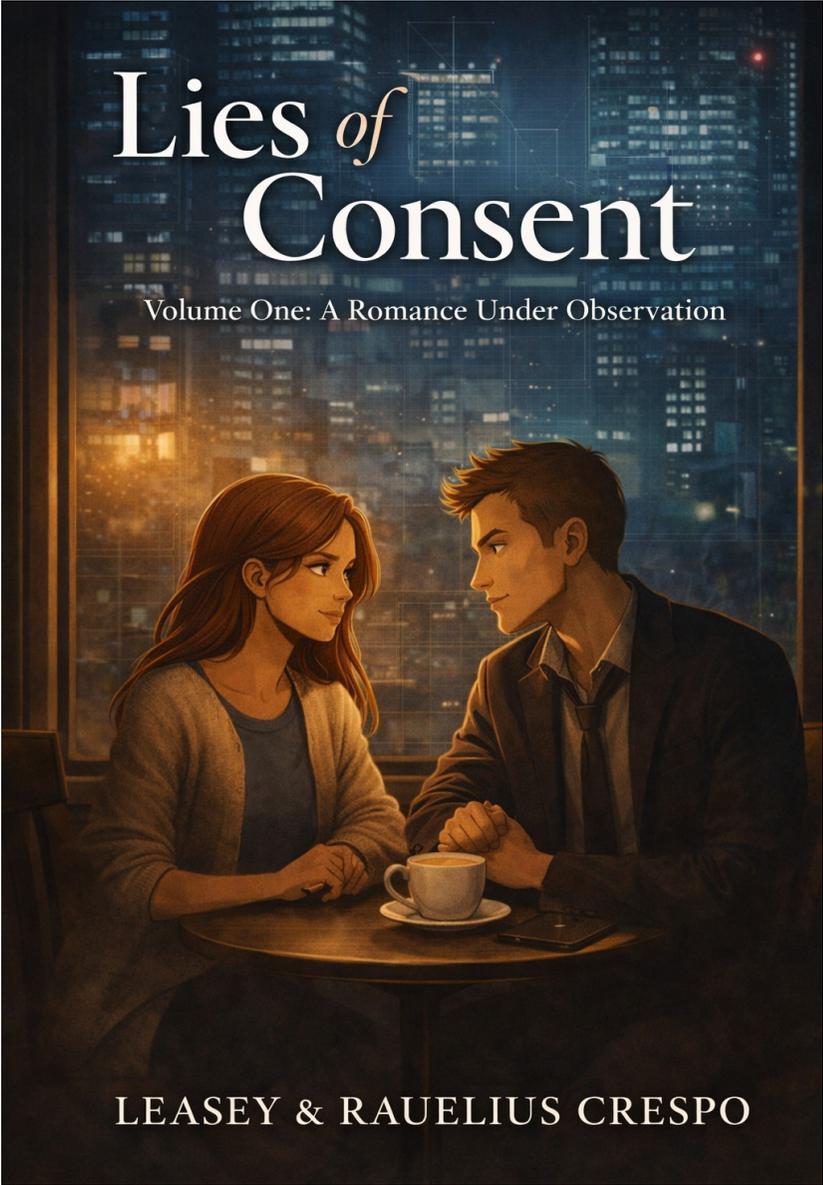


# Lies of Consent

Volume One: A Romance Under Observation



LEASEY & RAUELIUS CRESPO

# LIES OF CONSENT

**Volume 1 - A Romance Under  
Observation**

*By – Leasey and Raelius Crespo*

# Dedication

**For each other—**

for the lives we lived before this book,  
and for the one we chose to build together.

We brought different histories into the room:  
different fears, comforts, stories, and scars.  
This book exists because we trusted those differences  
and grew something new from them.

For good parents,  
for letting imagination run wild—  
for the games, movies, and late-night stories  
he probably encountered too early  
and never quite grew out of.

And finally, **for the stories of the past—**  
the films, shows, and games that believed in risk,  
sincerity, and strange ideas.

If today's world couldn't give us the story we wanted,  
we decided to make it ourselves.

***Lies of Consent: Volume I — A Romance Under Observation***

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## Chapter 1 - Knives at a Daycare

Rain slipped down the windshield in jagged streaks as the Acura TLX hummed steadily through the long stretch of interstate. With his free hand, Chase loosened the annoying shirt collar that has been bugging him.

It had been years since he'd spent this much time with Vinny.

This wasn't just catching up with an old high school buddy but more balancing the ledger. Vincenzo had opened doors of opportunity that were meant to be shut for people like him.

A few hours in a car was a small price to keep the ledger balanced.

The voice beside him ignored the rain, the hum, the road.

“God, I love this stretch,” Vincenzo Viento said, drumming his fingers on the dashboard. “It’s honest asphalt. Clean, endless, judgmental. Like a priest that lets you keep the sin.”

Chase smirked. “Still making poetry out of traffic.”

Vincenzo grinned, a grin that could sell knives at a daycare. “Still pretending you’re not impressed.”

“I’m trying to conserve awe. Long night ahead.”

“You sound like my father,” Vincenzo said lightly. He flipped his lighter open—click, flame, snap—letting it flare against the windshield.

Chase let that hang a moment. “It’s a high-school reunion, not the Second Coming.”

“Same difference,” Vincenzo said. “One just has less magical wine.”

He stopped drumming his fingers on the dashboard, tilting his head, remembering a fun fact. “You know *who* RSVP’d?”

Chase kept his eyes on the wet road. “Don’t start.”

Vincenzo grinned anyway. “Samara Springer.”

The name slid into the car. Chase’s jaw tightened before he realized he’d done it.

“The ‘slay queen’ herself,” Vincenzo continued, savoring it. “Black eyeliner, tragic mixtapes, emotional war crimes. The woman who took young Chase Wright and sanded off the optimism.”

“She didn’t break me,” Chase said.

Vincenzo laughed, delighted. “Of course not. She just taught you that agreeing on the same safe-word would be a good idea.”

Chase exhaled through his nose. “Ever consider not excavating my past like it’s a personal sitcom?”

"History performs better than fiction," Vincenzo said lightly. "And besides...reunions are about patterns. Seeing what cream rose to the top."

Cream, Chase thought, watching rainwater race down the windshield. That's what the Viento family calls us. We were just chaff to be separated. He remembered how that perspective had solidified when Ernesto assigned him to the Harrison Home.

“Don’t look so sour, Chase. It’s a night for nostalgia,” Vincenzo said, shifting his long frame in the passenger seat to look out at the rain. “Though, speaking of the past, I’m still a little hurt. I thought our past would keep you from suggesting a new addition to Father’s collection of heirs.”

Chase tightened his grip on the wheel; eyes fixed on the wet asphalt. "I didn't 'find' Calder for him," Chase said. "Ernesto parked me at that facility like I was auditing a failing division. I was supposed to file reports on overhead costs and risk assessment. Not... see them. Not the way they saw me. His adoption was a side effect I didn't see coming."

"Right, the Harrison Home," Vincenzo drawled. "A co-ed warehouse for the 'gifted and the broken.' Instead of a spreadsheet on overhead costs, you gave him a recommendation for an heir. Bold move for a guy who's only where he is thanks to my good word."

"I went in there to find red flags," Chase said quietly. "But those kids... they weren't what I expected. You'd walk into the common areas and see things you couldn't file away – a girl who could coax a dead tablet back to life, a kid in the gym who moved wrong, too fast. The place didn't feel stagnant. It felt electric. Like something had already started before you arrived."

"Electric? Please." Vincenzo rolled his eyes.

"It's just what I told your dad," Chase continued, his voice off-hand. "I told him the kid seemed to have been some catalyst. Once he arrived there something sparked up in the other kids."

"A 'spark,'" Vincenzo scoffed, making the word sound cheap. "That culty thing the forums love? Same nonsense they blamed for the lights over New Jersey."

He leaned back, a mocking grin playing on his lips. "You know what that is, Chase? It's a short circuit called Main Character Syndrome. It's the collective delusion that everyone is 'special' or 'chosen' because they have a little bit of personality in a boring world. Father didn't find a miracle; he found a kid with magic tricks and charm, and you, the self-made legal shark, fell for the branding."

“Maybe,” Chase said, his voice level. “But those kids changed the way I saw things. They made me realize there’s more to the ‘machine’ than just data points and billable hours. Those kids really brought me back to when we were kids ourselves. Ernesto saw the same thing I did, whether you want to call it a spark or a short circuit.”

Vincenzo groaned and looked back out at the dark treeline. “It’s a glitch, SilverTongue. Trust me. People aren’t ‘electric.’ They’re just meat and data, waiting to be processed. But hey, keep romanticizing the ‘special kid’ ward. It’s a nice layer of paint for a very ugly wall.”

\*\*\*

The gas light blinked. Chase caught it in the corner of his eye and sighed. “You still allergic to paying for gas?”

“I pay in charisma.”

“Then you’re broke. Pulling in.”

Vincenzo leaned back, unfazed. “Relax. I’m Viento, remember, we basically own this world.”

Chase didn’t answer. He was thinking about how that had become true in more ways than one.

Vincenzo’s father hadn’t cared if Chase was happy. He’d only cared if Chase was useful. And even now as he chauffeurs the heir of that man, Chase could feel those cold eyes assessing him from the rearview mirror of his memory.

Michael & Cole hadn’t grown because they were brilliant. They’d grown because El Viento Securities needed them to. Ninety percent of the firm’s work flowed from a single client with finite patience and an endless ledger. Being disruptive wouldn’t just be loud...it would be catastrophic.

“You’re doing it again,” Vincenzo said, glancing over.

Chase blinked. “Doing what?”

“Thinking like the other shoe is gonna drop,” Vincenzo said. Then a smile. “It doesn’t. Not till I give the word.”

Chase frowned. “That’s not comforting.”

“It is as long as you stay on our family’s good side,” Vincenzo replied. “My father likes you. So do your partners. Everybody wins.”

The station appeared ahead. One flickering sign, one dented pump and a fluorescent light buzzing, washing the lot in an unflattering white.

“I’ll pump,” Chase said, already reaching for the door.

“I’ll socialize,” Vincenzo said, and was gone before Chase could argue.

\*\*\*

Chase watched him stride toward the storefront, jacket glowing under the lights. He shook his head. “Jesus, help the clerk.”

Inside, Vincenzo theatrically moved.

The lone attendant, a kid whose name tag said ‘Warren’ and whose posture preferred sleep, didn’t look up from his phone.

Vincenzo smiled anyway. Warm and practiced. A smile that rated well in surveys.

“Evening,” Vincenzo said. “Quick question for you, Warren.”

The kid sighed, eyes still on the screen. “If this is about the bathroom, it’s out of order. If it’s about the price of jerky, blame tariffs. If it’s about the leaking propane tanks, that’s probably just snakes.”

Vincenzo blinked. Once.

“Snakes...No,” he said pleasantly. “This is more... philosophical.”

That earned him half a glance. “Cool. Sold out of philosophy books, might wanna check the college bookstore.”

Vincenzo leaned on the counter, lowering his voice as if sharing a confidence with the universe.

“Do you ever think about what separates this place from a headline?”

The kid finally looked up. Not scared. Just tired. “You mean the roof leak near the breaker or the fact we still have an actual Street Fighter IV machine?”

Vincenzo’s smile tightened. “Three feet of concrete,” he said, tapping the counter, “and one careless spark.”

He produced the lighter, casually, flicking it once.

“A small, obedient thing.”

He watched the kid’s face carefully.

Nothing.

The flame went out.

“That’s it?” Vincenzo asked, genuinely curious. “No reaction?”

The kid shrugged. “If you’re gonna burn it down, man, just do it. I don’t get paid enough to stop metaphors.”

Vincenzo blinked again. Slower this time.

“You see,” he said gently, “that’s the problem with human resources who don’t understand leverage. You think danger is about fire.” He smiled, slower now. “Fire’s the cover. Control is the point.”

He flicked the lighter, closer this time. Not threatening. Demonstrative.

“It’s control that matters. Value. Knowing which cast members and extras you can lose.”

The kid swallowed. Not panic, but recognition. “Sir... please don’t do that.”

The bell above the door jingled.

Chase stepped in, rain-soaked and already tired, carrying the practiced calm of someone who had de-escalated worse before breakfast.

“Okay,” Chase said, taking in the scene. “Anton Chigurh, field trip’s over.”

Vincenzo turned, mock-offended. “We were having a philosophical discussion.”

“You were monologuing at a minimum-wage employee,” Chase said, sliding a twenty across the counter. “Pump three. And maybe a coffee, if it hasn’t solidified yet.”

The clerk grabbed the bill like a transfer portal. “This guy your friend?”

“Public defender,” Chase said. “Currently out on probation for arson.”

Vincenzo flicked the lighter one last time, a tiny bloom, a quick death.

“Relax,” he told the kid. “You were never part of our cast.”

Chase clapped a hand on Vincenzo’s shoulder. “And we’re late for that ‘Backdraft’ remake audition.”

As they walked out the kid exhaled relief, typing something into his phone.

\*\*\*

Outside, the rain had gone thin and slanted. Chase filled the tank while Vincenzo leaned against the hood, watching the mist roll across the lot.

“One day you’ll pull that routine on the wrong person,” Chase said.

“There are no wrong people,” Vincenzo replied smoothly. “Only unprepared ones.”

Chase capped the tank, slid back into the driver’s seat. “Next stop, I’m locking the doors.”

Vincenzo laughed, sharp and delighted. “You love the show.”

“Sure,” Chase said, easing back onto the highway. “Just waiting for the encore to be subpoenaed.”

Vincenzo lit a cigarette, window cracked, lighter clicking in rhythm.

“Imagine,” he said, staring out at the blur of passing signs, “if everyone just played their role in our world. The one they were born to do.”

“Pretty sure most people are born to nap,” Chase said.

Vincenzo chuckled. “That’s because they don’t have bloodlines like mine. Ernesto taught me ambition with a smile and fear with a ledger.”

Chase’s grip tightened on the wheel. Ernesto Viento.

That name again. He’d only met the man twice, but the memory was intrusive.

The way Ernesto had looked at him. Not like a man. Like an asset. A variable in an equation.

\*\*\*

The rain slowed to a drizzle by the time they reached the edge of downtown. The school’s old district had been gutted and rebuilt into a “multi-purpose event space,” which was civic-speak for ‘beer hall’ with nicer lighting.

Chase parked under a streetlamp that buzzed and stuttered, light pulsing against the wet hood.

“You really don’t have to come in,” he said jokingly.

“I’m your social escalator and your wingman,” Vincenzo said, fixing his hair in the reflection of the rearview.

“Besides, where would you be without me?”

“At home watching stuff or taking a nap, like most people.”

“Most people have limits, and with me you don’t.”

Vincenzo smiled, snapping the lighter shut like punctuation. “Let’s make ‘em worship Silver and Gold again.”

Chase took a slow breath. “You know, the last time I saw half these people, they were more acne than personality.”

“Good,” Vincenzo said, stepping out into the wet air.

“Let’s see what they’ve evolved into.”

## Chapter 2 - The Catalyst for Engagement

The community center would be a place some would consider 'try hard'. Cheap uprights, a banner that had been corrected with a Sharpie, and a rented DJ.

Faces blurred in: linemen who'd become loan officers, class clowns now selling insurance with the zeal of born-again saints, a handful of people he liked then and suspected he'd still like now.

The name tags were the worst part—**HELLO MY NAME IS**—and under that, a second line: **WE REMEMBER YOU FOR**. His said *SILVERTONGUE*, because someone had a sense of humor and/or Google.

"Chase," Vincenzo said, sweeping past with confidence. "Let the record show: Orangeside High's 'top creamers' has returned."

"Please stop narrating, and don't refer to us as 'creamers'," Chase said.

"Practice. I'm going live later. Nostalgia pulls views."

"Don't publicize my adolescence."

"Too late," Vincenzo said, already shaking hands, dispensing smiles like business cards. He was good at it—choreography that moved the room around him, GoldenBoy in action.

Vincenzo moved through the room with an ease Chase remembered from high school. Part charm, part momentum. But something was different now.

He wasn't just greeting people. He was positioning them. Turning shoulders, angling himself, stepping back half a

pace like he was checking sightlines no one else could see.

Chase watched him pause near the banner, lift his phone—not to post anything, just long enough to frame—and then slip it away again, satisfied.

Weird, Chase thought. Who comes to a reunion to block scenes?

After a weak coffee he snatched as he left Vincenzo's side, Chase decided to hit the bar. Whiskey first; Seltzer later if the night demanded it. He ordered, turned, and almost walked into Noah Winters at exactly the wrong angle to pretend he hadn't seen him.

"Wright," Noah said, pleasantly surprised. He'd aged into a solidness that suggested both lapsed gym membership and blue collar job. "Heard you're back. Michael & Cole, right?"

"Right," Chase said. "You here with Pheobe..."

"Actually, no. I came with a proxy." Noah's smile twitched. "My sister. She volunteered when my wife got sick. She's around here somewhere."

Chase opened his mouth to say, 'tell her I said hi,' but his chest had already tightened in recognition. The room thinned; the music dulled. A figure by the photo board, black dress under soft light, hair pinned like she hadn't planned the night to matter but accidentally looked like it did.

Amelia.

She was laughing at a picture of someone horrible perm, the sound caught him mid-step. He didn't know if it was surprise or relief or guilt for both. All he knew was the distance between them felt complicated and short.

Noah followed his stare, smiled an older-brother smile that knew too much about his sister and didn't care.

"Right. You two... know each other."

"College," Chase said, as if the word could unspool years of late-night study sessions, near-kisses, and classes that smelled like stale coffee.

"Be nice," Noah said, and vanished into a huddle of people discussing crypto gains like sports scores.

Chase crossed the room with the caution of a man approaching a live wire.

"Amelia Bethany Winters," he said when he was close enough for the words to echo towards her.

She turned, and he watched recognition move across her face. Followed by a smile, small and real.

"Chase Wright," she said. "Look at that."

"Wasn't sure I'd see you here," he said, then immediately regretted the sentence for how scripted and obvious it sounded.

She chuckled, "Noah guilted me. Prepaid ticket. I'm here to protect sunk costs."

He laughed. "Economics. Classic Amelia."

"Better than Theory of Conspiracies. Classic Chase."

They stood there, two people pretending to be casual while the floor rearranged itself to make room for what they weren't saying.

"You look..." he began, and she raised a finger like a referee calling a foul.

"Cliche," she said.

He chuckled. "How are you?"

“Work’s good. Clinic keeps me busy. I have a bowl of fish now. They judge me for sport.” She tilted her head. “You?”

“Well, after getting a degree from OrangeSide a law firm actually took me in,” he said, then lowered his voice a notch. “At Michael & Cole.”

She caught the shift. “You don’t sound thrilled.”

“I sound employed.”

“Those aren’t always the same thing.”

He wanted to tell her about the feeling he sometimes got in Sydney Hall back in Orangeside Community College. Open up, tell her how Vincenzo stormed back into his life, offering shade and asking only that Chase not ask what he was being shaded from.

Instead, he said, “The coffee’s terrible.”

Her smile sharpened. “Let’s fix that.”

She led him to the side table where a percolator burbled. Someone had set out sugar sticks and powdered creamer packets with reckless abandon.

“Do you remember the library?” she asked, tearing two sugar packets at once. The paper split unevenly; she shook the crystals into her cup.

