

Song 11

Song 11. This Is How You Charm Me

I was proven right a couple of hours later.

We were in the kitchen taking our lunch break and going over the areas in the house we had le , when Ashton glided in. And that was what he did. The smooth entrance couldn't be attributed to the mere act of walking. It was also how my trouble-meter flared life.

I was glad to not be the only person who found it strange. Ma looked at him like he was the second weirdest person she'd ever met, a er me, and the other cleaning girl chocked on her sandwich as she saw him.

"Are you okay?" he asked her.

My ma plastered on a smile and set her food down on the plate, ignoring the other girl as she gulped large quantities of water down. "Can we help you with something?"

As the other girl recovered he shi ed his attention to my ma. "Yes, well. I just a got call from the school. Vera and I have to go back, I'm afraid."

That caught me in the middle of taking a bite and I froze, my sandwich hovering just shy of my chompers.

I so wanted it to be true, but I was afraid that if I said anything my ma would dismiss it all as a lie.

Kudos to my ma for keeping the pleasant facade intact. Her teeth almost shone as she smiled. "What do you mean?"

Ashton slowly leaned on the kitchen island. He looked down and bit his lower lip. Then he looked up. That was what I had come to recognize as his killer look. From the corner of my eyes I saw the other two women visibly melt. Not even Victoria Cecilia de la Cruz Vazquez was immune.

"Mr. Burlington, the advisor for the senior year, just called me. It turns out that we've been fit in as a last minute replacement for a di erent orchestra that was supposed to play for the children's hospital benefit next weekend. We need to start rehearsals ASAP."

But my ma was stronger and more stubborn than anyone gave her credit for. She took a sip of water and asked him, "What does that have to do with my daughter?"

Ashton's eyebrows went up. He looked at me for only a second. "She's the lead singer of the orchestra."

My ma and the other girl turned to me. The latter with some admiration. The former couldn't care two shits.

"Is she," my ma said in a way that was not at all a question. She took a bite of her sandwich. I knew this tactic. She'd used it on me a million times when she wanted me to think she already knew what I'd done and make me panic on my own. It usually worked like a charm, but Ashton didn't seem to be crumbling under the pressure.

He pulled out his cellphone, tapped it a couple of times and handed it to her. "I'm dialing the school, feel free to confirm for yourself."

Skeptical as fuck, my ma took the phone from him, checked the number on it and I guessed she must have memorized it, because she seemed to trust it. She put the phone on her ear and started at whomever picked up on the other side.

"Yes, hi. This is Victoria de la Cruz, I'm Vera's mother," she said to it, turning her back to us. "May I speak with the Mother Superior?"

As she waited to speak with her, I turned to Ashton. The smile on his face was freaking me out a bit. When he winked at me I freaked out a lot more.

"Hello," my ma said, louder. "I just wanted to confirm — ah, yes. Is it true?"

My eyes went wide as saucers as my ma's face slid from polite to irritated, then to resigned.

"Okay, thank you. I will." A er that she hung up and handed Ashton his phone in return. Without looking at me she said, "Vera Maria, grab your things from the car and go back to school. It seems they do need you."

Was that what winning the lottery felt like?

I looked up, thanking the Lord for this miracle. Telling Him I would never doubt again.

But what I'd told the Mother Superior a few days ago was true. I was not used to good things happening to me without a catch. "Um, ma, are sure? You'll be short handed here."

She waved one hand and fished into her apron pockets with the other one. She produced the car keys and gave them to me. "We made good progress in the morning. Here, come back and give me the key before you go."

I picked the keys from her hand like they were the holy grail of freedom. Still, I tried not to look too pleased, lest my ma got ticked o and decided to call the nuns and tell them to screw o .

I turned away from ma, caught Ashton's eye and mouthed thank you. Aloud I said, "I'll see you in school, then."

He tilted his head. "What do you mean you'll see me there? I'll drive us." When we all looked at him, he just shrugged. "I have a car."

Of course he did. He probably had everything he dreamed of. That was totally not me sounding jealous because I'd always wanted a car for myself, nope.

I decided to count myself lucky already and all but ran out of the kitchen from the service back door. I put the key in the lock in the trunk of ma's car and got my stu out. I was back in the house in record time. My cheeks hurt from not trying to smile.

Reluctantly ma grabbed the keys back and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "Text me when you're back in school, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ready?" Ashton asked, hands in his pockets. Cool as a cucumber, as though he hadn't just disrupted my day, and my weekend, in the best possible way. At that second I couldn't help but like him.

"Yep."

