stands, phone in hand, gaze lifting every so often to check on me.

“¡Dios mío, Tanner! No way!”

He tucked his hands in his pockets, soaking in my awe. Closing my eyes, the phantom roar of fans swelled—so much like tour nights. The rush he feels here had to be the same as the ones I felt on stage. Stadiums are stadiums; magic is magic.

“How did you manage to do this?”

“When you’re the quarterback for a football team that’s number one in the nation, you kinda have ties with a lot of people. Especially for the stadium you play in,” he said, shrugging.

“Right, of course.” *Brilliant question, Violet.* “So what occasion requires such a special field to bring me to?”

Tanner unzipped a shoulder bag I hadn't clocked and pulled a football. "I can't believe you don't remember the bet we made under the biggest oak tree in the quad."

"Oh, that. You should've mentioned it so I could've dressed more for it, Mr. McGrey."

A smile sharpened. "Okay, well, it would've given away the surprise. Besides, you kinda look the part. Like a pretty cheerleader. But you know, with more clothes. So, are you ready to carry out the bet? Or have you chickened out?"

Arms crossed. "Oh, you wish, don't you."

He spun the ball, doing tricks. "Of course, so I'd have something to tease you about later."

He winked.

Flustering didn't even have a chance; competition mode had already flipped on. Little-league tryouts flashed: smug boys, one girl. "You realize it'll be a lot harder to achieve each position with just the two of us, right?"

"Yeah, but that didn't stop you from betting," he said.

"Fair, I suppose."

"So, what position do you want to start off with?"

"How about we start off with your easy-peasy quarterback position."

"Alright, off-the-bat with the smartass-ness. I like that," he said, tossing me the ball. "How about you start, big britches."

"Okay, ready to get your *trasero* whipped?"

Tanner dropped into a running-back stance. "If you even can, sure. Now, how do you propose we do this?"

A plan snapped together. "I know. I'll throw ten to you. Some short passes, some long. Some hooked, some slanted. You know. Then you do the same."

"Hmm, okay."

"Ready?"

Back in his stance, he looked locked in. "I've been ready."

One corner of my mouth lifted. Eyes narrowed. "Game on."

Ten throws each—Tanner sprinting to mix up spots, me matching his chaos. Quarterback box checked. Next up: center duties—Tanner gave me a pass-off, a punt snap, a regular snap, then a shotgun snap—center zips it chest-high so the quarterback can drop seven yards. Tedious, sure, but aced because, well, excellence.

Offensive tackle followed with Tanner playing opposing defensive end, then a switch. His surprise at my strength showed; his win there also showed—muscular athlete versus sweater girl, fair enough. With that, the O-line was essentially covered. Wide receiver and cornerback got improvised: I ran as if I'd caught the ball; he had to tackle. Gentle hands made sure there were no injuries—cute, really. On the flip side, my tackle turned into a leap on top of him, both of us cracking up. Safety didn't make sense with just two. That left running back, fullback/halfback—homestretch for the crown.

He snapped as center, played quarterback, handed me the pigskin—and legs lit up. Lightning-bolt sprint, a cut behind me, Tanner diving for ankles—one hop, a miss, and a touchdown dance in my head.

"Nice footwork, Miss Adair. Let's try that one more time from an interception situation."

Breath fought its way back. Sweat turned the sweater into a sauna—desperately wanted to strip to a bra, obviously that wasn't an option. "Whatever. . . makes it easier. . . for the quarterback. . . who can't. . . catch me," came between gasps, including a little mocking wink.

“Whatever strikes your ego, darling.”

The ball flew his way. He barked a made-up play, returned it, and I cut for daylight. His block attempt met a fake-right, blast-left spin—out of reach. Just as freedom sang, arms wrapped my waist from behind; we spun and tumbled onto his back.

Rolling clear, the ball slipped free. Laughter detonated—loud, ridiculous, school-girl shrieks. The stars above looked like they were gossiping.

“You know, I don’t even remember the last time I took a moment to admire the stars,” slipped out.

“Yeah, me too. Life gets busy.”

“True. You know, being here is honestly the most amazing place I’ve ever been.”

He turned. “Here? You’ve been to so many crazy places that I’ve probably never even heard of, and *here* is the place that amazes you?”

“Yeah, I guess it’s because it’s like home. My Papi used to tell me football stories about this stadium. I can’t really describe it but all I know is that this is my favorite place in the world,” came out softer, “there’s no other place I’d rather be right now.”

A knowing nod answered. “I’m glad I brought you here then.”

A smile stretched. “Is this what you feel every time you play here?”

“Feel what?”

“Like you belong and everything is just right.”

He sat up, studying me. “How’d you know?”

Sitting up too, knees hugged, a shrug answered. “It’s the same feeling I have while performing.”

He nodded.

“What else do you feel? How do you feel when you enter the field and there’s a stadium full of fans either cheering you on or booing you down?”

“Look at you, the new instigator.”

A playful shove. “Well, it’s only fair. So come on, let’s hear those answers.” My chin dropped to my knees—ready.

“Well, I’m in the locker room getting ready for the game, mentally and physically. I’m nervous and the pressure is swelling, but that’s okay because I do really well under pressure surprisingly, you know?”

A nod encouraged him on.

“So, after the coaches go over a few reminders and pointers before the game, Coach Sayers always gives a speech that pumps up the team. I love ‘em because his speeches also apply to life. Like, going after what you want and nothing can stop you except yourself. So, the team and I walk down the tunnel banging on walls, shouting and touching the Crimson Tide sign before we reach the end of it. We wait to be called out onto the field. The adrenaline has my heart at the verge of exploding out of my chest that I just want to scream. When I peer out into the stands, I think ‘is today the day I let everyone down? Or are we going to get one more win closer to the National Title?’ and then I think ‘we are stronger, prouder, and smarter than we were yesterday. Whatever happens, there’s always tomorrow.’”

Focus stayed glued to him.

“We keep each other fired up by yelling pep talks. We’re jumping up and down, trying to keep our blood pumping. And when the announcer finally calls us out, we jog out to the field. We hear the fans roar over the boos of the opponent’s fans. They don’t matter, but they fuel our drive for the game in a different way. In those moments, I feel indestructible. We can’t be

stopped, we can't be touched, and we can't be beat. Every time it's strangely the best feeling in the world, that rush. It's why we do it. I wouldn't change what I do for anything else in the world. Even with all the pressure, the expectations, the championships, the perfectionism. Still, I wouldn't give it up for anything."

"Wow. You gave me chills." Arms lifted—the tiny hairs saluted.

He chuckled. "I try."

"So you really do love playing football. You don't ever get tired of playing it?"

"Nope, it's my passion. Do you ever get tired of singing?"

A lightbulb flickered—six months without a note. Shame pricked. "I don't know. I'm not sure about anything anymore. But it's something I've always loved. I can't imagine ever being without it."

"Why'd you quit?" He mirrored my posture.

Heartbeat thumped, bracing for shakes. "I didn't quit, per se. I'm just on a hiatus. I tend to let emotions, stubbornness, and paranoia get in the way of my happiness. An example, all of my relationships I got cheated on, but I continued on because they weren't that important to me. But Shane I cared about. He stabbed me in the back, on top of everything else that happened at the same time. My mother disappearing off with Stone, the issues with Papi's death, the tour. I lost all control. Everything went dumb."

"Damn, I'm sorry. I can't imagine how that must feel personally," Tanner said.

"Yeah, I hope you don't Tanner. You're an incredible guy and deserve better than that."

A funny look, then a grin. "Thanks. You're pretty great too you know, you didn't deserve that either."

A shrug answered. "Agree to disagree. But thanks for giving me a chance."

Tanner resettled. "What you were fronting was not actually you. Right here, in this moment, is who you really are. It takes big balls to admit your faults, begin the process of change, and refigure yourself out. I admire that about you. You've got big balls, Vi, and I cannot lie."

Whistled laughter broke us both.

"Thank you. You know, I think the reason I was forced to come back, sisters dragging me or not, was not only to face my issues with Papi, but just to have a fresh start," came while plucking at blades of turf.

"I wish I had intuition like that. But, when you're away for eleven years, you're bound to come back at some point."

"That's true, I suppose."

"I'm just glad your intuition didn't make you wait one more year."

"One more year?"

"To come back to Alabama."

"Why?"

"Because then we would've never met."

That line pulled the biggest smile out of me. "Yeah, same here. I don't know where I'd be right now if you hadn't just imposed on my life."

"Imposed? Such strong words!" he teased. "You got yourself out of the rut, be proud of yourself. Don't give me any credit."

An eye roll answered. "Learn to take a compliment."

"So, when are you going to start singing again?" he pivoted.

"I don't know. I'm taking baby steps into it, so maybe soon?"

“I hope so, I wanna hear you sing.”

“You wanna hear me sing?”

“Yeah. I’ve never heard you sing. In person anyway.”

“Are you trying to figure out if I actually sound good live or?” joking, obviously.

“Not at all. I just want to hear your angelic singing with my own bare ears. The best singers always sound better live.”

“You’re good at covering your *trasero*, Mr. McGrey. But one day, I will catch you at your own game.”

Eighteen

Violet

Tanner shot me a wink. “And I look forward to that day,” he said, shifting to lie back down on the grass. “So, tell me. What’s it like to be the famous you?” he said, poking fun. You know, the usual.

“What do you think it’s like?”

“The fame, the fortune, designer name brands, and high-class status. I’d say it’s awesome, right?”

“It’s overwhelming, is what it is. Everyone waits for you to mess up and watches your every move, judging it as if they get to dictate who you date, what you eat, how skinny to be or not, what you should do with your time, your money. I can’t complain too much because this is what I signed up for, right? But at the same time, I’m only human. You don’t get to work us like puppets just because you decided you wanted to support our passions. It’s hard to be role models and normal people at the same time. We’re not indestructible, we feel things too. Even with all the money in the world, it’s not everything. What’s crazy is the fact that you’ll never truly be normal or have peace after you’ve stepped under that spotlight, just once and long enough.”

“Talk about pressure. I thought I had pressure. Would you have a normal life if you could go back?” Tanner asked.

“In light of all that has happened. No. I’m an entertainer, I know it’s who I was born to be.”

“Fascinating. Now, tell me what it’s like before the show. Thousands of fans have paid to come see you give them an unforgettable experience and they’re chanting your name.”

“What most people don’t understand and sometimes lose sight of is it’s all about the fans. Our fandom is some of the most amazing people I’ve ever had the pleasure to meet. They’re brilliant, they’re fun, they’re hopeful, they’re courageous. All I’ve ever wanted to do with my music is to inspire and spark something within people, whether it’s a thought or emotion, I’ve wanted to be there for people because in the end, it feels like some of the most important people in your life won’t always be there. By choice or circumstance. Music has always been there for my deepest, darkest hurt. But my family, they have been there for everything else. My fans, they are family. So the moment I get to step out on that stage and give them the best damn show they deserve, it’s the most gratifying moment most people in the world don’t ever get to know.”

Tanner’s wide-eyed gaze egged me on. Felt like our talks would always be this way, we would always be this way. In either remembrance or if we ever did something with. . . whatever our status as two human beings spending a lot of time together was.

“I feel our music has always been very special in the way that it’s made very intimate. We’ve always been alternative, but we’ve explored pop and rock, now we’re exploring acoustics and similar sounds. The fans have been so supportive and loving with any avenue we venture down. So when we’re out on the stage and singing songs, it’s like we experience it together. Like we all collectively wrote these songs together because we’re all feelings the same way in life at

the moment. Fans singing your lyrics with you is so surreal. You know your music is out in the world and you see the ratings on different platforms. Each rating is a person and you don't even fathom it until your foot hits the stage of a sold out stadium of thousands. Putting faces to those ratings is such a blessed feeling. Concerts are like giant parties you're throwing for all your friends and you're the host, it's your job to entertain and have fun with everyone and make sure everyone's having a good time." In that moment, the pain of not singing for six months rushed back. Not just mine, but my fans' and my sisters'. Man, selfish much. Wow, performing is missed.

"Man," Tanner pretended to hold a microphone and shoved it near my face, "this has been E! 'An Insight into Violet Adair's Emotion-Packed Life', back to you Bill."

I lightly slapped him. "Okay, Reporter McGrey, tone it down over there."

"Right, right. So, what's your next move? You've achieved all your dreams, goals, aspirations and such. Retirement?"

"You're kidding. I still have so many goals and dreams to achieve!"

"What more could you want to do? You've already become an international icon."

"Well, sure, I guess. I've traveled the world and put my name out there, but there's still so much to do! I want to eventually go solo when the time is right. I want to get my own Artist of the Year Award from Billboard's and an Album of the Year Award from the Grammys."

"Is that right?" Tanner said. I couldn't tell if he was mocking me or not.

"Above all though, I just want to keep connecting through music."

"I think those are wonderful goals and dreams."

A blush warmed my cheeks. "So, what are your plans after college? NFL?"

Tanner made an of course expression. "Most definitely, the NFL has always been my dream."

"And what about after that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you have any goals after you make it to the NFL?" If I were a guy and I just made it into the NFL, there would be so many quarterback recorders I'd try to break.

"Not really. None of that extra stuff really matters to me. As long as I play my hardest and contribute everything I can to my team, then that's all I need. If I get noticed for that, then so be it."

"Wow, my Papi was the only other person I knew that thought like that. My mom told me once about why we never saw any of his awards. He kept them in a box in the attic, never to be seen again."

"An admirable man. Although, if you consider this a goal or dream, I'd like to have a family one day."

"Yeah? If that's in my cards, then it would be nice."

"Why wouldn't it be?" Tanner asked.

A shrug lifted a shoulder. "My career and goals in life. Plus, the dating scene isn't working too well in my favor."

Tanner nodded slowly. "Yeah. I'm truly sorry about that. Keep your head up, you'll find him. Don't lose hope just yet."

A grim little smile answered. "Thanks, but I don't need a man in my life to feel complete. As long as I'm alive, happy, healthy, and surrounded by everyone who matters to me most in this world, then I'm good. But at some point down the road, when it's right, it would be nice to find him."

Tanner nodded like he understood completely.

“So, tell me about your childhood,” I said.

He chuckled at my quick, randomness. “What for?”

“Because, I’m curious. Have you always been this charming, athletic, social man?”

Tanner smiled. “I suppose. I’ve always had friends, made straight A’s. Football really brings out the social aspect in you, you know?”

“And the charm?”

He popped up his collar. “Guess that’s just natural.”

A squeal of laughter broke free. “The way you said it, and the collar, was all too perfect.”

“Thank you, thank you,” Tanner said as he fixed his collar back to the way it was.

“What are your parents like?” I asked.

“My parents are so supportive. My dad put me in little league football and he coached it. He’s just a lover of sports. Good with any sport ball or stick you put in his hand,” Tanner said, grabbing the football and tossing it around. “My mom has always pushed me for excellence in academics. Grades, clubs, my future.”

“Wow. Your parents sound lovely!”

“Yeah, I love them. Want to throw the football some more?”

“Sure.”

We rose stiffly and distanced further from each other. Tanner threw the ball to me and vice versa. “So, what’s the backstory of the Scarlett Violets? How were you discovered?”

A curveball of a question. “We were playing in a local cafe. It was packed that night and everyone was enjoying our music. One of them was the father of a fellow classmate of Selena’s, and just so happened to be a talent agent.”

“Wow. Really? I guess you never expect any answer when it comes to a talent discovery question.”

“Very true. I wish our story was cooler, but you can’t control it unfortunately.”

He chuckled. “Yeah.” Tanner seemed to be thinking hard about something. “What’s a pet peeve of yours?”

“I don’t like when guys don’t tell you how they really feel,” I said.

Tanner’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, then shook his head. “Men don’t like that either. It’s not just us you know.”

“No, *pero* it’s nice if guys make the first move,” I said with a smirk, slowly shaking my sandals off my feet. I’m about to win this bet though.

A burst for the football came next—scooped up, then a mad dash for Tanner’s touchdown zone. Victory felt within reach. Speed carried me past Tanner before he really clocked the play, then footsteps pounded behind.

The touchdown line hovered inches away when hands snagged my legs. More like one of those win–nope–actually–lose moments than a life-flash one. Pain zinged without padding. Arms stretched like Mr. Fantastic, white-knuckling the ball for dear life, the nose of it hanging over the stripe.

A release sent me flipping to my back. “Wow, what a rush.”

Tanner crawled up beside me, out of breath. “You’re telling me, what was that about?”

“I just felt like it. Plus, I needed to win. And it looks like I did.” A finger pointed at the ball.

He examined it from where he laid. “I don’t think so ma lady,” he reached over me for it, picked it up, and looked down at me. “The ball’s tip only reached the edge of the line, not over. So, therefore, I still win.”

“¡Caray! I guess you can’t expect to win against professional athletes,” I said still out of breath, with a shrug that said what’re you going to do? “Although, I almost won. Given one more step.”

Tanner smiled at me, still hovering over me. I melted straight into the earth’s core as our eyes held for what seemed like forever.

“You know, we never bet on anything,” Tanner said.

A rapid scan of memory turned up nothing. “Huh, no we didn’t.”

“So. . . what can I have as a prize?”

Was that rhetorical?

A hard gulp worked its way down. My heart threatened to explode, launch, or plunge into unknowable depths. “You can have anything you want.”

His eyebrows questioned my statement, as if they knew this was some sort of proposal. Neither of us flinched. Probably didn’t breathe either. And just when I thought I’d made a fool of myself, Tanner slowly leaned closer. Oh, mierda, is this really happening? Is it finally happening?

He stopped three inches away from my face, gazing in my eyes. Pulse? Gone. Pretty sure death had arrived. He shut his eyes and almost closed the gap between our lips until lightning met Earth and thunder rattled in our ears. Huge drops of rain attacked us.

We glanced at the sky, then it down-poured.

Tanner immediately grabbed my hand and led us into one of the tunnels.

Soaked like a towel dunked into a bathtub, a freeze set in. Goosebumps came courtesy of rain and Tanner both. “¡Carajo! it’s cold!” I said, shivering.

Tanner cast his gaze out through the rain pouring harder every minute. You couldn’t even see past the field goal twenty feet from the mouth of the tunnel. “I would give you my jacket, but it’s in my bag. Which is out there. Getting soaked.”

“I’ll get it,” I said voluntarily, sprinting into the painful rain.

“Wait, Vi!” I heard Tanner shout before I disappeared.

The last memory of it placed the bag near the fifty-yard line. Sightlines shrank to the square of turf under my feet. A hand visored my eyes; the sky became a sheet of silver threads. Watching drops fall from clouds—oddly mesmerizing. Misery faded once drenched to the bone anyway. A quick sweep located the bag; a grab-and-dash brought me back under cover.

“I can’t believe you ran out there just for a bag,” Tanner said, slightly laughing.

Violent shivers hit—only because the tunnel lacked the rain’s thrill. “I’ll be fine. I’m gonna go back out there.”

One foot stepped out before Tanner caught my hand.

“Are you crazy? It’s lightning out there.”

“Maybe I am. But I think it’s about time I do something a little crazy. I wanna have some fun while I’m still here. And I’m doing it with or without you.”

Understanding flickered across his face; his grip loosened and a skip carried me back into the storm. Arms lifted, chin tipped up, drops drummed joy into my skin. A spin here, tongue out there—four-year-old freedom. A glance toward the tunnel found Tanner watching, amused.

A wave summoned him. “Come on Tanner, it’s fun! Live a little. You play football in the rain, do you not?”

Tanner looked left, then right, peered up, shrugged—and dove into the tsunami with me. Cartwheels were attempted; slick grass vetoed the idea. Cackles erupted every time Tanner tried one and biffed it. Ten more minutes of storm gave us its all before moving on. My sandals sat puddled in a grass bowl; Tanner snagged his bag. Squishy, cold shoes carried us to the car, my bodyguard shadowing.

Tanner settled me into the seat, my guard sliding into the back, then rounded to his side. Heat blasted on high as he pulled away. “Are you still cold, do you need more heat?”

A hand stopped him from fiddling with vents. “Tanner, I’m fine. Just drive.”

“Okay. I didn’t think it was gonna rain tonight, and I also didn’t expect you to go playing in it.”

“Hey, it was fun and you know it.”

Tanner chuckled as if it was our inside joke now. “Yeah, it was.”

“Thank you for tonight, Tanner. This was amazingly fun.”

“No problem. I’m mightily impressed with your football skills though, like damn.”

A giggle slipped free. “Thanks.”

Plenty exists to be grateful for—family, friends, fans, a blessed career. And then there was Tanner. “Tanner.”

He stole a glimpse of me. “Violet.”

“Thank you.”

“You already said that.”

“No. I mean, for everything. I’d still be a miserable piece of scum if you hadn’t put me on my *trasero*.”

Tanner shook his head, smearing that roguish smile. “You are quite the girl, Violet. Quite the human being. But, um, don’t thank me for anything. It’s all you. Also, you keep saying ‘*trasero*’ and I don’t know what that means.”

“*Caray*, Tanner. I’m trying to be nice and give you a compliment. If you don’t cut that *mierda* out, I’ll turn right back around, Mr. McGrey! And *trasero* means ass.”

He snapped his fingers. “Dammit, right back to formal terms!”

Giggles filled the car. Life ran less complicated, less stressful, less fast-paced with him around. “If I’m being honest, you’re my first male best friend.”

“Really? Not even best friends with the ones you dated?”

“Yes and no. We got along. But it was nothing like this I suppose. Everything is also so much more complicated in the spotlight.”

Tanner nodded like he understood. No one understands. “Well, I’m more important than all of them, so.”

“That you are, Tanner. That you are.”

“And just so you know, I love when you slip out Spanish words. It keeps me on my toes. Makes me feel smarter, and it’s also charming.”

A private smirk answered that.

The rest of the ride floated on soft music and busy, silent thoughts. Mind chatter buzzed about the near-kiss. Wanting it to happen again collided with knowing it couldn’t. Departure loomed two days away. Signals from Tanner read mixed—maybe vulnerability and a whoopsie almost happened. Embarrassment waited if that were true. Then again, vulnerability lived on my side too.

Arrival at my place led to a quick dash for the door. Strangely, no paps—unless tree ninjas with cameras lurked.

Up at my door, Tanner apologized again. “I’m really sorry about the rain. And with your clothes and your face and all.”

“My face?” I asked. I wore waterproof mascara. “What’s wrong with my face?”

He cackled heartily. “Nothing! Nothing. I’m seriously messing with you.”

A light slap tapped his arm. “*¡trasero!*”

A turn toward the lock brought realization it was set; keys fumbled out as words tumbled: “I’m never gonna get that image out of my head of your hand slipping when you did a cartwheel and landed on your *trasero*. That was too funny to even put into words!”

Tanner blushed. “Hey, I could’ve got it if the grass wasn’t soaking wet.”

The *yeah right* look did the talking while the door unlocked and swung open. Dallas stood there as if she heard someone trying to get in. “Ah, so you snuck out with Tanner.”

My bodyguard retired to his quarters across the hall, satisfied I was safe.

“I didn’t sneak out,” I said, correcting her.

“I’m just kidding, you know. Why are you soaking wet?”

“We just got caught in the rain, you know.” A gentle shoulder nudge eased her aside; a wave went back to Tanner. “Thank you again. Catch you in the morning for a quick jog? Same time, same route?”

He pointed at me. “You know it.”

Dallas shut the door. “So, how was your date?”

An eye roll fired. “You know it wasn’t a date.” Although it almost was.

Selena peeped her head out of her bedroom door. “Is that Violet I hear?”

A quick lean into her sightline and a wave. “Yes, it is.”

She tip-toed out and closed the door. “So, where did you guys go?”

“We went to the stadium.”

“Wow, that’s kind of. . . boring?” Dallas said.

“Not when you’re blindfolded all the way onto the actual field.” I said.

“Right. . .” Dallas said.

“What were you guys doing?” Selena asked.

“Playing football, what else?” I said.

“Why?” Dallas asked.

“We made a bet that had to be fulfilled.”

“What was the bet?” Selena asked.

A yawn cracked. “That I couldn’t beat him in a football match. We basically played every football position, except for some, and I almost won. But he tackled my legs before I reached the end zone.”