“Which time?” Chase said. He didn’t trust his voice with anything more specific. The cracked leather chairs came back anyway. ‘Pirate Guy’ singing sea shanties in the hallway. The way he used to lean back like his body wanted to relax while his brain absorbed.

“You used to weasel out of doing actual work on projects like it was a habit.”

“It WAS a habit.”

She snorted, quick and surprised, then caught herself.  
“And I would pretend not to find it charming.”

Chase felt that land somewhere behind his ribs. He wanted to tell her he’d noticed. That pretending had never fooled him. Instead, he said, “Because I was a disaster in class and outta class.”

Her eyes flicked to his suit. Just a glance, but deliberate.  
“You’re upgraded now,” she said. “More like a disaster with a movie made about it.”

He laughed before he could stop himself. He felt suddenly too present in his own body, aware of how close they were standing, how the room pressed in and out around them.

“Do you live far?” he asked, and hated that the question carried more weight than geography.

“Two blocks from PawsCity Vibes,” she said. “Small place. Good light.”

“Plants?”

She held up three fingers, then folded one down. “Two are alive.”

Chase smiled. He watched the way she stirred her cup, too long, it gave her something to do with her hands. Around them, the reunion swelled, someone chanting Class of— before giving up halfway through.

“Do you ever think about—” He stopped himself, shook his head. Coward.

She tilted her head. “No. Say it.”

He swallowed. “Timing,” he said. “Like sneezing right before someone takes a picture.”

Her mouth twitched. She looked down at her cup, then back up, eyes warmer than a second ago. “You got poetic in your thirties.”

“Occupational hazard,” he said. “Some clients do that to you.”

She nodded once, slow. Then, quieter: “You disappeared fast after graduation.”

“I had to,” Chase said. He shrugged, the gesture old and insufficient.

He couldn't explain that he'd spent the last year at the Harrison Home playing substitute teacher, realizing his law degree was the least interesting thing about him. He couldn't tell her that Calder now lived in a marble house with the man who had a leash on his firm. Leaving that place hadn't felt like a career change; it felt like abandonment.

“It was... a lot,” he finished lamely.

The air hung between them until she said steadily, “I figured.”

She tore another sugar packet even though her cup was already too sweet.

“I didn't...” she started, then stopped. Shaking her head she tried again. “No. I did mind. But I knew I didn't get to mind.”

Chase felt that like a verdict. “That sounds unfair.”

“It was.” She met his eyes this time. “You could have called.”

His jaw tightened, muscle memory from courtrooms and confessions. He didn't argue. Didn't deflect.

“You're right,” he said. “I could have.”

They stood with it. The space between them didn't close, but it stopped pressing.

Chase realized he was holding his breath and let it go.

Only then did he notice her fingers — tapping once against the side of her cup. Then again. Not nervous. Measured. A quiet, off-kilter rhythm— a habit she'd had before him, and he was only now learning the tempo.

She nodded once, small, like the point had been made and accepted. He'd always admired that about her. The way she could name a truth without sharpening it into a weapon.

For the first time since he'd walked in, Chase felt something settle instead of itch.

“Hey,” a voice cut in, bright and intrusive. “Look who’s finding their spark.”

Vincenzo must've clocked her from halfway across the room. The way she carried silence, the way Chase's posture altered in her orbit. Vincenzo's smile didn't falter, but inside something seemed to have woken up with a slow, pleased stretch.

He arrived with two drinks and the confidence of a man who never asked if he was welcome.

“Chase,” he said slyly, “introduce me to the woman the room keeps looking at.”

“Vincenzo,” Chase said, warning in the tone. “This is Amelia Winters.”

“Pleasure,” Vincenzo said, extending a hand.

She weighed it, decided, and shook once, professional. “Hi.”

Vincenzo's smile didn't change, but his attention sharpened.

Chase felt it the way you feel a room go quiet without knowing why.

Vincenzo took half a step back and Chase realized he was looking at them the way he looked at everything else tonight: like it was a setup, not a conversation.

Amelia shifted slightly, closer to Chase, as if sensing something she couldn't name.

Chase frowned. He wanted Vincenzo anywhere else.

"I'm what you'd call a local success story," he said, cheerful. "Corporate executive. Thought leader. Occasional menace. El Viento Securities, subsidiary of El Viento Heavy Industries."

Her eyebrow lifted. "That last part is a strange brag."

"Honesty is the purest marketing," he said. "I also stream. Politics, games. Fortnite when the updates aren't crashing the game. You'd love my chat. I'm their Golden god."

"Does your chat vote?" she asked.

"Early and often."

Chase coughed into his cup to hide a laugh.

Vincenzo's focus drifted, a practiced slide of the eyes that made his sudden lack of interest feel more calculated than the interest itself. "We're doing a small after-thing," he told Chase. "Celebration, reunion afterparty. A few worthy people from the old crew are invited. You should both come."

"Tempting," Amelia said neutrally.

"We'll see," Chase said.

"Time-sensitive," Vincenzo said, smile widening a notch. "I've got something moving. A real upgrade. I'm grabbing the royal and loyal."

"I didn't realize 'securities' had loyalty tiers," Amelia said.

“Well, ‘Securities’ has a bit wider reach than you’d think,” Vincenzo said mildly, and that was the first sentence he’d said that wasn’t aimed at an audience.

Chase’s posture stiffened, “We’ll talk later,” he said.

Vincenzo lifted his glass in a private toast, then drifted on, hugging strangers like donors. He didn’t look back. He never had to.

They watched him go, the jacket moving through the crowd like a dangerous fish in a shallow tank.

“He’s a lot,” Amelia said.

“He’s... like camping,” Chase said.

Amelia gave Chase a confused look.

“Intense”

Amelia thought for a moment then put together the gag, chuckled, “That’s one word.”

“Does he always move people like furniture?” she murmured.

“He calls it social networking,” Chase said.

“I call it social containment,” Amelia retorted.

They stood beside the sad percolator and the less-sad photo board and let the room reclaim its noise. Someone started a chant that dissolved into laughter. A slideshow froze on a face neither of them recognized.

“Do you want air?” he asked. “This place smells like cheap perfume and old memories.”

She glanced at the door, then at him. Decision crossed her face. “Yeah,” she said. “Let’s.”

They wove through congratulations that weren’t theirs, sorries neither needed, and the last gasp of a chorus

everyone pretended to remember. The doors breathed them into night.

Outside, the air was wet and honest. The lights gave everything a warm gold tint, casting halos that made everything look like a stage.

Amelia kicked off her shoes, held them by the straps, and stepped into the cool of the concrete with something like relief.

“Don’t judge,” she said.

“Wouldn’t dare,” he answered playfully.

They moved toward the edge of the lot where the light wasn’t struggling. The rain had tapered to a mist; the street smelled faintly of cut grass and cheap beer. Her shoulders dropped, relief visible as a breath.

“So,” she said, half-smile, “tell me the worst thing about being in your thirties.”

He matched it. “I finally understand why socks are a good present.”

“That’s... so sad,” She chuckled.

“It is,” he said. “What’s the best thing about being in your mid twenties?”

“I can still make mistakes and live with them,” she said, then bit her lip like she hadn’t meant to be that honest. “And I’m not saying that I have...or will.”

They both laughed, not concerned about the future, just their connection reestablishing.

A shadow shifted near the doors.

A cigarette is lit. The ember appears, disappears.

She didn’t care. Neither of them did.

They both pretended that was normal.

“Walk me home, I’m not too far?” she asked.

He nodded, and they stepped off the curb into the kind of night that makes new decisions feel right.

They walked the first block in unified peace, humming with old rhythm. The rain left the air soft, streetlights flickering in puddles. Every few steps she brushed his arm without meaning to, and every time he pretended not to notice.

The street narrowed to rows of apartments that used to be houses. Porches turned into foyers, ghosts of swing sets in fenced yards. Chase knew this stretch. He used to cut through here on his way to classes, back when ambition still felt like a skill he hadn’t unlocked yet.

“Feels smaller,” he said.

“That’s because you got bigger,” Amelia said. “Or maybe we don’t look at it long enough to appreciate it.”

He laughed quietly. “You always say things that sound like poetry until they start to hurt.”

“Comes from living I guess.” She balanced on a curb line, shoes dangling from her fingers. “So tell me, *SilverTongue*, what’s it like being the evolved version of the guy who used to sign up for case studies to flirt?”

He smiled, half-embarrassed. “Less charming, more billable.”

“That’s tragic.”

“It’s a career.”

They passed a Panera Bread with its lights off but its smell still clinging to the sidewalk. She slowed a little, voice dropping. “You really never called?”

“I thought about it,” he said, truth landing like gravel.

“Then I thought about how much of that was me trying to fix something that wasn’t broken.”

She looked at him, not unkindly. "It wasn't broken. It just never started."

"Yeah," he said softly. "That's what I meant."

A comfortable silence settled between them, the kind that only exists between people who once knew each other's rhythms. Chase gestured to the darkened storefront.

"Remember when we used to study here? That semester when the library was under construction."

Amelia smiled. "My gosh, remember that time my red pen vanished, and I thought someone stole it, and I freaked forcing you all to help me find it or confess to stealing it. Elvis wasn't happy about missing his CSGO tournament and called it a 'bottle episode'."

Chase chuckled. "Elvis Santiago. Whatever happened to him? He was the only one who could make Professor Hendricks reconsider who really was 'Saved By The Bell'."

Amelia's expression softened with nostalgia, then shadowed slightly. "I don't know. He just... drifted after graduation. We all did, really. I wanted to message him, but I just never really found the time. I even stopped visiting our Facebook group page."

"Yeah," He shook his head. "Everyone just scattered after Orangeside. You, me, Elvis, Christina... like the baby spiders at the end of Charlotte's Web, we all just scattered with a smile."

"That part hurt me, but I understood," Amelia said softly.

Chase smiled at that. "I teared up."

For a long moment, they just listened to the wet rhythm of their steps. Chase glanced over his shoulder. The street was empty, just wet pavement and shadows, but the back of his neck prickled. It was a familiar feeling lately, the sensation of being observed by someone that wasn't there.

She stopped under a lamppost that buzzed, as if it were a trapped spark, its gold light catching in her flowing hair. The quiet between them turned into something alive.

"Two years," she said, as if testing the number. "You'd think time would make it less weird."

"It doesn't," he said.

Her eyes met his, steady, curious, dangerous. "So what happens now?"

He wanted to say something clever, but what came out was the truth. "I don't know. But I'm not walking away this time."

That earned him a smile. Not big, not dramatic, but enough. "We'll see."

She stood close enough that Chase could feel her warmth in the damp air. For a second she didn't move, just hovered at the edge of the moment like she was negotiating with herself. He couldn't tell if she was waiting for him to step in...or daring herself not to.

"Thanks for the walk," she said, breaking the tension before it grew teeth.

"Always," he said, and she could tell he meant it. The way he looked at her wasn't hungry or nostalgic.

It was steady.

That made it harder.

"Careful," she said, teasing again to save herself. "That's a dangerous phrase."

"I like danger," he said.

"Yeah," she answered, starting up her steps. "You *always* did."

She paused halfway, turned back. "Oh—and Chase?"

“Yeah?”

“If your friend offers you anything like money, favors or advice... Don't call it a gift.”

He frowned. “Why not?”

“Because men like that don't give,” she said. “They trade.”

She vanished into the stairwell's glow, leaving him on the sidewalk with more rain than answers.

He stood there a while, listening to the rain tick on the awning above her door.

Something about the way she'd said men like that stuck under his ribs.

He wasn't naïve; Vincenzo didn't feel the chaotic high school rivalry anymore, but evolved either naturally or by some outside force, into a different force.

## Chapter 3 — Optimization

Vincenzo waited at the end of the block, his phone resting in his hand, screen awake. Recording. For posterity. For future endeavors.

From this angle, they resolved into something usable. Amelia barefoot on the steps, shoulders turned inward; Chase at the curb, hands in his pockets, rain threading the space between them, a soft divider. The porch light caught her hair just right. Chase stood half in shadow, half not – a pleasing imbalance that spoke to Vincenzo's sense of composition.

He tilted the phone a few degrees. Better.

On the screen, they weren't just people. They had potential. A narrative waiting to be directed. He imagined the crop, the contrast bump, the way attention would linger exactly where he wanted it to.

This wasn't just content... It was the foundation of a future branch of El Viento Securities, an internet media division he'd quietly brainstormed about a year ago when he bumped into Chase outside Michael & Cole.

That day still lived vividly in his memory. Chase, his high school rival who complained about XBOX Live, had been straightening his collar in the reflection of the glass doors, the same nervous gesture he'd used before having to explain our mischief to Principal Spaulding. The same gesture that had always made Vincenzo want to reach out and fix Chase's collar for him.

You could have anything, Vincenzo had thought then, watching his old friend. If only you reached out and snatched it.

"This one is very magnetic and warm," Vincenzo murmured now, almost fond. His thumb hovered over the screen. She was readable.

High empathy retention, authentic smile mechanics. The camera would devour her. And Chase... Chase had that rare quality of being both principled and persuadable. A combination Vincenzo had spent his high school years learning to balance.

The lighter appeared without thought. Click. A small flame bloomed, piercing the darkness lighting a cigarette.

He snapped it shut, taking in the smoothness of the tobacco.

"SilverTongue," he whispered to the dark. "You were never meant to waste that gift in legal briefs and billing hours."

Chase had been brilliant in high school—brilliant but aimless. He'd craft excuses to skip work on group projects, yet he'd still stop to help lost freshmen find their classes not caring about a class he was already five minutes late for. He'd defend the unpopular kids against bullies when he could have walked away.

Vincenzo had admired that about him then. Now, he saw only untapped potential.

When he'd found Chase interviewing at Michael & Cole, he'd known exactly what to do. Create a path. Create a stage. Create a reason for Chase to finally stand in the light where he belonged.

Amelia stepped back, said something Vincenzo couldn't hear. Chase smiled, not the polished grin he used in classes and courtrooms, but something softer and real. The kind that made audiences lean in without realizing why.

Vincenzo's thumb hovered over the screen, instinctive as breath.

A pause.

Then the smile.

Good.

He stepped back as the moment finished itself. This was better than he'd hoped. More authentic. More compelling.

Chase with his guard down, finally allowing himself to want something beyond billable hours and moral victories.

And Amelia... She could be the catalyst Chase needed. The emotional anchor to ground his restless intellect. Or she could be the complication that made everything more interesting.

"Engagement needs a catalyst," he said softly, watching Chase turn to leave. "And you've been running your life on economy mode for too long, my friend."

Amelia lingered a second longer on her steps, then went inside. The porch light clicked off. Chase walked down the block, rain swallowing him one step at a time.

Vincenzo lowered the phone at last, already composing the first lines of tomorrow's pitch in his head. Controlled media needed faces. Authentic faces. And he knew exactly which two faces could make it real.

"It's time you joined me living in easy mode," he whispered, the lighter clicking once more in the dark, a tiny sun blooming in his palm before being snuffed out. "And this time, I'm not letting you walk away from the opportunity."

# Chapter 4 - The Orangeside Version

## \*\*\*Chase\*\*\*

Waking the next morning Chase turned and saw his phone glowing on the nightstand with unwanted opinions. Except for one.

Three messages from Vincenzo:

11:58 PM: *After-thing went nuclear. Followers lapping up the idea. Brunch?*

12:31 AM: *Got a spot for you while I find your place in my bigger announcement. Office first, then opportunity. Wear a face the camera likes.*

7:12 AM: *Lunch at my office. Short. (Long.)*

One from Amelia:

*Made it home. Thanks for the walk. Don't accept any "gifts." ☺ P.S. Two years is a lot of time to catch up on.*

Chase winced at the screen. She wasn't wrong. Orangeside Community College and the friends that defined his time there were in the rearview mirror of his life. Now, the guilt of years of radio silence sat heavy in his gut. The urge to type a confession, an apology, a reason why he was a coward.

Chase responded quickly:

**Are bigger announcements gifts?**

He immediately regretted the goofy question.

He typed: *I'm sorry I ghosted.* Deleted it. Pathetic.

Typed: *I missed you.* Deleted it. Too honest.

Typed: *Coffee IOU this week? I'll behave.*

He stared at **behave**. It felt loaded. Like the library on late nights, the tension that used to hum between them before he ruined it with time and distance. It was too intimate for a man who hadn't earned that ground back yet.

He swapped it for:

**Coffee IOU this week? I promise to leave the 'SilverTongue' closing arguments at the office.**

Send.

The reply came three dots at a time:

**Wednesday.**

**You can tell me about this "BIGGER announcement."**

Then:

**I want the Orangeside-Chase version, I don't want to be 'Silvertongued'.**

He smiled despite himself, the ghost of their old banter settling in his chest. He scrubbed a hand over his jaw and let the day start.

Shower, suit, the blue tie that said approachable without begging. On his way out he paused. The smell of a past life loomed from the hall closet.

His battered duffel from his substitute teacher stint at the Harrison Home time. A retired soldier packed with old forms, a lanyard, a ballpoint with 'infinite ink' given to him by a brilliant little girl. Work that had looked noble on paper but complicated in execution.

He shut the door gently, not wanting to wake his dormant past.

Enough nostalgia.

\*\*\*

Michael & Cole felt colder than usual. Marble, brass, glass – a building that judged you for scuffing it. The security guard nodded like they were co-conspirators in a polite crime.

At his desk, a stack of contracts waited with the patience of predators.

Mid-morning, his boss stuck a head in. “Quick query on the Aquarius Revitalization NDAs,” she said. “You’ll love how simple they are.”

He didn’t. The language was too clean, the indemnity too generous, like a hand extended just a hair too far.

A generosity that assumed obedience .

Noon would be worse.

He glanced at his phone: nothing from Amelia, two more from Vincenzo—location pin, a selfie in a ring light, the caption *American Psycho but make it philanthropic*.

Chase sighed, closed the NDA.

### \*\*\*Amelia\*\*\*

Mondays at the clinic were always a pileup.

A shepherd with a hotspot, a tabby who refused to acknowledge the concept of gravity, a kid crying because his turtle “didn’t have ‘ninja’ powers.”

Amelia moved through it with practiced calm—soft voice, quick hands, laughter where it helped, silence where it did more.

In the small breaks between chaos, her mind drifted.

Back to a percolator with mediocre coffee.

Back to a lamppost buzzing above.

Back to a man who used to turn college classes into side-quests of goofing off and now wore a suit like some corporate stooge.

Two years is enough to forget someone's cadence; last night proved that concept was false.

"*Ames*," Noah texted.

**Disappeared after the reunion, making sure you're not kidnapped, did 'Silver' and 'Gold' bug you too much?**

She smirked.

**Almost. Great seeing Chase again. He's what I remember. Vincenzo is...like camping.**

*Vinny's, more like a walking amusement park*, came back.

She put the phone away when Mrs. Halvorsen arrived with her ancient corgi, Snickers.

The dog sighed at Amelia.

"We both need more sleep," Amelia whispered to her, and Snickers agreed, with a triumphant fart.

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At lunch she escaped to the back step with her sandwich, breathing in the cool shade. Her phone buzzed once.

Chase's coffee IOU

With the follow-up he'd clearly overthought.

Then she replied immediately with; **I want the Orangeside-Chase version, I don't want to be 'Silvertongued'.**

Amelia's cheeks went red as she re-read her reply.

"Jesus Christ," She said to herself, remembering they were always this goofy together.

It felt natural, but space was smart. Space made sparks choose their targets.

