Song 12 √ **Vitamin Ashton (Leading**

Us Along)

Fun story, but the last time a guy asked me to trust him, I'd almost given him my virginity. I'd been at one of Leti's fave parties last year. We'd got way past tipsy and I'd been dancing with one of DeAndre's friends a bit too tight. He was not as good looking and later I learned definitely not as nice, but he'd paid attention to me that night and we danced well. So well, really, that I let my guard down and let loose. I remembered it like it was yesterday. They'd been playing a classic by Tito El Bambino when he leaned down and whispered in my ear that we should find a đ room. We'd stumbled upstairs in between giggles and sloppy kisses, and at that point I hadn't cared about notions like losing my virginity should be with someone I loved and all that jazz. I'd just felt hot and tingly and a boy had touched me in ways I liked. "Trust me," he'd said once we found an empty room and closed the door. We started kissing and lost clothing items, one by one. He sat on the bed and pulled me closer. I was drunk on alcohol and hormones and my feet tripped on our clothes. I went flying on him and, well, a er that I'd sobered quickly. a It took what felt like an eternity for him to get his breath back, but by that point the nice mood had vanished. As he put on his clothes and glared at me he said words that were engrained in my head. The least insulting of which had been fat a⁷ Come to think, that had actually been the last party in the barrio I'd been to. I felt like everybody knew what had happened, or hadn't happened, a er that and I just didn't want to deal with their mierda. I sighed. That all wasn't here or there and I didn't know why I remembered it again. It wasn't like this situation and that had any comparison. "Okay, I'm sorry." Ashton's voice brought my wandering mind back to my body in his car. "I should've given you a choice." I folded my arms. "You still could. I mean, there's still time for you to turn around and take me back to school." That shut him up for a moment. a "I could. If that's what you want?" I drummed my fingers on my thighs and looked out at the more sparse buildings on the outskirts of the city. If we went back to the school, I'd be able to catch up on my homework. I guess I probably would also have to see what the fuss was about in the music club. I looked at his profile from the corner of my eye. Along the course of a week I'd somehow come to terms with the fact that someone like him was in my life. I didn't think it was going to last because, hey, my life was not a telenovela love story between the rich boy and the poor girl, or even the pretty boy and the ugly duckling girl, but I was kinda curious to see how it could be to hang out with someone who was completely out of my sphere of reach. "No, not really." I smiled as he startled. "All that fuss for nothing?" I shrugged. "Not for nothing. We do have to be back by curfew and we're looking at four hours on the road, to and fro." a "Easy, it's still early." We did take advantage of the entire two hours on the way to Sarasota for him to educate me on rich people music. He handed me his iPhone to find a few playlists on it. It was locked and I handed it back to him. He just o ered me his thumb to place it on the home button. I berated myself for the sparks I felt when I touched his hand. a This was nothing. Just two maybe friends, hanging out. I'd be crazy to get funny ideas in my head about him. a I didn't know how Ashton didn't drive into a ditch when I started attempting to sing to some piece of opera that I was trying to learn on the spot. I sounded horrible and there was no way around it. a The asshole started to laugh. My face was burning and I was sure I was going to try. I had no idea how I was going to possibly do this at competitions. "Oh my God, I am so fucked." He took enough pity on me to stop cackling like a hyena. "You're breathing wrong and that's why you sound like a banshee." I gasped. The mirth in his blue eyes made me feel even hotter. Like I was staring at the Caribbean under the midday sun. Or maybe I was just pissed. I folded my arms and looked away. "Stop making fun of me. No one's perfect on their first try at something new." "True, I was pretty shitty the first time I picked up a guitar." He paused. "Or a violin. Or a piano-" å I slowly turned my eyes back to him. "Just how many instruments can you play?" "A few," he said vaguely, looking out to the traic. "Let's try again. I promise I won't laugh this time." I restarted the song on his phone and found the page with the lyrics again. At least it was in English and I wasn't attempting to sing something in Italian or French. I listened to the song on repeat a few times, trying my best to get a vibe for it. Most of the times, without realizing, I made up a story about each song I heard. If I liked the story, I felt compelled to be a part of it by singing it. It was easy to sing a lot of Latin party songs because they were all about having a good time, one way or another. And that was really all I wanted. a This was di erent. It was homework. I'd never had to force myself to sing. That, and the unfamiliar beats of classical instruments had thrown me for a loop completely. a Ashton could tell when I got burned out because he turned o the radio. "Okay, what are you feeling right now?" he asked. When I had no reaction he glanced at me. "What?" "That's honestly one of the weirdest questions I've been asked." A rest stop came up ahead and he pulled into the exit. My eyebrows went up as he stopped and got out of the car. He walked around it and opened my door. a "Well?" "What?" I asked him. "Don't you want to stretch your legs?" đ We'd only been on the road for an hour or so and it wasn't like I was dying of cramps, but a little fresh air couldn't hurt. I jumped out of the car and took a deep breath. The sun was high in the sky and so bright that I had to squeeze my eyes shut. It was pretty hot. A perfect day for the beach. Ashton walked over to a bench on the rest stop and climbed on it. I looked around, but we were alone and there was no one else to give us shit. "Music is a feeling," he said suddenly, spreading his arms wide as he took a deep breath. "And feelings in turn can become music. Why do you think so many songs are about love?" He dropped his arms and looked back at me. I looked down, realizing I was still in my cleaning maid uniform. A smile came to my face at how strange this weekend had turned. "Come up here." I looked up with a question in my eyes and he just motioned me toward the bench. I climbed it with some di iculty, and he grabbed my hand to help me. I brushed myself o and fixed my dress. "What now?" I looked ahead of me. A patch of green field was ahead of us until the eye could see. The noise from the highway hit us from behind, at odds with the chirps from birds overhead and the insects that we couldn't see among the grass. And then there was us in the middle. He motioned all around us and asked, "What do you feel when you take in the moment? What's the song bubbling beneath the surface?" A song immediately came up and I shook my head. "No, I refuse." He li ed his eyebrows. I looked down at my sneakers with scribbles on them. "Nope, it's embarrassing." a "More embarrassing than your performance in the car?" I elbowed him in the ribs and he just chuckled. I rolled my eyes. "It's a Celine Dion song." He whistled low. "I'd be pretty shocked if you can pull her o ." a I looked away, pursing my lips and knowing I fell right for the trap. And so I started to sing fucking A New Day Has Come. And the pop version, to boot, to the backdrop of trucks and cars driving past at 70mph and facing a boy that wanted to laugh at me. But I sang like I was in front of a crowd in Las Vegas, with all the depths that I could possibly imitate from the original. The music in my head took over my body and it moved in tune to my words. I closed my eyes and imagined that it really was a new day, that I was brand new. And then I got to the end of the song, to the part where it was all because of a boy. a My jaw hung open. I couldn't look at him as he slowly clapped. "Now," he said, his voice charged with something I didn't care to decipher. "Try to remember that same feeling for our lesson. C'mon, we still have half an hour to go." a We got back into the car without making eye contact. He found the right song on his playlist and we continued practicing all the way until we drove past the sign saying Welcome to Sarasota. I could tell that he didn't need the GPS to navigate his way around the city, just as I could tell that he was getting more and more tense with every ticking minute. I probably should have given him some words of encouragement or something, but I realized for the first time that I really had no idea what we were going to walk into. For all I knew, the bad blood between the brothers was so terrible that the other guy would pull a shotgun at the first sight of us. Hopefully not. Ashton parked outside of a bar restaurant by the beach front called Flamingos and just sat there. Staring at the pink neon sign. "Um." I looked all around. "Is this your aunt's place?" "Yup," he said. a I opened my door. "Well, c'mon. This won't end until it starts." đ The first smile in the past half hour drew on his face. "You're probably right." a He exited the car and we walked into the place. It was pretty nice, all made of wood planks that made you feel like you were walking under a pier. The crash of the waves mixed with so music and the sound of the patrons' conversation. I somehow expected to see a clone of Ashton busying plates or menus back and forth, but none of the waiters looked anywhere like him. We did find his aunt, though. I recognized the woman behind the bar as though I'd seen her before, because Jesus Almighty, those aristocratic genes were strong in the Winters family. But this woman was tanned, with laugh lines on her face and sun kissed gold highlights on her dark hair. She was all color, and not just because her clothes were straight out of the beach section at Target. It was just the impression she gave. a Her eyes were more like Ashton's than his own father's, and they lit up once she saw him. She dropped the rag she'd been cleaning the bar with and ran over to tackle him with a big hug. "My favorite nephew!" I stifled a smile at how out of breath he seemed. Even though she was quite a lot smaller than he was, it seemed like she was strong. She released him just to pull him down to her level by his cheeks. "Oh my, you've grown quite handsome since I last saw you." He rolled his eyes. "I'm the same I was as when I visited last summer." "No, not really. You're di erent." The way she said it was with a smile, but Ashton still looked like a bucket of cold water had poured over him. That was when she saw me. "Ohh... so that's why." a I put my palms up. "Um, it's not what you-" "Ashton?" We all turned to the new voice. I shivered, as though a spirit had just walked through me. It was kind of an out of body experience to be in the presence of two identical people, whose voices were nearly the same. They looked at each other, and if it weren't because of the di erent clothes I'd have wondered if there was a mirror in between them. Ashton seemed to have the same struggle I did, but probably for di erent reasons. I couldn't imagine what it was like to always be