“That’s so adorable! What did you guys bet on?” Dallas asked.

Both of them stared like I was telling a fairytale bedtime story. Laughter bubbled up; heat flared across my face as the exact scenario spilled out—right up to the thunderstorm out of nowhere.

“Oh my god! You guys are digging on each other! But he has a girlfriend! You guys seriously can’t be doing this while he has one. I mean, it goes against everything you believe in. You know how cheating feels.” Dallas said.

“I know, I know. Thank god for the storm. I would’ve felt terrible afterwards after realizing it. It can’t happen again. I have to bottle up my feelings toward him and pretend the kiss didn’t almost happen.”

“Good plan! Sucks though. You two are seriously delightful together,” Selena said.

A quiet little smile answered. “Anyway, I’m tired, cold, and dripping. I’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

Nineteen

TANNER

What was I thinking? I almost kissed Violet, which coincides with cheating on Mary. Now I'm the one who can't be trusted. I can't hang around Violet anymore. What am I gonna do? Am I even sure I love Mary anymore?

Parking in my usual spot, a quick hop out and a scamper upstairs got me to the dorm. A knock, and Preston answered. "Well, look who's back!"

A straight dart to my room let me change out of wet clothes. Preston followed and leaned against the doorway. "So, how'd she like the field?"

"She loved it. You should've seen the way she looked at it. I swear I've never seen someone look at the field like that," I said, throwing on a clean shirt.

"Happy to hear it! Who won the bet?"

"I did, but she sure challenged me." With my mind still spiraling, there wasn't much more to say.

"Really? Losing your touch, Tan the Man?" Preston said jokingly. "Just kidding. She looks athletic as hell. So since you won, what'd you get as a prize?"

A quick poke of my head out the bedroom door confirmed no eavesdroppers. Not a soul who wanted to keep living in sight.

"You can't tell William this Preston. I want to tell him."

Preston raised his hands. "Hey, you know I won't say a word."

A flop onto my bed and fingers dragged through my hair. "I almost kissed Violet."

"Are you serious? That's awesome!" Preston said excitedly.

The *you're kidding, right?* face answered him. "Awesome? How is this awesome? I almost jeopardized my relationship and I almost kissed the girl William is interested in. I don't know. I don't know what's going on." Am I having a breakdown?

Preston pulled a chair across from me and sat. "Look Tanner, I'm not gonna tell you how to live your life. But I've honestly never seen you happier than these past two weeks. That's because of all the time you've spent with Violet, dude. I haven't seen you look at Mary the way you look at Violet. It's like you can hack the tension with a chainsaw."

"I don't know, Preston. This is so crazy. I don't want to throw this two-year relationship away on the off-chance that things might work with Violet, a person I've only known a week and a half. Not even! I don't even know if she likes me in that way."

Preston slapped his hand to his forehead. "Okay, how did this kiss even happen? Did she try to stop you in any way?"

"The kiss didn't happen, it almost happened. And no, I don't think so."

"Doesn't that say something right there?"

A shrug did the talking. "I suppose. I guess?"

"I think you should know something too as you're pondering about your little love triangle here," Preston said, taking a heavy breath, as if he didn't want to be the bearer of bad

news. “William made his move last night on Violet. I don’t know exactly when, but last I heard, she told him she’d think about it.”

Breath forgot how to work for a beat that felt like five minutes. “Oh. That’s um. . .good. That’s great! That’s what we wanted for him. So.”

Preston shook his head like a bobblehead thrashing side to side. “C’mon, Tanner. You’re obviously in denial here. You look crushed.”

Temptation to deny rose fast. Suppressing the feelings, pretending everything’s decent with Mary and destined to work itself out, sounded easy—like dropping my mind at a dry cleaner to wipe out stains. That’s what Violet was, a stain. A blood one. The more denial, the worse everything felt. Guilt surged; Mary deserved better. Breaking her heart when I—. “I’m breaking up with Mary.”

Preston’s eyes bugged out of his head. “Holy shit, seriously? You’re actually doing this?”

Even saying it felt unreal. Deep down, Violet involved or not, this relationship was over. Life can’t be a fight for a place in my own relationship. “Yeah, I am.”

Preston rocketed up like he could dance the energy out. “Alright! Then you’ll go after Violet.”

“No.”

Preston halted. “No?”

“I can’t, Preston.”

“And why not?” he asked, baffled—hands on hips and everything.

“Because he made his move, and clearly she’s thinking about it. Which means she’s interested to some degree and I don’t want to get in the way.”

Preston rolled his eyes. “Violet likes you. Trust me on this.”

“How do you know? Did she tell her sisters and one of them told you?”

“Well, no. Why can’t you just trust me on it?”

“Because I don’t even trust myself right now. I almost cheated on Mary. I’m a sleaze. If I go after Violet behind William’s back, I’m a sleazy asshole of a friend.”

“Okay, okay. Let’s cool off. There’s nothing you can do about any of this at this late hour. Just sleep on it all, alright?”

A long exhale, face shoved into my hands, then a nod. Anxiety had never hit like this. Kind of ridiculous—and pathetic—right? “You’re right, you’re right. I’ll take care of all this tomorrow.”

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A loud clang from the kitchen shot me out of bed. The door jerked open with a loaded fist and a racing heart.

William’s head popped up from behind the tiny island. He rose with a pan in hand. Guess he dropped it.

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked, pissed. A shuffle to the nightstand gave me my phone. “You realize it’s four in the morning?”

“Yeah, I know. But I wanted to make breakfast,” William said with a shrug.

“At four in the morning?” Preston’s voice drifted from the other side of the room.

William grinned. “Yeah, why not?”

A head shake followed. “You’re ridiculous, man. . .but make me a small omelet.”

He saluted. “You got it, Tan the Man.”

Conceded with girls, sure. But a solid guy nonetheless. Running gear went on, keys in pocket, and a water bottle grabbed from the fridge. William sported an apron—double take. Kiss this Sexy Chef.

“William.” I said.

He turned around from cooking my omelet. “What up?”

A sip of water finished. “What are you wearing?”

“My mom made it. Apparently, moms have this problem where if you don’t wear the embarrassing stuff they make you, then they stop putting money into the college fund,” he said as he diced tomatoes.

“Who’s gonna tell her you’re not wearing it?”

That’s when William glared past me to Preston, who took a picture. “What?” he asked.

A chuckle slipped out. “Fantastic.”

“Hey, I can put cumin in here,” William said in a lightly-threatening tone.

“Take it easy, I was only laughing. Unless you want a kiss to make your ‘sexy’ ass feel better,” I said teasingly.

Preston cracked with a spitting laugh. “Oh my god, you better watch it Tanner, he might like it!”

“He ain’t gonna do anything,” I said.

William’s anger always ran quiet—red face, muttered curses—and a flat palm bang on the counter. Classic.

Preston tapped my arm as I choked down water and motioned to keep watching. “Careful William, don’t break a nail!”

We wheezed with laughter and high-fived.

William practically slammed my plate onto the island. “There’s your omelet. And the only reason I haven’t poisoned it is because of what you did for me with Violet.”

A pit of guilt flared so fast it hurt. What was I to do? Code is code; we honored it. Maybe skipping the run with Violet made sense.

Preston clocked my reaction. “Oh, chill your hot pants, ‘Chef Sexy.’ We’re only having some fun. I mean, you woke us up an hour early, man. Besides, I think it’s sweet your mom sent you an apron. Means she’s proud of her boy going to school to be a chef.”

“Fair point. But no more jokes,” he said, pointing his spatula.

Breakfast disappeared quickly. Some hangout time with the guys turned into homework at my desk. The clock kept getting side-eye while I debated the run. If not, what would I say? Sorry, Violet, I didn’t meet up with you because I’ve secretly taken a liking to you and I have a girlfriend at the current moment and am not going to be *that* guy. And one of my best friends is trying to court you.

Another glance at the phone. Now or never. I’m an idiot—wonder how to say that in Spanish? A smile crept in like someone just said they loved me. Guess I should go find out. The door clicked shut behind me and stairs blurred underfoot on the way to the quad.

A pass through the quad turned up no Violet. Last night wouldn’t leave my head. The almost kiss. *Almost*. Sleep never came—Mary, the breakup, the whole mess on replay.

Violet popped out from behind a tree—scaring the shit out of me—and jogged alongside. “Hey you.”

“Geez! Why’d you do that?”

Violet laughed adorably. “I thought it might wake you up a little bit.”

“Even though I’m already awake. William woke us all up at four.”

“Why?”

“He was gonna make breakfast and accidentally dropped a pan on the ground.”

“Wow. But at least he was going to slave over a hearty breakfast for you guys.”

“Yeah, that’s true. But you should’ve been there. He wore this apron and it said ‘Kiss this Sexy Chef.’ A priceless moment. We were picking fun on him, of course.”

“Of course. Glad to hear he’s wearing the apron I sent him,” Violet said.

“What? You sent him the apron?” Bewilderment hit hard.

“Yup.”

“How? Why? He thinks his mom sent him that.”

A mysterious, mischievous look spread across her face. “Never underestimate me, Mr. McGrey. Every once in a blue moon, I like to have some pranking fun.”

A grin took over. “Who are you really?”

“I guess you could say I’m a ‘Jack of All Trades.’”

Shared chuckles carried us through the rest of the jog—strings forgotten: wanting her, Bro Code, Mary. That never-ending list.

Violet checked her phone. “It’s almost six. Shouldn’t you be heading back for practice?”

“Oh crap, I’m glad you checked. Thanks! I’m going to Mary’s dorm after practice and then I’m coming right over. Alright?”

Violet bit her bottom lip and then nodded. “Alright.”

“Cool. Oh! Before I forget, how do you say idiot in Spanish?”

Violet’s eyebrow raised. “*Idiota*. Why?”

A sly grin answered. “Because I’m an *idiota*.”

Violet chuckled. “*Un idiota*. But close enough.”

“I’ll catch ya later.”

A whip-around turn sent me sprinting back. The dorm door unlocked, and a quick run to my room grabbed my phone and a change of clothes for after practice—tossed into the athletic bag that miraculously dried overnight.

Preston appeared in the doorway. “Hey, you ready? You got back later than usual.”

“Yeah, I lost track of time.”

“That’s because you didn’t bring your phone to keep track of it,” he said, wiggling my phone in his hand.

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s just go,” I said, shooing him out, snatching the phone, and closing the door. Austin and William waited by the exit, geared up.

“Let’s head out!” Preston said, mock-commanding. We filed out; a click behind me locked the door.

Boots pounded toward the training facility, cutting through the quad and Silas Spire. So many memories crammed into a week and change.

“So, what’s your plan of action?” Preston asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean about Mary and Violet? Do you have a plan?”

“I’m talking to Mary after practice.”

“And Violet?”

“I told you, I’m not charting forbidden territory.”

“Violet isn’t his territory.”

“Yes, I know. But you know what I mean.”

“Yes, yes. Look, I know you honor the code, as we all do, but maybe talk to William? And, maybe, talk to Violet? Maybe about that—”

A raised hand halted him. “Preston, I appreciate your concern. But I just don’t know about Violet. I may not even break up with Mary. Maybe she’ll finally talk to me about us and we can work this whole thing out.”

“So, you’ve reeled yourself back into denial.”

“No.”

“Well, it’s either that or you’re afraid.”

A sigh escaped. “You don’t understand. This is very complicated.”

“Whatever, man. It’s your misery.”

“How are you and Dallas doing by the way?”

“We’re awesome! I can’t believe I’ve met someone so incredible.”

Preston had never sounded this lit up talking about a girl. Maybe we didn’t do this enough. Around campus, the real talk of the town was obvious: Scarlett Violets—half the student population bombarding her backdoor daily. And I thought game days were bad.

“Did you know that Violet sent William that apron?” I asked.

“Of course, who do you think hand-delivered it?” Preston said with the mischievous wiggle of his eyebrows.

A smile spread—*un idiota* indeed. “Right, of course.”

After about a mile, the facility appeared and we veered to the meeting room like every Thursday.

Coach Sayers handled announcements, then dismissed us to position rooms to study tape. Coach Ducan—Quarterback Coach and Offensive Coordinator—waved the QBs along.

In a year’s time, Austin would likely earn the first string position. Teaching him everything I knew felt right. Leadership, accuracy, quick decisions, communication—he had them. Pressure needed work. Around here, that’s non-negotiable. Football at Loosa is more than a game; it’s legacy, tradition, pride. Home.

Coach Ducan opened our corridor; we took seats at a table facing a forty-inch screen as Coach Sayers slipped in. A water chug later, the pen in front of me met my hand. The door shut, lights stayed off, and the Volunteers tape rolled.

“Alright, let’s take a look at this here,” Ducan said, firing up the TV and DVD player.

Quarterbacks slipped into quiet, into focus. Rotations and slant routes dominated Coach D’s chatter with me.

“Stay in rotation, okay? Here’s rotation,” he ran the clip and paused it, “that guy there is, I mean, we’re dead. Okay? So, we’ve got shot to—here, make sense? It’s got to be a pick off that free safety right there.”

“Defense had to have busted this, didn’t they?” I asked, pointing at the front.

“You’re absolutely correct. You’ve learned the right spot, okay? We just got to, you know, we’re pinning the ball on them. We’ve got to make a play. Okay?”

“Yep,” I said.

“That’s fine,” Coach Ducan added.

On it went—more corrections, a few Sayers notes dropped in. Two hours flashed by; Coach Sayers handed out Arkansas Razorbacks DVDs to study.

Showers came next to wash off the jog with Violet. Down the hall, the defense hustled past, sweaty in full pads—yesterday had been their meeting day. Preston crossed toward the big room for the O-line session.

“Have fun,” I said.

High-fives all around. “Good luck, dude,” Preston whispered, then peeled off.

At my locker, the bag went in and the towel/toiletries came out. Clothes into the locker, towel around the waist, and a beeline to the shower chamber. Cleaned up, dried off, and reversed the route to dress. Bag in hand, lock set, then a walk to Calloway Hall.

Tut wasn’t far—just a few blocks. Along Dorsey L. Beauregard Road, her street passed beneath my feet. A glance up at Violet’s balcony pulled a small grin before the climb toward Mary’s. The first floor buzzed—snack bars, a small store, ATM, clusters of pretty girls gossiping. Plenty of them recognized me and tossed flirty hellos; many were Mary’s friends.

On her floor, a knock brought Mary’s beaming face. Typically, surprise visits weren’t her thing. That smile needed remembering before things possibly turned ugly.

“Tanny! Come in. How was practice?” she motioned me inside.

A quick scan—as always—found the space identical to last time. Every item, down to the dust count, lived in its place. Narrow, modernist taste—black and white everywhere with abstract art. The kind of thing you’d see in a psychiatrist’s office.

“It was great! We’re really nailing the slant routes and everyone is just jiving with each other. We’re working so very hard,” I said, placing my bag on the wood floor next to the island.

“That’s wonderful, babe. But could you not place your bag on the floor? Maybe on the carpet over here by the door,” she said, hand extended to get the hazardous bag relocated.

“Oh right, sorry.”

“No worries, no worries. This is a nice surprise!”

“I’m not interrupting anything am I?” A careful sit on her couch made sure no heart attack triggered. She seemed fine.

“Um, no, no. My practice doesn’t start until one like normal, so you’re good.”

“Oh, good then. I actually came over because I want to just talk.”

Walls went up—plain as posture. That wasn’t the aim; discomfort or attack wasn’t the goal—answers were.

“It’s about what I think it is, ain’t it?” she said.

“Probably. A continuation of the conversation we were having at the fair.”

“Oh, I knew it!” A hand went to her head like the mention alone caused a migraine.

“Mary, what’s so terrible about having a casual conversation about the seriousness of this relationship? I feel this plays into your weird behavior whenever we get around your family and friends.”

A slight pace began, hands fussing at sleeves and hair—frantic thought made visible. “I honestly don’t even know where to begin.”

“Then how about you just come sit here next to me and we can calmly talk it out. That’s all I want. I just want to understand.”

Seeing no way out, she plopped down. “Tanner, the reason I haven’t wanted to talk to you about it is because it could come out the wrong way.”

“How so? Mary, if we’re going to make it in this relationship, we have to be honest with each other.”

A deep, dreaded sigh rolled out. “I . . . my life is stressful. Very stressful.”

A slow nod invited more. “Okay. I’m sure it feels that way. Classes, golf, friends, me.”

Her head shook, batting away my simple read. “No, I mean, since literal birth. And that’s the problem. I’m the only child to be born in my family.”

“Right. Where’s the problem in that?”

“My life has been planned out for me since I’ve had consciousness. Being an only child means I’m the sole focus of my parents’ world. All eyes are on me and everyone’s breath is breathing down my neck at perfectionism. ‘Mary will have a perfect life with the perfect husband with the perfect boy and girl kids in the perfect house in the perfect rich neighborhood with the perfect rich friends,’” she touched a hand to her cheek. “And on top of that, I’ll have a perfect career in professional golf. But if that doesn’t work out, I have the perfect husband to fall back on and be a perfect stay-at-home mother.”

Her sarcasm laid neatly over heavy burdens. Suddenly, some of her parents’ weird dinner-party comments made sense—Mary will finish at the top, Mary will post the highest scores, Tanner’s the perfect suitor. No wonder walking into their house felt like arriving as the main course everyone skipped appetizers for.

“This is making sense. But what does that have to do with us?” I asked.

Mary’s eyes fell to her hands. Nails got nervous attention. “For some reason it’s much easier to just appease my parents than just telling them flatly how I really feel and what I really want. But most of the time I’m conflicted, because do I even know what I really want? Sometimes it feels like what they want and maybe what I want blur together and it’s hard to identify the lines.”

Blur found me too. “It feels like you’re talking in riddles.”

“What I’m trying to say is that my parents want the best for me, sure. But they have set high expectations for me to reach. One being my mother wants me to settle down pretty quickly and have that picket fence life with a wealthy guy with kids and whatever. My father wants me to have a career to be involved in and fall back on. Also, being he never had a son to carry his golf legacy, it falls on me.”

“You enjoy golf though, don’t you?”

“Absolutely. It’s my life. I want it to be my life,” she looked at me. “But I feel as though I can’t have both. Or rather, I may not want both. Or I don’t know.”

“Both what?”

“Family and career life.”

A chuckle escaped. “Why not? People do it all the time.”

“Yeah, and a lot of the time it tears families apart.”

“Not always. We wouldn’t be that way.”

“You say that now.”

“I’ll always say it. I think it’s amazing, your passion and dedication for golf.”

Mary cocked her head, eyes sad. “Tanner, I started dating you to appease my parents. For them to think I was serious about settling down after college with a guy and getting right into the lifestyle they’ve always painted a picture for me to have.”

Staring in shock came easy—thoughts, not so much.

“What I didn’t expect was actually liking you, then loving you. And it’s been really hard this year because senior graduation is around the corner and I get anxious just thinking about settling down and either giving up golf to be a housewife, or completely drop that and go straight for the golf profession. Something I’ve been training for my whole life. I can’t be tied down, distracted, or anything else in between. Really, it’s the idea to be independent and be totally free from their ideas and wants for me, and just have my own worth. And how that affects us is simply the fact that I love you Tanner, I really do, but I don’t want to be that girl that traps you. And I don’t want you to be that guy that gets trapped. I don’t know if I could ever provide you

with what you want. And I'm struggling between you and golf, but I know nothing is going to come between me and golf. Not even a man I love."

Hands scrubbed through my hair; nails scratched disbelief. "I'm sorry, I'm just having a really hard time absorbing all of this. How did none of this ever come up?"

"A mixture of fear, not knowing how to tell you, and high hopes that maybe everything would work itself out or I would have everything more figured out," she said with an optimistic shrug.

"So, are you saying that you're picking golf over being with me because you can't handle both? You need to be on your own just to experience independence and freedom, even though you love me."

Mary shrunk slightly. "I am, unfortunately. As hard as it is to admit, and feel it."

Understanding landed, even if it stung. No part of me wanted to be the reason she sacrificed her dream. In her shoes, the same speech might've come out of my mouth. Confusion tangled up everything—walking in planning to break up because of Violet and the distance, yet hoping for mending—only to be, essentially, dumped by someone who still loved me.

Head spinning, words finally formed. "Mary, I appreciate your honesty and I don't want to stand in your way of your happiness. But I want to be honest with you in the same respect because you deserve to know the truth."

She nodded.

"My intentions were to come here to get some answers on our relationship and maybe, in finding those out, it might mend our relationship. But initially, I was coming here to. . . break up with you."

"For Violet."

Eyes widened when she landed there so fast. "No! No."

Mary gave the *oh, come on now* look. No *un idiota*, clearly. "Look, Tanner, I know I haven't been the best girlfriend. That's my fault. It's even my fault we got tangled up together with my intentions of practically playing you along to my twisted, insecure family thing. And while I have so much love for you in my heart, you deserve happiness. And that's whatever you decide that is. It's not going to be with me, even if things worked out between us, I'm not Violet. Y'all seem to be on some sort of untouchable level that no one else can get on. I'm. . . honestly very jealous. Which is why it is honestly really hard to be this open about all this."

Her eyes welled. Pain shot through the room. On instinct, I pulled her into a hug. Moisture glazed my own eyes, and the truth settled: this was it. She beat me to the punch, but the choice had already been made—Violet. Even with the ice, something just clicked between us. A bitter pill, all of it. "I'm so sorry. But you're right. And I feel like such a douche for it because I also almost kissed her."

Twenty

TANNER

The elevator doors opened and a dash carried me straight to Violet's door. Knuckles rapped urgently while lungs chased down breath.

The door opened and Selena's face greeted me with a bright smile. Cheery, positive—exactly what today needed. Well, Selena anyway.

"Hey, Tanner!" she said, then her face deflated. "What's the matter? You look like you just came from a funeral."

"Can I come in?" I asked.

"Yeah!" she said, moving out of the way.

A few steps brought me into the living room. Behind the island, Violet flipped through a magazine; her bodyguards sat at the table playing cards. The second she noticed me, light sparked across her face, then shifted to concern.

"Tanner what's wrong? Why are you out of breath?" She asked, hurrying to my side.

Violet guided me to the couch and we sat. A moment to steady emotions, then, "Mary and I broke up."

Violet wore that oh god look. "No. Tanner, that's terrible. I'm really sorry. Why? What happened?" she said, gently patting my back, sympathy bending her mouth.

The whole story spilled—first words to last—minus anything about Violet. Deflation followed. Sure, this was what I wanted, but the relationship felt like a sham, a play where no one gave me lines. No audition, no ticket purchased. Two years burned for nothing in the relationship column. Either way, done is done.

Violet frowned. "Here, I have an idea. Let me take you out somewhere. Get your mind off things. Okay?"

A quick weigh of options landed on relief. "Um, alright. Sounds good."

"Good! Just give me a second to figure out where." Violet grabbed Selena's hand and scrambled into her room, door closing behind them.

A minute later, a creak down the hall drew my glance. Dallas's head popped from a cracked door.

She spotted me with exhausted eyes. "Where is everyone?"

"Are you just now getting up?" I asked.

"Hey, I used to be the first one to get up around here, I'll have you know. And here lately, the one that used to sleep in until two has been getting up at five lately to see a certain someone," she retorted.

Confusion landed first—whether she meant Violet's morning runs with me or that she'd turned into a morning person. "Hey, I'm not judging. I'd love to get the sleep you guys are getting."

"I'm sorry, no one talks to each other for the first thirty minutes after waking up."

“Ohh,” a look at the microwave clock confirmed the hour. “I’ll check back with you in thirty minutes then.”

Dallas nodded. “Great. But, um, you never answered my question.”

“Oh. Everyone’s in Violet’s room,” I said, pointing.

“Thanks,” Dallas said, sneaking out and vanishing into Violet’s.

Ten-ish minutes ticked by before they reemerged. The guards kept sending me those quiet, intimidating glances. Violet plopped down beside me. “You’ve probably been to these places. But I was thinking we could go to the River Walk, and the James E. Graves Museum, maybe?”

“I’ve actually never been to the River Walk or Graves Museum, so let’s go.”