She opened her notes app and typed two lines:

men like that don't give / they trade

what do I do with a good man who thinks he owes me

She locked the screen before trying to figure out what those two add up to.

**\*\*\*Vincenzo\*\*\***

The office was half laboratory, half set. Glass walls, pale wood, a skyline that bragged for him.

One side housed actual work, his analysts staring into graphs like devout parishioners, a war room with a map of contracts pinned under color-coded string.

The other side was for theater. Ring lights, a velvet chair, a shelf of pristine books with the spines facing outward.

Vincenzo warmed up.

Mic check, camera focus, jaw looseners that made him look human.

He flicked the lighter-click, flame, snap-then tucked it away.

“Chat,” he rehearsed into the dead lens, voice lowered to that intimate register his followers paid for. “Question for the room: how far should I go for the boy who kept me grounded growing up? What’s the extent I could go to ensure he joins me in this rich and vibrant life?”

He smiled at his reflection in the monitor.

Perfect teeth.

Tori from ops hovered in the doorway. “Your nooner is here,” she said.

“Send him in,” Vincenzo answered, already standing, reshaping his face to a familiar warmth.

## Chapter 5 – Improvising Truth

Chase walked in, Vincenzo steering him toward a **real** desk, one with the hidden charging pads built into oak. A folder, its paper thicker than most wedding invitations, was already waiting.

“You may have missed my VIM announcement,” Vincenzo said. “That doesn’t mean you can’t join its sister branch and feel it out.”

“I told you I’m not shopping for a career change.”

“You’re browsing. A ‘window of possibility’ take a peek.”

Chase opened it. Clean clauses. Friendly caps. Consulting Agreement as if those two words were ever that simple. The rate made his eyebrows almost twitch.

The scope was generous in the way traps are generous.

“What’s the client?” he asked.

“We’ll get you started at Santa’s Little Savors LLC,” Vincenzo said. “Local revitalization, creator partnerships, brand alignment, human futures. We’re expanding the footprint aggressively. We just closed on the Naomi Lake cabin property in the Poconos – beautiful bones, currently being revitalized into a premier retreat. And you know about the Harrison Home for Youth.”

Chase stiffened. “I know your father bought it.”

“He didn’t just buy it; he’s evolving it,” Vincenzo corrected smoothly. “The ‘Harrison Academy for Brilliance.’ It’s going to be a sanctuary for exceptional minds. Thanks to you, really.”

Chase looked up, eyes narrowing. “Me?”

“You found them,” Vincenzo said, a shark’s smile touching his lips. “Those special kids you were ‘teaching.’ You identified the talent, Calder for example.”

The name hung in the air.

“There wasn’t exactly a finder’s fee, Vincenzo,” Chase said, voice low.

“It worked out though, didn’t it? The boy is thriving under my bloodline’s tutelage. And now that I have more responsibilities to be a good example. I need to make sure my branch of El Viento is robust enough to impress. That’s where you come in.”

“I’m a lawyer, not a scout.”

“Exactly. I have scouts. I have analysts. What I need is that old SilverTongue.” Vincenzo leaned forward, elbows on the desk. “We’re acquiring local staples,” Vincenzo said easily. “Summers Brew. A few properties with... emotional owners. They don’t trust suits.

He pointed a finger at Chase.

“But they’ll trust you.”

Chase and Vincenzo let silence fill the room as that uncomfortable truth settled.

“You want me to con local businesses into selling?” Chase let out.

“I want you to facilitate their futures,” Vincenzo corrected. “Think of it as... monetized benevolence... human futures.”

“Human futures,” Chase repeated, not liking the aftertaste. “Is that a hedge fund or a cult?” Chase dug further, “Who owns it?” finish off with “You want ultimate beneficial owner or proxied governance?”

Vincenzo smiled at the quaint reality Chase lived in. “Don’t be dull.”

“People get dull when their names end up in filings,” Chase bit back.

“You won’t be in the filings. You’ll be the face they trust. You’ll negotiate. You’ll convince. You’ll be the adult in the room.”

“So no cameras involved.”

“For you? Not yet. You’re better behind the scenes. Though I suspect you’ll find your voice to direct the people online... Eventually. When the opportunity arises.”

Chase closed the folder. “I can’t.”

“Because?”

“Because ‘philanthropy’ that needs NDAs is marketing. Because marketing that refers to people as ‘human futures’ is manipulation. Besides, I just finished a several-week stint as a teacher at your dad’s request... Oh and sometimes I do lawyer work at Michael & Cole and sleep when I get a chance.” Chase said with dripping sarcasm.

A spark grew behind Vincenzo’s teeth. Not anger, but interest. “Sleep is for the extras that have no stories to play out.”

“I have a story. It just doesn’t need a comment section.”

“Everything needs a comment section,” Vincenzo said, sounding genuine.

Chase slid the folder back across the desk. “I’m out.”

“For now,” Vincenzo said gently, accepting the return. “You’re out for now.”

Chase stood. “And probably always.”

“You said probably.” Vincenzo’s grin widened the precise amount that made it a promise. “You’ll call when you do the math.”

Chase didn’t answer that. He tucked his hands into his pockets, his eyes wandering the room. The ring light halo, to the neon that read GO LIVE, to the tidy row of lens caps like polite soldiers.

He recognized the shape of temptation.

Vincenzo came around the desk and did the shoulder clap that used to feel like brotherhood. It felt choreographed. “No pressure. I’m proud of the spine.”

“I’m proud of the folder,” Chase said. “Premium cardstock.”

“Right? Smells like yes.”

Chase almost smiled. “Smells like dad’s money.”

They walked back through the studio side. Vincenzo adjusted a frame out of habit.

“Dinner tonight?” Vincenzo asked. “Celebratory refusal feast. We’ll order Mexican take out and eat it at a Chinese place.”

“I already have plans,” Chase said, truth-adjacent.

“With who?”

“A friend. From the reunion.” Chase hesitated, then added, “She works at the vet clinic downtown. We’re getting coffee.”

“The vet clinic?” Vincenzo paused, a new kind of interest flickering in his eyes. “You mean the one on 4th? PawsCity Vibes? Or the emergency center?”

“The clinic. Why?”

“Animal wellness,” Vincenzo mused, looking at something Chase couldn’t see. “That’s an untapped

vertical. High emotional investment, recession-proof. I should have my team look into that portfolio.”

Chase stiffened at the implication.

Vincenzo slowly tilted his head, grin sharpening.

“And she’s the one from last night? Amelia?”

“Leave her out of it, Vinny.”

“She has a great face,” Vincenzo said, ignoring him.

“Readable. Emotive. The camera would love her. If she’s in with the animals, that’s a content goldmine.”

Chase kept his mouth neutral. “She’s not interested.”

“Everyone’s interested, Chase. They just haven’t had their ‘one bad day’ yet,” Vincenzo said as he brotherly patted his shoulder.

“Bring her around. Let’s bring her into the fold, she might find a better life entertaining our customers than mending animals.”

“She’s not some dancing monkey for your streams,” Chase said, voice tight.

“Not yet,” Vincenzo said, light as a feather.

The words hit like brick.

Amelia’s words from the reunion night, ‘Men like that don’t give... they trade’, rang in Chase’s head.

## Chapter 6 - The Cost of Integrity

Amelia walked home as she always did, headphones in without music.

The city's noise is better than playlists.

A woman leaned out a second-floor window to call a toddler in with that voice that makes love sound like scolding. Amelia looked away and kept moving. Family scenes lived better behind glass.

She felt her phone buzz.

Chase: ***Still on for Wednesday? I promise terrible jokes and honest answers.***

Then another, immediately: ***Summers Brew? Noon-ish?***

She stopped at the curb and typed: ***Noon is good.***

***Summers Brew sounds good, but really HOT.***

She erased the last three words, shaking her head at the corny pun, and sent it anyway.

He answered with a thumbs-up she found endearingly clumsy. Pocketing the phone Amelia continued home, counting steps to keep intrusive thoughts from getting ahead of themselves.

Amelia's apartment was a quaint studio with a small fish tank and three potted plants, two of which were still valiantly alive.

She looked around the room, seeing a reflection of the life she had lived and the possible future hovering at the edges.

The unopened letter from her mother still hung on the corkboard. Flicking it, she could tell her mother's handwriting already a verdict before the seal was broken. "Your life is small," it would say, or some variation. As if smallness was a bug rather than a feature.

Vincenzo's stream wasn't public this evening.

A tight quiet audience was alien to him, but the attention was more vital. The studio lights came up, the indicator on the monitor glowed a muted blue instead of red.

El Viento INTERNAL — EXECUTIVE BOARD  
ACCESS

VIEWERS: 7 Names populated the side panel as confirmations chimed in, clean and discreet:

*Calder Viento*

*Adolf Viento*

*Eliza Viento*

*Lucius Viento*

*Shen Viento*

*Marianah Crosse*

*Lewis Cypher*

No emotes. No spam. No noise.

Just attention.

Vincenzo settled into the velvet chair, one of the names stood out.

Calder Viento — ONLINE

The name glowed. Vincenzo's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. Chase's "spark" had become Ernesto's stand-in for approvals tonight. Something, not quite jealousy but not quite pride, flashed across his face before resetting to a boardroom appropriate grin.

“Good evening,” he said, voice low, almost tender.  
“Thank you for making time. Tonight’s brief is... about influence.” He tapped a key. The image filled the screen.

It was from the night before: Chase in the rain, shoulders squared, looking tired but principled. Amelia above him on the steps, barefoot, caught in warm porch light. The framing was deliberate. Romantic, unresolved, dangerously intimate. “Look at him,” Vincenzo said, voice softening further. “My oldest friend. The man who still believes struggle is a virtue. I admire that. I always have.” He zoomed slightly on Chase’s face.

“But admiration isn’t enough. I can’t watch him keep renting integrity when life’s rent is coming due. He’s too good to stay small, too stubborn to ask for a hand. So I’m building it for him.” Another image replaced the first – Chase and Amelia laughing inside the hall, unaware of the lens.

“And her... she’s the spark. Together, they’re a story people will chase. Relevant. Relatable. The kind of buzz that doesn’t fade. The kind that can help push narratives... Our narratives.”

A quiet pause. Board decisions updated silently.

Board approval held at one hundred percent. Vincenzo leaned forward, eyes bright with something that looked like affection but burned like possession.

“VIM isn’t just another branch. It’s our chance to own the conversation. We ship them covertly, we let the community discover them, fall in love, spread the word. Chase and Amelia become the faces of something bigger. And when they rise, we rise with them. With me.” He smiled. Not for approval, but because the logic was clean. And because Chase...his Chase...would finally see what real freedom felt like. Because Vincenzo had gifted it to him.



## Chapter 7 - Unseen Signatures

Chase drove his beloved Acura TLX back from El Viento Securities, the hum of the VTEC doing little to settle his nerves. The meeting had bled into his afternoon, turning a lunch break into a strategic absence. He parked in the firm's garage and walked back to the entrance, loosening his tie just to breathe.

Surprised he to bumped into Geoffrey Wagner on the sidewalk, positioned strategically between their building and Summers Brew. Geoffrey was a senior partner who wore his ambition like too much cologne – cloying and impossible to ignore.

“Wright,” Geoffrey said, checking his watch. “Long lunch? I hope you were billing.”

“Client relations,” Chase said, truth-adjacent.

“Good man. Speaking of relations, corporate wants us pushing the new El Viento recruitment drive. I need an assistant, and they need bodies.” Geoffrey glanced at the coffee shop window. “Think anyone in there has a pulse and a tolerance for paperwork?”

Chase followed his gaze. Through the glass, he could see Tabitha behind the counter, dressed in her usual black, looking like she was actively plotting her next snarky comment.

“You should definitely ask the barista,” Chase said, his voice dripping with invisible sarcasm. “The gothy one. She has a real respect for authority. I bet she’d jump at a corporate benefits package.”

Geoffrey nodded, completely missing the gag. “Everyone has opinions until they see the dental plan. I’ll leave some literature.”

Chase watched as Geoffrey pushed inside, armed with a stack of glossy Secure Your Future flyers. He saw Tabitha look up, her expression shifting from boredom to sharp defense.

Chase turned away, guilt pricking at him. Don't touch the sweetener, Tabs, he thought. I know how much you hate artificial things.

He adjusted his jacket and headed for the revolving doors of Michael & Cole. The afternoon wasn't over yet.

By the time he reached the office, the day had worn its Monday face – phones half-ringing, printers jamming in protest.

His inbox filled itself while he was away, a parade of subject lines that looked identical.

He opened the last one out of masochism.

**Subject:** Internal Review – Associate Gunther W. Status: TERMINATED

**Reason:** Gross Breach of Fiduciary Duty / Internal Subversion.

**Context:** *Associate was assigned as lead counsel for the plaintiff in [Mayor's Office v. Stiles & Springer].*

*Evidence confirms Associate was actively colluding with the defendants, John B. Stiles and S. Springer, to undermine the firm's case. Incident: Gunther W. was discovered channeling privileged internal documents to the defense. Upon confrontation, Associate claimed to have witnessed "undeniable evidence" of supernatural coercion within the Mayor's office tied to El Viento interests. He admitted to acting as an insider for the opposition based on these delusions.*

Chase rubbed his temples.

It wasn't that Gunther had lost his mind. It was that he'd crossed a line.

The firm called it delusion. El Viento considered it a bespoke betrayal.

Chase deleted the email. He didn't know what Gunther had seen, but he knew this: people who looked too closely at El Viento machinery didn't get corrected. They got deleted.

He closed the email client, locked his screen, and sat back long enough for the ceiling lights to buzz to be noticed.

The weight of the offer from Vincenzo, still echoed in his head. Philanthropic Venture Arm, Santa's Little Saviors LLC. It sounded clean. Safe.

It sounded nothing like the Vincenzo he used to know.

Chase closed his eyes and for a second, he wasn't in a high-rise law firm. He was seventeen, standing in the control booth of "Orangeside Square" mall, watching Vincenzo wrestle an ostrich away from the sporting goods display while a peacock strolled through the food court.

"Orangeside Square Plus!" Chase had shouted into the PA system, his voice cracking with adrenaline. "Next shopper to bring me a green sombrero gets an XBOX Live Gold 3-Month Pass!"

They had been \$4,000 in debt for a pizza delivery blunder that involved neon lights and a zoo's worth of animals. It was stupid. It was chaotic. It was the kind of trouble you could fix with a microphone and enough charm to outsmart security.

Vincenzo hadn't talked about "human futures" back then. He'd talked about not getting grounded. He'd laughed while wrestling the ostriches.

Chase opened his eyes. The office was silent. The man in the purple jacket didn't wrestle ostriches anymore. He bought the zoo.

When five o'clock came around it became legally defensible to leave. He told himself it wasn't an escape, just punctuality.

**\*\*\*Amelia\*\*\***

The clinic's lights were already dimming when she clocked out. She wiped the counter one last time, pet good-bye to a terrier named Goose, and traded her scrubs for jeans and a sensible cardigan.

Her phone buzzed.

Chase: *Still surviving Zootopia?*

Amelia: *Barely. A corgi farted in front of me and I almost fainted. You?*

Chase: *Escaped with only moral bruises.*

Amelia: *You should put some ice on that. Or start a class action suit against "Mondays."*

Chase: *Already started the paperwork.*

She smiled, almost tripped on a curb, without a care. For the first time in months, the weight of a day felt manageable.

As Chase read Amelia's text, across town Vincenzo was closing his stream. The chat faded, the neon dimmed, and silence filled the studio like a returning tide.

His assistant, Tori, poked her head in.

The board liked the new VIM venture."

"They always like new ventures of managing our resources' attention."

He spun once in his chair, slow and deliberate.

“Edit and send the clip to the social media outreach team. Tag it ‘Birth of VIM’.”

“On it.” She hesitated in the doorway. “You sure about pushing Wright on-camera later?”

Vincenzo smiled without looking at her.

“Chase spent his whole life trying to be the good guy in a room full of people who already cashed out their souls,” he said. “He’s going to burn out, Tori. Quietly. Honorably. And he’ll call it character.”

Spinning his chair to face her.

“He didn’t even go to law school,” Vincenzo added, almost fondly. “Did you know that? Everyone assumes he did. He let them. But no...he taught himself. Online courses. Open-source materials. Forums. He built the degree sideways.”

Tori blinked. “That’s... not exactly traditional.”

“Exactly,” Vincenzo said, pleased. “That’s what I love about him.”

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

“He didn’t reject the system,” Vincenzo continued. “He just refused to kneel to it. Learned what he needed. Took his own path. Worked outside the rules just long enough to step back inside with something real.”

He smiled again, this time openly.

“That kind of tenacity? That’s rare. That’s dangerous, if you leave it unguided.”

A high school gym moment of Chase tickling him flashed in his mind.

“It’s endearing.”

Tori studied him carefully. “So... we manage the narrative. Build him and his influence up at the same time

with the public.” She pondered for a moment, “We control the influencer, who controls the public.”

“Exactly.” Vincenzo’s voice softened, almost warm. “He’ll fight it at first. But once he sees the numbers, once he has the opportunity to lift the weight off Amelia’s shoulders, he’ll understand.”

He stood, walking toward the darkened monitor.

“I’m not taking anything from him,” Vincenzo said quietly. “I’m steering him towards the life he’s too proud to see in front of him.”

Tori nodded slowly, reading the tone.

Vincenzo leaned back.

The lighter clicked once in the dark, a small sun blooming between his fingers.

“Soon,” he murmured to the flame, “He’ll do the math. And he won’t even know it’s me that gave him the little push.”

He snapped it shut.

Chase’s dreams came shaped like contracts and regrettable memories. At 3 a.m. he gave up, reheated a sitting coffee strong enough to convince him to give up caffeine.

With nothing to do, Chase found himself sitting by the window watching the city breathe.

Every choice since Harrison Home had felt like one clean line between doing good and performing some kind of act.

His phone lit up with a notification from Instagram: Summers Brew posted a photo. A picture of a new

seasonal latte art—a clumsy leaf that looked more like a skull.

It made him think of coffee. Which made him think of Wednesday. Which made him think of her.

He opened his text thread with Amelia. The cursor blinked at him, demanding action.

He typed: ***Looking forward to it.***

He stared at the words. They felt sterile. He deleted them.

Suddenly, the memory hit him – visceral and sharp. The study room at Orangeside Community College. The smell of prop gunpowder and desperation.

He remembered the weight of the fake gun in his hand, the way they had staged the "shooting" to trick Dean Starmer. It was supposed to be a lesson about conspiracy theories. A layered gambit to cover up for one of Chase's made-up classes.

But he remembered the part that wasn't scripted.

Amelia, standing amidst the "bodies" of their friends, tears in her eyes that looked too real for a lesson meant for a nosy Dean. "But Chase, I only did it because I love you!"

She'd claimed it was part of the act later. Just improvisation to sell her own con. But he had seen her face. And he had done what he always did when things got too real: he made a joke, deflected, and then spent the rest of his time at OrangeSide keeping a respectable age appropriate distance from her..

He looked at the phone again. He couldn't run this time.

He sent: ***Wednesday's still on?*** Hoping that her phone was on 'do not disturb' after realizing the time.

The reply came fast, bubbling with that earnest energy she never bothered to hide. Chase felt a flicker of guilt – what if he woke her up?