around your own clone, to suddenly not have them by your side.

I knew I was being rude but my eyes narrowed. What a strange name. $\boldsymbol{\mathcal{A}}$

Their aunt clasped her hands together. "I guess we should all have

the three of us stared. "Virgin cocktails for you three, of course."

that it was hard to tell they weren't the same person.

I snapped my fingers. "I knew you were the smart one."

"I remember you! The singing cleaning lady."

shrug he never got to release. "I came for you."

"You didn't have to, I'm not going back."

it out of my pocket and nearly collapsed.

"It's my ma," I said. "I am so dead."

I knew things had gone too well.

looked at me with worry.

danced around the bar pouring things into a blender.

Ayrton looked at me then. I noticed that his eyes were more on the

grey side, like a storm cloud to Ashton's Caribbean ocean. Other than

But then the cheekiest smile curled his lips and showed all his teeth.

He laughed and laced his arm around his brother's shoulder. "I like

Ashton rolled his eyes but there was genuine relief all over his mug. I

rolled my eyes to myself. He was the weird one. Whatever made him

And then Ayrton stepped back, without dropping his smile. "What are

Ashton put his hands in his jean pockets and coiled his shoulders in a

His brother leaned against the bar. In the background their aunt

My eyes bounced back from one brother to the next. I figured that

The panic must have been blatant on my face, because they both

SONG OF THE DAY: Chevelle - Vitamin R (Leading Us Along)

was my cue to make myself scarce, but then my phone rang. I pulled

think his own flesh and blood would punch him in the face at first

cocktails to celebrate this wonderful family reunion." She laughed as

The life of a twin was an odd one.

"Ayrton."

this one."

sight was crazy talk.

you doing here?"

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