An athletic bag went over my shoulder; the door beckoned. Whispered sister-strategy wrapped up, and then Violet—with three guards—joined me. In the blacked-out SUV, conversation circled back to the breakup while we threaded past the paps again. Venting helped. Only Violet and Preston ever really listened and offered real, constructive thoughts. Quite the pair we were becoming—and that felt good.

Up front, Violet drove while I rode shotgun. Cameras still flashed through the windshield; a forearm covered my face. “So, do you even know where the Graves Museum is?”

She smiled. “We have these things called navigation on our phones now. It’s pretty cool, you should check it out sometime.”

My guard snorted through his nose.

“Oh, okay, wow,” I said, playing along. “Fair, I guess.”

Violet pulled up to a Japanese steakhouse and darted inside before any questions formed. A few minutes later, she returned with a to-go bag and handed it over while driving.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“I bought you food. Steak and shrimp with vegetables and noodles. I figured you were hungry, so I pre-planned in my room.”

“How did you—?”

“Preston.”

“What, do you have him on speed dial?” I joked.

“No, but I do have his number and he said he is always a text away.”

A laugh escaped as the box opened. Steam and soy-sauced noodles hit like a gut punch—in the best way. “Thank you. Seriously. I’m very hungry.”

Violet flicked away my gratitude. “Anytime.”

The food practically vanished by the time we turned off 9th Street onto a short dirt road and parked at the Graves Museum. The sign read The University of Tuscaloosa, James E. Graves Museum. A square building with a glass peak; three tall windows beneath the title, doors in the center. Her door opened first, then mine. Countless passes by this building, never once stepping inside.

At the desk, Violet paid ten dollars for all of us before I could sneak a card down—caught and denied. The left wing came first. Hall of Honor stretched long, filled with photos of every team “Grim” Graves coached. A bronze bust anchored the middle. The plaque read James Eli Graves, 1916–1985. Displays ran from Tuscaloosa’s 1895 beginnings to the present. The first uniform—long-sleeved red with leather pads—looked brutal. The ball from the first win over Auburn was rugged as oak. Crimson Reign history and tradition glowed from every panel.

“Man, I can’t believe they played in such rough conditions. These uniforms have no padding whatsoever,” Violet said, examining the uniform.

“I know, I can’t imagine playing back then,” I said, staring at a cloth helmet—no facemask, cloth of all things.

The next section walked through Tuscaloosa’s coaches. Robert Jones brought the first two national titles (1936, 1938). Eric D. Murphy (‘48–‘56) posted 56–30–8. A trophy bowl filled with fake oranges commemorated the 1968 Orange Bowl. Steve Harden (‘86–‘89) 30–17–2. Bob Flury (‘90–‘93) 27–9. Paul Holts (‘94–‘98) 70–16–1—once a student and assistant of Grim Graves. Mike Cummings (‘99–‘00) 24–23. George Sullivan ‘01–‘02. John Jacob ‘03–‘06. And then, the largest hall—Coach Sayers.

Grim’s section waited next, the legend himself. Rows of national and bowl trophies crowned a miniature “house” at the center. Championship balls lined glass cases, designs evolving through the years. Older trophies shone gold but weren’t football-shaped like today. A plaque noted: in December 1960, James “Grim” Graves—former Tuscaloosa player—took over for 25 years and won seven national titles. Familiar facts, but powerful in person. His office, reconstructed, showcased desk and keepsakes along a full wall.

“Aww, Golden Flakes chips are the best! My dad used to get them every Saturday for the game. You were lucky if you even got to snag one because they were always gone.” Violet said.

Vintage Golden Flake and Coca-Cola ads on his wall must’ve sparked the memory.

“I’d never tried Golden Flake until I arrived here. They are really good,” I said.

A small section honored “The Throw” by Jackson Monroe, #14, in 2005—later named Throw of the Year. One photo stopped me cold; watching that live with my dad had lit the fuse to play at Loosa.

“Everything okay?” Violet asked.

“Yeah,” came out breathless. “There’s just a lot of emotions in here. Good ones, proud ones. This picture brings back memories. I saw that catch on TV and that’s when I knew I wanted to play here.”

“Yeah? How come?”

“In those days, Tuscaloosa was the underdogs. Year after year, they lost and lost and lost. They lost the limelight of legends after Grim Graves, but they never lost their grace, their pride, their integrity, their focus, their spirit. It’s shown in the plays, in the players. In those days, Monroe was one of the players. I witnessed some of the most amazing, talented, hard working guys work their ass off just to make a play count. But that game, that play, Monroe’s persistence for making that throw. . . I knew. I wanted to be part of the change at Loosa. I wanted to make legendary plays like that happen. It’s undeniable. If you want to prove something of yourself, you come here.”

Violet inhaled deeply and gave one solid nod. “I know what you mean.”

“You do?”

“When I was little, I wanted to be just like Papi in every way. He’d let me watch his old football tapes from when he played at Tuscaloosa. We’d watch the games together every Saturday. So, there was a little league in my community. It was only for boys but I wanted to be a part of the team so bad that I could practically feel the adrenaline in my veins at the rate I knew I could play with them. Papi challenged the coach in a bet. If I passed all his challenges, I could be on the team. I remember all the smug faces that judged me, but all that mattered was the pride in my father’s smile. Coach Leighton worked me on that field. Running, throwing, kicking, catching. Challenging me on the offense and defense, on my knowledge. I can remember jumping higher than the safety and catching the ball, dodging his block attempt, and making the touchdown. The satisfaction of proving them wrong was such a rush. A phenomenal feeling. I

proved myself. I made the team. I didn't get respect from the boys until I showed up early and stayed late for every practice, staying positive and continuously nice to them all no matter what. When I watch football, it's not just a team and games to be won. It's literally inspiring what you guys do. It rises in me a need to take action, to make change. To keep going, to continue proving the naysayers absolutely wrong."

"You know, everything about you is starting to make sense, Miss Adair," I said with a beam. "Little league boy team, huh? I wish I could've witnessed that. There would've been two people there supporting you then, putting them in their place."

Violet smiled, tender, then dodged eye contact after a few seconds. "Yeah, right. You probably would've thought the same thing all the rest of them did."

She walked on, leaving me trailing with an amused, agape mouth. A heartbeat later she chuckled, maybe joking. Hard to tell—and didn't matter in that sweet moment.

Shirts reading "We Are Coming Back" hit hard. That pivot from the '90s drought to the present felt personal. A mannequin wore one of my teammate's uniforms beside last year's national title trophy. The 75th Celebration of Football closed the tour—our whole team had signed a ball for it, my own signature tucked among the others.

"It must be weird seeing all this stuff," Violet said.

Signatures and silver hardware hammered home what mattered: history, legacy, and work. Heartbreak couldn't touch that. Confidence seeped back in. Part of a tradition, part of a future.

"It is. But, it makes me feel proud of myself and our team. No one can ever say that we aren't hardworking, humble, and grateful."

Violet's eyes sparkled, her grin proud enough for both of us.

When we left, a lighter chest made itself known. "Thank you for today. I definitely needed this. More perspective on my life."

"No problem. I enjoyed it myself. I got to reconnect with my father and our memories in a way I never thought I would again. It feels incredible being a part of something bigger than yourself. Right?"

We piled back into the SUV. "Yeah, it is. I'm very lucky where I am, and where I'm going to be. I'm also really happy that the memories coming back to you are happy ones."

"Thank you. I'm really happy for you too."

Violet shot us toward the next destination.

"So where to now?" I asked.

Gravel shifted to river stones as we bumped into the Riverwalk lot. Once outside, her hand found mine.

"Get ready to do some exploring," she said, leading the way with guards drifting a distance behind, faces carved from marble.

"So, I have one more surprise for you," Violet said, shoving away her phone.

Four miles later, the SUV came back into view. Peace clung to the trees and water—never figured nature walks would be my thing, but the quiet worked on me. Fall colors did the rest. Every so often, Violet inhaled like she could pull stillness into her bones. Lampposts leaned romantic; bodyguards, not so much.

An eyebrow arched. "What's that?"

A devilish grin spread across her face. "You'll see."

Back at her building, the gauntlet returned—flashes, shouts, signatures for fans. Watching her stop and pose with everyone surprised me; even in my world, that level of frenzy looked next-level. Safe inside again, she produced a bandana like a magician.

“You have to put this on first,” she said.

“Why?”

“So your eyes don’t ruin the surprise, duh.”

Fabric tied tight, hands guided me down the hall. A knock sounded—presumably her door. No clues, no peeks.

Violet untied the knot but kept the cloth over my eyes. “You ready?” she whispered in my ear.

A chill raced up my spine. “Yeah.”

The bandana fell. Preston, William, Austin, and the sisters stared back—smiles plastered everywhere.

“SURPRISE!” They cheered.

Twenty-One

Violet

— ✕ 4 Days to LSU Kickoff ✕ —

A mini bar slowly formed on the kitchen island, ripe for anyone to raid. Selena claimed bartender duty, shaking up fresh-ingredient mixes on request. Her margaritas—untouchably legendary, so Austin swore—flowed. Our bodyguards got an invite, but they opted to hang in their rental across the hall to give us privacy, on the condition we didn't leave without them.

The intimate party for Tanner's closest friends hit the exact vibe planned. Lights dimmed to a warm, humming glow—bright enough to see, soft enough to exhale. William manned the grill with a grin and a cider, turning steaks and blistering veggies. Laughter rolled through the condo; joy vibrated through this new space and, for the first time in what felt like ages, happiness settled in. Anxious thoughts still nipped at the edges—Papi, the secret owed to my sisters, Mamá and Stone, and Tanner.

My, oh my, Tanner.

A single man now. Shock and hurt made sense on him; in his cleats, no clue how to even sort the feelings. That awful line between wanting to salvage things but knowing it's already over—then having the other person confirm it for you. Not even a try from her. Sometimes that's the worst: fighting to make something work when the other person decides you're not what they want—or, in his case, chooses singleness for career and finally snaps the reins on her parents' plan. Honestly, good for her. Poor Tanner, though. He'll be okay—everyone gets there eventually.

Wanting him anyway came like tidewater—tempting as sin. Self-control and stubborn pride tag-teamed to keep the wanting on a leash. Priorities needed rearranging: the tour, my sisters, my fans, my mental health, the messes to clean. Forgiveness for the months spent in the shadows might or might not come; only time would tell. For tonight, those demons got shoved to the back. Maybe they'd drown on their own. Lord willing.

The balcony railing cooled my forearms while the distractions soaked in. Stars speckled between streaky gray clouds; a chill nipped my nose every few minutes. Cropped sweater, mom jeans, arms cross-wrapped tight. Campus lights haloed the low clouds; the practice field wore moonlight well.

"This party was a great idea, Violet. You sure know how to help someone feel better about an unfortunate situation," William said, sipping his beer.

Zero awkwardness lingered after the decision made at the fair; friendship with William still felt easy. That goofy, generous, understanding core—someone would be very lucky to meet him and fall, no clue why, just because.

"Anything for my friends," came out too flat. Lies do that sometimes, even when the sentence holds truth.

“Well, we’re grateful to have friends like you,” he said, nodding as the steaks hissed and popped. Juices beaded; a stomach grumbled—maybe mine, maybe he’s just that good.

“Anytime.”

Trapping these past two weeks in amber suddenly sounded perfect. A whole different world than the one in lenses and spreads—fiction braided with fact. Here, the real me resurfaced. Soft respect, gentle care—needs met, not mined. Kind, normal people with balanced lives. Gratitude swelled. A drop hit the back of a hand—rain? No. Wet cheeks told the truth.

The slider opened and Dallas stepped out with a drink. “Hey guys! Why don’t you come in? Everyone’s watching *Big Bang Theory* and *Mom* reruns. Can never get tired of comedy-gold.”

“Suppose I could take a break for a few minutes. Gotta make sure these steaks don’t overcook,” William said, asking Siri for a timer before heading in.

“Everything okay?” Dallas asked.

“Yeah. Just taking a moment to grab some fresh air.”

A slow nod said she understood. “It is a magical night, huh. This spot ended up being perfect.”

For a beat, ego wanted to argue. Better sense won. “You were a hundred percent right. I can’t imagine leaving now. It’ll be bittersweet when we go.”

An arm landed around my shoulders; her hand got caught and held. “Yeah. It’s going to suck. But hey, we’ve got the memories to look back on and we’ve got this condo for as long as we want it. So, not all is gone forever. We can keep making memories anytime we want.”

“True.”

Selena poked her head out. “You guys coming or what? It’s not a party without everyone.”

We glanced back.

“Yeah, we’re coming,” rolled out with a grin.

Once the last plate got licked clean and William’s cooking earned its chorus of praise, the kitchen called. The final dish slid into the washer; footsteps announced Tanner at my side, hand-washing the misfits.

Glances met in perfect sync and turned to grins.

“How do you like your small party so far?” I asked.

“I can’t even put into words how much I love it. Even in high school, I never had a small get-together as nice as this.”

A grin widened into a full smile. “I’m really happy to hear that. With everything that happened today, I figured you could use some downtime with people that love and care about you.”

“So, I guess you’re in that boat, huh?” he said, playful.

Heat climbed my face; a chuckle tried to hide it. “You’re one of my closest friends at this point. So yeah, I care a lot if you’re hurt.”

“I’ve finally broken through and have become a part of the inner circle! That is something to celebrate.”

An eye roll and a smile answered. “Yeah, yeah.”

“Seriously though, thank you so much. It’s been difficult to process everything, but it’s been easier with you,” he added quickly, “and your sisters, of course.”

A hand towel caught the last drops while Tanner wiped counters. Distraction helped him, sure—but he needed something that actually soothed, not just a box to shove the hurt into. Music has always carried me through the worst. There it was—the answer.

“Hey,” Selena’s voice floated in.

We turned. Everyone else had slipped onto the balcony behind her.

“We’re all heading out to the balcony to enjoy the view and just relax if you guys are coming,” she said.

“Sweet, we’re just finishing up,” Tanner answered, drying his hands.

A nod, then the door clicked shut; a margarita twirled in her hand.

“Well, I guess we shouldn’t keep everyone waiting,” Tanner said.

As he breezed past, fingers caught his hand. A look over the shoulder; eyes dipped to our linked hands.

“Hold on. I want to share something with you. Follow me,” came out softer than planned.

The piano waited—an old friend slowly welcomed back. Quiet hours had been spent stitching a song together, exact words and angles, puzzle clicking into place. Finished at last, and hopefully enough to steady him.

We sat; his bewilderment was adorable. Before he could speak, fingers found the keys. Eyes shut, notes flowed; vibrations thrummed through bone.

*I wish you could've known me before
the season changed
permanently
I'm not the same girl I was then
sacred oaths lyin' here broken
wide-open from your orange bottle token
hearts break
unspoken
oh, this year's open season
time to breathe in the healin'
from anywhere it's given*

*I wake to rain
trickling through the leaves
just above my face
I've seen this side of the road before
passersby, stoic eyes stare straight ahead
I'm a shivering, sidewalk eyesore
in front of this general store*

*And it's etched into every line of my face
the scars are horrifying
it's something I've learned to embrace
though i find the reflection mortifying
I can't call our memories home
when they lie in a catacomb
it's hell waking up at dawn*

*within the town-lines of this zip code
'cause it's my fault you're gone
and now I'm just another kid on the side of the road*

*I'm a charged spade aimed in the dark
daring to lose my one spark of madness
flyers flee the streets
there's no character to root on here
and I don't wanna consume this fear
but it seems this life has chosen me
glancing up, I'll scream
til I'm as blue as the sky
I'll wake up to the black rain dried
like watermark stains on my heart
I'm not the young lady you raised me to be
I'm a systematic burn-out
the real deal teenage tragedy*

*I walk down memory lane late every night
retracing steps might change the end
and make things right again
I'm such an ugly sight
there's no more warmth at the front door
so I don't knock anymore
I'm a human in need
of reprieve from these memories
but I'm kicked to the curb in a moment's heartbeat
once I've run out of road
I'm a gutter child by the barcode*

*The pain's etched into every line of my face
the scars are horrifying
it's something I'm learning to embrace
though I find the reflection mortifying
I can't call our memories home
when they lie In a catacomb
it's hell waking up at dawn
within the town-lines of this zip code
'cause it's my fault you're gone
and now I'm just another kid on the side of the road*

*I'll spend the rest of my life
on the run from this internal strife
knowing I'll never be
a kid held together by golden frames
it's all ashes and flames
nothing tames the beast*

*and it's all they see
when they cast their gaze over me
so that's who I'll be
casting their stones
I'm thinning to bones
and it's all I see*

*Is the pain etched into every line of my face?
the scars are horrifying
it's something I've learned to embrace
though I find the reflection mortifying
these memories will never be home
they'll remain in the catacomb
'cause it's still hell waking up at dawn
within the walls of this fucking zip code
'cause it's my fault you're gone
and I'll always be the kid on the side of the road*

When the last chord faded, a smile broke free. The relief. My hands shook at the rush. Euphoria must have been obvious, because Tanner beamed.

"Wow. Just. . . wow. I'm sorry, I just. . . I have no words," he said. "When did you write this?"

"I wrote it when I was sixteen. It won a spot on our first album, *The New Romantics*. I had no idea it would resonate with so many people. That's why music is so special to me. To connect with others and heal together."

"You've done just that. I mean, Violet. You've got die-hard fans camping outside this building right now. Clearly, you've touched a lot of people. And that includes me."

Warmth turned bones to sugar. "I hope so."

He arched his back, stretched his fingers, and stared at the keys. Hands hovered, then settled; sound blossomed. A few bars in, recognition snapped into place.

"This is Clair de Lune by Debussy," slipped out, awed.

"You have good ears. Though, that's no surprise," Tanner said, continuing with easy grace.

Questions stacked like alphabet blocks, but watching won. Technique spoke its own story; melody dissolved the room. A couple hiccups, otherwise nearly flawless. The ending arrived too soon; readiness hadn't caught up.

Eyes opened; words scrambled. "Where? Who? When? How?" came with a flabbergasted laugh.

He laughed too. "I need questions in the form of sentences, Miss Adair."

A cheeky grin stretched until it hurt. "I don't even know where to begin. Who taught you piano?"

"My mom."

"Oh, that's right! Your mom majored in Music Composition. How come you never told me?"

A shrug. "It's not something to brag about. I'm not that good. I'm no Debussy," he said. "Only Preston knows. But my mom taught me because she wanted me to learn discipline. She'd

sit me down at the piano and have me practice two hours every other day. I used to dread it, not gonna lie. But it did help me with football by teaching me patience and discipline. I remember thinking, ‘what’s the point of this? I don’t care about the piano, I’m not making a career or anything out of this.’ In hindsight though, it’s part of the reason for my success. Focus, patience, discipline. I have so much to be thankful for in my success due to my parents.”

“Yeah, it’s definitely that for some people. And then there’s people like me, who could spend hours at the piano without any convincing whatsoever.”

“Very true. I enjoy it more now than when I was a kid, but I’m a little rusty since I haven’t played in a good while.”

Confession pressed at the back of my tongue—admiration that made leaning in for a kiss dangerously easy. Restraint held. “Never stop. You’re quite good. She taught you well.”

Before he could answer, Dallas slid the balcony door open. “Hey. You guys coming or what?”

Twenty-Two

Violet

The party wrapped around eleven. The hours before the close? An absolute blast. Dallas showed off her rapping skills; my sisters hauled me into dancing as everyone else did, turning the living room into our own mini club. Karaoke even made an appearance. Moments like these—sister chaos and easy laughter—had been the thing missed most.

Dallas and Selena ducked out with Austin and Preston—separately—to destinations better left unasked; that same courtesy would be wanted in reverse. Each left with a bodyguard, and mine got a heads-up that I'd be staying put. William drifted last, lingering a while before finally heading out. Bottom line: cleanup duty landed on me again. Mess wasn't bad, but the hint of inconsiderateness still pinged. Given recent behavior, paying the tab in chores felt fair. Tanner, guilt-ridden or just sweet, stayed to help.

Glasses and cups got corralled while Tanner scrubbed the grill. Leftover drinks met the drain; Solo cups met the trash. Crystal got hand-washed. Once the balcony gleamed, he swept through for bottles, trash, and a final wipe-down of surfaces.

"So, I have a question," came while drying a glass.

Tanner paused. "Okay, shoot."

"What made you feel that Mary was the one?"

"Well, other than the affection she used to show me and things we used to do together, and the fact that she got along with my mom, I guess not much. I figured love was just that simple."

A slow nod and a crooked mouth answered. "You're doing a whole lot better with Mary than I've done with my breakup with Shane. Props to you."

Tanner shrugged. "It is what it is. I was pretty certain I wanted to break up with her anyway, I just wanted to give it a fighting chance if there was one. So it didn't have to be all for nothing. In a weird sense, it was but wasn't. Honestly, I'm still not sure how to make sense of it."

"No blame here. Makes my head hurt."

His smile returned; a rag got slung over his shoulder. We did a slow scan. Condo: sparkling.

"Thanks for helping, Tanner. You really didn't have to."

"No problem. I wanted to. You guys have done so much for me and my friends," he checked his phone. "I guess I better head back. I don't want to keep you from writing or anything."

"Well actually, I wasn't planning on really doing much. Maybe watching some movies. If you want, you can stay and watch them with me. If that sounds like any sort of fun to you that is."

"What kinda movies are we talkin'?" Tanner asked with a mischievous smile.

The title hit the screen—then a blood-curdling scream. A phone rang; Drew Barrymore answered. “Hello?”

Three giant snack bowls took shape on the coffee table: Nacho Doritos, popcorn, grapes. Comfies had gone on earlier—Papi’s worn Bee Gees tee and old gym shorts. Tanner cracked a joke about expecting silk pajamas from France; banter ensued.

“Ever seen this?” he asked as I dropped onto the couch.

“Are you kidding me? This is one of my favorite scary movies. It’s, like, the best.”

“I knew there was someone in the world who thought like me.”

Thirty minutes in, commentary flowed—shared jokes, affectionate roasting. With a first-time watch, talking would’ve been a crime; with a classic, fair game.

“So I love the way you perform. And not just you, but the three of you,” Tanner said, like the thought had been marinating.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s ‘bands’ like Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. One person leads as the center of attention and the others just follow. But you and your sisters are a band. You guys play off each other and have fun with one another. You connect. It’s just a different vibe from you guys, and it’s wonderful.”

“Oh. Wow. Thank you, Tanner. That’s the sweetest thing I’ve heard in a long time.”

“Your guys’ singing is incredible. Dallas can rap. You literally sing like an angel. And the dancing. Where did you learn to dance like that? And can you guys, like, telepathically read dance moves? Because you guys literally know exactly what one another is going to do before you guys do them! And how can you breathe?”

A hand went up. “Whoa, Tanner. How about you breathe for a second?” A laugh slipped. “Selena is our choreographer. She’s literally a tiny, flexible genius. She makes us practice them until we get them down. We’ve memorized every dance routine to every song. She’s been dancing since she was little. Our mom was a dancer. And as for breathing, it’s like learning how to hold your breath underwater for longer periods of time, you build a high tolerance. Much practice and control. Here, here! Let me show you.”

The coffee table slid aside—Tanner helping—opening floor space. He plopped down to watch.

“Now, when we don’t have any specific dance moves for a song that’s not our own, it’s not one you’ve rehearsed and it’s random, then you just go with what your body says. Take what you know and let your body do the rest. So, like this.”

A grounded stance, eyes closed, and the body called up a song—*All She Wrote*, third album: *Black + Blued*—then moved. A creative, lyrical flow took over while singing, the Eb5 landing with warm vibrato.

*“a writer in the dark
always imprints a blue mark
inking scripture across the heart
why don’t we skip to the best part”*

When the last line fell away, Tanner sat there in quiet wonder, chin braced on his hand. “Wow, your voice. Ariana Grande got nothing on you. How do you. . . mesmerize?”

“I call it VICEP.”

“Vicep?”

“Yes. Voice, Inspiration, Confidence, Energy, and Power. ¡*Maldita sea*, Tanner! Keep up!”

“Oh, jeez. Sorry, I’m not heavily into your ‘Scarlett Violets’ world,” he teased.

“Apology accepted. VICEP keeps us alive and thriving with ourselves and our fans. As a band, we agreed on this formula together. Also, just knowing what you’re doing helps immensely, just like with anything.”