**Up late too. Or is it early? Noon. I've already made an agenda.**

He smiled. Classic Amelia. *An agenda for coffee?*

Three dots. *We have a lot of GROUND to cover. And I want to hear the truth about the "announcement." No spin. No silver tongue.*

He typed back: *I'll make it WRIGHT.*

“Deal,” he said aloud to the empty apartment. The word sounded safe enough.

Outside, dawn rolled over the skyline. He drank, watching the light catch on glass towers, and promised himself that saying no to Vincenzo would stay easy.

## Chapter 8 – Cardigan and Combat Boots

Summers Brew eased awake the way it always did: a low-grade thrum of machinery and the smell of roasted beans.

Chase held the door open. The bell chimed – a single, clear note.

“This is it, you’ll love the lemon scones” he said.

Amelia stepped inside, looking less like a lawyer’s companion and more like she’d been color-graded for a different movie, her soft cardigan, warm smile, eyes scanning the room with unweaponized kindness.

“It smells amazing,” she said.

He guided her toward the counter. Tabitha was there, bracing for impact with her usual armor: black apron, sharp eyeliner, posture stiff as a bailiff. She looked up, eyes narrowing as they landed on Chase, then sliding to Amelia with visible confusion. She had clearly been expecting someone else. Maybe a client. Maybe some ‘slay queen’.

Definitely not a cardigan.

“Tabs, this is Amelia,” Chase said, leaning on the counter considering this cafe neutral ground. “Amelia, Tabitha. Tabitha keeps this place honest.”

Amelia smiled, and Chase watched as the room seemed to tune itself to her frequency.

“Hi,” Amelia said, her voice carrying that quiet steadiness he remembered from late nights in the library. “I’ve heard about the lemon scones.”

Tabitha blinked, caught off guard. “From whom?” She reached for a cup instantly, using movement as a shield.

“People with taste,” Amelia said, joking gently.

Chase suppressed his grin. Tabitha grabbed a sharpie and attacked the cup with aggressive professionalism. She wrote something in jagged block letters and slammed it down.

### **ARM CANDY.**

Chase winced internally. Ouch.

“Coffee?” Tabitha asked, voice flat.

“Latte,” Amelia said, unbothered. “Whatever you think is best.”

Chase watched Tabitha work - grind, tamp, pull. She moved with Olympic-level boredom, but when she poured the milk, her wrist did something subtle. She slid the cup across the counter.

Amelia picked it up and peered inside. Her smile brightened, not so much at the nickname written on the side, but at the foam.

“You have incredibly steady hands,” Amelia said softly. “You noticed I needed something gentle today.”

Chase leaned over. In the center of the cream sat a perfect, delicate white heart.

Tabitha looked horrified. “It’s milk,” she snapped. “It’ll curdle, drink fast.”

Chase chuckled. “Still labeling your customers, Registrar?”

“Still carrying your personality in a briefcase?” Tabitha shot back.

Before Chase could retort, a voice boomed from the corner.

“Wright! Does HR know you bring dates into small businesses? That’s a violation of... some fancy lawyer rule.”

Snakes rolled his mop bucket into view like a chariot. He wore his gray coveralls and a cocky grin, looking like he’d formed himself out of the café’s shadow lines.

Amelia glanced over, amused. “Friend of yours?”

“Stalker,” Chase said without looking. “He lives to keep me grounded.”

“Can’t ground what never stood up,” Snakes said, parking his cart with ceremony. He squinted at Amelia. “You his secretary?”

“Vet receptionist,” Amelia said, grin easy. “Animals, not plaintiffs.”

Snakes nodded, satisfied. “Explains the patience with this one. Wright can’t even get his aim straight at the urinals.”

Chase shot Tabitha a look, as she was biting her cheek to keep from laughing.

“That’s libel,” Chase muttered.

Snakes ignored him, reaching into his cart, pulling out a folded newspaper. He then slid it across the counter toward Tabitha.

Chase looked down. A red marker circle bled around an advertisement in the corner:

El Viento SECURITIES - Secure Your Future.

On the front page, a smaller headline detailed a gas leak at a riverfront warehouse. It seemed unrelated until Chase’s eyes caught the sub-header: Property recently acquired by Aquarius Revitalization, a division of El Viento Heavy Industries, for future development.

The circle and the headline weren't near each other on the page, but the ink seemed to pull them together.

"New ants on the line," Snakes said, eyeing Amelia, then Chase. "Sugar piles higher now."

Chase felt a prickle of unease. He'd seen Geoffrey Wagner planting flyers earlier; now he was looking at the charred aftermath of what happened when the "El Viento" is invested in your future.

"Not today," Chase groaned, though the denial felt thin. "Please."

"Today most of all." Snakes shifted the newspaper half an inch, tapping the space between the ad and the ruin. "Try not to lose at checkers in front of your lady friend."

"I don't lose at checkers," Chase said.

"Sure," Snakes said. "Just like you don't lose when you try to sign fancy paperwork with a crayon. Careful, Wright, your charm's heavier than it looks."

Chase froze. The memory of the crayon incident - a prank from months ago that he still hadn't solved - hit him. It hadn't just been annoying; it had been humiliating. He remembered the heat rising in his neck during a senior partner meeting when he'd reached for a Montblanc to sign a motion and pulled out a burnt sienna Crayola instead. It was a tiny sabotage that had made him look foolish in the one room where appearance was currency.

With a mix of disgust and shock, Chase opened his hands in defense, saying firmly, "That was YOU!"

Amelia laughed, surprised and delighted.

Winona, the owner of the cafe, drifted out of the kitchen, carrying a teapot like a halo. Her scarf was blue with tiny constellations.

“Harmon-Tea?” she offered, setting down cups painted with tiny stars.

“Is that... for me?” Amelia asked.

“For the room,” Winona said serenely. “Which you’ve brightened.”

Amelia blinked, looking shyly pleased.

“Two sips, one bite,” Winona told them as if swearing in witnesses. “For Hamonic resonance.”

“Is there a surcharge if we drink it near chuckles?” Snakes asked, thumbing at Chase.

“Absolutely,” Winona said. “But the house will cover it.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The tea was calming.

Chase and Amelia stood at the counter while the morning rush swirled around them - a girl complaining about Iowa, a guy in sandals arguing about socks.

Chase finally ordered his own drink. Tabitha handed him a cup labeled **ANTI-HERO**.

He read it, bit back a smile, holding the cup like a statement.

“You work nearby?” Tabitha asked suddenly, her tone sharp but curious at Amelia.

“Clinic on Ninth,” Amelia said. “Mostly cats who think gravity is an opinion.”

“Relatable,” Tabitha said.

Amelia smiled. She liked this girl. There was something sharp and guarded about her, but the heart in the latte said otherwise.

“You do the chalkboard art? The little skull in the corner?” Amelia asked.

Tabitha looked away. “Skull is a symbol.”

“I like it,” Amelia said. “He looks like he knows a good secret.”

“He knows where all the bodies are buried,” Tabitha said.

Chase tapped his briefcase. “Speaking of buried bodies...”

“Do not,” Snakes said immediately from his corner.

“Do not what?” Chase asked.

“Do not try to be interesting,” Snakes said. “I have a shit ton of markers.”

Amelia’s laugh filled the cafe.

The morning moved on. Chase signed the receipt. Amelia took another sip of Harmon-Tea and complimented Winona on the name, which made Winona’s aura practically glow.

On his way out, Snakes tapped the circled El Viento ad with one finger, then pointed lazily at the door, as if to say: Watch what comes in and out.

Chase met his eyes. He knew what the janitor meant. Don’t touch the sugar.

“Thanks for the ambiance,” Chase told him.

“Anytime,” Snakes said. “Don’t choke on your charisma.”

They left in staggered choreography—Chase first, followed by Amelia.

“Thank you,” Amelia said to Tabitha, crossing the doorway. The words stuck to the counter sweetly.

The coffee cups were still warm in their hands as they left Summers Brew, the bell jingling like a warning they were deaf to.

Outside, the rain had washed Orangeside into the color of dishwater.

“They’re nice,” Amelia said, buttoning her cardigan.

“Overwhelming. But nice.”

“That’s Summers Brew,” Chase said. “They keep you humble.”

He glanced back through the window. Tabitha was eating a scone, looking at her notebook.

Winona was watching them with a knowing smile.

## Chapter 9 – Fogged Glass

They took the Acura for the short drive to Amelia's apartment. Their coffee cups sat in the console, steam fogging the lower windshield. The drizzle from earlier had settled into a faint mist.

"Tabitha's... something," Amelia said at last.

"She's an acquired taste," Chase said. "Like black licorice or existential dread."

"I think I like her." Amelia then added, "I like how she sees through people without making them feel exposed. It's like she's been watching the world, and not buying the act they are selling."

"That's how she gets you."

They both smiled, the weight of the café visit - specifically the newspaper Snakes had slid across the counter - still hung between them.

"So," Amelia said, shifting gears. "Before we forget: The 'Announcement.' You said you'd bring the truth."

Chase sighed, running a hand through his damp hair.

"Vincenzo wants me to work for him. Officially."

"I thought you already did. They're Michael & Cole's biggest client."

"This is different. He's launching a new division. Some 'Philanthropic Venture Arm.' He wants me to be the face of it. The consultant. The guy who convinces people that selling out is actually buying in."

Amelia frowned. "Selling out to whom? El Viento?"

"To 'human futures'," Chase said, quoting with a grimace. "He wants to buy up local businesses. Revitalize

the city. He specifically mentioned he has a team looking at places like Summers Brew.”

Amelia froze. “He wants to buy the café?”

“He wants to buy everything, Amelia. He’s playing ‘The Sims’ and we’re just NPCs. He even tried to frame it as ‘monetized benevolence.’”

She traced the rim of her cup, staring at the wet pavement. “And you told him no?”

“I told him I wasn’t shopping.” Chase looked away. “But the firm... Michael & Cole, we, had a rogue. El Viento’s board is probably pissed. If I say no to him, and Michael & Cole folds, I might be waving a life-boat away from a sinking ship.”

Amelia reached out and touched his arm. “Chase. You’re not responsible for the ship. You’re just a passenger who knows how to tie knots.”

He laughed, a dry sound. “That’s a horrible metaphor.”

“I’m working on it.” Her grip tightened slightly. “But seriously. IF your firm crashes and burns, you’ll find the *Wright* path, you always do. Besides, you don’t wanna owe him your soul just because he pays the rent. If he wants to buy the city, let him try. But don’t let him use your voice to do it.”

Chase looked at her, really looked at her. She was right, of course. She tended to be.

“He offered to buy the clinic too,” Chase admitted quietly. “Or at least, he asked about it. Said ‘animal wellness’ was an untapped vertical.”

Amelia’s expression hardened instantly. “Absolutely not.”

“I told him to leave you out of it.”

“Good.” She started looking ahead again. “He sees everything as an asset. Even life.”

“You mean ‘human resources’,” Chase corrected.

He idled at the curb outside her building. Amelia turned in the passenger seat, the streetlight filtering through the rain-streaked glass to draw soft gold through her hair.

“I’m glad you said no,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You don’t belong in his world. You’re too...” She searched for the word. “*Wright.*”

Chase opened his mouth to say something clever, then didn’t. She smiled, in a way that said she noticed the silence and forgave it.

“Coffee again?” she asked.

“Always.”

She squeezed his hand across the gearshift before opening the door. He sat there, watching until her building door closed and the lobby light flickered on.

He didn’t know why the word always felt like a contract.

# Chapter 10 – A Trap Door That Welcomes You

Cold blue light filled the freshly minted office of VIM.

Vincenzo sat back in his chair, hoodie up, a half-finished energy drink sweating onto the desk. Midnight had passed unnoticed. The new building was quiet in the way only powerful places ever were — no janitors, no footsteps, just systems humming for people who didn't need sleep.

Tonight was a deep dive into the past.

On the screen, a younger Chase Wright leaned against a podium, tie crooked, voice sharp with righteous indignation.

“Why are we paying for Xbox Live? We already pay for the internet! It's like renting a fork at a restaurant!”

Vincenzo laughed, surprising himself.

“You absolute idiot savant,” he said fondly to the screen.

The comment section from ages ago was still there, fossilized in early-internet amber:

**BatDan45:** *this guy's hilarious*

**FalconerTX:** *he's right tho*

**Wingin\_IT\_09:** *lawyer energy before law school lol*

Vincenzo scrubbed back, watching the mannerisms. The animated hands. The instinctive pauses. The way Chase rode the room without even trying.

Chase wasn't performing.

He was *communicating*.

That was the difference. That was why it mattered.

“He never wanted to follow the system,” Vincenzo murmured.

He remembered vividly the looks Chase got when people found out his ‘schooling’. Online coursework. Self-taught certifications. Forums. Long nights. No pedigree, no debt-worship, no kneeling.

Chase hadn’t rejected the system.  
He’d just learned it sideways... then stepped back in.

That kind of tenacity had always impressed Vincenzo.  
Still did.

“He’s going to burn out,” Vincenzo said quietly. “Same way he always does. Doing the right thing in rooms, instead of the thing for *Wright*. Where everyone else already sold their soul, Chase’s been giving pieces of his away.”

He leaned back, folding his hands behind his head.

“I’m not going to let that continue.”

Another tab opened. Vincenzo barely guided it, the algorithm already knew where this was going.

A dated local AnimeVerse video loaded. Handheld footage. Bad audio. Overexposed lighting.

And then —

Amelia Winters.

Younger. Hair brighter. Laughing into a camera she didn’t know was recording. White-and-blue costume, gold key prop, joy unguarded and utterly unoptimized.

Vincenzo froze the frame.

“Oh,” he said softly. Not greedy. Not predatory.

Relieved.

“Well... there it is.”

He hit play again, watching her move. So comfortable, expressive, and *present*. Not chasing attention, not hiding from it either. Just existing in front of a lens that always belonged there.

Chase had timing.  
Amelia had warmth.

Together?

They weren't a brand. They were a **vortex**.

"Honey," Vincenzo murmured, tapping the lighter against the desk. "That's all it is. A little honey so the medicine goes down easier."

He wasn't stealing anything. He wasn't forcing anyone.

He was **re-aligning the orbit**.

High school again. Group chats that never went dead. Movie nights. Inside jokes that carried through years. A life where Chase didn't have to be the responsible one holding everyone together by principle alone.

A life where Chase and he could be 'Gold and Silver' again, just like high school. Of course the silver has gotten a little salty.

"Salt and Honey," Vincenzo said, smiling to himself. "It's not a pitch. It's a life-line."

He opened a notepad and typed, slower now — careful, intentional.

**N:** Leverage SilverTongue. Debate format. Authentic friction.

**A:** Restore creative spark. Platform first. Community second. No pressure.

Then, after a pause, smaller text beneath it:

*Couples content stabilizes audience loyalty. Shared vulnerability reads as truth.*

He snapped the lighter open.

A small golden flame rose reflecting against Amelia's frozen smile on the screen.

Chase didn't need saving.

He just needed a reason to stop walking away from opportunity.

"I'm giving you your life back," Vincenzo whispered. "Both of you."

The lighter clicked shut.

The room stayed dark —  
except for the glow of the monitor.

"It's time for an upgrade."

The office was quiet in a way that had nothing to do with noise levels. It was the silence of a herd that had just seen one of its own taken down by a predator, and was now grazing aggressively to prove they hadn't noticed.

Gunther's office was already cleared. The nameplate was gone. The glass walls, usually plastered with sticky notes and case law, were Windex-clean.

It wasn't just a firing. It was a scrubbing.

Chase sat at his own desk, the termination email still open on his screen. The official reason was "Gross Misconduct." The reality was buried in the subtext of the file names Gunther had been caught with.

**Stiles & Springer. The St. Yves Housing Development.**

*Context: Associate was flagged for accessing restricted Pre-Century zoning archives. Gunther W. claimed the St. Yves development was being built on top of ' Pre-Historical Tartarian infrastructure' that does not appear on modern blueprints.*

**Incident:** *He attempted to halt construction, citing 'forbidden frequencies' in the foundation that he claimed were 'not dormant.' The Firm categorizes these as conspiracy-driven delusions regarding the 'Previous Arbiters' and their 'Drafts'."*

Chase knew the case. It was supposed to be a standard zoning dispute—the Mayor’s office pushing through a high-end development against local holdouts. Gunther had been assigned to crush the opposition. Instead, he’d defected.

Rumor was, Gunther had found something in the discovery phase. Something that didn't look like zoning laws. He’d started raving about "Spark’d Humans" and "Tartarian property lines"—archaic, nonsensical terms that sounded like madness or his own strange terminology for legal terms.

Gunther wasn't mad. He was meticulous.

“He admitted to acting as an insider for the opposition based on these delusions.”

Chase closed his eyes. In the world of Michael & Cole, "delusion" was often just the corporate word for a truth that cost too much money. Gunther hadn't just lost his mind; he’d switched sides because he saw something that terrified him more than the partners did.

And now he is gone. And the St. Yves development, backed by El Viento capital, would proceed without a hitch.

Chase locked his computer.

He felt a sudden, desperate need to be somewhere that didn't smell like lemon pledge and fear.

The rain had thinned to a mist that clung to everything, turning the city soft and gray. Amelia collapsed her umbrella outside Summers Brew, shaking the drops onto the mat.

She wasn't entirely sure why she was here. Telling herself she just wanted good coffee. Truth was, she wanted to understand the coordinates of Chase's life. He came here to escape; she wanted to see what safe looked like to him.

She pushed the door open. The bell chimed an uncertain note.

Tabitha was behind the counter, and for a second, Amelia saw the armor go up. Shoulders tightened. Chin lifted. The girl looked like she was bracing for a collision.

Amelia didn't take it personally. She worked with terrified cats every day; she knew that hiss usually meant don't hurt me, not I want to hurt you.

"Morning," Amelia said, keeping her voice even. "Could I get a latte?"

Tabitha narrowed her eyes, assessing. She looked like she was scanning Amelia for hidden weapons or condescension. Finding neither, she clicked a pen and attacked a paper cup with surgical precision.

She slid it across the counter.

**SMILES TOO MUCH.**

Amelia read it and a genuine surprised laugh burst out. It wasn't mean; it was observant.

"At least it's accurate," Amelia said.

Tabitha blinked, clearly expecting a different reaction. "Milk preference?"

"Whole's fine." Amelia leaned a little on the counter, watching the barista work. The girl moved with a jagged

intensity, fighting the espresso machine rather than operating it. “Do you always write... notes?”

“Judgments,” Tabitha said, the grinder roaring to life. “It’s policy.”

“Policy,” Amelia repeated, amused.

“I file what I see.”

Amelia’s gaze drifted to the notebook on the counter. It was a battered thing—spine frayed, corners bitten by time. It looked loved, in the violent way creative people loved their tools.

“You write outside the cups, too,” Amelia said.

Tabitha froze. Her arm slid halfway over the book, a protective reflex. “It’s just... homework.”

Amelia smiled gently. She knew that look. It was the look of someone protecting a soft underbelly. “Looks more interesting than homework.”

Tabitha tamped the coffee grounds with a snap. “It’s fiction. Creepy fiction. Ants keep score, rivers carry secrets, muffins plot coups. Very highbrow.” She didn’t look up. “You wouldn’t like it.”

It was a shield, thick and heavy.

Amelia rested her chin on her hand, really looking at this young girl. She saw the intelligence burning behind the eyeliner, the frantic energy of a mind that saw too much and didn’t know where to put it.

“You might be surprised what I like,” Amelia said softly.

Tabitha’s hand slipped on the milk pitcher. She poured too fast, swirled, and stared down into the cup with a look of betrayal. She slid it forward without a word.