I followed him out the house from the front door. Leaving this mansion felt like leaving a modern day castle, all marble floors and decoration out of a catalogue. Parked out front was a white Jeep, with black letters that read Rubicon. I shook my head. So maybe it wasn't the car I'd have expected him to drive, something low on the ground, in a flashy color and with a loud engine, but at that moment it felt like a carriage that was taking me to the ball with the Prince Charming.

As we climbed into the vehicle I guessed it was Prince Charming, actually, who was driving the carriage to his own party where a princess was waiting for him, and I was actually the mouse companion. He turned on the car and filled the car with the random sounds of commercials on the radio. I waved goodbye at his house as we pulled out into the street and sat back, pleased as punch, to have made such an easy escape.

A er a few minutes on the road I noticed that he drove by and away from our boarding school.

With narrow eyes I turned to him. "Um, where are you going?"

His smile made me want to punch him.

"I didn't lie to your mom, but I was thinking we could take a little detour since we just have to be back by curfew and practice starts tomorrow."

"If this detour is leading to a Starbucks I'm fine with that."

Blue eyes flashed to me for a second, but I was glad he kept them on the road. It was only when he pulled to a stop at a red light that he spoke again.

"I think I know where my brother is."

I folded my arms and paraphrased my ma from earlier. "And what does that have to do with me?"

He brushed his fingers through his hair and bit his lower lip. I swatted his thigh.

"Stop doing that!"

Eyes wide he asked, "What?"

"Stop biting your lip and looking up like a puppy. I'm sure it gets you everything you want but stop using it on me."

His lips quirked. "Because it's working?"

"Because it's pissing me o , and if you don't answer my question I'll get violent, and guess what?"

I could tell he was almost on the verge of laughing. "What?" he asked.

"The cops won't care that I beat you up when I tell them you kidnapped me."

Ashton snorted and rolled his eyes. The light turn green and we advanced in the tra ic.

"I'm not kidnapping you. It looked to me like you were pretty happy to come." When that reasoning obviously didn't please me he sighed.

"To answer your question, nothing. This has nothing to do with you. But I could use with a friend right now."

I looked out the window as we le the pretty houses and moved onto the, still nice, but more middle class areas of Winter Park. We rolled onto Baldwin Park and drove by Metropolitan High School. A way nicer school than the one I'd been attending all my high school career.

I sni ed and looked back at him. "Don't you have a million other friends?"

He gripped the steering wheel just a tad harder. "Not really. I thought I had a handful but that was all my imagination."

If he was referring to Madison and Quinn, I felt kinda bad for bringing that up. I looked down at my clasped hands on my lap and figured that since he'd saved me from at least five more hours of cleaning his house, I'd just cut him a break.

"Okay," I said. "Where's your brother then?"

Instead of answering my question directly he clicked his tongue, hummed deep in his throat, and changed the topic.

"So," he started. "I thought we could take advantage of this trip to start practicing. I thought we could take advantage of the recital."

I fixed my best resting bitch face on him. Even though he kept his focus straight on the road, I could tell that it was having an impact on him. His large body recoiled away from me almost all the way to his door.

"You said the word trip." I recognized the steel in my ma's voice in mine. "As in, wherever your brother's at is not Orlando."

He pursed his lips. I noticed we got on the I-4.

"You're correct," he finally said. "He's not in Orlando."

My eyes narrowed to slits. "But he's in Florida, right?"

He nodded. He swallowed hard.

"Ashton." He looked at me. The fact that he looked adorable when he was scared made me even more pissed. I drew in a deep, deep breath. "Where are we going?"

"Sarasota," he spat out.

I shrieked and smacked him where I could reach. His arm, I thought. Then I hit him a second time for good measure. He cringed at the blows.

"Jesus, V. Are you a boxer?"

I had so many questions, but the one I started with was. "Who told you to call me V?" And because he was too slow to answer me I fired a few more. "And did it ever occur to you to, I don't know, ask if I wanted to go to Sarasota? I don't want to get in trouble with the school!" I paused, and looked o into the distance as a sudden thought struck me. "Why do you even think he's there?"

"Finally, an easy question." He had the gall to smile at me. "It's where our crazy aunt that our dad hates lives. She's the only person who could've taken him in in such short notice."

"Crazy aunt, really? And you're taking me there?"

His eyes rolled. "Relax, she's just too much of a hippie for my dad's conservative standards. She's not some psycho who's going to roast you over a bonfire."

"That's reassuring," I said sarcastically.

"And we'll be back on time before curfew." He turned to me and anyone just arriving to this conversation would have thought he looked the picture of innocence. "Trust me."

SONG OF THE DAY: Nickelback - This is How You Remind Me