Tanner chuckled. “I can attest to that.”

A grin sharpened. “Alright, come on. Get up here. We’re going to teach your *trasero* to break a few moves. Come on.”

“Um, I can’t.”

“And why not?”

“There’s no music.”

“Aha, like most people, are you. Fine,” a beat passed, then the first line rolled out: “I got this feeling, inside my bones. It goes electric, wavy when I turn it on.”

Sure, a phone could’ve handled the soundtrack. But the itch to sing—newly back, newly bright—wanted out.

Tanner grinned and wiggled off the couch. “Now we’re talking.”

As the JT hook kept going, his moves. . . oh boy. Classic dad-catalog from the ‘50s through the ‘80s. Hyena-level laughter erupted until a few simple ‘90s hip-hop pointers got handed over.

“Who taught you how to dance? Chandler Bing?”

“That is Chanandler Bong to you, ma’am.”

A gasp and point. “You nerd!”

He flopped back into his seat, breathless. “Which also makes you a nerd because you know exactly what I’m talking about.”

Finger snap. “Damn you, Squire,” and the cushion welcomed me back.

“I play football. This is pathetic!”

An eyeroll. “You’re the quarterback, you don’t run nearly as much as everyone else.”

Tanner dealt the death-glare.

A hand covered my mouth to hide the grin. “I’m sorry, I was only kidding!”

“Jerk.”

“So, what shall we do now?”

“We could actually finish this movie.”

A scrunched face said no thanks. “Meh, I’ve seen it so many times. Oh, I know! Let’s play Hot Hands!”

“You’re so on!”

We faced each other, crisscrossed, the grape bowl between us. His hands slipped under mine. A flinch at the first brush—light, warm—but not enough to lose.

“So, I say let’s make this game a little more interesting,” he said, brow up, then down.

“Alright, what are your propositions?”

“The winner gets to ask whatever question he or she desires and the loser has to answer it. There is no ‘Plead the Fifth’ in this game. There is no way out of any questions. And the answer must be honest.”

“What are we? Twelve?” Secretly: excellent. “But, I accept the addition of rules.”

“Perfect. Ready?” he asked, locking eyes.

A stare-off took shape. “Yes.”

His hand shot for the slap; mine vanished just before contact.
 “Wow.”
 A smirk. “Welcome to Hot Hands, Mr. McGrey. Violet Edition.”
 “Okay, okay. I see you’re no amateur at this game. Nice job. Ask away.”
 “What was your hobby as a child that you still do to this day?”
 A grape arced into his mouth; a dreamy look did the chewing. “When I was about eight I liked to collect model cars.”
 “Wow, really?”
 “Yep! Antiques and newer models. My dad has ‘em stored somewhere up in the attic.”
 “That’s so neat! My dad had this Hot Wheels 1970 Cord Green Redline he would let me play with. It was gorgeous.”
 “I have that one! It’s a nice one.”
 “Yeah, too bad Selena scratched it later that year.”
 “Oh my god! He must’ve been pissed!”
 A ticking laugh got swallowed; a nod did the job. “You have no idea.”
 “Next round.”
 Hands reset; roles reversed. He tickled my palms; the Western showdown began. A tumbleweed rolled, at least in the mind. His hands—giant, clean, impossibly soft—kept sparking little shocks. The want to lace fingers through them, to feel them everywhere, pressed hot and insistent.
 A purposeful twitch of my right hand made him jerk. “Got you!”
 “Nice move, Vi. Very slick,” he said, duly impressed.
 A cheeky smile bloomed—for more than the win. “Thank you. Now, why are your hands so soft?”
 He studied his palms, rubbed them, and looked back. “I’m confused.”
 “You’re a football player, are you not? How come they’re not calloused?”
 A hand went to the back of his neck; pink touched his face. “Well, I buff them.”
 An eyebrow flew. “Really?” Tone = dubious.
 He nodded. “At first I did it for Mary because she didn’t like how scratchy and stubby they were against her skin. Then I realized, I like it. I like the clean-cut look, you know? More professional.”
 A slow nod brought approval. More guys like that, please. “I agree, Mr. McGrey.”
 “Next. Round.”
 Hands swapped. His right snapped down like a cobra; mine yanked back too late.
 “Ha, ha! Got ya!”
 A jitter shook through a foot. No clue why the nerves hit.
 “Okay,” he rubbed his hands. “What is the thing that scares you the most?”
 “Any living thing that can remove my limbs. Or kill me.”
 “So like—”
 “Sharks, alligators slash crocodiles, snakes, big-ass spiders, and grizzly bears.”
 “Grizzly bears? Oddly specific.”
 “Hey, those bears are huge, fast, and will take you out on sight.” A finger pointed. “My turn!”
 Hands reset. A left flick nailed him a heartbeat later.
 “Tell me more about you and your brother. What is your relationship like?”

“Man, Brian,” admiration softened his voice. “We’re so close. He’s always had my back for everything. I honestly don’t know what I’d do without him, where I’d be. Brian helped me with studies, in Little League when we played together, driving me to school and home, to my practices. There’s nothing he hasn’t been there for me for. He gives the best advice. I guess that’s why college can be a bit homesick for me sometimes. If it weren’t for the guys, I’d feel pretty empty. And having your sisters around, hearing about everything with your dad. . . it hits home.”

“Wow. You really miss your family.”

“Yeah. I couldn’t wait to go home for the holidays. I’m pretty excited this year too, my last year here.”

Family-man energy—about as attractive as it gets. “I can imagine, that’s great Tanner.” Hands reached for grapes; the bowl sat bare.

“Damn,” Tanner said.

“What a shame. So, back to the game?”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

A flurry of near-misses, a few solid slaps, and a handful of answers later, he finally snagged another win. Mild disappointment flickered at every failed attempt to crack my timing on the first try; this one pleased him.

“What was your very first impression of me?”

Freeze. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, seriously. Was it that bad?”

“Hear me out. I thought all athletes were like this. So, all things considered.”

“And your version of that is?”

“Self-centered jocks with no self-respect or respect for others. Spoiled. Brats. But not stupid.”

A suspicious eye. “I feel so flattered. You still don’t think that, do you? Of the team too, not just me.”

“No! Of course not!”

A half-smile crept up. “Payback.”

A swat went for his shoulder; he braced. “*¡Dolor en el trasero!*”

“What did you call me?” he cackled.

An eye-roll and a sly smirk. “Pain in my ass is what I said. Now I have to ask you the same question.”

“I really didn’t have one.”

“Really. Not even a smidge of hate.”

“No, I’m serious. And I don’t hate anyone. Just strong dislikes.”

“Yeah, strong contempt for Mary right about now, huh?” One last hopeful scavenge for a grape; a stray hair got tucked behind an ear.

“Vi,” Tanner said, tone unfamiliar.

Eyes lifted. “Yeah?”

Nerves made him look like a hairless cat in winter. “I need to get this off my chest or mind or whatever it is. Maybe all of the above. But I need you to know or just need to let you know how I feel.”

“Um, okay? About what?”

Tanner opened and closed his mouth once, twice. “That night on the football field—”

A hand cut gently through the air. “Say no more. I got it. Total mistake. Mary was being weird as always, and I was there. No biggie.”

“It wasn’t a mistake,” he said, “I don’t regret it.”

Everything in me stilled. Focus snapped tight. “Okay. Go on.”

“I mean, sure, I was feeling vulnerable because of the situation with Mary. But I knew, even that night, I didn’t love her anymore.”

“Uhuh, sure, right.”

He rubbed his neck. “And what I also know is that, um. I’m really into you, Violet. You’re so fun and cool and nice and funny, and you love my friends and they love you. Your sisters are great—”

“That’s debatable,” slipped out with a point and a grin.

Tanner chuckled. “And I think we just click, you and I. We have the same goals and aspirations. We have so much in common. And despite everything going on with you, especially in the beginning and now still, I want to be with you. And I don’t know if you feel the same, but at least I spoke my truth.”

Silence held too long. Say something. Anything. “I, um. Um. Uh... just give me one second.”

Feet mad-dashed to the bathroom; the door clicked shut. Leaning over the sink, a breath held to the burn. “What the hell is wrong with you? You’ve been pining over this gorgeous man all week and now you’re getting cold feet? You really like him. Just say how you feel. Say something. Anything!”

A soft knock. “Hey, Violet. Look, I’m sorry if that made things kinda uncomfortable. If you want to remain friends I’m okay with that, but I just needed you to know—”

The door flew open to a wide-eyed Tanner in my room. A single look at him and the heartbeat went feral. “I wish you would’ve kissed me that night.”

“Really?”

Eyes stayed on his as steps closed the distance; hands cupped his face; lips pulled his to mine. Fire. Melt. Goosebumps over numbness. More—so much more—became the only thought.

We broke just long enough to breathe. “Wow. I’ve been waiting a while for that one,” spilled out, eyes locked to his. “I’m pretty sure I’ve liked you ever since I met you.”

“Pretty sure?” he asked, hands resting on my hips.

“Yeah, well, you know how denial goes and all,” came with a giggle. “That I do. That. I. Do.”

Color rushed his face; the happiest smile alive refused to budge. Fingers traced my jaw and he kissed me again. Arms looped around his neck; we shuffled backward toward the bed.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“What do you think?”

“Oh! Are you sure? Losing it is a serious moment and—”

A finger pressed to his lips. “I’ve never been surer.”

Twenty-Three

Violet

Vi,

Last night was amazing. It was incredible. It was a lot of things. I wish nothing more than to still be by your side this morning when you wake up, but as you know, I have a huge game to practice for. You know how these things go.

I ran out real quick to get you this rose. A symbol of how I feel for you and of our friendship. But I would like to date you, Miss Adair. I don't care how, when, where. I just want you in my life.

I hope your day goes well and that you don't eagerly anticipate me most of the day, as I will you. I'll see you after practice.

PS: I love your t-shirt. I grew up listening to Bee Gees too. My mom insanely loves them.

*Your admirer,
Mr. McGrey*

The letter was written on the very first page of my song journal, the rose rested on top of it. Both on the side where Tanner slept all night, by my side. I picked up the rose and bit my lip. I sat up in bed giddily and peered down at my shirt. The Bee Gees were killer after all. I always thought so.

I glanced at my door, light cracking through the bottom of it. It was too quiet. Too still for this to be our household. I thought about my sisters and wondered if they made it back or if they stayed out all night. I searched for my phone and found it on the floor. *How'd it get there?*

8:52 am. I guess I'll skip on this morning's run.

Selena: We're back safe and sound! Last night was awesome. We should do more of them! Maybe just the three of us next time? We've missed you. It's wonderful witnessing the old Violet coming to life again, but better than ever. Like Violet 2.0. I hope she'll continue to. Love ya! 💕💕

Oh good, they're back! I'm glad they had a blast. I've missed them too. Maybe even my old-self a little bit too. It does feel nice not to be so hardcore. To loosen up a bit. Though the anxieties still lie dormant at the bottom of my mind.

I suddenly remembered what Selena told me about what Jack said about everyone going crazy on social media and such about Tanner and I. I hesitated to hop online, but I needed to see. I needed to know. As soon as I did, all those anxieties roared immediately with a striking vengeance.

Article after article, Tanner and I. Me and Tanner. Everywhere. Everyone had something to say about it. It seemed to be everything everyone talked about. People, Us Weekly, CGCU, OK!, Entertainment Weekly. *Violet isn't in Rehab, but with another Beau!* and *The Blonde Adair blowing off highly anticipated tour for a College-Ball-Boy!* Let's not forget, *Violet Adair forgets Fans for her next Boy-Toy!* And my personal favorite, *Middle Adair in Life Crisis: Is There No Stopping It?*

Oh my god. *How is this always so much worse than I ever think it'll be? How am I ever shocked at this point with what they'll come up with next? But are they right to some degree?* Celebrity gossip magazines weren't the only ones reporting on it either. ESPN, YardBarker, NCAA, CBS Sports. *Crimson Reign QB hanging around with celebrity trouble.* Also, *Is QB McGrey taking this season seriously?* and *Tanner McGrey serious about championship this year or Scarlett Violets' bad-girl Violet?* You decide. Lastly, *Kiss that champion ring goodbye with distractions, Reign's McGrey.*

¡Ay, no! No, no, no! What have I done? It's one thing for people to attack me and my career and life decisions, but *not* Tanner's. He's worked way too hard for his position and career. My anxieties fought for the number one spot in my head to get a stress-induced headache about. Back and forth, back and forth. What I want and what I must focus on and do. My responsibilities. My music. My sisters. My fans. I can't have my fans thinking I don't love and care about them. Like they don't mean anything. That a *boy* is more important than their feelings and support.

And the more I thought about it, the more I knew I also couldn't risk another heartbreak, another relationship down the toilet. Another mistake I'd have to pick pieces of my heart off the ground from. *There's so much against this. It would be easier and smart to just call this off and stay friends. It would be better for literally everyone if we didn't, no matter the feelings involved. Besides, I need to focus on myself. I need to continue bettering myself. For me, for the band, for the fans.* As much as I wanted this, I couldn't do it. Not to everyone, especially not to Tanner. *I can't let myself go through it again either.* I threw my face into my hands, I wanted to cry but I hardcore restrained myself. A fool I was to think this could actually work, or just ignore that I knew it couldn't. A huge confirmation if there ever was one. *No one could handle this world. I can barely handle it sometimes.* I sighed. *I miss the bubble I was just in already.*

I couldn't stop reading the letter either, which made things worse. I decided to close my journal and shove it aside. I tried to embrace an amazing, hot shower, then craft breakfast.

But Tanner was the main focus the whole morning. Then Tanner and I. Me and Tanner. My anxieties balled all my guilt up into a massive one. I reread his note over and over and over and over again in my mind. *What am I going to do? I can't risk another heartbreak. Another world-phenomenon humiliation. But I also don't want to break his heart. But I'm doing this for him, for both of us. It would save us so much time and heartache in the long run. We could both focus on ourselves and our careers. But do I really want this?* I chuckled nervously to myself, as

there was no right answer. *What to do? What to do??* While I zoned out in thought, I heard the squeak of a door opening.

Selena dragged her feet across the floor to a bar chair, wearing pajamas and an open bathrobe draping her. She rubbed her crusty eyes, yawned, and peered over at me. “Hey, Violet. What are you doing?”

“What’s it look like I’m doing, bed head? I’m cooking us some breakfast,” I said, flipping an egg omelet in the air onto its other side.

“Now look who’s the morning person,” she joked, “are you glowing like sunshine somehow right now? And what did you do all last night?”

“I could ask you the exact same question.”

“You got me there. You. Got. Me. *There.*”

I placed an omelet in front of her with breakfast potatoes. *Is she drooling?*

Dallas approached us from her room, having the rugged-edge set like Selena, but with much more energy.

“Something smells *amazing* in here!” Dallas said as I poured breakfast potatoes onto her plate and placed it next to Selena’s. She immediately inhaled it.

“So, what *did* you do last night?” Selena asked again.

I glanced at the clock. Nearly nine-thirty. *I should talk to them. Get some thoughts and opinions.*

“Okay, here’s what happened.”

Twenty-Four

TANNER

“Okay, so let me get this straight,” Austin said, throwing the football to our running back, who ran off with the football after he caught it. I stood beside him in a full-padded uniform, my #12 bright-white in the daylight. Another football thrown to the next awaiting player to practice catching by Austin. “Y’all put on a movie, danced like no one was watching, played a children’s hand-slapping game, then did the do.”

He nailed another pass to a wide receiver’s hands perfectly. When it was my turn to throw, I landed them beautifully into players hands like I passed them swaddled babies. “Yes, that is exactly what I just said. Austin, I haven’t known her long, and it’s been an adventure navigating between two different Violets, but I think there’s something here.”

Another football was passed to me. A line of wide receivers and running backs waited as Austin and I sent balls flying.

“What does that even mean? ‘Something here.’”

“I don’t know yet really. Just feels in my bones like this could go right. Either way, what am I gonna tell William? I’ve completely backstabbed him.” Though Austin was younger than me, he and Preston were the only guys I confided in for advice. The right move seemed obvious, yet hope kept begging for another route.

“Uh. I don’t know, man. I would just tell him, maybe he won’t react as badly as you anticipate.”

“Won’t react? He’s had his mind set on Violet since he first saw her. He wouldn’t make me find out all this information about her for nothing. Then I sleep with her and he’s supposed to just be okay with that?”

Austin’s expression vague-d through his helmet, eyes alert. “I don’t know. I think William’s got more of a level head than you believe. Is love making you nutty already?” he chuckled, knocking on my helmet before a swift return to throwing.

Maybe he was right. Feelings for Violet had ramped up faster than made sense—like we’d known each other since pre-K. Honesty felt like the only path forward, which meant telling William everything, and telling Violet why the hangouts started in the first place—William’s wingman idea. Reaction unknown. Truth still required.

Focus snapped back in when Coach Sayers whipped around to rip us a new asshole about saving chatter for later.

“So, was it good?” Austin asked in a hushed tone, glancing over after Coach S left.

“Was what good?”

“You know. . . it.”

A bite on the inside of my cheek kept the laughter inside. Perfect opportunity. “Sorry, Austin. Don’t know what ‘it’ you’re referring to. You’re gonna have to be more specific.”

“Oh, come on. Don’t make me say it.”

A grin kept spreading as another ball spun out perfectly. Honestly, it's too easy at this point.

"Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up. But seriously. How was it?"

A delicious secret lived in my chest. Flashbacks of her came sweet and addicting as chocolate—soft, gentle, loving; clever, real, funny; Spanish slipping out between breaths. Goosebumps sparked like live wire. Sweat already warmed beneath the pads. "That, my friend, is none of your business."

Austin whistled. "Man, you really do like this chick. Just tread carefully, my friend."

Whistles from coaches cut the air—time for offense vs. defense. Tapes from the Volunteers game still fresh, we tuned reps for LSU week. Rivalry juice always hits differently. Auburn remains the holy war; a single win over them can redeem a season. The family back home mostly bled orange and blue—except my parents, Brian, and me.

Coach Sayers patrolled in his rolled-up call sheet and bucket hat with the crimson "T," scanning every rep. Coach Duncan signaled; my job—translate to the huddle. "Four, eighty-six, eagle f-crimson on two."

Huddle broke. Hands tucked under the center, cadence cut through the line. "SET... BROKEN ARROW SEVENTY-TWO, BROKEN ARROW SEVENTY-TWO, HUT-HUT!"

The snap hit; seven steps dropped, shoulder turned, ball hugged. #10 flashed open, deep. Left hand reached, hips fired, and the throw took off before contact arrived. A perfect turn, a hop, the catch—then nothing but turf and speed.

"YEAH!" Arms lifted. Confidence stomped around the field like the elephant on our helmet. Everything clicked.

"Nice pass, Tanner, nice pass! Keep up with that perfect vision down the field," Coach Duncan clapped. "Great catch, James!"

A cornerback wasn't so lucky under Coach Sayers and Coach Gracier's chew-out. Tough skin grows fast here.

Reps repeated until timing locked, then came Coach Sayers's special: 888 Sifter F-Hunter on three. After a handful more, practice released us. Legs marched to the locker room in unison, heavy and satisfied. A quick shower plan formed—straight to Violet's after.

At my locker, William slid out from the row, already dressed, spinning his combo. "Hey, what's up, Tanner?"

Brows lifted. "Nothing much, how about you? Haven't seen much of you this morning."

"Yeah, I woke up before everyone so I decided to lift some weights before practice," William said.

"I see. Well, I need to tell you something. Last night—"

"Hey, listen, that's awesome. But I gotta go. My class is in thirty minutes and I still have to stop by the dorm to get my books because I'm a ditz who forgot them. We'll talk later!" And just like that, gone.

A hand floated up, uselessly waving at the empty aisle. Conscience dropped a medicine ball into my gut. Avoidance would be easier; the right thing still needed doing. Deodorant swiped, shirt on, lock snapped—time to face Violet.

That condo overlooking our practice field stayed in my head. Maybe she'd watched this morning. Nerves prickled—time to tell her the whole truth, however she took it.

The lobby sat quiet—desk clerk, a couple people in the downstairs gym. Elevator numbers climbed; anxiety climbed with them. Their door gave at the handle.

“Let me read that letter again,” Selena’s voice drifted. A pause. “We should really know more details about the thing.”

“The *thing*? You mean the *sex*? What are you? Thirteen?” Violet’s voice asked.

A laugh slipped out before the door shut again. So she’d told them—and showed the note. Sounded like standard sister debrief. Probably fine. Knuckles met wood.

Silence stretched a beat too long. Then the door opened.

She smiled, but the shape read different. “Tanner! Hi!”

“Hey. Is this a bad time?”

“Huh? Oh. No! No. Why would you think that?” She slipped into the hall and closed the door behind her.

“You just seem frazzled.”

A nervous giggle, fingers to the back of her head. “Me? Noooo. No. Just a busy morning.”

A look lingered. “Okay. . .”

A breath filled her chest; hands slid into front pockets. Eyes squeezed shut. “I do have something to say though.”

“Alright, shoot.”

A storm of emotions crossed her face. “Tanner. . . I think you are so very wonderful and the last person in the world I want to hurt is you.”

Uh-oh. “Okay, I’m listening.”

“You have been so understanding and gentle, in an assertive way,” she added with a small laugh, “and you have helped me get through a lot and I am so appreciative of that. But last night, while it was wonderful, it. . . we can’t happen again.”

A slow nod tried to catch meaning and weight. Brains sometimes get pancaked by semis—this felt like that. “I’m sorry, I’m just rather confused. And shocked.”

She nodded too. “That makes both of us. Tanner, you deserve someone who is sure of themselves and has got themselves together. Someone who isn’t confused. Someone who isn’t rude. Someone who isn’t me.”

“Violet, don’t say that,” came softer. “Everything I said about you last night, I meant it. You’re incredible. You’re trying to get your shit together—more than most people. Nobody’s perfect. Hang around me long enough and you’ll see my faults. Besides, you got more charming as the week went on.” A light tap at her arm tried to lift the mood.

A small grin flickered. “It’s not just that. I’m going on tour in two and a half months and I have so much work to do. I have to focus. I’ve put off everything for so long. Not only are my sisters counting on me, but so are millions of fans. Fans that have spent their hard-earned money to see me out there working my passion. I can’t let them down. I can’t have any more distractions. There’s too much at risk.”

Eyes dropped. Shoulders sagged like someone knocked the head off the statue. Who could argue? Saturdays are played for thousands; every rep, every film session, every lift, a fight to keep the job. Pride swelled in my chest for her finding her fire again. Love, if real, doesn’t hold someone back.

Her hands fit in mine; thumbs traced over her fingers. “I understand where you’re coming from. You gotta do what you gotta do. And I’m not going to hold you back. If this is what you want, then I’ll stand by it.” Agreement didn’t live in every corner, but respect did.

A teary half-smile answered. “It’s for the best. For both of us. I promise.”

A fake grin tried and failed. One nod. “But you should know, if this is your final decision, then I’m moving on too.”

She pulled me in immediately, arms around my neck. The hug landed heavy—the point of no return. Friends? Not after last night. Not now.

“I understand,” she said. “I want you to be happy. You deserve to be.”

One more squeeze, then space opened between us. Time for the last truth. “Vi. There’s something I want to tell you. I should’ve said it sooner, but there never seemed like a right time.”

A tilt of her head, hands to hips, brow lifting a thread. “Alright.”

A sharp inhale steadied me. “At the beginning, the reason I hung out with you so much was because William asked me to wingman you for him. And I know that sounds kinda creepy and intrusive, possibly makes us seem dishonest. But you have to know I had no ill intentions. I would never do that to anyone—much less you.”

Processing tightened her features. “So, this whole time you were actually trying to know my business. My secrets. Everything? Wait. . .” Fire lit behind her eyes. “You told him, didn’t you? About what happened with Papi. About my sexuality.”

“No! Absolutely not! Violet, I would never tell anyone those personal things. Not my place.”

“You’re right. But you were scoping me out for your friend. How am I supposed to trust you now? I bet you guys have gathered at the round table and have had laughs about everything I’ve told you. Right!”

“That’s ludicrous! Why would we do that? Who would do that? And who owns a round table?” Spinning started—mirror-ball fast. How did this catch fire so quickly?