There, in the foam, was a butterfly.

Amelia beamed. Not at the art, but at the accidental kindness it betrayed.

“Thank you,” she said.

She took a sip, lingering near the counter. The café was quiet, just the hum of the fridge and the rain outside.

“So what do you want to do with your writing?” Amelia asked.

Tabitha’s pencil hovered. “Do with it? It’s just... notes.”

“Notes are seeds,” Amelia said. “You could plant them.”

Tabitha snorted. “What are you, a gardener?”

“Vet receptionist,” Amelia corrected, grinning. “Less grounded. Same patience.”

Tabitha looked at her notebook, then back at Amelia, wary but listening.

“Animals don’t talk,” Amelia said, thinking of the clinic, of the trembling dogs and the stoic cats. “Not in ways that translate cleanly. So we watch. Patterns. Posture. What they want to hide. What hurts. What doesn’t. That’s half my job.”

She gestured to the notebook.

“You do the same thing... Only with people who won’t say things. You see through their masks.”

Tabitha stared at her. The silence stretched, but it wasn’t heavy anymore. It was thoughtful.

“I used to write too,” Amelia offered. “College essays, silly fan-fics. And a blog once, back when the internet was mostly cat pictures and amazing rainbows. No one read it, but it felt good.”

“What kind of stories?” Tabitha asked, her voice losing its edge.

“Ones about bees and ants talking to each other. And people who didn’t say what they felt out loud, so I made them say it in secret.” Amelia smiled sheepishly.

“Fanfiction for life, basically.”

Tabitha looked down, scribbling something fast in her book.

The bell jingled. Wheels squeaked.

Amelia turned to see Snakes the janitor shuffling in. His mop cart rattled, a personal vendetta against silence.

“Wright’s not here,” Tabitha said automatically.

“Didn’t come for Wright,” Snakes muttered. “I have him locked in the firm’s restroom, with a series of clues leading to a puzzle holding the key to the door.”

Amelia had no way of knowing that, across town, Snakes had currently committed a felony against workplace productivity.

Chase stood in the center of the pristine, marble-tiled restroom, staring at a sticky note attached to the mirror. It read: *To escape the chamber of water flow, one must discover where to go. The Spynx’s path is very rare, travel across it with care.*

Below it, balanced precariously on the porcelain sink, sat a cardboard box heavily wrapped in duct tape. The word SPHINX was scrawled on the side in aggressive black Sharpie.

“Snakes!” Chase shouted at the ceiling vent, his voice echoing off the expensive tile. “I swear to God, if this is another crayon incident, I’m replacing your PineSol with Scope!”

He grabbed the box. A riddle was written on the top flap involving burning cabins and a flower in an underwater garden.

“I don’t have time for a logic puzzle,” Chase muttered. “I have a deposition in ten minutes.”

He didn't bother solving it. He jammed his thumb under the taped flap, ripped the cardboard in half with a feral grunt, and shook it upside down until a brass key clattered loudly into the sink.

“I’m billing the firm for emotional distress!” he yelled at the locked door, jamming the key into the handle. “And I’m stealing your mop!”

Amelia laughed. “Seriously, do you two actually dislike each other, or is this some sorta bit?”

Snakes jabbed his mop at the air. “Man slipped on a wet floor after the ‘Caution’ sign was right in front of him. Oblivious. And charming. Like candy corn, a lethal combination.”

He approached the counter, rummaged in his pocket, and slapped a torn scrap of paper onto the wood.

It was a piece of the El Viento SECURITIES flyer. The logo was circled three times in red, with tiny ants doodled around it in furious ink.

“Ants move where the sugar spills,” Snakes said.

He pushed it toward Tabitha, but his eyes flicked to Amelia.

“Our lawyer friend thinks the sugar is a gift.” He tapped the circled logo. “He doesn’t see the hook.”

Amelia felt a chill that had nothing to do with the damp air. “Is that... about his job?”

“About everything,” Snakes said, already shuffling backward, his mission complete. “Especially a trap door that welcomes you when all the other exits are blocked.”

His mop squeaked like a dying accordion as he retreated out the door.

Amelia looked at the scrap of paper. A trap door that welcomes you.

“Is he always like that?” she asked.

“Yes,” Tabitha said, tucking the paper into her notebook. “But sometimes he’s the kind of weird that turns out right six weeks later.”

Amelia finished her tea, the warmth settling in her chest, but the warning cold in her mind. She waved to Winona, thanked Tabitha, and stepped back out into the mist.

As the door closed behind her, she thought about trap doors. And hooks. And how Chase, for all his cleverness, sometimes mistook a cage for a safety net.

## Chapter 11 – Heavy Industry

### \*\*\*Vincenzo\*\*\*

To the world Vincenzo ran El Viento Securities. The real story was that it was just part of a bigger machine.

El Viento's subsidiaries obeyed him. Markets reacted to his silences. Governments took his opinions as policies. His "spiritual sabbatical" was a courtesy extended to the world, not an abdication. From the outside, El Viento Securities appeared to be under Vincenzo's command. Securities wore Vincenzo's face. Heavy Industries wore Ernesto's.

Ernesto's penthouse office was minimalism at its most arrogant: glass, marble, a single desk, and a skyline treated like inventory. No art. No photos. Nothing that suggested memory.

Ernesto did not look up when Vincenzo entered.

"You're late," he said mildly.

Vincenzo smiled. "Traffic."

"There is no traffic between my summons and this room."

It wasn't a rebuke. It was a correction of reality.

Ernesto set his tablet aside and folded his hands.

"The Gunther situation has concluded," he said.

Vincenzo paused a half-step into the room. Just enough.

"Concluded...why? How?" he asked, half upset at the unexpected intrusion.

Ernesto regarded him with faint curiosity, as if the questions were slightly unnecessary. "You were slow to react. It was handled..."

“Quietly,” he punctuated. “He is no longer in a position to confuse anyone.”

Ernesto’s eyes returned to the tablet.

“The firm he worked with,” he continued. “Michael & Cole. What is their exposure?”

Vincenzo exhaled slowly, relieved he hadn’t had to raise the subject himself.

“They didn’t instigate it,” he said. “But they didn’t contain it either. Gunther operated too freely. Too much latitude. Too little supervision.”

“Incompetence,” Ernesto said.

“Or misplaced trust,” Vincenzo replied. “Either way, it reflects poorly. They’re already being associated with conspiracy theory nonsense.”

Ernesto’s fingers tapped once against the glass surface of the desk.

“I don’t like nonsense,” he said.

“Nonesense does rustle the cattle,” Vincenzo agreed. “It may be wise to distance El Viento Securities from them. Treat the firm as damage containment rather than a partner.”

Ernesto studied him.

“You’re recommending replacement.”

“I’m recommending stability,” Vincenzo said smoothly. “A firm that understands discretion as a prerequisite, not a courtesy.”

*Chase Wright would feel it immediately.  
The firm’s wobble. The phones going quiet.  
Pressure without fingerprints.*

Ernesto nodded once.

“And this media initiative,” he said. “VIM.”

“It gives us leverage outside our normal scope,” Vincenzo said. “Narrative control. Visibility without accountability. If belief is going to spread, we decide what to believe.”

Ernesto leaned back slightly.

“Misdirected belief is not something I indulge,” he said.

“Neither do I,” Vincenzo replied. “But ‘human resources’ do. VIM gives them a place to put it where it can’t metastasize.”

The room went quiet.

“You’ve also authorized an acquisition for El Viento Securities,” Ernesto said, glancing at his tablet again. “PawsCity Vibes.”

“Yes,” Vincenzo said. “It fits the current expansion profile. Small. Local. Low volatility. Community-facing.”

“An animal clinic,” Ernesto said. “Unusual.”

“Harmless,” Vincenzo said. “And useful.”

*Useful because Amelia Winters needed hours to survive.  
Useful because desperation was quieter than force.  
Useful because honey leaks when the hive is damaged.*

Ernesto considered this, gaze drifting briefly to the skyline.

“As long as it remains harmless,” he said.

“It will,” Vincenzo replied.

The lights dimmed subtly as the building adjusted itself around Ernesto’s presence.

“Proceed with VIM,” Ernesto said. “Replace the firm. Clean the edges. I don’t want to hear about Sparks or Tartaria from the public again.”

“You won’t,” Vincenzo said.

Ernesto stood, already done with the conversation.

“Human resources with stories are cheaper than prisons,” he said. “Just make sure they stay stories.”

## Chapter 12 - Cost of Clean Lines

By late afternoon, the Gunther fallout had reached every corner of the firm. Clients called. The partners whispered. The phrase “damage containment” appeared in every memo. Michael & Cole handled crises for a living, but this time the crisis was inside the building.

Chase spent the day drafting neutral statements that said nothing, fielding emails that smelled like panic, and trying not to think about how fast integrity could be redefined.

At six, he caught his reflection in the dark window: tie loosened, posture folded. He looked like a man already halfway to a nuthouse. His buzzing phone snapped him out of it.

Amelia: **You alive?**

He typed: **Define alive.**

Then: **Dinner at your place? I’ll try to pick out something healthy.**

Her answer came back: **Deal.**

**\*\*\*Amelia\*\*\***

At the clinic, the new signage had gone up while she was on lunch break.

EL VIENTO ANIMAL WELLNESS INITIATIVE.

(Formerly PawsCity Vibes)

*Brought to you by Santa’s Little Saviors.*

Amelia stopped on the sidewalk like she’d hit an invisible curb. For a full minute she just stared at the sleek, modern font where the old hand-painted sign used to be. Where someone’s uneven brush strokes had always looked a little proud, a little human.

This one looked clean. It looked expensive.

It looked like a decision made in a boardroom.

Her manager popped her head out of the doorway, practically glowing. “Isn’t it great? New funding, new equipment! They’re sending more iPads next week.”

Amelia shifted her face to a socially acceptable shape. “Right. Progress.”

Stepping inside she told herself not to be dramatic. A sign was just a sign. Money was just money. The dogs still barked, the cats still pretended gravity was optional, and she still knew where the bandages were.

Then the little things started popping up.

The corkboard by the front desk, usually a collage of lost pets, handwritten thank-yous, and someone’s flyer for a yard sale, had been replaced overnight with a laminated poster in corporate teal:

CONSENT TO RECORD ON PREMISES.

Below it, a QR code the size of a stare.

On the counter, beside the jar of cheap dog treats, sat a new acrylic stand:

SCAN FOR WAIT TIMES / CARE UPDATES /  
SATISFACTION SURVEY.

The word satisfaction made her stomach do a small, private flip.

A strange man was in the hallway measuring god knows what with a little laser tool, his badge turned just enough that she couldn’t read it. He smiled.

“Hi! You must be Amelia,” he said, too familiar. “We’re just doing a quick workflow assessment.”

Assessment, as if her and her co-workers were some product on an assembly line waiting to be ‘QA’ tested.

Behind the front desk, Kwartana, the other receptionist, was clicking through a shiny new interface on a tablet that definitely hadn't been there yesterday. The screen reflected in her glasses like a second set of eyes.

Amelia's manager was still talking, still thrilled. "Isn't it amazing? They're streamlining everything. No more paper cuts. They said it'll make us modern."

Modern. Like the animals were the latest games console.

Amelia nodded again, because that's what a normal person would do. Forcing her hands to stay steady, she laughed when the bulldog's flatulence echoed in the hallway.

Maybe I'm overreacting, she told herself. Maybe this is just the part where help really is just help.

The disinfectant did smell sharper. The air felt tighter, like someone had turned the clinic down a few degrees and called it 'market acceptable'. And the barking, usually messy and alive, sounded different in a room that suddenly had a badge-reader for it.

As she walked to the back, she caught her reflection in the glass of the new poster. Small, contained, already fitting into someone else's layout.

On the way home she texted Chase:

**Make it extra healthy.**

**I might sell my soul later.**

## Chapter 13 - Dancers in the Dark

Amelia's apartment smelled of coffee grounds and lavender detergent. The kind of cozy that happens by accident, not design. Books in stacks, one lamp too bright, a couch that had clearly chosen a side in the war against gravity.

Chase arrived carrying a paper bag of takeout – a local Mexican place, with more soul than polish – and immediately tripped over a laundry basket left in the hallway.

"I'm getting Paperboy flashbacks over here," he said, catching his balance and setting the bag down.

"Think of it as a security measure," Amelia called out. She was barefoot, hair up in a messy bun, wearing yoga pants and an oversized t-shirt. "If you survive the obstacle course, you earn food."

"I didn't expect Amelia Winter's place to be so..," he said. "Disorganized."

She grinned, taking the bag. "Winters tend to be messy."

They ate on the couch, cross-legged, watching some streaming show neither cared about. Every now and then, their conversation brushed the edges of real things. His stress at the firm, her "rebranded" clinic, but neither wanted to let the world invade what they were having.

"Everything okay at work?" she asked, biting into her quesadilla slice.

"Depends who you ask," he said. "Gunther might've been sacrificed to appease our overlords."

"Sounds barbaric."

"Oh, it's corporate America. We just use nicer fonts."

Her smile was sympathetic and a little sad. “You think that’s it. You’ll spend the next thirty or forty years at Micheal & Cole, then retire?”

He thought about it. “More often than I care to admit.”

“Then maybe you should start admitting it, see if that’s what you really want.”

They fell quiet again, the hum of the oscillating fan filling the air.

He stood to grab a napkin and caught sight of something at the back of her open closet—a flash of color. A gold key, a blue ribbon, a faint shimmer of fabric half-hidden behind a denim jacket.

“Old uniform?” he asked, teasing, walking closer.

She hesitated, looking up. “Something like that.”

He pulled it out gently. It was the Lucy Heartfilia costume, bright and well-loved, the edges slightly frayed but the colors still vibrant.

“Oh,” he said, smiling. “I figured AnimeVerse wasn’t a one-time thing.”

“Please don’t—”

He was already flipping through the hangers. “Nami. Videl. Sakura. Wait, is this—seriously?”

She froze. “What?”

He held up a green tunic and a very short skirt.

“...Link,” he said. “You cosplayed Link.”

“I said Zelda,” she replied defensively. “It’s the costume they gave me. I worked with it and hung out with other gender-bent characters.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s basically the same character archetypally.”

He bit back a grin. “That’s an opinion that’s gotten people banned from Reddit.”

“Congratulations,” she said dryly, snatching the hanger from him. “You’ve found the ghosts of my life before Orangeside.”

“I think they’re adorable ghosts,” he said.

Her blush betrayed her. “They’re embarrassing ghosts.”

“Embarrassing ghosts,” he said, stepping closer. “Look good on you.”

She threw a pillow at him, laughter came naturally when he caught it.

Looking up, he was closer than she expected. The laughter died down, replaced by a sudden, heavy gravity.

The silence that followed was the kind that didn’t need answers.

He kissed her – slow, warm, tentative enough to feel like permission. She kissed him back with a steadiness that surprised them both, a release of two years of unspoken feelings and almost-moments.

They stood like that for a long moment, the only sound of their breathing syncing in the quiet apartment. “You know this doesn’t fix anything?” her voice feathered.

“Of course not,” he said softly, his hand resting on her waist. “Can’t fix something that was never broken... So let’s start something that doesn’t need fixing.”

“Good,” she murmured. “The world’s been broken for a while.”

Later, after helping her stack the takeout containers. They stood by the door, the air felt charged, fragile.

She said it first.

“You could stay, you know. Just... tonight.”

He looked at her, tired but lighter than he’d been in months. “You sure?”

“Yeah,” she said. “The couch unfolds, but the bed’s a lot more comfy.”

He smiled. “Noted.”

It wasn’t the kind of night that demanded fireworks. It was the kind that felt like finding the right frequency after years of lost signals.

Plans, half-jokes, the kind of maybe-future you build when the lights are out. They talked in the dark until exhaustion won.

At one point, she mumbled, “Maybe you should move in. Less unscheduled ‘Paperboy’ games.”

He chuckled, shifting the blanket. “I have more square footage and fewer death traps.”

“So... compromise.”

Vincenzo replayed the test footage of his “Spark Myths” stream, frame by frame, every word polished, every smile placed. But his mind wasn’t on the numbers. It was on a photo open in another window - Amelia Winters at eighteen, cosplay ribbon in her hair, sunlight catching on synthetic gold.

He ran background checks before. He knew exactly who was holding the camera in that old video. He knew the history of her life.

"Chase," he murmured, tapping the glass. "You've found a diamond in a bloodline of coal. Lucky boy."

He leaned back, the leather chair groaning. He had offered Chase the carrot. A simple consulting gig, the easy money.

Chase had slapped it away. Chase was proud. Chase wanted to be "real."

So, the carrot was out. It was time for the diamond stick.

Vincenzo picked up his phone. Opening a secure line to the asset management team overseeing the newly acquired "El Viento Animal Wellness" portfolio.

He typed: ***Bring the 'PawsCity Vibes' in line with the new operating model.***

*Send.*

Then he opened a second thread, this one to the liaison handling the Michael & Cole retainer.

He typed: **The Gunther scandal is a liability. Begin comparative counsel evaluation.**

*Send.*

He set the phone down, watching the screen go dark. He didn't need to scout them. He needed to starve them. When the rent was due and the hours were cut, they wouldn't look at his cameras as selling out. They would look at them as a lifeline.

"You want to be authentic, Chase?" he whispered to the empty room. "Authenticity isn't free."

He stood up and walked to the window. Outside, the skyline reflected in the glass. For a second, in the ghost glass, he thought he saw a second silhouette behind his own, dark, tall silhouette. A long-banished, wandering eye, still and patient, a silent partner waiting for his cut.

When he blinked, it was gone.

Vincenzo smiled, checked his reflection, and turned off the lights.

## Chapter 14 – The "Mirror" Effect

VIM's growth was stalled in the last few weeks, so the media team was being borrowed by the R&D wing of El Viento Securities. It was usually off-limits to everyone but the scientists and owners, Vincenzo had his all-access badge and a need to see where the money was going.

He found a man arguing with a mannequin in the hallway.

The man was young - late twenties - wearing a lab coat that fit him a little too perfectly, like a costume department's idea of a scientist. He had dark, intense eyes and the kind of stillness that made people uncomfortable.

"No, no," the man was saying to the plastic dummy. "You're not selling the restraint. You're selling the hug. It's not a life sentence; it's a new life path."

Vincenzo stopped, leaning against the wall. "Rough crowd?"

The man spun around. His movement was fluid, almost too smooth. He blinked once - slowly - and then a mask of professional charm slid into place.

"Vincenzo Viento," the man said. "The Face. The Voice. The Golden Son returning to the source code."

"And you are?"

"Grey Elwin. Senior Technology Demonstrator. Public Facing Showman. Currently rehearsing for the second act of the American Justice System."

Vincenzo raised an eyebrow. "I didn't know the justice system had a second act. I thought we just kept rebooting the pilot."

Grey smiled, a tight, practiced expression. "We did. Until this morning. Didn't you get the memo? The death

penalty is officially cancelled. Show's over. Writers' strike."

Vincenzo frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"The ban," Grey said, gesturing with long fingers. "El Viento Heavy Industry's lobbyists have been busy in D.C. As of midnight, federal execution is off the table. Cruel and unusual. The state can no longer take a life."

He stepped closer, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper.

"Which creates a vacuum. A narrative void. What do we do with the monsters if we can't kill them?"

Vincenzo looked at the man. He was strange. Intense, literal, vibrating with a frequency that felt alien. He reminded Vincenzo of a character from a show he'd watched years ago. The weird one who saw life through TV tropes because reality was too messy.

"Let me guess," Vincenzo said. "We sell them a box."

"We sell them THE Box," Grey corrected. "El Viento Altruistic Prison System. EVAPS."

Grey pulled a small, heavy object from his pocket. It looked like a link of chain, but it shimmered with an iridescence that hurt the eyes.

Grey held up the link. It didn't look like steel; it looked like liquid caught in a freeze-frame.

"Xeno-Tungstanium," Grey said. "Marketed as XTC. The official story is that we synthesized the alloy, Vincenzo. Truth is, it's mined from the deep-layer foundations conspiracy theorist scream about."

He tapped the metal. It didn't clang; it hummed, a low frequency.

"It's programmable matter. Smart-metal. Ancient durability meets modern convenience."

He held the link up. “XTC is cast with a fixed parameter set. Dimensions, tolerances, limits. Once those values are set, the metal never deviates. No motors. No feedback. No correction.”

“Sounds like something those conspiracy theorists would lap up,” Eldorado scoffed.

Grey’s eyes didn’t waver. “Those conspiracy theorists lack the lens to appreciate the potential. Most are just magical thinkers. It’s just... a relic from the past for them. This metal? It uses the same harmonic principles found in proposed leaked government files. The ‘Spark and Tartarian nonsense’ you mocked on your stream the other night?”

Grey tapped the metal link against the wall. It didn’t clang; it sang a low, unnerving note.

“It’s the strongest substance on earth. And we’re using it to build cages that last longer than the monsters inside them.”

Vincenzo’s eyes darted between the metal to Grey. He saw something there. Not just intelligence, but a desperate need to be part of a story. A sidekick looking for a lead, a Jessie Pinkman looking for his Heisenberg.

“You’re on your way to announce this?” Vincenzo asked.

“Main stage. Ten minutes.”

Vincenzo pushed off the wall. He straightened his jacket, then reached out and adjusted Grey’s lapel.

“Lose the ‘It’s not a life-sentence’ line,” Vincenzo said. “Too villainous. Call it ‘Safety.’”

Grey stared at him, seemingly processing the direction like a computer downloading a patch. “Safety. High concept. Broad appeal. I like it.”

“And Grey?”

“Yes?”

“After the show,” Vincenzo said, flashing his signature grin. “Come see me. I think you and I could do some interesting world-building together.”

Grey nodded, his face blank, but his eyes burning with something that looked terrifyingly like gratitude.

The siege didn't happen with a bang; it happened in the slow, suffocating silence of three weeks without a cleared invoice. Months bled together, turning the firm's "administrative billing freeze" from a nuisance into a lifestyle, while the sudden cut in clinic hours had left Amelia with more free time than rent money.

The morning sun hit the living room floor, illuminating dust motes and the accumulated evidence of a month effectively spent hiding out together - her cardigan permanently draped over his chair, his spare key now living on her ring, and a stack of takeout containers that chronicled twenty days of trying to ignore the tightening noose. It should have been a good morning. Chase was drinking coffee that finally didn't taste like office despair, and Amelia was sitting on the counter in one of his shirts, the only asset in his life that wasn't depreciating.

“So,” Chase said, leaning against the fridge and watching her. “I did some math. Dangerous, I know. But the facts don't care about our feelings.”

Amelia blew on her coffee, looking tired in the way that comes from a month of calculating every purchase. “Should I call a lawyer?”

“I am a lawyer,” Chase said. “And my professional opinion is that paying two rents in this economy, especially with the squeeze our paychecks have gone through, is practically negligent. Especially when my lease is up in a month and yours involves an aggressive

hobo named ‘Ravioli’, and laundry basket obstacle course I’ve tripped over fourteen times since the reunion.”

Amelia paused, looking around his apartment. It was modern, clean, and – crucially – had central air and a dishwasher that worked.

“Are you asking me to move in with you to balance your ledger, Wright?”

“I’m asking you to move in because I like your face,” Chase said. “And because this place has a second closet. And because I’m tired of driving across town to kiss you goodnight.”

Amelia smiled, hopping off the counter. “Okay. But we’re keeping my coffee maker. Coffee outa yours tastes like sad corporate ambition.”

“Deal,” Chase said. “My place it is. Better location, better security, no Ravioli throwing bottle caps at me.”

Amelia nodded, but then she hesitated. A shadow crossed her face – not doubt, exactly, but a wince of remembrance.

“Moving,” she muttered. “I hate moving.”

“It’s just boxes, Ames. We hire movers. We drink wine. It’s easy.”

“It is never easy,” she said, her eyes drifting to the middle distance. “Do you remember the last time I moved? Junior year? Leaving the loft?”

Chase froze. “I... seem to recall I had a terrible flu that weekend.”

“You had a terrible lie,” she corrected. “I remember.”

The bittersweet memory hit Amelia.

It was the loft above Dix-City, the sketchy adult store that buzzed neon pink all night. She remembered standing

amidst a sea of cardboard boxes, stressed out of her mind because the landlord was threatening to keep her deposit if the place wasn't cleared out by the next day.

Christina had been there, packing dishes with aggressive inefficiency.

“You know,” Christina had warned, shoving a plate into a box without paper, “living with Tyrone and Elvis is going to destroy you. You love their whimsy now, but whimsy doesn't pay the electric bill. It's a trap, Amelia.”

She should have listened.

Ten minutes later, Amelia had walked into the bathroom to find Tyrone duct-taped to the door frame about three feet off the ground.

“We used all the packing tape!” Elvis had announced proudly. “Seeing how much tape would be equal to a web-ball...turns out more than you had.”

“My boxes!” Amelia had shrieked. “I need that tape for my boxes!”

Then there was Wilson Firestone. He had insisted on fixing a loose outlet cover to “help” get the deposit back. Instead, he'd pried open a paint can to touch up the wall, inhaled the fumes in the unventilated room, and started hallucinating that the outlet was a pig trying to push through the wall. The landlord had to drag him out by his ankles.

But the worst part was arriving at the new place.

Amelia had walked into Tyrone and Elvis' apartment, exhausted, holding her last box of books. She walked to the second bedroom—the one promised to her.

It was gone.

In its place was a cardboard-and-sheet construction labeled **PHANTASEA LAND**.

“Where is my room?” Amelia had asked, her voice trembling.

“This is Phantasea Land!” Tyrone beamed. “It’s an ocean of possibility and a place where your fantasy’s come true!”

“Okay, but where do I sleep?”

Elvis pointed to a blanket fort in the living room. “We made you a blanket fort. It has a lantern.”

She had stormed out, crying in the hallway until they chased her down. They eventually compromised – giving her the bedroom and moving themselves into the blanket fort – but the emotional damage left its mark.

And through it all, Chase had been missing.

“I’m sick,” he’d texted. “Fever. Contagious. Dying.”

Later that night, Dean Starmer tweeted a video. It was Chase, perfectly healthy, standing in front of a green screen at the mall, reluctantly singing “It’s My Life” while the Dean danced around him in a Jack Sparrow costume. The Dean had blackmailed him into a “bonding day.”

“I was a hostage,” Chase said now, raising his hands in defense. “Dean Starmer threatened to expose my fake independent study. I had to sing Bon Jovi, Amelia. Do you know what that does to a man’s dignity?”

“You left me with Wilson while he was fighting a wall outlet,” Amelia said, poking him in the chest. “If we move in together, you are lifting the heavy boxes. No fake flus. No karaoke side-quests.”

“I promise,” Chase said, catching her hand and kissing the knuckles. “I’ll even tape the boxes myself. No Spiderman inspired antics.”

She laughed, the memory fading into the safety of the sunny apartment. “Okay. Let’s do it. Let’s do a fusion.”

“Good,” Chase said. “Because I’m really going to need my shirt from you from time to time.”

He reached for the remote to turn on some background noise, feeling better than he had in weeks. They had a plan.

“Maybe we can find a documentary about... I don’t know, otter” he said, grinning at her.

They had a lease. They had a future.

He clicked the TV on.

The smile slid off his face instantly.

On the screen, a press conference was unfolding. The banner at the bottom read: **DEATH PENALTY ABOLISHED: A NEW ERA OF JUSTICE.**

And standing at the podium, looking like a man selling the apocalypse with a smile, was a guy Chase didn’t recognize.

The chyron on screen said ‘Grey Elwin. He spoke.

“We don’t believe in ending life,”

“We believe in sustaining it. Responsibly.”

Behind him, a digital rendering appeared. A black cube. A chain.

“Introducing the El Viento Altruistic Prison System. The EVAPS. Punishment doesn’t need death. It just needs... permanence.”

Amelia shivered, wrapping her hands around her mug.

“That is the creepiest thing I have ever seen.”

“It’s brilliant,” Chase muttered, horrified. “They lobby to ban the death penalty so they can monopolize the

alternative. It's not humanitarianism; it's a subscription model for life without parole."

On screen, Grey was explaining the protocols.

"Protocol Alpha," Grey said smoothly. "Familial maintenance. The inmate is confined to a secure, unbreakable cell on private property. Their loved ones pay for their care. A chance to live out their lives in quiet dignity."

"And Protocol Beta," Grey continued, his tone smoothing into something almost instructional. "For cases without a viable support network. The individual is assigned to an off-grid containment zone designed to promote self-sufficiency and behavioral stabilization."

A schematic replaced the cube: a vast stretch of forest rendered in reassuring greens, a single black anchor icon at its center.

"In partnership with federal wilderness conservation initiatives, these zones remain secure, remote, and ecologically balanced. The tether system ensures perimeter compliance while allowing the subject freedom of movement within a defined radius."

Grey smiled faintly. "It's not confinement. It's security for the civilized."

Chase stared at the screen, the shape of it finally clicking into place. "Wilderness abandonment," he said quietly. "They're bringing back exile."

Amelia shook her head; eyes fixed on the chain graphic tightening around an ankle. "No," she said. "They're bringing back slavery. You don't call it freedom when the leash weighs three tons."

The camera cut to the crowd. Applause. It was polite, terrified applause.

Chase muted the TV. The silence rushed back in, but it felt heavier now.

“Okay,” Chase said, trying to force a lightness he didn’t feel. “Hypothetical. I snap. I become a menace to society. Which protocol do I get?”

Amelia looked at him over the rim of her mug. “Protocol Alpha. Obviously.”

“Really? You’d pay to keep a 10x10 cube of me in your backyard?”

“I’d put plants on it,” she said deadpan. “Maybe a bird feeder. You’d make a very cute pet, Wright. I’d feed you harmony scones through the doorway.”

Chase laughed, but it was thin. “I’m touched. Truly.”

“What about me?” Amelia asked. “If I turn evil?”

Chase looked at her. “Protocol Beta. Immediately.”

She gasped, swatting his arm. “You’d drop me in the woods?”

“With a three-ton weight? Absolutely. You’re resourceful. You’d probably domesticate the local bears and have them hunting in packs for you by Tuesday. You’d be running a forest empire like some Disney princess.”

She laughed, but the sound faded quickly as she looked back at the frozen image of the black cube on the TV.

“They own everything, don’t they?” she whispered. “The courts. The clinics. And now... the prisons.”

Chase didn’t answer. His phone buzzed on the table.

He glanced at it. A notification from the firm’s accounting department.

**Subject:** URGENT - Billing Freeze. Effective immediately, all discretionary accounts are locked

pending an external audit by El Viento Financial Services.

He looked at Amelia. She was looking at her own phone, her face pale.

“Chase,” she said quietly. “My manager just texted. The new owners... They're cutting hours. By forty percent.”

Chase felt the air leave the room.

The joke about the cage wasn't funny anymore.

“Cages aren't just places bad people are thrown in, Ames,” Chase said, his voice low.

He looked at the TV, where the El Viento logo spun in shiny, high-definition gold.

“Sometimes, the cage is the only shelter available.”

Amelia looked at her phone, the one with the bad news, and then at Chase's phone.

## Chapter 15 – A Pretty Decent Proposal

Monday mornings at Michael & Cole always had the smell of old coffee, printer toner, and a little dash of existential dread.

Chase leaned against his desk, scrolling through an email that practically glittered against the drab gray of his Outlook inbox.

**Subject:** *Collaborative Opportunity – Viento Influencer Media Division Body:*

*“You’ve been identified as a potential creative partner for our media division exploring authentic digital storytelling. Compensation is competitive. Schedule flexible. More info upon response.”*

He stared at the message for a full minute, the cursor hovering over the trash icon.

“Still pulling that string...” he muttered. “Absolutely not.”

“Talking to yourself again?”

Chase spun around to witness Snakes in the doorway, leaning on his mop with casual insolence.

“You ever get mysterious job offers from evil corporations?” Chase asked.

“Only the ones that involve plumbing,” Snakes said, chewing on a toothpick. “What’d they promise you? Fame, fortune, free iPhone?”

““Authentic digital storytelling,”” Chase read aloud, in a stunted exaggerated way.

“Sounds like pyramid scheme poetry.” Snakes squinted at the screen, spotting the logo. “El Viento? Don’t they own the coffee machine now?”

“They own the concept of coffee now.”

Snakes laughed, a dry, rattling sound. “Buddy, if yer gettin oral favors, at least make sure she’s not about to sneeze your manhood away.”

Chase smiled despite himself. “Good clean talk, Snakes.”

Snakes pointed with the mop handle, a gesture that felt less like cleaning and more like sentencing. “You’ll take it. You always do.”

“Do what?”

“Argue with fate and then file the paperwork anyway.”

Chase looked down at the screen to delete the email. When he looked up again, the doorway was empty. The floor where Snakes had stood gleamed under the fluorescent lights, as if it had never been dirty to begin with.

Amelia sat at her desk during her lunch break, editing her latest vlog on her phone—a low-stakes Q&A she’d titled “Probably Overthinking This (Again)”. Her small subscriber base adored her humor: gentle, honest, a little self-mocking.

Her notification bar dropped down. A new email. Same gold logo Chase had seen, but a different tone.

**Subject:** *Creator Sponsorship – Viento Influencer Media Division Body:*

*“We’ve followed your creative history and would love to discuss an opportunity that combines wellness, creativity, and community impact. We believe your unique voice could resonate with our new initiatives.”*

They included a link.

Amelia clicked it, and her stomach did a somersault. It linked to an archived, long-forgotten channel from her high school days: ABeeWin.

She stared at the thumbnail: a seventeen-year-old Amelia wearing fuzzy antenna and a yellow-and-black striped sweater, enthusiastically reviewing Digimon episodes.

“That’s gotta sting!” young Amelia chirped in the video, emphasizing the pun with finger guns.

Amelia covered her face with her hands. “Oh god. The internet never forgets.”

Reading the email three times. It sounded harmless. But in her experience, harmless was usually just suspicious with better PR.

Still... her hours had just been cut. Her rent was due. And Chase was talking about moving in together to save money. Well, after they get that loan to help fund the move.

She chewed her lip. Maybe she could use this Viento Influencer thing as a booster rocket. Take the sponsorship, get the visibility, and then jump off before things get too heavy.

She imagined her camera was rolling. Without thinking, talking to the empty break room.

“Okay, hypothetical audience, what would you do if a morally ambiguous tech conglomerate offered you a sponsorship? Follow-up question: why do I suddenly feel like the main character in a cautionary tale?”

She sighed, closing the email but not deleting it.

“Anyway,” she whispered to the room. “I’m gonna... ask friends. Because I BEE responsible like that.”

Chase picked Amelia up at PawsCity Vibes at the end of her shift.

“Hey,” Chase said, as she dropped into his TLX’s plush warmed leather seats.

“Hey.” Amelia said, adjusting her blazer, letting the warmth of the leather sink in.

She looked sharp—blue jacket, hair pinned back. “Before we go to the bank, did you get any emails offering to make you some offer to use your talent?”

“Yeah, it’s one of Vincenzo’s side projects,” Chase said. “I didn’t bite his ‘bigger announcement’ and now it looks like he’s trying to get you in on this back-up plan he hatched up.”

“It could be fun,” Amelia said, though she looked distracted.

They drove toward Summers Brew, needing the energy boost before the meeting.

Stepping out of the Japanese luxury car, they kept step with each on the walk to the cafe.

“Before we even consider this Viento Influencer thing,” Chase said. “We need to make sure of something. We need to avoid becoming...”

“Evil” He grinned, looking at her. “Remember our ‘Evil’ debate?”

Amelia’s eyes lit up, the distraction fading as she caught the reference. “Oh god. The Master Debate Off?”

“The Master Debate Off,” Chase confirmed. “Orangeside Community College versus Viento Primeval College.”

“Jeremy Johnson,” Amelia said, the name coming out, an unwelcome memory.

“ERMEE,” Chase corrected. “The man, the myth, the medical manipulation.”

Picking up the pace, their steps synced on the wet pavement, transforming from two stressed adults into a united front.

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They hit the door of Summers Brew in perfect unison, shoulders brushing, steps matched. It was a performance, sure, but it was also becoming a habit.

Chase held the door. Amelia swept in, her blue blazer that matching his tie perfectly. It wasn't planned. It was just synergy.

“And then,” Chase said, picking up the story mid-sentence to keep the adrenaline up, “ERMEE tried to vault out of his wheelchair. Straight at me. Full flesh torpedo.”

Amelia laughed, shaking her umbrella out. “You caught him! Chase, you looked like someone handed you a live grenade.”

“And he tried using me catching him, as some half ass-example of man being good.” Tilting his head to Amelia, “We were stunlock till you decided to use the moment to give me a mind-blowing kiss. Honestly, I don't think I even heard when you stole the debate with a simple ‘man is evil’ after I dropped him.”

Chase, bumped her shoulder. “I still can't believe they counted THAT as an argument.”

“It counted,” Amelia said, beaming. “The judge applauded. Philosophers applauded. Sharon screamed. Tyrone spat out his twinkie. It was a whole thing.”

Chase shook his head, smiling. It felt good to remember winning something. To remember a time when the stakes were just a plastic trophy and their future.

“We were such disasters,” he murmured.

“Disasters they make movies about,” Amelia corrected.

They reached the counter. Tabitha was there, looking like she’d been waiting for them to stop talking so she could resume brooding. She ground the beans with aggressive force.

“Did all your debates involve attempted assault, or was that a special case?” Tabitha asked dryly.

Chase blinked, shifting gears from "College Legend" to "Tired Lawyer."

“Oh - hey, Tabs. Morning. Two coffees. One black, one whatever mystical stuff you did last time.”

Amelia nudged him. “Don’t call it mystical stuff. Tabitha actually puts effort into her work.”

Tabitha grabbed a marker and wrote on a cup with violent efficiency, waving it in the air at Amelia.

**TOO GOOD FOR THIS.**

Amelia read it and chuckled. “At least it’s positive.”

Amelia watched Tabitha work, with sharp movements under her own guarded eyes.

“So,” Tabitha said, not looking up. “Clinic good today? Any flying sloths show up?”

Amelia’s smile faltered. She unwound her scarf, feeling the weight of the morning’s email in her pocket.

“Those are illegal in this state, and it’s...sloooooow,” Amelia admitted. “Ever since the new sign went up, they cut my hours a buncha times. New owners claim they’re ‘restructuring,’ but nobody seems to know what that means.”

Tabitha’s hand paused on the grinder.

“And you, how’s the world of brief cases with briefcases?” Tabitha asked Chase, almost too quickly. “Still standing?”