“Oh, so now my feelings are a joke? Well, I find what you and your friends did as ludicrous.” The door cracked open behind her. Hurt radiated. “How could you do this?”

“Vi, as I said, I wasn’t doing it to be malicious. How could you think this about me after everything these past two weeks?”

Back turned. Head dipped. When she faced me again, the door stood between us. “I think it’s best if you leave. Goodbye, Tanner.”

Legs wanted to bolt; pride wanted to speak once more. “Violet.”

Annoyance and pain mixed. “What?”

“Me saying this doesn’t change anything, but you’re wrong about yourself. And about me. This is what you do—I get it—but at least I was honest and genuine the whole time. No matter what you say to justify running, I know who I am. You can’t tear that down. I hope you find happiness too.”

Steps carried me down and out into the cold. A heart can feel like it’s going to burst without a single tear shed. Energy needed an outlet more than crying—so the training facility called.

The duffle thudded onto rubber flooring and plates clanged. This weight room is a bodybuilder’s playground; the crimson “A” glares from every wall as a reminder of who you are. Career, dream, grind—people say that’s enough. Maybe it is. But who shares it with you at the end?

Gloves laced up for the heavy bag. Light taps warmed the shoulders; power crept in with every memory—Mary; Violet; last night; this morning; the kiss. The kiss. Hands hammered harder, trying to knock out the reel. Blame searched for targets—her, William, the plan. Nets came up empty until the mirror pointed back. Feelings got in the way. The “job” should’ve stayed about helping Will. Then again, Mary and I were headed for an end regardless.

Arms wrapped the bag; forehead rested against leather. Tears threatened; stubbornness stuffed them back down.

"I'm *un idiota*." A breath left like a flat tire.

"Hey, Tanner. Are you okay, man?"

A turn found Preston on the bench press. When did he come in? The bag got released. "When's the last time you felt super fucking confused?"

He pressed—one, two, three, four.

"I'm not sure. Why, what's going on?" Five hit the rack with a clank.

"Basically, she and I agreed this isn't going anywhere. I also told her the truth about why I started hanging around her in the first place, and she did not take that well, which left us on bad terms."

Preston sat up. "What? Seriously?"

A nod answered.

"I don't understand, why would you tell her? Also, did you say your feelings for her? Does she not feel anything back?"

"Yeah, Preston—honesty's the only way anything real works. I didn't want to start with secrets. She deserved the truth. And. . . I don't know. She's got a lot on her plate, and there's no room for me. I get it—but god, it sucks. She's amazing. It was amazing until the wingman thing came out. Now she hates me. And I hurt her."

"I'm sorry, bro. You must be feeling like shit. First Mary, now Violet."

Mary's wound stayed open; Violet rubbed salt right in it. Questions haunted. Tell William what happened? Hand him the notes I'd gathered or let it all go?

A shake of the head surrendered everything except football. Sleep sounded like the only win. A lifetime nap sounded even better.

"Look, you can't control how people feel. Maybe she just needs time to process it all. She's probably been through a lot, dude. Give her time—she might have a change of heart. You'll see."

An hour of lifting with Preston bled off the shakes. Outside air bit at skin, sun still doing its best. Joy didn't land.

"I can't stand seeing you like this, man—you look so depressed. Literally," Preston said.

A shrug answered. "I'll be alright eventually. Just sucks."

"Yeah. But you look worse than after the Mary thing."

"It won't be alright now, but eventually. This is probably for the best, you know?" The pep talk tasted chalky. "Everything happens for a reason."

"You will, Tanner. Xbox?" Preston slung an arm across my shoulders.

That beat a nap. "Okay."

Twenty-Five

Violet

Sinking into the couch solemnly, a few tears rolled. Selena parked beside me, patting my back, while Dallas took the chair next to us with a box of tissues.

“I take it things didn’t go very well?” Selena asked.

“Of course not, look at her face,” Dallas said giving her the fucking-duh face.

Head lifted. “At first, it was perfectly fine actually. But then he said he was only hanging out with me to get dirt on me for William.” Several tissues came free of the box and went to work on my cheeks.

“Seriously?” Dallas asked, her brows just as questionable as she was. “Why?”

A nod answered. “Well, William is into me. Tanner was being his wingman I guess.”

“Oh, well that’s not so bad. I mean, kinda took it a little far, but anyway. So you telling him you wanted to remain friends went fine though? That’s different.” Dallas said.

“Wow. Can I date him?” Selena kidded.

Almost shot her a glare even knowing she joked. “You guys aren’t helping.”

“Hey, she said it,” Dallas said, “but I don’t understand, Violet. I thought you were into him?”

“I am,” the admission drifted toward the ceiling, “I mean, was. That’s why I have to let him go.”

“Um, what?” Selena asked.

“Other than the fact that he lied to me and was trying to pry me for info to laugh at with his friends, I can’t get mixed up with another guy right now. I have so much to do and so much to think about and I just don’t have time. And he’s a risk.”

“A risk?” Dallas asked.

“Yeah. What if I get hurt again? I don’t know if I can handle that,” fingers twiddled of their own accord, “then I think about Shane and how I feel guys like him are the only ones I deserve.”

“What?” Dallas said in bewilderment. “Why would you think that?”

“I’ve done horrible things in my life, Dallas.”

Dallas laughed. “What are you talking about? What have you done so bad that you deserve human trash?”

Hands stared back at me while a war raged—now or never. Mamá and I promised silence, but years have a way of turning secrets into lead. Every day spent looking at my sisters knowing they had no clue about what I’d done to their biological father—our father—ground me down. With Mamá gone, consequences belonged here.

“Violet?” Selena said.

“I don’t know if it’s time to tell you guys yet.”

“Tell us what?” Selena asked.

The inner demon clawed up my throat. Holding it back hurt more than letting it out. Tears welled again. “The truth about what really happened to Papi.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Dallas asked.

Knees found the rug. Their eyes—so full of love in this moment before truth—met mine. “The day Papi died. . .” one deep, unraveling breath, “it wasn’t because of his ALS. He committed suicide. And I—I helped him.”

A pause.

“Excuse me?” Selena said.

“What? How? What?” Dallas asked, face contorted with confusion.

Everything spilled out. Words shook, body shook, but the story came—every shard I’d carried. Tears kept coming whether wanted or not. Therapy never felt this raw or this relieving.

“Mamá said his condition progressed so fast that there was nothing anyone could do,” Selena said.

“She lied.”

“So, she knows then?” Dallas asked.

“Yes, she’s known this whole time.”

Selena stood up. “Why were we lied to?”

“Yeah, especially me.” Dallas said, standing as well.

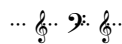
Feet followed theirs up. “Mamá didn’t want us confused and even more upset than we already were. She wanted to put it all behind us, and we did. Literally.”

Dallas shunned me with a look away—glossy eyes, crossed arms, foot tapping mad. Selena’s face went blank; memories of Papi live softer for her.

Dallas stomped off and slammed her door.

A glance at Selena met a glance back. “Sel, I—”

She shook her head and headed for her room too. Her door closed slowly, like the hinges wept. Silence arrived, and for the first time here, felt unwelcome. The floor took me, and that’s where I stayed. Everyone I knew and loved hated me. Violet Adair kept slipping off the face of existence, and maybe no one would care.



— ✕ Gameday ✕ —

Saturday morning offered only my company. Yesterday vanished in a haze of half-songs in my room and zero knocks—no bedroom door, no front door. Guessing games said my sisters holed up too; only kitchen noises proved life still existed. Wild, how solitude once sounded like paradise and now rang like madness.

Secrets never feel lighter in daylight. Maybe waiting would’ve been wiser. Maybe making myself Papi-less sooner breaks something no glue can mend. And then Tanner—yeah, he hurt me too, but walking away felt like a favor to both of us. Risks no longer fit the life I’m trying to build. His heart deserved fewer storms. My life comes with its own weather. He should be thanking me... carajo, missing him still sneaks in.

Worst part—bags leave tomorrow. Chances of coming back slim to none, which means no more Tanner in hallways or stadium tunnels. Best for everyone, right? Time stretches, memories fade, happiness returns. Odds chewed up couples braver than us.

Exhaustion rubbed away, the day got a reluctant start. Shower steam, a little brunch, TV tray in the living room—edge-of-the-seat highlights. CBS flicked on for Tuscaloosa Football. Kickoff hit at two-thirty; by the time half the morning slate wrapped, Loosa lined up to throw down.

The team kicked as brunch wrapped and dishes clinked clean. Wipes swept crumbs while eyes kept darting to the screen. The offensive line bulldozed scrimmage, turning LSU's front into lineboys. Five, six yards on the ground, quick tens through the air. Tanner's passes? Filthy. Drive looked possessed. Hands propped my chin on the counter; the stadium called my name like a siren.

He fled the pocket—rare sight—and every sack made shoulders tense. Hands flew up after first downs, that hidden, roguish-boyish smile peeking from the facemask. A palm dragged down my face. Maybe cancelling cable wouldn't be the worst idea.

Bedroom doors cracked open a few minutes apart. Hearts froze as my sisters took bar stools and just. . . stared. Eyes ping-ponged between theirs, trying to read the tells.

Dallas started, of course. "I want to say that I'm sorry I walked off without a word the other day, even though I don't regret it. I was just really in shock, and angry. And I still am actually. But I've had time to simmer on the news and really think things through. It took a lot of bravery to come forth with that, something I'm sure not easy, especially carrying that burden on you for so long. I can't even imagine what you've been going through and really explains a lot going on with you, especially lately. But I really do wish you would've confided in us sooner. I know Mamá said not to say anything, but still. I can't believe Mamá would do that."

Selena nodded. "I agree. But also, what's more appalling is that Papi would not only do that to us, but you. That was so selfish of him and such an uncharacteristic thing for him to do. Violet, *perdón*. About all of it. I don't blame you for anything, I hope you know that. I mean, I know the silent treatment yesterday didn't really come off that way, but I truly don't. This is all just so *increíble*."

Eyes fell to the counter; the words still hit like a warm blanket. "I'm so sorry we kept it from you. But I feel if the truth had come out at such an early age, who knows if you would be as understanding as you are now. It's a lot to process so young."

"Maybe yes, maybe no. It's hard to say. You might be right. I forgive you and I'm sure Sel does," Dallas said, glancing at Selena, and she nodded. "But we will have to talk to Mamá when she returns and talk as a family about it. Just know we're here for you, we support you, and we just want you to be *feliz*."

Selena nodded with a wide, sympathetic grin.

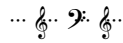
Tears pricked as a grin tugged up. "Thank you." The counter got circled fast so I could fold both of them into a hug. "I truly have the best sisters."

"You were so young handling all this on your own for so long how? I can definitely understand the attitude now, though I think it could've been toned back a bit. . ." Dallas said.

A shrug took over. "Music. It's the only thing that has internally got me through."

Understanding washed across their faces. Music saved all of us, at some point. Focus returned, right where it belongs. Stakes feel real again. One more squeeze—tight, for good measure—and then we settled in to finish the game together.

Almost a shutout—thirty-five to three. Shouts rocked the walls; neighbors definitely got a sequel to Party Night. Custom Tuscaloosa cookies came out of the oven like a trophy ceremony.



Sunday morning arrived mercifully fast. Never imagined leaving Tuscaloosa would taste bitter—always figured pure sugar. Vinegar hit the tongue instead. Bags finished before sunrise after another sleepless spin. Wheels needed to roll by eight; earlier sounded even better.

The suitcase parked in the hall while “public” spaces got one last straighten. Everything read ready. Dallas and Selena rolled out next; the door clicked behind us. Hand found the suitcase handle, one last glance swept the condo—conversations, laughs, tears, all suspended in this quiet air.

A grin showed up anyway. The lock turned.

The elevator hummed us down while tour plans filled the gap. Outside air kissed cheeks; for once, no freeze. The sun blazed; the breeze still stole a point.

William’s car idled out front. ¿*Qué diablos?* Thoughts sprinted straight to Tanner; heart tried to keep pace. Maybe he’d be here. A mental self-slap reset the face. “What’s going on?”

“William offered to drop us off at the airport. Preston and Austin wanted to tag along to say goodbye to us,” Selena explained.

The back hatch lifted. Selena and Dallas stowed bags; mine joined them. Sister one and sister two climbed in with Preston and Austin, which left me shotgun with William—now that the curtain had lifted. One ride. Just get through it.

Silence took the passenger seat while the backseat giggled with their lovers. Jealousy—new territory where my sisters were concerned—scratched at the window.

“I heard what happened with you and Tanner,” William said all of a sudden.

“I suppose you hate me. Want to give me a piece of your mind for hurting him?”

He puffed his bottom lip and shook his head. “No. I just wanted to say that I’m sorry about how all that went down with y’all. And my asking of Tanner to wingman you wasn’t meant to be invasive or creepy. I just liked you.”

“Well, thanks. But you don’t know me. What’s done is done. And I’m just not the girl for him anyway.”

William seemed bewildered. “Wow. Then you really don’t know Tanner.”

Any more and the waterworks would start. “Can we just drop it, please?”

Not another word the rest of the way. The jet and pilot waited. Luggage got pulled, goodbyes were passed around—kisses for them, an awkward nod for someone who’d felt like a close friend five minutes ago, before the reveal.

“Violet, I really don’t understand how you can just leave like this,” William said in my ear.

We let go. “What do you mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean. Y’all care about each other too much to leave on these terms. Tanner is gonna be a nightmare. I think you’re hiding behind excuses. I don’t think the wingman thing truly bothers you, or at the very least, you don’t think Tanner’s really a liar. I’m telling you Violet, it’s not like I bugged him every day to hang out with you, he did that on his own.”

“I didn’t come here with my heart in the right place. We met for two weeks. We wouldn’t work out anyway. I’m going on tour in two and a half months, what then? It’s just ridiculous. And you know what, think whatever you want. It doesn’t matter anyway. I have a lot of people depending on me, including myself.”

“But isn’t it worth a try?”

“I’ve tried these things with other people, William. A lot of the time these situations just don’t work out. He deserves someone who can always be there.”

“But you haven’t even tried with Tanner. Did you even voice any of this to him?”

“Some. Indirectly.”

William’s eyebrows launched. “What?”

A peek at the jet showed Dallas, Selena, and Jerry waiting. “Look, I gotta go. You want to know more, ask Tanner. Believe me, I know this is for the best.”

“For the both of you, or just you.”

“Bye, Will.” Confidence put on its best runway strut up the stairs.

The bunk swallowed me whole the second the door shut. Tears finally got their stage. The jet engine roared—best sound in a minute.

Twenty-Six

TANNER

Camped in the living room playing Rise of the Tomb Raider, sucking at first and then slowly kicking serious ass once the groove set in.

After yesterday's stomp over LSU, the world felt wide open. Football stood as the last thing—maybe the only thing—I could actually control, aggression poured into every snap until the other guys wore it. Sports channels wouldn't shut up about it. Empowered described the mood, and, in one minuscule corner of that feeling, a nod went to Violet.

The door clicked. A quick glance showed William and the guys; the clink of keys hit the counter.

"I'm back," he called.

Okay, here goes. Now or never. The game paused and the controller hit the couch as Preston and Austin dropped into the open seats.

"Hey, Will. I need to talk to you. It's important."

"What's up?" he asked.

A sweep of the room confirmed we had an audience—who already knew. "Um, more privately. Maybe out in the hall."

One raised brow, one nod. "Alright."

The hall swallowed us. With the door shut, lungs filled. "Will, I have to confess something. And you're not going to like it. But I have to tell you because I don't want our friendship to be compromised by lying. At least it will be the truth if it is."

"Okay?" William said with a slight chuckle, arms crossing. "What is it, Tan?"

Hands rubbed together, nerves sparking. "I know this whole wingman-mission with Violet was to get information on her so you could 'whoo' her and whatnot, and while it started off that way, it didn't exactly end that way."

"What are you trying to say? Spit it out, man."

"I, unexpectedly and unplanned, caught feelings for Violet. And the night of the party, we slept together. I was a terrible wingman and I broke the Bro Code and I am so very sorry, Will. I really, really am."

Silence at first. A weird eyeing, like he sifted through reactions. Shrug came next. "It's okay, dude. I'll find someone else." A light tap landed on my arm.

Felt like a brick slap. "What? I'm not sure I follow."

"Of course I'm in, or was, into Violet. She's totally hot and cool, even with the whole attitude thing. I made my move and asked her out at the fair, she said she'd think about it, and when we were all saying goodbye at the fair, she told me she wanted to be friends. Which I respect. Honestly, I didn't think she'd be into me anyway, and why would she? She's Violet Adair."

"Oh."

Relief washed through, confusing and warm, despite the rejection still fresh.

“But of course, I knew the real reason she was turning me down.”

“And what’s that?”

William scoffed, gaze sliding off while a smirk tugged. “Violet’s in love with you dude. The way her eyes follow you like you’re a tall dream. Once I realized it, I backed off my pursuit. It’s forbidden to chase a woman who’s been swept off her feet, especially by your best friend. Bro code. I’m honestly kinda surprised about my own wingman ability.”

“Will, I never ever thought I’d ever say this to you, but thank you. I would still be stuck with Mary if it wasn’t for you. For all of you guys. You’ve got my back and I’m lucky to have friends like you. But still, I am very sorry.”

William smiled and pulled me into a bro-hug. “No need for apologies, bro. You didn’t know. And you didn’t really do anything wrong. Violet’s into you, not me, I can accept that. But I appreciate you coming clean about it. Now I know I have a real brother in life, the brother I never had.”

When we let go, reality elbowed back in—Violet hadn’t mirrored the feeling, and now probably never would. Shoulders dipped. “Violet isn’t in love with me. She doesn’t feel the same way I do about her. Plus I hurt her.”

“I don’t believe that,” he said. “I personally think she loves you. Or something very similar at the very least.”

A skeptical tilt answered. “Yeah? How?”

“Well, for one, she cares enough to not want to hurt you. Or even ruin a chance with you. In my book, that’s love. Or whatever.”

The idea hovered—tempting, but instincts stuck with what she’d said. Focus needed redirection anyway. Career first. In the middle of that mental pep talk, William’s “she’s gone” slammed into my ear like an explosion.

“What?”

“Violet’s gone. We dropped her and her sisters off at the airport like an hour ago.”

A 14K gold-finished knife to the heart would’ve been subtler. “Oh.”

He must’ve seen it land. “But hey, listen. I think if you wait it out, Violet will come back. I give it a week, if even that. Bet.”

“As nice as that would be, that’s highly unrealistic, Will. And it’s okay that it is. Really. Violet’s got more important things to worry about at any rate, and the fact is so do I. We talked about it and we agreed on that.” Somewhat. Before my news.

“I see it in your face, Tanner. You don’t whole-heartily agree.”

A shrug did the talking. “It’s her decision and I respect it. She has fans to worry about, and so do we, Will.”

He nodded—agreeing to disagree territory. “How did you hurt her?”

“I told her the truth. About wingman-ing for you.”

William hissed. “Yeah, I could’ve told you that would be a bad idea.”

Another shrug. “Better than lying.”

Twenty-Seven

Violet

“Five, six, seven, eight,” Selena counted us and our dancers into our rehearsed dances from the practice room to the stages we were on. We danced on the main stage. Eventually, we’d practice on Stage B across the front way. The main stage is sort of designed like the Deathly Hallows symbol from Harry Potter without the circle, and with some added features of course. The front corners are circles and the main stage wraps around the giant seamless screen. The catwalks are also screens, the coolest feature we’d never had on tour before.

As our choreographer, Selena was also the lead dancer in our group. Instruments not her thing, singing she loved, but dancing was her passion, her strength. When she danced, she stole the show and everyone knew it.

Selena watched us run the whole set dancing and singing with great concentration and intent, examining our every move nailed to the T. Shane viewed us from stage-right with bottled water in his hand and a smirk on his face. The Buzz remained part of our set for our very first headlining concert for the tour since we wrote a song together and fans anticipated seeing it happen live. Professionalism for them came first—I could manage that.

“I’m so proud of you Violet! You are just nailing this choreography!” Selena said, clapping her hands and sporting mini jumps.

“Yeah, and your vocals are on fire! All those years of six-month-warm-ups before tours have really paid off,” Dallas said.

All true though. Work ramped to triple-time these last two weeks just to catch up with everyone who’d been rehearsing for months. Training sixteen hours every day exhausted me, but it was so rewarding because everyone noticed how hard I was trying to make it up to everyone, and myself. Bless Selena, she stayed up with me just to help me nail the choreography alone. Our vocal coach worked longer hours just to help me get up to par with everyone else’s vocal health. Our costume designers hustled overtime to get my nine different outfits caught up with everyone else’s. Everyone busted *trasero* to catch me up. Blessed—that feeling quickly curdled into fresh shame about everything I’d put everyone through. The least I could do was get my shit together now.

“I also agree!” Shane said loudly from his spot, toasting to me with his open water.

An eye roll arrived on instinct as fingers fidgeted with my earpiece monitor and the receiver clipped to the back of my shorts. As if I need your approval. *Uf*. I can’t wait for the first show to be over just so he’ll be gone. A scan around the stage took in all the empty arena seats, then down to the staff and crew hustling to make sure this whole thing performed smoothly. Sometimes when the scale hits too hard for too long, overwhelm creeps in. Ten-minute intermissions became my move. “Can we break for ten?”

“If you want a break, you get a break,” Selena said in all smiles, “keep up the great work!”

A small, appreciative grin answered as I sped past Shane to get off the stage and to the dressing room. A search for my backpack—the one with my songwriting journal—turned up

nothing; hands went up as the realization hit that it was still in the black SUV from the hotel. The SUV waited parked in a secluded spot at the back door, guarded by two bodyguards.

A brisk beeline later, the guards unlocked it and the bag came free. The door closed and I thanked them—then Shane lingered in the doorway. *¡Jesús!* Creep. “Shane?”

“Hey,” he said, “can we talk? Alone.”

Sure, because all great conversations start out with “alone,” and don’t end in murder. “About what? The guards have to stay here Shane.”

He stepped out from the shadows in the doorway and into the sun, where his dark eyes glowed light and his dark, feathered hair shone. Is it ridiculous to think he kind of looks like a vampire right now? Yes. It’s absolutely ridiculous. But still true. “I want to first and foremost apologize for everything that happened between us. What I did was unforgivable and I made a real ass of myself.”

A slight tilt narrowed my eyes; one brow escaped upward. Am I seriously hearing a sincere apology from this guy? “Um, what?”

He nodded humbly, his head hanging low. “I don’t want to be the bad guy, even though I am because of what I did and I take full responsibility. But from here on out, I don’t want to be that guy and I know I’m not that guy, I never was before I met you. I don’t know what happened. But I want to prove I can to you.”

My mind and gut sloshed like a tidal wave with vicious swells big enough to take down the Titanic. No time to untangle every feeling; focus mattered most. “Look Shane, I don’t have time for this. You don’t need to prove anything to me.” A stride whisked me past him—until his hand gently caught mine.

“I know I hurt you, so immensely. It pains me that I did. I want to right it. I want a second chance with you. Tiana and everyone after were a foolish mistake. I want you,” he said, both hands wrapped around mine.

A turn brought his face back into view—those enchantingly dark eyes, that smile that once used to punt my heart into triple-time. Heartbeats raced now and who knows why. Emotion and confusion flooded in; words scrambled.

“It’s very bold and mature of you to come to me with an apology. I forgive you because I see you mean it. But I’ve got a lot to work through. I need to focus on the tour. Everyone is counting on me and I don’t want to let them down.”

“Of course, I understand. But please, think about it. You and I, we just make sense. More so than you and that McGregor guy,” he said with a playful smile.

My hand snapped away like he’d burned it. A glare did the rest. “You don’t get to let *McGrey* slip off your tongue. We’ll talk later.”

Keys on the traveling keyboard clicked under my fingers while fresh lyrics found their shape. A sound to fit them was the goal, sprawled on the floor of our choreography practice room. Tanner’s note from that night branded the first page of my journal—and my brain—no matter how hard I tried to file it. Most nights after rehearsal, long after the crews cleared out, pages filled here in the quiet and dark. Sleep wouldn’t come; lyrics kept flowing; the room gave them space. Sometimes lines belonged together; sometimes they split into different songs. No off switch existed. That current started the night we departed Tuscaloosa. No one knew, which gave me some stolen alone time. Secrets confessed to the piano like old times. Writing past midnight

had always been the way. Most musicians seem like night writers, but my sisters aren't—Selena least of all, morning's resident sunbeam.

As the keys got toyed with, lines fell into place more easily.

Ugh, no, no. Not that word. What can I use instead of scarlet letter? Hmmm. Crimson lover. Yes! Perfect.

The words scribbled down to complete verse two. While chasing a progression that would naturally flow into the next bit, the door opened. No turn toward it—concentration had me pinned. A sidelong peek off the mirror wall showed Selena. Why is she here?

She knelt beside me and let her eyes drift across the mess of process circling the keyboard. "Hey. What's all this?"

"Just some songs I'm working on. What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be sleeping?"

"I had to see why you stay so late at the arena all the time. Now I know. May I?" She gestured for an invite into the chaos.

A nod answered.

Selena studied each page, probably reading the lyrics and then the notation under them to feel the sound. A small smile of disbelief flickered with a hint of confusion. "These are love songs?"

Another nod.

"But you never write love songs. There's a reason people call you *The Blue Queen* you know," she said, still shuffling through my music sheets.

"Well, that was the old me. I don't want to be known for my pain and my flaws."

"Either way, these are amazing. You miss Tanner, huh."

"What makes you think that?"

Selena pointed out lyrics that were transparently Tanner-inspired. "Red freckles here. Football references there. Crimson lover? *C'mon*," she said, giggling.

Heat rose in my face and a sad little grin snuck out. "I suppose I do."

"Have you talked to him since. . .?"

A shake of the head.

"What would I even say? I don't think we could ever be just friends at this point. He lied to me. And he hasn't reached out. I think it's best this way."

"Why? So you don't hurt him. . . or so he doesn't have the chance to hurt you."

A sigh slipped out. "He already did. And I think both reasons are pretty even-keeled. I need to pace myself. And Tanner deserves someone so much better. And Shane talked about getting back together with me today."

Her nose scrounged up and her arms crossed immediately. "Seriously? Ugh. The nerve of *ese tipo*."

"Well, I'm not trying to think about any of it. I'm just trying to stay focused on the tour and our music. And us." A palm pressed to the floor for balance—ice cold. Wild that it hadn't registered before.

"And what about you?" Selena asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Are you focusing on yourself? Your health? Your happiness? Because that's just as important."

Eyes settled on the keyboard like it might cough up answers. “I believe so. I’m writing and singing again. We’re about to go on tour. I have a therapist now. Everything is back to normal.”

Selena shook her head. “That’s the problem. You’re right back to where you were before all this started. You’re going to end up slipping off your cracker again at some point with something different. Except maybe the therapist will help with that, but I think you need to figure out what makes you happy and prioritize it. Be open-minded for once. Dallas and I care about your happiness and well-being over everything, you know that right?”

“Any time I’ve ever been open-minded, it’s bitten me in the *trasero*. And yes, I know. That’s why you guys have been the best sisters anyone could ever ask for. After everything I’ve put you guys through, you two deserve an award.”

“Eventually it’s not going to bite you in the ass. You have to keep taking risks or you’ll never get anywhere. We didn’t give up on our dreams and now we’re here, we’re making them happen. And don’t be silly, what else is family for? We’ve always been in this together and we’ll continue to until the day we die.”

A reluctant smile crept in. “I suppose you’re right.”

“You know how proud Dallas and I are of you for being so focused and working so hard for not only us and this band, but also the fans. I think you’re too hard on yourself sometimes. You’ve proven yourself and I think you deserve happiness wherever you find it, whether you think you deserve it or not. If my word counts for anything, I believe any guy that respected me enough to pretty much dump him without trying to fight you on it and was honest about his intentions with you, which sounded innocent. Let’s be real here, he deserves a shot. Especially if you can’t get him out of your head like this,” Selena said, motioning toward my chaotic genius thrown up everywhere, “and not some loser ex who didn’t know what he had the first time around. Like c’mon, who sleeps with a bunch of girls and then decides he wants a girl back? No decent man, that’s who.”

A laugh bubbled up and a hug followed. “Thank you, Sel.”

“Any time,” she said. When we let go, she picked up my music and my songwriting journal. “Do you want help? Or maybe write a song together? Or I can just sit and—”

“I’d love to do all the above.”

Twenty-Eight

TANNER

The guys and I sat in the living room analyzing game tapes of our upcoming opponent on the TV. We pointed out tendencies and weaknesses—little tells like when a safety drifted too far outside the boundary, or when an offensive lineman’s hands and feet positioned differently for a pass versus a run. Body language gave everything away if you knew where to look.

Doing this together was always fun. We studied film individually, but once a week we carved out time to do it as a group. It helped Austin and me especially, since we could learn from each other’s mistakes. Every quarterback has his own style and vision, but the more eyes, the better.

I was grateful for the distraction. Coming off two breakups—or really, one breakup and one let-down—I needed it. Mary and I had been drifting for a while, but Violet. . . that cut deeper than I wanted to admit. I didn’t expect to like her so much, which made pushing her out of my head harder. Football, though, demanded focus, and that kept me going.

Pens scratched across notebooks as we traded observations. William, though, seemed glued to his phone, his brows knotted.

“Everything okay, buddy?” I asked.

“Uh. . . yeah, everything’s good,” he said, still scrolling.

“You sure? Doesn’t seem like it. What are you looking at? Not more videos of lions devouring cantaloupes, is it?” I chuckled.

William sighed, dragging a hand down his face. Definitely not wildlife videos.

“Seriously, Will. What’s up? Spit it out already,” Preston said. He and Austin paused the tape, both watching William now.

“Alright, alright. Just. . . don’t shoot the messenger.” William tapped a few times and mirrored his screen to the Apple TV.

The headline flashed: *Violet Adair and Shane Trevyn, Old Lovers No More?* by Celebrity Gossip Clean Up. Dated today. My stomach dropped.

“Okay. Gossip columns make things up all the time. Doesn’t mean it’s true,” I said, even though my pulse was racing.

William scrolled further, and pictures filled the screen. Violet and Shane, standing outside what looked like an arena. Talking. Too close. One shot showed Shane clasping both of Violet’s hands in his. My chest caved in.

First Mary. Now Violet. Was I really that unlovable?

“She lied to me,” I muttered. At least I’d come clean to her.

“Hold on now. Let’s not jump to conclusions,” Preston said. “We don’t know what’s happening in those photos. If you want, I can check with Dallas.”

Did it even matter? If Violet wanted me, she would’ve said so. She told me she needed to focus on herself. That was my answer. I forced myself to sit straighter. “No, it’s fine. Really, guys. She already told me she wasn’t interested. I’m moving on.”

William raised a brow. “Really?”

“Really, really.” I scrambled for something that sounded convincing. “In fact, we should go to a party. If there’s one tonight, let’s find out where.”

Austin frowned. “Are you serious? You hate parties.”

I tossed my notebook onto the table. “Yep. Call everyone you know. Tonight, we’re going out.” I stood, retreating to my room before anyone could argue. I needed a way to get her out of my system for good.

“Alright. Who’s ready to party?” William rubbed his hands together like he was scheming.

Preston and Austin joined us in the living room.

“Hell yeah!” Austin said.

“Guys’ night out!” William grinned.

“Right. . .” Preston muttered, uneasy. “Everyone ready?”

They looked at me.

“Absolutely. Let’s go,” I said.

We clomped down the hall and into William’s car. Preston fell in step beside me. “Are you sure about this? It’s not like you. Two recent dumps—that’s rough.”

“Of course. The only way to move on is to socialize, right?”

He gave me a skeptical look. “Sounds like you’re just shoving your feelings into a corner. That’s not healthy. Why don’t you reach out to Violet instead—”

“And what? Ask her about the photos when I don’t even have the right to? Whether she and Shane are back together or not doesn’t matter. She told me she didn’t want a relationship with me, Preston. Then she got mad at me for being honest about wingmanning for William. I have to respect her decision. I can’t stay hung up.”

Preston squeezed my shoulder, his face soft. “I get it, man. If you need a wingman tonight, I’m there.”

William drove us to a condo near Violet’s, but not close enough to risk seeing her. Cars lined the street. Big party.

“Whose place is this?” I asked.

“Brock’s,” William said.

I didn’t know a Brock.

The front door cracked open without anyone behind it, so we walked in. Bass thumped, lights dimmed to a smoky amber glow. Conversations buzzed in every corner. Some people danced, some played drinking games, others huddled over cards. A party in full swing.

I spotted a makeshift bar and headed straight there. A guy behind it grinned. “What’ll it be?”

“Surprise me,” I said.

A few drinks in and I was tipsy—not drunk, but loose. I mingled, joked, even laughed with strangers. Then I noticed her.

Dirty-blond pixie cut. Blue eyes. A cute button nose, freckles—enough to remind me of Violet, but not Violet. She sat beside me, her laugh bright.

“So, how’s football? Y’all are undefeated—it must be great!” she asked.

“Uh, yeah. It’s going well. Defense is locking down. Offense is dominating the rush and passing game. We’re figuring out blitzes and coverage—”

Her expression glazed over. I forgot I wasn't talking to Violet.

"Uh, great! But I'll be honest, I don't know what you just said," she laughed nervously. "But I'm sure y'all will crush it Saturday. You always do."

I blushed. "Thanks. Sorry. Football talk runs away from me sometimes."

She leaned closer, tequila on her breath. "That's okay. Passion's sexy on you."

She winked. Tipsy as I was, the idea of being wanted—even by someone I barely knew—was tempting. "Really?"

"Really. What'd you say we talk more about football in a private room?"

My chest tightened. I wanted to drown the ache Violet left behind. I wanted someone to want me. "Sounds perfect."

I took her hand and led her into a pitch-black bedroom. As the door shut, she wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me. My shirt was off before I could think, her hands everywhere.

And then Violet crashed through my mind. The quad. Dinner at BWW. The oak tree. The Ferris wheel. The night at her condo. The jokes, the honesty, the vulnerability. Us.

I froze. Pulled back.

"I can't do this," I whispered.

"Huh?" she breathed.

"I'm sorry, Lily. But I can't. There's someone else." I yanked my jeans back up.

"Mary really hurt you, huh?"

"No. It's not Mary."

"Ahhh, it's that Violet girl then, isn't it?" she teased.

"How does everyone know about this?" I muttered, fumbling for my shirt.

"It's all over the media. Campus too. So tell me—what's she got that I don't?"

I found the light switch. "It's not about you. I don't even know you. But I know her—and I like her. Most people think she's rude or cold-hearted, but she's not. She's the realest person I know."

She smirked, flopping back on the bed in her bra and underwear. "Wow. I hope some guy says that about me to another girl someday."

I handed her clothes, turning away while she got dressed.

We stepped back into the hall. She tugged her shirt on inside-out and groaned. "I'm gonna puke."

I spotted a bathroom and rushed her inside. Holding her hair back, I rubbed her shoulder as she leaned over the toilet.

God, I'm never going to another party.

Twenty-Nine

Violet

Day two of dress rehearsals after finishing stage rehearsals, and I finally felt... good. Still nervous—always—but mostly excited to see our fans again. To sing again.

We were deep in Act Two of the *Viciously Precious* Tour. Four acts, two stages, one over-the-top fever dream we built piece by piece.

Act One: a crumbled ice kingdom—three thrones rising on a lift, torn banners, stone “paths” radiating from the screen catwalks.

Act Two: pirates. The ship rocked gently while a digital sea rolled across every screen. A plank ran down the center catwalk (Selena’s idea), masts rose from the old columns, sea dragons coiled up extra posts breathing fire—eyes glowing red. Stairs spilled down the hull to reach the walkways.

Act Three moved to Stage B out in the crowd. A big rectangular lift—dressed as clouds (balloons, flour, tape, pillow stuffing; don’t ask)—carried us out for the acoustic of *Lips On A Girl*. The lift locked into Stage B, a trapdoor opened, and up rose our angel-wings piano.

Act Four: London at midnight. Ben Clock Tower in the back corner, brick catwalks, benches and lamps on each lift, fog in bruised pinks and reds. We opened with *Persona(L)*—shadow silhouettes, walking staffs, giant fedoras hiding our eyes. On the last hit, we twisted, sent hats flying into the arena, and closed with *Stella* and a *Masquerade / Bad Temper / WOW* mash, drowning the place in rainbow confetti.

We always had our hands in everything: costumes, staging, lights, setlist, dancers. Usually the final run made me high as a kite. This time it felt different—like I was stepping back into a life and trying to remember the choreography to myself.

Mid-number, we swept our arms and looked out to the “crowd.” That was when I saw her—walking down the middle aisle—Mamá. And Stone.

“Pause rehearsal!” Dallas called into her mic, bolting off the stage and into Mamá’s arms. Selena piled on. I froze. Ice rose in my chest. Old Violet crawled up from her grave and gripped my jaw.

Mamá took her sunglasses off—ageless with crimson lips and hazelnut eyes. Stone stood beside her, steel-calm.

“Everything okay, Violeta?” Mamá asked.

I crossed my arms. “Yeah. Other than you disappearing for months with my bodyguard. Peachy.”

“Ah.” She slipped her glasses into her bag. “Starting strong with the greetings. I apologized. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision. I didn’t think anyone would mind.”

“Mamá, we need to talk. In private,” Dallas said.

“It’s not just about the vacation. We know,” Selena added.

“Know what?”

I hopped down from the stage. “They know about Papi. I told them.”

Her face tightened. “Lead me to your dressing room.”

Stone shadowed us, then stood guard outside. We lined the wall; I took the door.

“So,” Mamá said, “I’m sure you have many questions. Maybe a few *palabras odiosas*.”

“Why did you keep it from us?” Dallas fired. “And why make Violet keep it? It’s been shredding her.”

Mamá looked at me, surprised. “Has it? Why didn’t you come to me?”

“You said never to mention it again,” I said. “What was I supposed to think?”

“*Cariño*, I meant: make peace and move forward.” She rested her hands on a chair back.

“You were so young. I didn’t want you to turn on your sister—or yourself.”

“But you never told me it wasn’t my fault,” I said.

“You didn’t know?” she asked, stricken.

“I was ten,” I whispered. “I didn’t even process it until I was twelve. Maybe thirteen.”

She nodded, eyes shining. “I’m sorry, Violeta. Truly. Then I left—bad timing on top of everything. You’re right.”

She exhaled and looked at the floor. “After your father died, I never felt anything like him. Until Stone. Before we left I asked myself, *When did I last do anything spontaneous?* I had lived for my girls—two jobs, long nights, little dreams. You’d made me so proud. But for a few months I wanted. . . to breathe.” A small, guilty smile. “It wasn’t fair to you. I know.”

Memories flickered: her sore feet, double shifts, the attic boxes, the way she clapped off-beat at our first cafe gig anyway. I thought of Tanner, then shoved the thought away.

“I’m not saying it was okay,” Dallas said. “But I got it more now.”

“Same,” Selena added. “Still would’ve loved a phone call. Or ten.”

“Exactly,” I said. “We’re not condoning it. But I understood. I can’t call the kettle black when I’ve been the pot.”

“What portrait? Pots? Kettles?” Selena asked.

“You know what I mean.” I looked at Mamá. “I forgive you.”

They all stared.

“You—you do?” Selena said.

“Yes.”

Dallas rubbed her temples. “What just happened?”

“I didn’t like how it went down,” I said. “But I got it. The secrecy? Not cool. The impulse? Human.”

Mamá nodded. “You had every right to be upset.”

“And you’re not going to like the next part,” she added.

We braced.

“While we were away, Stone proposed. I said yes.”

A punch of silence—then a weird mix of hurt and warmth. My heart swelled, but I also . . . wanted to squeal.

We looked at each other. We squealed, then hugged her.

“You should’ve called,” Dallas said into her shoulder.

“You should’ve FaceTimed,” I said.

“I know,” Mamá said. “I wanted to live in the bubble. It was wrong. I’m sorry.”

A knock. Stone stepped in, hands folded.

“Ladies,” he said. “Two things. One: yes, I asked for your mother’s hand. Two: I’m retiring from private security. We want a quieter life—more country than city.”

My stomach dropped. “So you’re not my guard anymore?”

“After the tour,” he said gently. “I’ll finish my promise.”

I tried to joke and failed. “Great. So now I’m stuck with Baldy? Did he even speak? I hadn’t heard a word.”

“I know this is hard—” Stone started.

“Don’t sell me the ‘I understand’ *mierda*.” Heat spiked behind my eyes. “I—I need air.” I shouldered past and stormed out.

The meet-and-greet room was empty, the barbed-wire photo wall waited for faces. I sat on the floor in my long red dress, legs tucked, fabric fanning in a scarlet puddle. Somewhere, our costume designer was having a heart attack.

I wasn’t mad at my sisters. I wasn’t furious at anyone. It was just a lot: Stone retiring; Mamá remarrying and maybe moving; Papi’s truth; finding myself; trying not to burn bridges I had just rebuilt. Change was a slow, stupid burn, but I was finally walking through it—not sprinting, not collapsing. Just walking.

The curtain parted. Stone.

He stepped in and squatted across from me, mirroring my pose—except in a tailored suit, while I was a human tomato. “What are you doing on the floor in your stage dress?” he asked.

“It’s comfortable,” I said. “I’m sure someone was crafting a death email as we speak.”

He smirked. “Sulking?”

“Thinking.” I pulled a thread on my hem then stopped myself. “Trying to find some common ground in my head.”

He nodded. “About earlier.”

“About all of it,” I said. “I knew change was inevitable, but it felt like it was piling on. We had just got you back and now you were leaving. What was I supposed to do without Mamá around all the time?”

“She believed her girls were grown and strong,” he said. “And she was right. She also deserved some quiet. So did you.”

I nodded. “I knew. I still wanted to be selfish for a minute.”

“You were allowed. She’s your mother.” He paused. “And I wasn’t vanishing. Maybe not by your side every second. But you called, I answered. Day or night.”

Tears stung, soft and embarrassing. I wiped them away.

“And you had your sisters,” he added. “You three got through everything. You always had.”

Finally, I breathed out. “No one would ever know it, Stone, but you always knew just what to say.”

He shrugged, eyes kind. “That’s why they called me Stone. So don’t ruin my brand.”

I laughed—*really* laughed—for the first time all day.

Thirty

Violet

My sisters and I lay on our backs across the long strip of stage inside the arena, watching the sunrise paint the city in orange and pink. We'd never done this before—just lying together, letting it form around us—and I couldn't understand why. It was beautiful.

The past few weeks had been filled with the kind of quality time I thought I'd ruined forever. We bonded through new songs, popcorn fights during movie nights, late-night practices that turned into goof-offs with dancers and crew, silly photoshoots, and interviews that went hilariously off the rails. Somehow, our relationship felt stronger than ever.

I still had plenty to figure out, but right now—lying here with them—everything felt euphoric.

"This is amazing. When was the last time we did this? Ever?" Dallas asked.

"Not that I can remember," I said.

"Good. Means we're still discovering new things to experience together," Selena said.

I turned to her and smiled. "Agreed."

"I missed doing things like this. It's nice to have you around again Violet," Dallas said, reaching for my hand and squeezing it. "I can never say it enough."

I squeezed back. "Thanks. I just wish I could enjoy this moment more if my mind wasn't so all-over-the-place."

"Because of the media gossip about you and Shane and those pictures that broke out?"

I nodded.

"It's so disgusting," Selena said, making a face like she'd just seen toe fungus. "That people would even want you guys back together without knowing any of the details. The Truth. Just because, on an attractive scale, you guys look 'cute' together." She even air-quoted.

I chuckled. "Yeah. The media has never made sense, has it? And I can't believe paparazzi hid in a bush just to get whatever pictures they could and twist it into such a soap opera. Well, actually, I can believe it. But you know what I mean."

"Have you talked to Shane at all since his little spiel?" Dallas asked.

I shook my head. "No. I'm trying to avoid it. It's literally the last thing I want to deal with at the moment."

"I mean, that's understandable, but you have to address it."

"I don't have to, technically. After our opening performance Monday night, they'll be outta here faster than we can say sucker," I said smugly, "and I can just ignore his *trasero*. He'll get the hint then."

"I guess that's a way."

"So. . . how are you and Preston doing?" I asked.

"We're good. We talk every day. It's hard obviously, but I don't know. Something about him makes this whole long-distance-thing worth it," she said with a giant smile and an excited shrug.

"That's so great, Dallas. I'm so happy for you guys." I said, forcing a smile.

Truthfully, I thought about Tanner and the guys every single day. Tanner most of all, but also the group—they were fun to be around. To my own surprise, I even missed Alabama itself. The atmosphere, the people, the freedom of feeling normal again. But Tanner was the reason for all of it. A hard pill to swallow.

“Thank you,” Dallas replied.

I hesitated, then asked, “Has Preston said anything about Tanner to you?”

Both my sisters smirked immediately.

“Why do you wanna know?” Dallas teased.

I rolled my eyes but smiled, heat rising to my face. “Look, I . . . I just want to know if he’s doing okay.”

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?”

The question made my heart race. Through therapy I’d started to realize I may have overreacted to Tanner’s honesty, and guilt gnawed at me. But my therapist kept telling me my feelings were valid too.

“I hurt him. Twice. Who wants to talk to someone who hurt them? I know I don’t. Yet, here I am, forced to deal with Shane. And I fear Tanner may hate me after seeing those photos.”

“I find it fascinating that you think Shane is what you deserve and yet you don’t want to be with him. And yet, you told Tanner the reason you didn’t want to be with him was because of your issues.”

“And the tour, fans, and you guys! And I said the only guys I deserve are like Shane, not literally just Shane.”

“Same difference!” Selena said. “Might as well date Shane since you’d know exactly what you’re dealing with instead of a whole new douche bag to begin with. They could be worse. They could abuse you mentally or physically.”

“No, no. Violet, do you honestly believe you deserve people like Shane? Please don’t tell me you still think that. Look at where you are right now. Did you think a month ago this is where you’d be?” Dallas asked.

“No. . .”

“And do you think you should be cheated on or abused just because dad conned you as little kid to help him commit suicide?” Selena asked.

The words hit hard. I fought tears and repeated my therapist’s mantra: accept the bad with the good, then let it go. “N—No.”

“Okay. And do you think, anywhere in your heart or your mind or anywhere else, that Tanner would legitimately cheat on you? Lie to you? Do anything to intentionally hurt you?”

“No. But no one thinks any of those things will happen, doesn’t mean it won’t.”

Selena slapped her face dramatically. “Doesn’t mean it will happen. Look, I know you don’t have the best track record with guys, but think about it this way. Tanner could be the guy to break that so-called ‘curse.’ Sometimes you just have to keep taking chances. And sometimes, they just land right in your lap when you least expect it.”

“Even if what you’re saying is true, that doesn’t excuse the fact that I need to focus. The tour starts in a month!”

“So? You’ve worked your ass off. Our vocal coach said your voice is ready, Sel thinks you’ve got the choreography down. And regardless of that, you deserve to be happy. And god, did Tanner make you happy. I have never seen you happier with anyone, boy-wise. And the fact that you’re writing love songs about him, c’mon. Get your head out of your ass girl!” Dallas flailed her arms and smacked me in the face.

I laughed, clutching my cheek, and they laughed too.

Dallas propped her head on her hand. “You’re Violet fucking Adair. You deserve any guy who wants to be with you. He got to know you at your absolute worst, your most vulnerable. Just think about that.”

“Agreed. But also, if I were you, I’d address those photos on one of your social media accounts. Just so the truth is out there,” Selena added.

“Adair sisters!”

We spun around. Jack and the other tour managers stood behind us, Mamá and Stone lingering nearby.

“We have some things to go over,” Jack said.

We trudged in and out of meetings all day between vocal and choreography practices—schedules, publicity, new music, every little detail about the tour. At least everything was on track, which gave me one less thing to stress about.

On the bright side, my sisters and I finally recorded the songs I’d been working on for months. The album was done—twelve carefully chosen tracks out of the dozens I’d written. Strategically picked, of course. We always loved leaving Easter eggs for the fans.