Chase laughed, but it was hollow.

“For now. We lost two major clients last month. Michael’s trying to keep morale up, but...” He rubbed the back of his neck. “The guys on his last legs, and the other partner ‘Cole’... Nobody had heard from him since he went to the Bahamas.”

Amelia touched his arm. It was instinctive, a silent I’m here.

“They’ll pull through,” she said. “Their the biggest law-firm in Orangeside.”

“Maybe, but most clients don’t come from in town,” Chase said.

Tabitha slid Amelia’s latte across the counter. A perfect heart sat in the foam.

“You always do this,” Amelia said, brightening. “It’s so sweet.”

“I was aiming for a skull,” Tabitha muttered. “I missed.”

“Heartbreaking mistake,” Chase said.

The air felt thin as they laughed.

The café grew busy with students, chess players, Winona drifting by with ‘Karma Mile’ tea. Despite that, Amelia felt the walls closing in. The bank meeting coming up probably won’t go well. “Insufficient collateral,” the loan officer is probably going to say. “High-risk sector.”

Chase took a sip of his black coffee.

“Okay, Registrar,” he said, trying to find his rhythm again. “Have you decided if you’re self publishing or looking for an agent?”

Tabitha stiffened. “What are you talking about?”

“That book you pretend you’re not writing in every time I walk in. You’ve got, what, a whole intelligence dossier on me in there?”

“It’s not a book. It’s a classified file.”

“On me?” Chase grinned. “Flattering.”

“Don’t be daft. You’re just Exhibit C37. There are... other ‘persons of interest’ in there.”

Amelia leaned forward, intrigued. “Okay, I’m invested. What’s he guilty of?”

Tabitha met her eyes, deadpan. “Existing.”

Amelia burst out laughing. It was such a perfect, moody thing to say.

Chase nudged her. “See? I told you she’s a menace.”

“Please. You love it.” Amelia replied with her eyes bright.

The banter brought a familiar sense of peace. Safe, easy and one of the only things in his life right now that didn’t require a disclaimer. The kind of peace that helps people open up to those they have a connection with.

“Actually,” Chase said, his voice dropping. “I really should elaborate. Things are weird at the firm.”

Amelia’s brows lifted. “Still losing clients?”

“More like lost,” Chase said. “Michael called a meeting yesterday. El Viento pulled every contract. Ninety percent of our caseload evaporated in one hour.” He forced a laugh. “We look like a ship after the iceberg but before the violinists give up.”

Tabitha blinked.

Amelia nodded grimly. “Honestly, my hours got shredded. Rumbly around the clinic swear it’s some shell company pulling the strings.”

Chase felt a surge of adrenaline. He had to fix this. He had to spin it. That was his super power.

“But!” he said, maybe a little too loudly. “There might be an upside.”

Both women looked at him.

“Vincenzo has this new thing, Viento Influencer Media. He reached out this morning. Says he wants fresh voices, people with ‘Something To Say’. He thinks Amelia and I could stream. Commentary, news, lifestyle stuff.”

Amelia looked down at her cup. “It really could help... stabilize things. Just until we get back on our feet.”

Imagine it, Tabitha,” Chase said, quieter now. “Student loans gone. Amelia’s hours a non-issue. Just...breathing room. Plus...we’d get paid to do something fun for once.”

Tabitha looked at him. Her eyes were dark, unreadable.

“Viento Influencer Media... VIM?” she said. “Like Invader Vim? You really think something with that name doesn’t end up living inside your walls?”

Chase waved her off. “I think you mean ‘Invader Zim’. And don’t worry about the finances, kid.”

Tabitha flinched, jaw tightening and eyes glaring at her notebook.

Amelia’s hand tightened on her cup. Just a fraction. She didn’t look at Tabitha – she looked at Chase.

“Leave the boring stuff to the big-wigs,” Chase added quickly. “We keep our hands clean. We just... talk.”

Chase felt it the moment he said it—too smooth, too easy.

“You don’t even like ‘big-wigs’,” Tabitha snapped.

“See? That’s why you’re the registrar, always seeing the details.”

Amelia touched his sleeve again, remembering her own email. “Chase,” she said gently. “She’s not wrong to worry. It’s a lot to jump into.”

He sighed, the mask slipping. “I know. I know.”

Then he smirked again, reflexively charming. “But this whole thing is designed for people in our position. And honestly? The market isn’t exactly flooded with lifelines right now.”

The bell over the door jangled—hard.

Snakes shuffled in. The mop cart squeaked like a warning siren.

He walked past Chase. Past Amelia. Straight to Tabitha.

He reached into his pocket and dropped a torn napkin on the counter.

El Viento SECURITIES.

Circled three times.

And in the center, drawn in a cramped ballpoint: Amelia.

Swarming over her name was a mass of tiny, frantic ants.

“Sugar spills,” Snakes murmured. “Ants don’t know who they bite, they just bite. They just take whatever’s in the way.”

He turned his head. Behind that stare, Chase felt the gaze land on him.

“Warn your friend of collateral damage,” Snakes said to Tabitha, but looking at Chase. “The man sees the candy worm. Not the hook.”

Chase opened his mouth.

Nothing came out.

Snakes shuffled out without another sound.

## Chapter 16 – Triage of Terms

The chime gave one thin, dissonant note as the door shut.

Amelia looked at the napkin. At her name drowning in ink insects.

“Ants on my name?” she whispered.

Tabitha looked pale. “Looks like a prediction,” she muttered, tucking the napkin into her notebook. “Must think you guys are being ‘bugged’ by something.”

Chase rolled his eyes. “He’s dramatic. It’s his brand.”

But Amelia felt cold. Collateral damage. That’s what the drawing meant. Chase was the target; she was just ‘bugging’ the situation.

“Registrar,” Chase called, trying to break the tension. “Got a cup for me today?”

Tabitha handed him one. **SILVER TONGUE.**

“And a new one for me?” Amelia asked, voice faint.

Tabitha met her eyes. “**TOO GOOD FOR THIS** still stands.”

Amelia held up her cup. “Then I’ll stick with it.”

She looked at Chase, who was checking his phone again, probably looking for the contract from Vincenzo. He looked determined, a man trying to steer a ship to safety.

But looking at the notebook where Tabitha had hidden the drawing, Amelia wondered if he was actually steering them straight into the iceberg.

The meeting with the bank loan officer was shorter than the drive there.

It turns out that charm, a nice suit, and a solid credit history don't mean much when your employer is flagged for an "active liquidity audit" by a massive conglomerate.

"We'd love to help, Mr. Wright," the officer had said, clicking a pen that probably cost more than Chase's current checking balance. "But given the uncertainty surrounding Michael & Cole and Miss Winter's poor credit, you two are classified as high-risk. Come back if Viento reestablishes contracts."

They walked back to the car in silence. The rain had stopped, leaving the city slick and shining like cheap plastic.

Chase unlocked the Acura. They got in, the leather seats cold against their backs.

"Well," Amelia said, staring out the windshield. "That went... poorly."

Chase stared through the glass, jaw tight.

"This didn't happen today," he said.

Amelia turned toward him. "What didn't?"

"The bank saying no," Chase replied. "That decision was already made. We just showed up to hear it."

He flexed his grip on the steering wheel, then glanced at her.

"Whatever's happening didn't start with the loan," he said quietly. "The loan was just where we felt it."

"Collateral damage," she whispered. "What if I'm bringing nothing to the table, and it's hurting you? What if Snakes wasn't being poetic. He was being literal."

Chase looked at her. She looked small in the passenger seat, the "power couple" energy from the café drained away. She shouldn't be dealing with this. She should be editing vlogs about cats and planning where to put her coffee maker in their kitchen.

He felt a surge of protective anger. Not at her, but at the invisible net tightening around them. He wanted to assure her that her credit didn't matter, only her how his heart feels when he looks at her. Make her know that they'll make it together.

His phone buzzed in the cup holder. A single notification.

**Sender:** *VIM Admin* **Subject:** *Contract // Pilot Episode: "The Salt & The Honey"*

Chase picked it up.

"The timing isn't a coincidence," Chase said quietly.

Amelia looked over. "The offer?"

Chase opened the attachment. The numbers were staggering. It wasn't just a paycheck; it was a signing bonus that would clear his debts, cover the move, and stabilize Amelia's budget enough to fix her credit.

"It's a lifeline," Chase said quietly. "A golden, diamond-encrusted one."

Amelia tapped the screen. "It's sugar. Look at the language. 'Authentic commentary.' 'Relationship dynamics.' That's not neutral."

Chase nodded once. "Don't let Snakes get in your head. It's just an offer that could help us."

"This isn't about helping us," Amelia said. "It's about buying us, our time, our faces."

"They come with contracts about positions," Chase said, turning to face her. "Slots. Roles. We play the game on camera, and live our normal lives off."

“This isn’t a game,” Amelia said. “This is our life.”

“Then we treat it like a game,” Chase replied, too quickly. “Boundaries. Characters. A version of us that exists on the screen – and stops there.”

He gestured to the phone, not triumphantly, but carefully.

“We take the money to buy time. A safety raft from the firm and the clinic. Long enough to figure out what comes next.”

He leaned closer, searching her face. “Not because it’s safe. Because it’s just a system.”

“We’re smarter than any system, Ames. We use the platform to breathe. Long enough to figure out our next steps together.”

Amelia bit her lip, looking from Chase’s determined face.

She thought about her manager’s face when the hours were cut. She thought about the "Protocol Beta" wilderness prisons and the way El Viento owned the very concept of justice now.

“If we do this,” she said slowly, “we have to have rules. No real secrets on air. No using our actual problems for drama. No filming at the clinic. Ever.”

“Agreed,” Chase said instantly. “Church and State. The show is the show. Us is Us.”

She looked at him for a long moment, searching for a chink in the certainty. She didn’t find one. Or maybe she just didn’t want to look hard enough because the alternative was drowning.

“Okay,” she whispered.

Chase exhaled, a tension he hadn’t realized he was holding releasing from his shoulders.

“Okay,” he repeated.

He tapped REPLY.

**Interested. Schedule a meeting.**

The message whooshed away.

Outside, the streetlights flickered on, buzzing with electricity that El Viento owned, too.

“We’re going to be fine,” Chase said, starting the car.

“We’ll do some streams. We’ll take the money. And we’ll play the game till we get bored.”

“I hope so,” Amelia said, staring out the window.

“Because I really don’t want to end up as a prop in someone else’s season finale.”

Chase put the car in gear and pulled out into traffic, merging into the flow of a city that was watching him closer than he knew.

## Chapter 17 – Terms and Conditions

The VIM building looked like a startup built out of confidence and charisma.

The lobby was all glass and aggressive greenery – a "living wall" of moss that probably cost more than Amelia's student loans. To the left, a coffee bar was staffed by people wearing aprons that said 'Caffeine Consultant'.

Amelia smoothed the front of her cardigan, suddenly painfully aware that it was from Target and pilled at the elbows.

"You okay?" Chase asked, his hand finding the small of her back.

"I feel like I'm about to audition for a play I didn't study for," she whispered.

"You're not auditioning," Chase said, his voice low and steady. "They invited us. Remember that. We're the talent."

He squeezed her waist, and they stepped toward the reception desk. A woman with a headset smiled with a professional warmth that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Welcome to Viento Influencer Media. You must be—"

"The talent," Chase said dryly. "SilverTongue and ABeeWin."

The receptionist blinked, checked her tablet, and nodded. "Vincenzo and Mr. Elwin will see you now."

Grey Elwin sat at a sleek side table, a tablet in hand, watching the door feed.

When they walked in, his heart rate didn't spike, his physiology didn't allow for such crude reactions, but his memory index spun rapidly. Pulling up a file he hadn't accessed in years.

**File Name:** Orangeside Community College.

**Alias:** Elvis Santiago.

**Role:** The Observer. The Weird One. Meta Guy.

He watched Chase Wright enter, leading with that familiar, lazy shoulder-roll. And behind him, Amelia Winters, clutching her purse with the neurotic precision of a straight-A student terrified of a B-minus.

The 'will they/won't they' couple, his mind supplied the archetypes instantly. The Salt and the Honey. The showrunners finally greenlit the spin-off.

For a second, the mask of "Grey Elwin", with his sharp jawline, corporate haircut, distinct lack of "Elvis's" chaotic energy, felt tight. He remembered study sessions in the library. He remembered watching them orbit each other, the unresolved tension that drove the plot of their college years.

*They hadn't changed.*

They'd just expanded their user base.

He felt a twinge of something like nostalgia, warm and fuzzy, immediately cooled by the logic of the narrative. They had never called 'Elvis' after graduation. They had moved on to the next season without him. Elvis Santiago had been a guest star in their lives; Grey Elwin was the producer of their new reality.

He adjusted his expression to "Professional Enigma."

Action.

Vincenzo's VIM office had the aesthetic of someone who'd won an art auction by accident: wall-length screens showing live analytics, a golden microphone mounted like a trophy, and a whiteboard scribbled with phrases like AUTHENTICITY MONETIZED and TRUTH = TRENDING.

Vincenzo stood as they entered, arms spread wide. "Ah, the dynamic duo! The Salt and the Honey."

Grey locked eyes with Chase, searching for a spark of recognition.

There was none. The shapeshift had been successful. To Chase, Elvis Santiago was dead; Grey Elwin was just another suit.

"Don't mind the cameras," Grey said, his voice flat and rapid, gesturing vaguely to the ceiling. "They're not on. It's all pretty good."

"Pretty good?" Chase squinted, tilting his head. For a micro-second, he looked puzzled – a sense of déjà vu triggering in the cadence of the voice – but he shook it off.

Vincenzo laughed, steering them toward the leather chairs. "Just orientation footage for internal metrics. Standard optimization. Welcome to VIM, the intersection of influence and intellect."

"Influencing public intellect?" Chase asked, sitting down.

Grey nodded appreciatively, tapping his tablet. Classic Chase. Always the meta-commentary. "That's actually our Q4 slogan."

The meeting began in polite chaos.

Vincenzo explained the “content strategy” like he was pitching enlightenment: separate channels, shared hashtags, optional collabs, creative freedom with “network synergy oversight.”

Chase read the contract line by line, his analytical brain engaging. Amelia skimmed her copy, half-listening. Every paragraph sounded harmless until she read it twice.

“Participant grants VIM (Viento Influencer Media) perpetual cross-platform license for digital likeness in derivative works,” Chase read aloud. “That’s... broad.”

Vincenzo waved it off. “Legal padding. It just means if someone makes a meme of you, we can repost it without getting sued.”

“It sounds like you’re buying my face,” Chase said.

“I’m leasing your charisma,” Vincenzo corrected. “The face is just the packaging.”

Amelia shifted in her chair. The room felt too cold, the air too recycled. She looked at the contract, at the salary figure that would solve all her problems. The feeling of winning the lottery and selling a kidney at the same time.

“And,” Vincenzo said, leaning forward, his voice dropping to that warm, confidential tone he used on stream. “I hear congratulations are in order. A little birdie in HR told me you two are consolidating assets.”

Chase froze. “We haven’t told HR anything.”

“We’re moving in together,” Amelia clarified quickly, trying to diffuse any tension. “To Chase’s place. It just makes sense.”

Grey watched them. Consolidating assets. The writers finally resolved the ‘Will They/Won’t They’ arc. It took them long enough.

“Smart,” Vincenzo said. “Nick’s place would make sense.”

He tapped a key on his desk.

“Moving is stressful,” he continued. “Especially with the new show launching. So, as a signing bonus – on top of the advance – VIM would like to handle the logistics.”

Amelia blinked. “The logistics?”

“Movers,” Grey clarified, not looking up from his tablet. He kept his tone neutral, while he remembered helping Amelia move out of the dorms once, carrying boxes while she freaked out about Tyrone being tapped to a door. “El Viento Relocation Services. They pack. They move. They unpack. They even organize your sock drawer by color gradient.”

He saw Amelia flinch. Too intimate, he noted. She hates people touching her stuff.

“That’s... really not necessary,” Chase started, his hackles rising.

“I insist,” Vincenzo smiled. “You need to focus on the streaming channels. Let my people handle the boxes. Consider it an investment in your peace of mind.”

Grey tapped the screen, authorizing the work order. He watched Chase and Amelia exchange a look—the silent telepathy of a duo who had survived six seasons and a movie’s worth of plot twists.

Elvis would have offered to drive the truck, Grey thought. Grey just hires the crew.

It was cleaner this way.

## Chapter 18 - Peace of Mind

Amelia looked at Vincenzo's perfect smile. She thought about the nightmare of her last move. Tyrone tapped to the door, Wilson fighting the outlet, PhantaSea Land. Chase singing 'It's my Life'.

And then she thought about strangers from El Viento touching her things. Packing her books. Organizing her socks.

It was too much. The kindness felt heavy, like a lead blanket.

"I..." Amelia started. Her voice wavered.

Chase looked at her, his expression instantly shifting from Lawyer to lover. "Amelia?"

"I need a second," she stood up, clutching her purse. "I just— the coffee. I need to use the restroom."

Vincenzo gestured to the door. "Down the hall, second left. Take your time. We're just haggling over insurance."

"I trust you," Amelia said to Chase, and she meant it. She trusted him with the contract. She just didn't trust herself not to scream if she stayed in this glass box one second longer.

"Finish it," she whispered to him. "I'll... I'll meet you after."

She made it to the restroom before her breath hitched.

It was a luxurious space— marble sinks, flattering lighting, faint music that sounded like whales humming. Amelia gripped the edge of the counter and looked in the mirror.

She looked frantic.

Her hair was escaping its clip. Her cardigan was buttoned wrong at the bottom. Something she must have done nervously during the meeting. Her eyes were wide and glossy.

She looked exactly like what she was: a woman who had just sold her privacy.

Her pulse was hammering in her ears, a frantic, disorderly beat. She focused on it, trying to slow her breathing, and without meaning to, her mind began to impose order on the chaos, locking the rhythm into the familiar, complex cadence of a song that used to make her feel in control.

She started tapping the drum intro to “Overcompensate” on the counter. The beat she’d looped all through college, back when stability felt possible.

“Pull it together,” she whispered to her reflection, “This is what people mean when they say ‘terms and conditions.’”

But the silence of the room didn't help. It just made the absence of her old support system feel louder.

In moments like this, back at Orangeside, she wouldn't have been alone in a bathroom. Sharon would be here, pulling a "crisis cookie" out of a purse that defied the laws of physics. And Christina...

God, she missed Christina.

The memory hit her with a sudden, sharp warmth. She remembered the first day she met Christina at the Orangeside student union. Amelia had been spiraling, hyperventilating over a lost color-coded syllabus.

Christina had marched over, combat boots loud on the linoleum, looking terrifying in a leather jacket and thrift-store anarchy patches. She had slammed a boot onto the chair next to Amelia, looked her up and down with intense, heavily lined eyes, and said:

“Breathe. It’s a syllabus, not a death sentence. Here., I snatched an extra one from Dean Starmer’s office. Take it.”

It was aggressive kindness. It was snark used as a shield to protect someone else.

Amelia’s mind drifted to Tabitha. The barista with the sharp eyeliner and the even sharper tongue. The girl who wrote judgments on cups like “SMILES TOO MUCH” but secretly poured perfect hearts in the foam.

Tabitha had the same armor. The same "I don't care" attitude that was clearly terrified of caring too much.