Now we sat in wardrobe check, wrapped in shades of red for the tour’s color scheme. My own costumes leaned dark—crimson and black—as if I were leaning into my “Rotten Adair” reputation with sarcastic flair. Sequins layered over glitter, lace over leather, everything shining like a rock version of a Victoria’s Secret show.

I perched on the couch while Dallas and Selena got measured at the vanities. Mamá sat on the far end, watching, while Stone lingered outside the door. I shouldn’t have been sitting around in costume, but no one said anything. People tended to tread lightly around me lately. Everyone had heard the rumors about Tanner.

My eyes drifted to my songwriting journal. His note was still tucked inside, his words still echoing in my head. He probably never read the lyrics scrawled through it—lyrics about him, every red freckle and football metaphor—but part of me wanted him to. I hung out with him every day in my thoughts, even months later.

“Alright, dress rehearsal is in thirty. Let’s make our way to the stage and make it happen,” our tour manager called. Jack popped in over his shoulder with a goofy grin.

Everyone filed out, but I lingered. Selena noticed.

“Are you coming, Violet?”

“Yeah, I just need a moment. If that’s alright?”

“Of course! Everything okay?”

“Yeah! I just need to clear my head for a minute.”

“Alright. See you out there!”

She bounced out, leaving me alone. I tilted my head back, inhaling and exhaling until my chest loosened. Tanner haunted my thoughts like a ghost I didn’t know how to exorcise.

I needed a distraction. My eyes landed on my backpack—on the unread note from Papi tucked away inside. My chest tightened. Maybe now was the time.

I pulled it free. My fingers shook, but before I could stop myself, I unfolded the paper and read.

Mi pequeño pastel de punkin,

I'll never forget the day your mom and I first saw you. Instantly, we knew you were the one to adopt. You are such a wonderful, beautiful, sweet, talented girl. The way your eyes glistened at us, the smile you flashed when you gripped our fingers with your tiny hands brightened any room and melted it away. It's like you chose us. The night we brought you home, Dallas camped out on the floor next to your crib. She did that every night for two weeks, only to stop because we finally made her, but not without a fuss first. She was so excited to be your big sister. And Selena, she admires you two so much. I hope you'll always be a positive, great influence on her.

Being your father has been the proudest and most fulfilling position I've ever been in my entire life, to you and your sisters. I always thought I would share my football passions with a son one day. But Violet, you have been a greater gift and blessing than any son I imagined. Live the life I always wanted for you: fearless, unapologetic, and free. You are so strong, sharp, witty, ambitious, and resilient. That will make some men insecure, but the right one will fall in love with you hard for it. If you ever find that kind of love, especially like the one I have for your mother, please don't run from it.

You have made me so proud. Never give up on your dreams and keep your chin up. Life is all about blitzes on your plays, but it's important to remember to believe in yourself and your teammates, and then fake 'em out with a play-action. No matter what happens in it, I'll always be right there. You should never be afraid of the world, Violet. They should be afraid of you. Because you are going to do amazing, wonderful, great things in this world and they won't see it coming, and they just might not be ready for it.

I love you so very much. Believe in yourself and be confident in who you are and you will go farther than the stars.

*Amor,
Papi*

Tears splattered onto the page before I wiped them away. His little football metaphor made me laugh through the ache—classic Papi.

He hadn't meant to hurt me when he dragged me into his plan. It was never about me; it was about desperation, circumstance. Still inexcusable, but reading this letter helped me understand. Therapy had given me words for it: forgive, release.

And then the line about love. His words struck like lightning: *don't run from it.*

Images of Tanner flooded my head—our stupid jokes, the car ride lip-syncing, that Ferris wheel, his note, our night together. Each memory sharper, faster, until the truth was undeniable. I wanted him.

Not needed—*wanted*.

I shoved the letter back in its pocket, grabbed my things, and bolted for the stage.

Dallas and Selena turned as I skidded to a stop, my chest heaving.

"What's wrong Violet?" Dallas asked.

The haze lifted and the truth fell out of me. "I want him."

"Want who?" Selena asked.

"Tanner. I won't say I love him, but, I feel something of the same *familia*."

Their smiles lit up the room.
“So?” Selena pressed.
“What? What more do you want me to say?”
“We think you should go after him,” Dallas said.
“Like he owes me money or something?” I laughed.
“No, dumbass! As in you guys should be with each other so you need to fly to him and win him back,” Dallas said.
“That’s ridiculous,” I said. “We have dress rehearsals and the tour is—”
“Is going to be okay if you’re gone for a maximum of two days,” Dallas cut in. “You’ve rehearsed your ass off and everyone thinks you’re ready.”
Selena nodded. “We’ll stay behind to keep everything on track.”
“Guys, this is sweet and all but—”
“Violet, you get one shot in winning this boy back. Just a phone call won’t do. I’m thinking an album drop and a plane ride would do just nicely,” Dallas said with a wink.
Their smiles were infectious. I hugged them tight. “What would I ever do without you? But I can’t leave right now. I’ll leave after rehearsal.”
Selena checked her phone. “Normally, I’d agree. But this is Natty weekend for him, which means he’s going to be hardcore focusing on football. There’s a ton of people there for the festivities and we need you back asap. Plus, it’s a three and half hour flight, give or take. So the sooner you go, the sooner you can get back to finish preparing.”
Mierda. She was right. The National Championship game was this weekend. Tanner didn’t need me messing with his focus, but. . .
“Maybe I should wait until after his game and settle for the phone—”
“Do you want him or not?” Dallas asked.
“I do!”
“Then go! Now! We’ll handle the rest. We’ll talk to the label about dropping the album at midnight tonight too. Just go!” Selena said.
“And if you’re truly going, I’d at least have Stone go with you,” Mamá said from behind us. I hadn’t realized she’d been listening. “Instead of one of the new bodyguards. For old time’s sake.”
Stone gave a small nod. “I’ll happily go if you agree.”
My chest warmed. I missed him as my guard. “Okay, let’s go.”
I bolted down the hall toward the SUVs, then stopped. Shane’s dressing room door loomed ahead. His voice echoed in my head—his stupid “second chance” speech.
I smirked, ripped a page from my songwriting journal, chewed a stick of gum, and taped the note dead center of his door:

Shane,

No way in hell.

Vi

Thirty-One

TANNER

If we weren't filming, interviewing, or practicing for the championship, we rested. We'd rolled into Indianapolis around 7:30 p.m. Friday night—Clemson came in Saturday. The flight had been hyped at first but quieted down as the hours dragged on. Surreal doesn't even cover it.

Not that I hadn't been here before—I had—but this time I was leading from the starting quarterback seat. A whole different high. Being on the sidelines teaches you, makes you hungry, but stepping out here knowing it's yours? That you finally get your chance? You're gonna make the absolute most of it. And here we were again.

The nerves weren't there—just focus. Blissful, sharp focus.

This team was something special. We'd bonded for years, but this season was different. One heartbeat. Everyone bought in, did their part. We'd fought through one of the hardest schedules in college football—took down the Gators, then Ohio State in the playoffs. Now it was Clemson. Time to make another mark.

And I couldn't have asked for better people to do it with. These guys weren't just teammates—they were brothers. Memories we'd carry for life.

Me, William, Preston, and a bunch of the guys were working out in a dimly lit room when someone launched a balloon across the floor. Next thing we knew, it was a dodgeball war. We ducked, rolled, tackled each other to the ground, laughing like we were twelve at a birthday party. The balloons had been part of the welcome decor, but we made good use of them.

Moments like that reminded me why I loved this game.

It also reminded me of what was missing.

I'd graduated top of my class a month ago—before the SEC Championship—with all honors. It should've been the proudest moment of my life. And it was. . . except I wished Violet was there. I thought about her every day. Always something—a phrase, a place, a song—reminded me of her. Even when I tried to shove her out of my head, she lingered.

And the worst part? She didn't want me in her life. She'd made that clear. But I still wished she was here. Even if it was just in the stands, cheering.

Media Day had been brutal. I dodged her name as much as I could, but of course the questions came. They always did. I skimmed the headlines, too. People online said some cruel things about her—stuff that made me sick. No wonder she's the way she is sometimes. She probably read every word of it, too. Maybe that was part of why she pulled away. Maybe not.

It didn't matter now.

Even though I was hurt, I missed her. The guys saw it too, and I hated that I couldn't hide it. They distracted me the best they could, and I was grateful for it.

— ✕ Gameday ✕ —

Breakfast was quiet—every guy locked in. By the time we reached the stadium, tailgates had already blown up. Crimson and orange flags everywhere. It wasn't Graves-Silas, but Lucas Oil had its own vibe. Honestly, from the outside it looked like some giant brick factory with a retractable roof. No trees, no green—just roads, lots, buildings. But walking in, seeing the locker room, seeing *my* jersey hanging up freshly pressed—it hit different.

This was the last time I'd wear it. I wanted to make it count.

Everyone settled into their rituals. Some stretched on the floor with towels over their eyes. Some showered. Some blasted music. William, superstitious as ever, ate exactly three of his mom's snickerdoodles. For me, it was all about rhythm—footwork, throws, breathing. Little meditations to find my zone.

We went out for pregame warmups. Stretched, sprinted, jumped, cut routes. Our conditioning coach was barking us through every drill, hyping us up the way only he could. I worked on throwing outside the pocket, loosening my arm, settling into the turf. Nerves slipped away. Confidence built.

Then it was back inside. Time to suit up for real.

The locker room pulsed with music, towels snapping, teammates hyping each other up. Shoulder pads clanged. Cleats stomped. I bobbed my head to the beat, locked in.

Until I heard it.

That voice.

Her voice.

One of Violet's old songs blasted through the speakers—early-era Scarlett Violets, all edge and bite. My chest tightened instantly. For a second, I turned, half-expecting her to be behind me. But no, just her ghost. Just her voice ripping through the air like it still owned a piece of me.

Most of the guys didn't know our history. They thought I'd be pumped, so they pointed, laughing, trying to drag me into it. But my stomach knotted. My throat closed. I couldn't breathe with her voice bouncing off these walls.

"Next track guys!" I shouted.

The room groaned. Towels whipped at me. But someone skipped it, and Bob Marley's *Three Little Birds* filled the space instead. Instantly, the mood flipped—everyone belting out *every little thing's gonna be alright* at the top of their lungs.

And for a moment, I believed it.

Preston clapped my shoulder. "Hey, sorry about that song. I advised against it, but you know how that goes."

I forced a grin. "No worries, I'm all good."

He didn't buy it, but he played along. I was grateful.

"Alright. You ready? You pumped?"

I closed my eyes, letting the vibrations of the room fill me. The hair on my arms stood straight. This was it. I opened my eyes, met his grin, and smiled back big.

"Oh, yeah. I was born for this moment."

Thirty-Two

Violet

I purchased a bouquet at some fancy florist place on the way to the stadium for him. I honestly didn't know if guys liked receiving *I'm so sorry I messed up* flowers, or flowers in general. Tanner loved giving me a rose, maybe he'd like receiving one too, along with a healthy mix of lilies, sunflowers, carnations, and stargazer lilies—my personal favorite. I drummed my fingers on my stomach with the flowers resting on my chest like a burial as I laid sprawled out on the backseats of an Uber. Stone sat in the front seat with the kid driver named Derek, as the Uber app told me.

His wide, darting eyes in the rearview mirror were a tattle-tale on his curiosity. He licked his lips here and there, as if his tongue had gone dry just thinking of all the questions it wanted to ask. But Stone shot him major side-eye, which wasn't very nice to do.

I stared at the ceiling of this boy's car, which smelled of strong, chemically-made lavender. It was clean though, *gracias a Dios*. I kept my feet off the seats and crammed them uncomfortably off the edge. Toasty with the heat on, I could almost nap. The drumming on my stomach slightly eased the anxieties sending my heart to the races and causing a riot in my stomach. Also, since these windows weren't blacked out, lying down seemed the best way to stay hidden.

Will he be happy to see me? Will his face light up in surprise? Will he forgive me? Will he take me back? Will he like these flowers? Does he even personally like flowers? Uf, I shouldn't be doing this today of all days.

A good person would at least wait until after the game. But my sisters had a point. A phone call wouldn't do, even if it's understandable given my tour. And I couldn't wait any longer if I really want to do this.

I recognized the music softly playing in the background—drowned by my thoughts. *Is that my new album?* I shot up. I figured I would ease the driver's nerves while we idled in traffic.

"You can speak to me, by the way. I don't bite, and neither does Stone, despite his glare."

"Speak for yourself," Stone said.

"Thank you so much, Violet! I'm a huge fan! I mean, *huge*. My sisters and I all have matching tattoos of 'broken ego makes for softer hearts' on our right rib," he said, before taking a sip of soda.

"Really? That is so awesome! You'll have to show me when—"

Immediately, he raised his shirt on his right side and I leaned over the console. In script, the line broken egos makes for softer hearts from our album *Blued* was tattooed right where he said. "Oh, wow. You weren't kidding. That is so beautiful! I'm very honored to have our words etched into your skin. What are the names of your sisters?"

"Dayna and Sabrina."

"Such gorgeous names. How about we take a video while we wait in traffic to send to them? Hopefully they'll send one back and I can see them," I said.

Meeting fans was the highlight of my life. They made the experience unforgettable and supported my dream. How could I not want to know every single one of my fans?

“Oh my god. Really? That would be the best thing of my life! I’m so honored to be your Uber driver!” he said.

He snatched his phone off his phone mount and began the video. “Guess who I’m driving to the national championship game! I can’t believe it, Day and Brina! We’re even jamming to her new album that dropped today!”

I waved into the camera, mirroring my perfectly made-up face. I wore my signature hairdo—a braided bun, this one low and tight—and Tanner’s jacket over warm clothes with the temperatures close to the negatives. And I thought home was cold. “Hi, Dayna and Sabrina! I love your names. Your nicknames sound like they could be one, creative name. I like it. Also, I’ve been meaning to ask you Derek, when did this album drop?”

“Midnight last night. You didn’t know?”

“I knew it was dropping, I just didn’t know when. What’s your favorite song so far?”

“Oh my god, Violet Adair is asking me to pick a favorite! Geez, I don’t know if I can. Every song has such intimate, specifically detailed lyrics. The melodies are like listening to angels sing. I can’t do it, I can’t do it!”

Stone allowed a side grin to sneak up on us.

I laughed. “Okay, okay. I won’t make you. I appreciate your love and support of my music.” I felt so deeply touched, I hugged him. It was awkward because of his seat blocking a natural-formed hug, but he was thrilled either way.

He ended the video and sent it off to his sisters, his eyes watered. “Your guys’ music has changed our lives! It has gotten us through such hard times.”

I teared up instinctively. “Don’t cry! You’re gonna make me cry. You and all the fans in the world have changed our lives. So it’s an even exchange.”

He nodded excitedly.

“I do have a question though,” I said.

The traffic broke at the front of the long line and Derek threw the car into drive, easing on the gas.

“Yes, anything!”

“As a person of the male species, how do you feel about receiving flowers?”

Derek dropped Stone and me behind the stadium where I was to meet William at one of the back entrances. We’d talked the rest of the way about the album, my sisters and our music, and Tanner—about how I was there to apologize. I didn’t spill all the beans, and I made sure to tell him to keep it between himself and his sisters if possible. My fans were protective and loyal—another reason they’re the best in the world. I did get to see Dayna and Sabrina’s beautiful, crying faces before I had to hop out though. A treat.

I texted William to let him know Stone and I waited out back, flowers in hand. A few moments later, William popped his head out the door and grinned when his eyes fell on me. Once inside, we hugged like best friends who hadn’t seen each other for a whole summer.

“It’s so great to see you again, Violet.”

“Likewise, Will. You look great.” I meant it too. His blond hair had grown almost to his shoulders, uniformed in shoulder pads and a jersey. He reminded me of Sunshine from

Remember the Titans, which was adorable—especially since I used to have a crush on Sunshine my whole childhood-life. The game was starting soon, I had to get to Tanner.

“So do you. Tanner is going to flip his lid when he sees you! Which reminds me.”

William pulled out two VIP passes of some sorts and threw one over my neck. “This’ll get you close to him. You’re lucky I’m able to pull a few strings.”

William eyed Stone and handed him his pass. He looked back at me. “Who’s the guy?”

“This is Stone, my official bodyguard.”

William mouthed *ahh*, then stepped forward. Stone and I followed.

“So, do you really think he’ll be happy to see me?”

“Absolutely. Whether he’ll show it is a matter of question. He is rather hurt over those photos of you and Shane.”

Through sharp turns and back ways—cold air, mixed bright-to-dim lighting—I could hear booming music, rumbling, and cheers inside the heart of the stadium. A sold-out game, and I didn’t have a ticket, which left me wondering how I would stick around. Stone stayed close behind us.

“I knew it. I knew he’d see those photos. Stupid paps. Always creating stories around the truth.”

“So, what is the truth?”

“I don’t think you have to ask me that, considering you’re helping me get to Tanner in the middle of a very important game that I should really wait to talk to him about afterwards.” My right hand slid over stone-cold bricks, a feeling I admired.

William smirked. “I suppose you’re right. Look, if I wasn’t one-hundred-percent sure Tanner could still focus on the championship with you here, then I wouldn’t bother helping you reach him before the game. But you have to make it quick, you’ve got fifteen minutes.”

We made it. I’d never stared at two more intimidating double doors than the locker room’s. I gulped. Did I even plan a speech? *Oh dios. I better start now.*

William disappeared inside, saying to leave the rest to him and that he loved the new album with a mysterious wink. He even handed me two sold-out tickets meant for his sisters, who couldn’t make it. A shame.

I paced in a small circle to the side of the doors while Stone stood tall with arms crossed, expression stern, calm. Cameramen waited off to the side in the tunnel for the team to come out. Many stared at me and one even pointed a camera. I quickly turned just as Stone blocked their view. This is no one else’s business but mine and Tanner’s. Maybe I should go. This isn’t a good time. In fact, it’s a terrible time. I’m a terrible person. I’m gonna go. Yep, yep, gonna go.

As I took a few flushed steps, the doors flung open. Flashes of crimson and white uniforms surged into view. Shouts of hype and claps echoed off the tunnel walls. I spotted William and Tanner together in full uniform, helmets on. William grabbed Tanner by the shoulder, said something into his facemask, and pointed to me. *¡Carajo!* No turning back now.

Tanner approached slowly, parting the river of rushing teammates like he was seeing a ghost for the first time. “It’s really you isn’t it?”

I couldn’t tell if he was happy, upset, or shocked. Maybe all the above? “Yeah. It’s me.”

He took his helmet off and stood in front of me, gently gazing down at me like he was trying to figure me out—my motive. He glanced at the flowers in my hand, the jacket on my body, then met my eyes. “I—what are you doing here?”

It took me a beat to process everything. Thick, black lines underneath his eyes accented them like makeup somehow. He stood so tall, so confident, so gorgeous, and he stared at

me—someone he'd wanted out of every girl in this world with fewer problems, more beauty, more charm, more this and less that. But the way he looked into my eyes filled me with more confidence—reminded me why I'd flown all the way out here and why not to chicken out now. "I want to apologize."

Tanner slightly turned his head and narrowed his eyes. "Really? For what?"

I glanced past him at the cameras, though Stone continued to block their view. "There's cameras filming us, we should probably move this conversation somewhere more privately."

He peeked behind him and finally agreed; we breezed around the corner he pointed to with his helmet. Stone stood behind Tanner, a wall between us and the lenses.

"I want to apologize for how things ended between us. I regret everything I said and letting you go. While a lot of it was true and logically it makes more sense for us not to be together than be together, I don't care."

I could see his mind reeling, trying to decide which question to land on. "What about Shane?"

Knew that was coming. Cursed paps making this harder. "Tanner, there's nothing going on between Shane and I. You know how the paparazzi stages things and make up gossip."

"So Shane wasn't really grabbing your hand and looking at you like—" he couldn't finish, didn't want to.

"Okay, that did happen. But it really isn't what it looks like. Shane went on and on about getting back together. I told him I appreciate the apology and everything, but I have more important things to think about."

"So you didn't say no."

"No, I did. Right before I got on the plane here. The point is that I realize after these past few months Tanner is that I can't stop thinking about you. I can't stop writing about you. I can't stop thinking about your smile. You're everywhere. I just can't stop. I want you in my life. You've brought so much balance, light, and happiness. While I've remained focused on what I need to, I just—I want you around."

Tanner's eyes softened but stayed unsure. Like he wanted to believe me—really, really wanted to—but he was still hurt. Words could be a bandage, but wounds need time.

"Violet, I'm not going to pretend that I haven't thought about you since you left. I'm not going to pretend I'm not hurt by what you said. And then whatever happened with Shane, I believe you. You deserve better than that garbage and I'm happy you know that. And I won't pretend I haven't been dreaming about a moment like this because I haven't moved on like I said I was going to. But you have to understand that you left. You're the one that ran off without the real reason why and just left me here to deal with the consequences of getting emotionally involved."

I couldn't deny he had reason to be upset, doubtful, wounded. The Violet from a handful of months ago would've said he had every damn single right. I felt hopeful that he hadn't stopped thinking about me like I hadn't about him, but I knew it would take more than I'm sorry and I want you back.

"I know. I wasn't lying when I gave you my reasons, they just weren't all of them. You're right, it was wrong of me to just run off at first sight of a mountain. And I'm not trying to point fingers here, but you got yourself involved in my business. So if you're to blame anyone for emotional involvement, it's yourself. You hurt me too Tanner, good intentions or not, I trusted you. And while that was a familiar wound being stabbed at, I forgive it. You wanna know why?"

Because you were right. If I'm to truly know you and your heart, then I know I was right to trust and have faith that you wouldn't tell anyone my secrets."

He nodded. "I appreciate that. Really, I do. And I forgive you. But how do I know you're not just going to run the minute things get hard, get uncomfortable, get. . .get—"

"I know how hard it is to trust in someone, Tanner. Believe me, I've been through it so many times. But I'm not afraid anymore. I don't care what people are going to say or assume. I don't care that people are going to try and divide us and pin us against each other. The fact of the matter is that I trust you and I want us enough to really give this the try it deserves. I'm not going to run anymore. I want that second chance. I don't want this with anyone else. I don't care about any other guy in this world but you, Mr. McGrey. I'm asking you to trust me."

Tanner glanced everywhere but my eyes, weighing it. "I'm sorry, Violet. But I don't know. I can't just take words anymore. How can I trust to let you in and that you won't trailblaze right back out?"

Defeat nipped at me—frustration too. I thought back to his persistence, his stubbornness the day we hid from the paps. He'd wanted the tiniest hint I could give to guide him into knowing me. Wait, that's it. The album. "You know what, Tanner. The best answer I can give you is that maybe you need to listen to a little more music, I think that will help."

A flicker of confusion—and déjà vu—crossed his face, but before he could answer, William slipped in behind us (with a nod from Stone) and tapped Tanner's shoulder. "Tanner, it's time. They're about to call us out onto the field."

Tanner's face shifted from soft-serious to focus-serious. A mode I knew all too well. "I'm sorry, Violet."

With that, he threw on his helmet, clicked it into place, and jogged off with William to go win a championship. I hung my head, the bouquet still in my solemn, sweaty, shaking hand.

An arm slid around my shoulders and pulled me in. A single tear trailed down my cheek. *Mi corazón está tan roto.*

Thirty-Three

TANNER

In the first half, we put up thirty-five; Clemson had seventeen. The third quarter turned into a battleground. They punched in a touchdown; we answered with ten. Our defense was at its sharpest—best all season. When the fourth quarter hit, every fan threw up four fingers. Tradition.

Clemson had it at midfield. Hand-off, crease up the middle—looked like their back might pop free—until our safety detonated him. The whole place went “Oooo.” Then a flag.

“Personal foul. Number thirty-eight. Helmet to helmet. Fifteen-yard penalty. Automatic first down.”

Our DB flung up his hands and pleaded his case; the ref walked away to cool off an already steaming Coach Sayers. Headset-saving territory. I wonder how many of those he’s killed over the years.

Even with a cushion, you never relax. That’s when opponents feast—when you bend at the waist, hands on hips, head drooping. We’re trained not to stare at the clock, but in the fourth there’s mercy. I peeked, counted it down, hungry for the finish.

Back on offense at our thirty-five: snap—whistles, flags. Huddle. “Offside. Number fifty-four. Five-yard penalty. Still second down.” I tapped our guy’s helmet. We’re good.

Snap. Shuffle. Scan. A linebacker broke clean; I spun out, rolled, signaled my back left, and flicked it. He snagged it and knifed ten yards for a first down. Fist-pump. Ninety seconds left. I wanted one more nail.

The stadium tossed a quick Scarlett Violets clip through the speakers—same album as the locker room earlier. It rattled me for a beat. Violet flashed in my head. I shook it off. Focus. You’re almost home.

I crouched, barked the cadence. For a heartbeat I saw her again—Violet crouched across from me, smirking—then she was gone. “HIKE!”

We handed off and banged a few yards. The clock kept rolling—he stayed in bounds. Good. Eat time.

Next snap, their blitz hit like a freight train. Sack, ten yards. Sayers lit us up, then—tick, tick, tick.

Another quick Violets clip. Another ghost of her in the stands. I called the play, broke the huddle, slid into the pocket. Scan deep for the shot to flip the field—and for a blink my wideout was Violet sprinting down the seam before he wasn’t. A hand stabbed the ball; strip. I hit the turf under a pile.

By the time I found air, Clemson was sprinting the fumble into our end zone. Touchdown. The stadium split—cheers, groans. Under thirty seconds, still our game, but it burned. I looked to the sideline expecting Rampage Sayers. Instead: the focused frown, a clap, a shoulder pat. “It’s alright, good job.”

I jogged off—heavy feet, low shoulders. He stopped me. “Hey, it was a mistake. We’ll talk about it and kick ourselves in the ass later, alright? But for now, let’s just enjoy the win.”

I half-grinned, nodded. That's the thing about him—he'll cut you down to keep you humble, and lift you when you're buried.

We fielded the kick. I took knees until the clock bled out.

CHAMPIONS!

Confetti cannons, fireworks, crimson-and-white snow. Opponents shook hands; we shouted, hugged, dove into drifts of paper. One guy stuck out his tongue to catch pieces like flakes. I laughed. William, Preston, Austin crashed into me, bouncing and screaming. Helmet off, I let it all in.

Reporters swarmed—quick hits on the win, the drive, the fumble, the G.O.A.T. Then we clustered for the trophy. Hats and tees materialized; I threw both on over pads. Clemson fans streamed out; our side stayed to belt Rammer Jammer at max volume.

Onstage with the presenters, Coach, and two teammates, I watched the rest of the squad packed tight behind us. Speeches. MVP Defense. MVP Offense. Both humble, both killers. I whooped for them.

Then they waved me to the mic. Smile so big it hurt.

“Tanner, what an unbelievable season you've had with your teammates. How does it feel to be part of such a dynamic and dominant team in college football history?”

“It feels absolutely incredible and I'm so honored. My teammates and I kept our focus and our heads together, you know? We've had such a brotherhood relationship and are loyal to the game and its craft. I couldn't be prouder of everyone than I am right now. They put their faith in me as their quarterback and I put my faith in them. The love we have for the game, the coaches especially, and each other is untouchable. And shout-out to Clemson for playing their hearts out! A worthy opponent.”

“That's really wonderful. Obviously you're going to go out and celebrate once y'all are finished here tonight, but is there anything else you're going to do?”

“Like you said, the obvious is to celebrate with my teammates and my family,” I said with a chuckle.

I looked up into the lit stands—phones blinking, voices rolling—and then back at my brothers. No partner to high-five and whisper we did it to. My mind slid to Violet. Was she here? Still? Emotions didn't mix with adrenaline. I flashed back to her in the tunnel: The best answer I can give you is that maybe you need to listen to a little more music, I think that will help. “But there's some unfinished business I have to take care of. I think I'm gonna go listen to a little music before I do some celebrating.”

“Alright, sounds different! Thank you. Everyone, that was Tanner McGrey, the Crimson Tide's national champion quarterback. Enjoy your win tonight and be safe getting home tomorrow!”

Photos. More scrum. Then the locker room flood. Raucous didn't begin to cover it. After a quick postgame presser with Coach and a couple guys, we came back to the chaos.

Coach pulled us in for the speech. Arms cinched around shoulders, knees bent, swaying. Count, then the fight song. Hands down, hands up: “ROLL TIDE!”

Be smart tonight. Wheels up at 9 a.m. Sharp. The room detonated into showers and street clothes. Photos, videos, strangers in suits sliding between lockers.

As I laced fresh sneakers, William appeared with one earbud in. “Tan the Man, you've got to listen to this album. Immediately.”

I laughed. “An album? Now? Why?”

He handed me the other bud. “I thought about what you said in your speech about listening to music. On a hunch, I went to Scarlett Violet’s apple music artist account to see if they had any new music out. Sure enough, they dropped a brand-new album at midnight last night. I really think you should listen, dude. Literally it’s all anyone is talking about online. I mean, in the music and fandom world.”

I sat twenty minutes, letting tracks roll while most of the team peeled off to families or the night. Preston, William, and Austin lingered, waiting me out. The record was a live wire—artful, emotional, beautiful. It walked through going home, the old hurts, the new ones—and laced through it all, us. See You Again, Blue, Wordless. It was all there. I felt flattered. Exposed. Pulled in.

I scrolled to the closer—Second Chances—and tapped. Piano, bare and honest, a straight apology to me. It echoed the tunnel conversation, but sharper. Her bridges always cut. The last lines:

*“if you change your mind and you’re all about me like I’m all about you
slant your route to meet me under the grand oak tree, if you don’t hate me.”*

When it ended, I felt like *un idiota*—our little Spanish joke. I glanced at the title: *Twelve Confessions of The Gold Queen*. She’s The Blue Queen; gold means healing. Twelve—my jersey number. Twelve tracks. Twelve in Wordless. That wasn’t an accident. She’d told me—listen to more music. Same line as the day under the big oak. She wanted me to hear this, to know she’s not running.

She’s serious.

I popped up from the bench. “I need to find Violet. Is she still in the stadium? Do you know where she is?”

Heads shook.

Bolting down the tunnel and out into the edge of the bowl, seats emptied to cleaning crews. I scanned for her, gave it a few minutes, then let my head drop and turned back toward the locker room.

That’s when I spotted the bouquet propped against the wall, a small envelope tucked behind it with my name in looping cursive. Violet’s bouquet. I lifted it to my nose—soft, not cloying. I’d never been given flowers before. It felt. . . good. I opened the note.

*Congratulations on the win, Champion McGrey. You deserve so much of it.
I wish you nothing but a beautiful and happy life.*

P.S. I knew I was right to pick you as my star quarterback for my Fantasy Football team. Call it a hunch or just a somewhat crazy, nonchalant fan since those teenage-angst years.

Vi

I snorted. *Champion McGrey—maybe I’ll name my son that.* Kidding. I looked at the flowers again, then headed for the door to find my guys and the night.

Thirty-Four

Violet

“Nervous” didn’t cover it—my heart kept searching for an exit and adrenaline ran the show. If there’s one thing true about me, it’s that I’ve never been good at hiding emotions, no matter how hard I pretend.

My hands trembled and grasped each other for dear life.

“I can feel you’re tense from here. Just breathe. It’s going to be fine! Once you’re out there, it’ll be no sweat. You know the steps, the lyrics, the cues, and skidoos. You’re going to kill it. We’re going to kill it!” Selena said.

Our preshow playlist thundered through the arena as my sisters, Mamá, Stone, the dancers, and I hustled from dressing rooms to backstage, Act One costumes on, minutes from lights up. We’d already prayed and rallied the crew. We’ve had record-breaking tours, but this one felt different—bigger. The looks, the set, the lighting, the choreography—everything pushed harder. We’d made a few show-one-only changes, too. The Buzz had bowed out—apparently my door-note landed. Broken egos make for softer hearts. Ha haaaaa, a wise lyric I wrote is ringing trueeeee.

We looked like queens—by design. I wore a red ballgown: lace bodice streaming down the center front and back into solid fabric; glittered black gloves to the elbow; wing earrings; beaded collar; black heels. Everything velcroed for rip-away changes. Dallas glittered in gold; Selena shimmered silver, her dress like couture battle armor with jeweled sandals spiraling her calves; Dallas added a one-shoulder black cape. I watched them banter with dancers, faces electric. My chest warmed. I can do this—for them. Deep breaths.

We took our marks. Night knifed the stadium into near-black. The massive screen in the bowl blinked off; fans shrieked in the dark as the last notes of the preshow track faded. We held the silence for under thirty seconds—let the anticipation crest—then the intro film snapped on. The roar vibrated through my ribs. Anxiety evaporated; current replaced it.

I traded silly faces with my sisters while our recorded voices unspooled like secrets. The screen cut to black again, then slammed into our opening track. The stage glowed: a crumbling ice castle; screen-wrapped catwalks; banners on broken columns with our Heartbreak Kingdom sigil—a heart pierced by a blade, one blood drop falling; a sea dragon sculpted into the wave crest at the thrust’s nose—teasing Act Two.

Dallas hit first from the screen’s edge, singing. The building shook.

*“you know we’re swift guns with a merciless fuse
we’re caught blue-handed when the smoke clears
they ink us in black ‘cause all they see are face tattoos
crowning us in paper so it’s an instant sear to their fire
little they know, we’ve acquired friends in the umpire
suit up, this event requires black tie attire.”*

As she finished the chorus, Selena rose on the right-corner lift, spotlighted against the column, dancers bursting with her. Verse two, full theater. I watched on the backstage monitor, grinning. A tech waved me toward the center throne. I sat with one leg crossed, arched back, wicked smile—persona on, adrenaline humming, last-minute tugs to hair and hem.

The lift delivered us into our kingdom. Light hit; I smirked and sang my line, then floated down the center runway to meet my sisters as the crowd detonated. Welcome back. We missed you.

Performing still feels like flight—if you remember to slow the mind, to clock-out for a breath and see every light in the dark is a person. To hear your words sung back. Echo sections always kill me for that.

We closed *Heartbreak Kingdom* and snapped straight into *Hell Froze Over*, dresses ripping away beneath a ring of dancers to reveal bodysuits: mine black, drowned in sequined flames; Selena in a Spanish-cut piece with gold drips and a red satin fall; Dallas in a black jumpsuit that vanished for ten seconds so armor could be fastened on mid-routine. The ice-castle setting made the punchline obvious; the lyrics tied the bow. Everyone was fully awake now. Time to yank the past into the present with a mashup and two surprise guests.

Adairsville led. Dancers flanked the side walks, skeletal dragons traded for skeletal soldiers, half-masked faces jeweled and ghost-blue eyed, earpieces like blade-mohawks. We hit the first line, drove to the pre-chorus, and were supposed to slide into *A Sign of Things to Come*. Instead, Dallas veered, mic out to the crowd.

“Well hello, beautiful boys and girls of Philadelphia. How are you guys doing tonight?”

The stadium ruptured.

“Oh, I don’t know. I think you could do better than that! How are you doing tonight, Philadelphia?”

A second quake—jumping, waving, cupped hands megaphoning love.

“Wonderful, wonderful. You sound beautiful tonight. I don’t know if you know this, but I’m sure you heard, this tour almost didn’t happen,” Dallas said, continuing. “It’s been a difficult year for the three of us personally, but as you can see we’re all here because no matter what we go through, we push through for you. And it’s not because we have to and it’s not only because we don’t want to let you down, even though we most certainly don’t want to do that. It’s because we love you and you help us through our hardest times in life, just like our music does. And that is evident in your presence tonight, sharing the love of music.”

My sisters looked at me; I blinked—this wasn’t rehearsal. The music bed looped behind them.

“Violet, you are one of the strongest people I have ever known. This year has been extremely taxing on you and I just wanted you to know that I love you and I truly appreciate and take pride in being your big sister.”

“And to show it, we decided to switch up the setlist as a surprise for everyone!” Selena said giddily. As she would, she loved being a part of surprises.

*“some say if she keeps it up she’ll be a nobody
that’s okay, ‘cause she’ll be proving them wrong one day
they can laugh at her being passionate and different
but when I watch her, all I see is someone truly magnificent.”*

Dallas started; tears blurred my lashes. Selena took the next lines.

*“she may not look like me, but everyone is more than skin deep
she is my reason of being, one of three pieces to my soul
sister, oh-ah, sister, sister
I know you wouldn’t, but don’t ever let anyone change you
sister, oh-ah, sister, sister
if something ever happened to you, I would be permanently violet blue.”*

On our debut album we’d each written sister-songs. Selena’s *Dilly-Dally*, my *Dear Sister*, Dallas’s *Violet Eyes*. I pressed fingertips to my nose as tears spilled. I am so, so lucky—even when life refuses to go your way, somebody has it worse.

They kept it inside the mashup frame. When they finished, I hugged them hard and said, “Thank you so much for putting up with me,” then looked out at the sea of faces, “and that goes out to all of you too. I’ve been really selfish, crude, and miserable for most of this year and there’s no reason for it really. Not to the ones that have always been there for me and have always shown me love and support. And I’m never going to do that to anyone again, not to you guys,” I glanced back at my sisters, “And most certainly not to you.”

Chants rose—“We love you! We love you!”

I breathed, feeling the next cue coming, and smiled. “You know what really helped me realize all this? I’ve been avoiding a place for a long time now and really suppressing all the terrible things that happened there for me personally. But in doing so, I also suppressed all the amazing and wonderful things too and that’s no way to live. You need to accept and heal, not run and suppress. I returned home a few months ago and it was bittersweet leaving, something I didn’t think I’d feel going into it to begin with.” I peered at Dallas as a dancer handed her a Fender Strat. “But I guess it’s true what they say. . .”

She hit that immortal riff. “Home Sweet Home, Alabama.”

Dallas ripped; I caught the counter-line on my guitar; the band slammed in. Fireworks, floodlights, backup singers soaring, dancers slicing the air. Dallas and I leaned on opposite crumbled columns; Selena owned the front-center. “Ladies and gentleman, please welcome, Johnny Van Zant!”

The place came unglued as Johnny rose on a throne lift. “Turn it up!” he howled, and we did. It’s my Papi’s song, one of his bands. After the first chorus, we brought Kid Rock out for “All Summer Long” in the mash. Roof? Gone. Act One, obliterated.

We vanished down with the thrones, leaving a crowd buzzing like a hive.

Drenched, alive, and reborn. Coming back from darkness is like a second life—you notice everything with a softer heart, you can’t stop smiling. Act Two’s pirate ship sent the fans feral—song choices hit bullseyes, and we let the stadium sing back at us. Pure magic. We intro’d the band, backup singers, and dancers between *River Of No Return*, *Splinters*, *Piracy*, and *One Condition*—kept the room intimate in the spectacle.

Act Three was euphoria. Angel wings, my blue crown; the cloud-lift floating to Stage B; the piano ascending through the platform like a trick of heaven; the acoustic braid of *Next To You*, *Fallen Angel*, *Miss Perfectly Fine*. Of course I thought of Tanner—on and off all night—especially during *Miss Perfectly Fine*. But even a rightful rejection couldn’t dim me. Not tonight. Tonight I was Violet fucking Adair. We slid *Second Chances* in, too—fresh from the album—for him, and for home, and for the road back.

Act Four's intro film, *Embracing the Mysterious Reputation*, hit me with chills. The message is the point: define yourself and keep it, femme fatale energy—hence opening on *Persona(L)*.

We stood beneath lamp posts in blackout, wide-brim fedoras hiding our eyes—mine crimson, Dallas's black; wireless headsets near our painted mouths. Dallas and I in black coats and heavy boots; Selena—lead dancer—sharp in white with ruby heels. Cigarette holders as props. Stillness. Then the crowd swelled and the track kicked. A spotlight found Selena and the smoke turned the stage into a dream. She lifted her head, smirked at the camera, and sang.

*“listen for the best
everyone wanna be her friend to get rich off her secrets
boys lining up to be her ex just to be famous
with friends like that who needs enemies
betrayal so deep it lasts for centuries, generational anxiety
that ego's black and blue
she's more than her identity with you
and she could dress it up
but all she wants is to strip it down, down, down (hasta el final).”*

Dallas and I slid into sync behind her as spotlights bloomed. Dancers delivered our custom staffs and whisked away the boquillas. Dallas took the pre-chorus.

*“so she waits in the shadows of quiet nights
under dim light, ready to strike
mysterious and beautiful, she'll lure you to your fate
a dynamic image I can't articulate
an anti-hero with hidden eyes and painted lips
smirking under a big-brimmed hat, hourglass hips.”*

Faces blazed in the first rows and all the way back—our people, lit like constellations. Together, we hit the chorus.

*“and she says, ‘you made that shit personal (per-sona-l)
‘cause you know I take it personal (per-sona-l)
a crafted façade insulting my very reason of being
and you're reapin', I don't agree for disagreeing
I'm dangerous, viciously precious in every way
I don't show up to play, I show up to win
feelin' the happiest I've ever been and they declare it a sin
and I take that shit persona-l (per-sona-l).”*

The lighting stayed moody on purpose; smoke sculpted the drama. Choreography kept our faces hidden the whole track—just mouths and lipstick—because symbolism matters.

My verse, center stage:

*“always the person to cry why barefooted in wilder woods
licking their chops, she was their game afoot*

*a handsome reward out for her arrest
you couldn't catch her in her highest heels and tightest dress
a brass knuckle underneath an oven mitt
there's nothing she loves more than being underestimated
that ego's black and blue, know it's coming for you
emerging from dark spaces, she knows your hiding places."*

Selena slipped in beside me, smiling, and took the next pre.

*"and you could hear her coming in the night
the taunting strike of her cane just isn't right
the whiff of smoke wafts from her eccentric boquilla
she'll lure you to your fate, you know what's at stake
mysterious and beautiful under a big-brimmed vanilla hat
a dynamic image I can't articulate."*

We hit the chorus again, then Dallas owned the bridge.

*"you did me wrong, stepping out of line
played me like a song and tried taking what's mine
but I always get even one way or another
'cause honey, I may appear like a honeymoon
but underneath I'm a raging catastrophe like no other."*

On the last line, we launched our hats into the sea of hands. The big screen caught it—revealing half-masks beneath, a Phantom cut. Fans shrieked; lights strobed. The masks matched our *Crass + Callous* era—Selena's white with gold filigree; Dallas's bicolor with notes and crack-lines; mine white, music notes on brow and cheek, ocean-blue shading, gold stitched brows and eyes. Old lore, new power.

We slammed into *Stella*, ripping off coats to final looks—power suits: mine blush with a train; Selena, white and gold two-piece with train; Dallas, baby blue mini with a cape, pink-and-gold embroidery. *Stella* is a cult favorite for a reason.

One last mash: *WOW*, *Bad Temper*, *Masquerade*. We ran loose—steps tight, smiles looser—blowing kisses, waving, letting the floor breathe. On the final lyric of *Masquerade*, we tore off the masks. Breathing hard, we let the moment land. Then thank-yous, bows, gone on the lift.

Backstage was chaos and joy. We chased each other down the run, grabbed waters, headed for dressing rooms to reset for meet and greet.

"That was so much fun!" Dallas said.

"It was! I think this show will be my favorite of all time," Selena said, agreeing.

I laughed. "It was definitely memorable. I still can't believe Johnny Van Zant and Kid Rock agreed to sing with us on stage. Can it get more epic than that? My adrenaline is running!"

"Well, get ready for it to completely ditch you then," Dallas said, smiling past me.

I knew that smile. She launched into Preston's arms a few steps ahead. Tuscaloosa jerseys crowded the hall—Austin, William—half the Reign. My brain leapt to Tanner; I found him a beat later.

He moved slower than the pack, all black except for his high school baseball cap from Bet Night, VIP pass bouncing on a lanyard. This had my sisters' fingerprints all over it.

The guys swarmed Dallas and Selena first—congrats, hugs. Tanner and I locked eyes; he grinned. Not just a grin—the roguish, boyish side-grin. Dallas was right: my adrenaline left—and took my heart.

He reached me; time slowed. Honey eyes gentle; freckles dusted like someone had breathed them on; copper scruff he'd never had before and I immediately loved. I clasped my hands behind my back and smirked.

"Well, well, well, isn't it Champion McGrey."

"I suppose it is. I finally made the Great Violet Adair's Fantasy Football Roster, I had to thank her in person." He pulled a small folded card from his jacket's inner pocket—my note.

I couldn't help the smile. "You impressed me so much, you left me no choice but to draft you. And I suppose I made you quite a handsome offer you couldn't refuse."

We laughed—our brand of stupid flirting.

"Violet, the show was unbelievable. You were truly incredible up there. I know how hard you worked to get there and believe me; the fans were absolutely ballistic out of their minds for all of it. Including me."

Heat rushed my collar. "Thank you, Tanner. That means a lot."

"But if I'm being honest, I didn't come to the show only to watch it. Your sisters were kind enough to let me come and grant me access back here to see you without you knowing. I wanted it to be a surprise."

I shot my sisters a grateful half-smile and turned back. "Okay, shoot. Not to be rude, but I do have fans waiting in a meet and greet room. If I leave them in there too long, they just might get hostile like I was when we met."

"Right. I don't think that's possible, but we'll skip over that for later," he said with a chuckle, then, "Violet, I wanted you to know I'm sorry for the wingman thing. I know it came off very deceiving and in no way should I've let it get that far as I did. But I can't regret doing it because if I do, then I regret us. And I don't regret us at all."

"I know. I agree. I forgive you."

"Thank you. Also, I listened to the album. Twelve Confessions of The Gold Queen, right after the championship win in the locker room. Since then, I've probably had it on loop fifty times. First of all, wow. You wrote and recorded everything in a handful of months? That's unbelievable. And it's amazing. The storytelling, the imagery, the details, the way you capture us and how we were feeling. I'm just blown away at your talent. But anyway, second, I want you to know I could never hate you."

Second Chances. Twelfth track. Bridge, eighth line, last five words.

"No?"

"Of course not. You mean way too much to me. Besides, how could you when The Blue Queen who never writes love songs, writes you one."

"The Gold Queen wrote those songs, and she actually wrote twenty-five. But I see. So, the things you said at the—"

"I meant them," he said, then exhaled. "I did a lot of thinking about what you said. When we won the championship and I answered those questions from the presenter, I realized something. I had my teammates, my family, but I didn't have a *person* to share that with. Someone to turn to, high-five and say, 'we did it!'"

"Okay."

“What I’m trying to say is the only person I thought about was you. I wasn’t sure if you were there, and even if you were, we’re not lovers.”

Tears brimmed his eyes when he looked away, then gazed into mine. “And I want to be. I want you, and everything you carry. If I could say you truly knew my heart wasn’t trying to be malicious with the wingman incident, then I have to give you that same credit. I know why you did it. I didn’t agree with it, but I understood and respected it.”

He glanced at the ground between us. “I’ve tried to get over you. But honestly, these past few months, other than football, all I’ve thought about is you.”

My eyes lit and stung. “I left for much more cowardly reasons. I searched myself online and read all these headlines about me, then you, then me *and* you. Horrible, awful, untrue things about me are what I’m used to. But when I saw those headlines coming after you and your career because of me, I couldn’t let that happen. You’ve worked too hard for it to not be taken seriously because of a trainwreck girl.”

“Violet, you’re not a trainwreck. And you’re more than some girl to me. I don’t let any of the outside noise get in my head, about you or my career. At the end of the day, I know what I want and what I want to work hard for.”

“You have no idea exactly what you’re getting yourself into with me and my lifestyle. You thought my condo was bad, you haven’t seen anything yet.”

He took my hands. “Whatever hardships we might face, we’re gonna face them together. I can handle it. We can discuss strategy later if you want. But right now, I just want to know if it’s not too late to pick up where we left off.”

I smiled—out of words and full of them. He’d forgiven me, I’d forgiven him, and when his life was sprinting toward an NFL Draft, he’d flown to watch me live my dream.

I kissed him. Cameras, eyes—let them. He brushed my cheek with his thumb; we smiled into the second kiss like we’d been waiting months to breathe.

THE END.