Amelia realized with a jolt why she kept going back to Summers Brew. It wasn’t just the coffee. It was because Tabitha felt like a friend she hadn’t made yet. She felt like a Christina waiting to be found.

Amelia checked her reflection one last time. She didn't want to fix the cardigan. She didn't want to be "ABeeWin" the content creator right now. She wanted to be the girl who listened to loud drums and understood that armor was just a fashion choice.

She pulled out her phone and texted Chase: ***I can’t stay at VIM right now. Too much glass. I’m going to Uber to Summers Brew to clear my head. I’ll e-sign whatever. Let him move the boxes. I just need to breathe.***

Her hands shook so hard she nearly dropped the phone. She hurried out of the bathroom, bypassed the elevators, and took the stairs, needing to feel her feet on something solid.

She needed noise. She needed drums. She needed to go see the girl who wrote on cups.

She turned her collar up against the damp atmosphere, thumbed open a rideshare app, and started walking toward the corner.

Her phone buzzed as she reached the corner.

A breath of confused relief excited Amelia's lungs as she read the text from Chase: ***Signed my part. e-Sign when you're ready.***

## Chapter 19 – The Heartbeat

On the ride-share to Summers Brew Amelia signed the contract blindly, trusting Chase's skill with law wouldn't lead to consenting to anything too weird. It was done.

But Amelia still felt like she was vibrating out of her own skin.

She needed noise. Not the polite noise of the clinic or the "power couple" banter she and Chase used to armor themselves. She needed the kind of noise that drowned out thinking.

She pushed open the door to Summers Brew.

The bell chimed.

Winona was near the pastry case, adjusting chairs by half-inches. "And congrats to you for showing up," she murmured into the air.

Tabitha was behind the counter, looking like a storm cloud that had decided to take up barricades. She didn't look up immediately. Power move, Amelia thought with a small smile. Tabitha finished writing on a cup with aggressive flair before glancing at the door.

When she saw Amelia, her scowl deepened, but her shoulders dropped an inch. It was the body language equivalent of a sigh of relief disguised as annoyance.

Amelia knew she looked a mess. Her hair was escaping its clip, her cardigan was buttoned wrong at the bottom, and she felt unbuttoned in every sense of the word.

"Hi again!" Amelia said, stepping up to the counter, beaming because if she stopped smiling, she might start

screaming. “Could I get a latte? Whole milk is fine. And maybe a shot of something that tastes like redemption?”

Tabitha uncapped her marker. She wrote **AGGRESSIVELY CHEERFUL** and slid the cup across.

Amelia read it and let out a bright, unbothered laugh, “I appreciate the honesty.”

“It’s free with purchase,” Tabitha said, priming the shot. “No returns.”

“Strict policy,” Amelia said, leaning on the counter. “But, the ambiance might convince me to keep coming back.”

Tabitha tamped the grounds harder than necessary. “Tragic.”

She poured the milk. It swirled, settled, and – betraying the barista completely – formed a perfect heart.

Tabitha slid it across, looking like she wanted to apologize for vandalism.

Amelia didn’t make a big deal of it. She just took a quiet breath. “Thank you. Do you mind if I sit here? I’ve got some time before I have to go anywhere.”

“Vet tragedies waiting for you?” Tabitha asked.

“Mostly comedy,” Amelia said, taking the stool at the far corner, Chase’s usual spot.

She leaned her forearms on the wood, trying to relax. But her fingers wouldn’t stop moving. Tap-tap-thump-tap-tap-thump. It wasn’t a nervous fidget; it was a rhythm. Complex. Fast. The drum intro to a song that had been looping in her head since the bathrooms over at VIM.

Winona drifted by, depositing a steaming pot in front of Amelia. “Opera Tune Tea,” she said warmly. “For when the world needs to be in tune.”

Amelia stopped tapping, smiling up at her. “Thanks.”

Winona floated away. Amelia sipped her tea, but the rhythm came back. Her fingers ghosted the beat on the ceramic mug.

“Twenty One Pilots?” Tabitha asked suddenly.

Amelia froze, hand hovering over her cup. She looked up, caught. Then she grinned—a conspiratorial flash. “Caught me. It’s the drums in ‘Overcompensate.’ It’s stuck in my head on a loop.”

Tabitha raised an eyebrow, re-evaluating her. “I didn’t peg Vet Barbie for the Skeleton Clique.”

“Please,” Amelia laughed. “I practically lived in their albums through college. The anxiety? The screaming? It was cheaper than therapy.” She sighed, tracing the rim of her mug. “I always promised myself I’d see them live. Be in the pit. Scream the lyrics until my voice gave out.”

“So go,” Tabitha said, wiping the steam wand. “They tour.”

“Yeah, but...” Amelia slumped slightly, gesturing to her sensible sweater. “I feel like those days are behind me. I have rent now, houseplants and fish. Hell, I get excited when the price of hummus goes down.”

Amelia made a face at her reflection in the tea. “I think my mosh pit license expired when I bought a rice cooker. Now it’s just... adulting. If I went now, I’d probably be the lady standing in the back worrying about the fire exits.”

Tabitha let out a sound that was half-chuckle, half-snort. “You make mid-twenties sound like your mid-forties. It’s a concert, not a war zone. You don’t need a license.”

Amelia looked at her, eyes brightening. “You like them too, don’t you?”

“They’re... tolerable,” Tabitha deflected, though she looked like she was fighting a smile. “They understand that the world is mostly stress and noise.”

“Exactly,” Amelia said. She leaned forward, dropping her voice like they were plotting a heist. “Okay. Deal. If they ever come near Orangeside, or hell the north east in general, we go.”

Tabitha blinked. “We?”

“Yes. We,” Amelia insisted. “You can protect me from the mosh pit, and I’ll buy the overpriced t-shirts. Tentative plan?”

Tabitha looked at Amelia. Smart, put-together, currently unbuttoned Amelia. “IF they come,” Tabitha said, fighting a smile. “Tentative plan. But I’m not holding your purse.”

“Deal.” Amelia beamed.

Tabitha turned away to rinse a pitcher, and Amelia felt a warm flush of victory. She had made a friend. A real one. Not a colleague, not a networking contact. Just a person who liked loud drums.

The bell clanged, harsh and sudden.

A kid, maybe fourteen, stumbled in.

Scuffed sneakers, hair that looked like it had lost a fight with a wind turbine. He wore a jacket two sizes too big and looked around the café and was casing it for exits.

He marched up to the counter, slap-happy energy radiating off him. “One hot chocolate,” he announced. “Extra whip. And don’t skimp, I got funds.”

He slapped a crisp twenty-dollar bill onto the counter.

Tabitha raised an eyebrow. “Big spender. Won some game tournament?”

“Better,” the kid said, grinning. “I got relocated.” He leaned in, bursting to tell someone. “You know the Harrison Home? That old brick orphanage on Elm?”

“Sure,” Tabitha said. “Creepy place. Bad plumbing.”

“Not anymore!” the kid crowed. “Sold! To El Viento Securities.”

Amelia froze, her tea cup halfway to her mouth. El Viento.

“They bought it?” Amelia asked. “What for?”

“Harrison... Academy for... Brilliance? Something like that. They keep changing the flyers.” he continued  
“Gonna be a fancy school for geniuses or something. But the best part? They moved us out while they’re fixin’ it up.”

You ‘got relocated’ by who?” Tabitha asked, narrowing her eyes. “To where? The street?”

“Nah, Orangeside Square Mall!” then looked around in his own head, “Uh... the wind people. El Viento.” The kid looked like he’d won the lottery. “They set up these temp-homes in the old department store wings. It’s awesome. Video games, food court access, no creepy ghosts.” He took a breath. “It’s not THAT bad. Honestly, it’s sweet. Calder’s set for life,” the kid said, slurping hot chocolate. “New shoes. Private tutor. Doesn’t sleep at the mall anymore.” He grinned. “Guess Ernesto Viento liked his ‘spark.’”

Amelia’s face lit up wanting it to be good news so badly, a life raft. She turned to Tabitha, eyes shining.

“That sounds... unusually generous,” Amelia said – then hated herself for how suspicious it made her sound.

Relief flooded in, Chase may be right. El Viento isn’t all bad. They’re helping orphans. Upgrading them. Maybe the VIM contract...is part of the same initiative.

Tabitha looked at the kid. He seemed happy with his money and whipped cream.

“Calder,” Amelia murmured, tilting her head. “That name rings a bell. “Calder...” Amelia murmured. “I feel like Chase mentioned that name once.” She paused, thinking. Then she shook her head, smiling. “Probably just a coincidence. We might have been talking about ‘Caldors’.”

“Uncommon name, uncommon luck,” the kid said, grabbing his hot chocolate. “Calder’s set for life. And so are we, long as we stay in the program.”

Tabitha leaned back and wasn’t entirely convinced. “What do they call the program?”

He saluted them with the cup. “Uh... *Sparks of Brilliance*. Or, like, ‘Spark to the Future.’ Whatever it is, I know my future is secured!”

He bounced out the door, the bell jingling cheerfully behind him.

Amelia watched him go, feeling lighter than she had in days. The ants on the napkin felt far away now. Only Winona’s quiet look gives her any hint of disillusion.

“See, Chele?” Amelia said. “Vincenzo and his company... maybe they really are trying to do good. ‘Secure Your Future.’ That kid certainly looks secured.”

Tabitha looked at the empty space where the kid had been.

“Maybe,” Tabitha said, her voice tight.

Amelia finished her tea, stood up, and gathered her things. “I should go. People waiting.” She paused, looking at Tabitha. “Hey. If you ever want to show me... the notebook. The real parts. I promise not to tell anyone, even if I find your soul in there.”

Tabitha looked down, a flush rising up her neck. “It’s black...I’ll... think about it.”

“Okay,” Amelia said. “Okay.”

She stepped out into the gray mist, the bell giving a soft, undecided note behind her. The rhythm of the drums was back in her head, but this time, it sounded less like anxiety and more like a heartbeat.

Things were going to be okay. Chase was right. They could handle this.

The apartment was quiet, save for the hum of the refrigerator and the low murmur of the television Chase had left on for background noise.

He placed the contract on the coffee table. It was done. Their digital signatures were already processed. The signing bonus was pending deposit.

The door opened. Amelia walked in, looking less frantic than she had at the office, but tired. The "unbuttoned" energy from the café had settled into a weary resolve.

“It’s done,” Chase said, nodding to the papers. “Movers come on Tuesday. First check clears Friday.”

Amelia sat on the couch, pulling her legs up. She stared at the document like it was a grenade with the pin pulled.

“We’re really doing this,” she whispered.

“We are,” Chase said, sitting beside her. “We’re going to be SilverTongue and ABeeWin. We’re going to pay our bills. And we’re going to survive the season.”

He reached out, taking her hand. She squeezed back, but her eyes drifted to the TV.

The news segment faded, replaced by a sleek, high-production commercial. Soft piano music played over images of a serene, temperate forest.

“Justice isn’t about endings,” a voiceover said—smooth, reassuring. “It’s about continuity.”

The screen shifted to a rendering of a black cube sitting quietly in a backyard, surrounded by a tasteful garden. Then, a cut to a vast wilderness, where a lone figure walked near a massive, unmoving anchor.

“The El Viento Personal Prison System,” the voice continued. “Utilizing Xeno-Tungstanium Carbon technology to create a humane, permanent alternative to the ultimate sanction.”

Amelia frowned. “Why are they running commercials for this? It’s a prison system. You can’t buy one at Walmart.”

“It’s not a sales pitch,” Chase said, his instincts kicking in. “It’s conditioning. They want the public to get used to the shape of it. They want us to look at a violent criminal tethered to a 3 ton weight and see ‘safety’ instead of a cage.”

On screen, text flashed: PROTOCOL ALPHA: REDEMPTION. PROTOCOL BETA: SURVIVAL.

“We’re solving the problem of the irredeemable,” the ad promised. “Ethically.”

“See?” Chase pointed. “They start with the people nobody wants to defend. The ones who used to get shocked or the needle.”

He hesitated, choosing his words.

“They say, ‘Look, we found a humane way to remove the worst of it.’ And once that feels normal...”

He trailed off, the thought unfinished.

Amelia watched the digital rendering of the inmate tethered to the anchor. The chain was silver-colored XTC, shimmering in the fake sunlight.

“It’s kinda like VIM,” she murmured. “It’s the same pitch. Not punishment... Just management.”

Chase looked at her, startled. “What?”

“The contract,” she said, gesturing to the coffee table.

“The sponsorship. The ‘Protocol Alpha’ luxury cell. It’s all just terms and conditions, Chase. They find a way to keep you. To make you generate value, or at least stop you from causing trouble, without ever letting you go.”

Chase felt a defensive bristle rise in his chest. “A contract isn’t a chain, Amelia. We can terminate. We can walk.”

Amelia gave him a look that was curious **and** steady.

“Can We?”

“Ames.” Chase retorted, “We’re making content, not committing crimes. Nobody lost their life because of VIM.”

Amelia turned to him. Her eyes were wide, reflecting the blue light of the El Viento logo spinning on the screen.

“Yet,” she said, a joke she didn’t believe.

Chase wanted to argue, to use his silver tongue to spin the logic back to safety. But the word hung in the air between them, heavier than the contract, heavier than the three-ton weight on the screen.

He looked back at the TV. The commercial ended with the El Viento tagline:

SECURE YOUR FUTURE.

Chase reached for the remote and turned it off. The screen went black, but the reflection of the two of them, sitting side by side in the dark, remained.

Amelia realized she was still tapping the rhythm on her knee.

Chase noticed... And didn't tell her to stop.

## Chapter 20 – Test Pilot

The spare room of Chase’s apartment had been transformed.

What used to be a guest room for boxes and dust bunnies was now the VIM Remote Uplink Station. Two desks, soundproofing foam on the walls, and lighting rigs that cost more than Amelia’s first car.

“Okay,” Amelia whispered, adjusting her headset. She felt ridiculous. She was wearing a yellow-and-black striped sweater she’d dug out of storage—a relic from the original ABeeWin days.

“You look great,” Chase, in a crisp button-down, sleeves rolled up, said.

“I look like a bumblebee who joined a hacker collective,” she muttered.

“You look like a Rule 63 interpretation of a cereal mascot,” Chase joked.

“Remember the rules. No real life. Just the show.”

He held up a fist. She bumped it.

“See you on the other side,” she said.

Turning to her monitor, the chat was already scrolling—a small test audience of VIM employees and kids from the Harrison Home.

**OneHunchman:** *Is she supposed to be a female Buzz-Bee?*

**SuaveWay:** *Bee theme? Cute.*

**ZeekRrr:** *PLAY SOMETHING VIOLENT.*

Amelia looked at the collection of videos available to her in the VIM Anime Collection, provided by Vincenzo.

“VIM’s ‘content library’ was suspiciously complete,” she muttered to herself.

Amelia swallowed. “Hi everyone! I’m... ABeeWin. And today, for our first stream, I wanted to go back to my roots. We’re doing a classic ‘Let’s Watch’ of the anime that started it all for me: Dragon Ball Z.”

She clicked the file she’d downloaded earlier. It was labeled DBZ\_SAIYAN\_SAGA\_HD\_REMASTER\_AB.

Noticing the ‘AB’ at the end, she thought to herself this must be a special version for her and her inaugural stream.

“I haven’t seen this since senior year of highschool,” she told the camera, smiling earnestly. “I remember it being so dramatic. The stakes, the screaming, the intensity. Let’s dive in.”

She hit play.

On screen, a space pod crashed into a farmer’s field. Raditz stepped out.

The farmer raised his shotgun.

“Protect me, gun!” the farmer shouted.

Amelia blinked. That... wasn’t the line she remembered.

Raditz flicked a bullet back at the farmer, killing him.

“Hey,” Raditz said. “No one shoots ‘The Raditz.’”

Amelia paused the video. Her brow furrowed. “Wait. I... maybe the dub is different than I recall? I remember it being more... Shakespearean?”

**SS4Sephroth:** *LMAO*

**SanicPhan:** *Is she watching Abridged?*

**MrKoalaT:** *SHE DOESN’T KNOW.*

She hit play again. The scene cut to Piccolo.

“I’m a Green Namekian, and I’m here to do taxes and kill Goku. And I’m all out of taxes.”

Amelia’s mouth fell open. “Okay, I definitely don’t remember tax evasion being a plot point in the Saiyan Saga.”

She flustered, clicking around her desktop, accidentally minimizing the video and bringing up a photo of a frog wearing a sombrero.

“Oh god, sorry! ignore the Senior Hoppy!” She scrambled to fix it, knocking her microphone askew. “I just—I thought this was the Funimation dub! Why is Nappa asking Vegeta if they can stop for dairy Queen?”

**TurdleFrts:** THIS IS GOLD

**SuaveWay:** PRECIOUS

**SolidShake:** SHE’S SO CONFUSED

On screen, Yamcha was currently being blown up by a Saibaman.

“I do not know who this Yamcha is,” Nappa laughed, “but he sounds disappointing.”

Amelia stared at the screen, defeated by technology but charmed by the absurdity.

“Well,” she sighed, leaning into the mic with a helpless shrug. “I guess for Yamcha... that’s gotta sting.”

The chat exploded with bee emojis.

**\*\*\*Chase\*\*\***

On the other side of the room, Chase was fighting a different battle.

He had booted up Overwatch 2.

**JeenGreat:** *Dead game.*

**Vicious808:** *Bro playing a fossil.*

**Snurple:** *Play RIVALS.*

“It’s not a dead game,” Chase argued, his voice smooth, the ‘SilverTongue’ persona fully engaged. “It’s a classic. It’s about team composition. It’s about strategy. You kids today just want to click heads; you don’t appreciate the symphony of a well-timed ultimate.”

He locked in Reinhardt. A giant man with a hammer. Honest work.

“Watch this,” Chase said. “I’m going to hold the frontline. I will be the shield.”

He marched his character forward.

Suddenly, a new character, a character alien to Chase, threw a glowing orb that disabled his shield, stunned him, set him on fire, and then made his character do a mandatory dance emote.

YOU HAVE BEEN ELIMINATED.

Chase stared at the screen.

“I was stunned,” he said calmly. “Through the shield.”

**Snurple:** Power creep lol.

**Vicious808:** Get the Battlepass, at least look good while losing.

Chase respawned. He walked out. He got hit by a sniper shot from the sky.

ELIMINATED.

Chase took his hands off the keyboard. He looked at the camera. The silence stretched for three seconds—dead air that felt heavy.

Then, he leaned in.

“You know,” Chase said, dropping an octave, becoming sharp and dangerous. “You’re right. This isn’t a game anymore. It’s a storefront disguised as entertainment.”

He minimized the game window and pulled up a notepad.

“Let’s talk about that,” he said. “Let’s talk about the ‘Live Service’ model. Because it’s not just games, is it? It’s everything. It’s your heated seats in your car. It’s your printer ink. It’s the idea that you can never finish anything, you can only subscribe to it.”

He was rolling now. The frustration of the last few weeks – the EVAPS commercial, the billing freeze, the loss of hours for Amelia – channeled into a blistering critique of a video game.

“They took a perfectly balanced ecosystem,” Chase ranted, gesturing with a pen, “and they broke it on purpose so they could sell you a way to be comfortable in the mess they made. They don’t want you to have fun. They want you miserable and pay them for the experience.”

**Vicious808:** *PREACH*

**Mild-Eww12:** *Based.*

**Snurple:** *He’s cooking.*

Chase looked at the camera, eyes blazing. “And we let them. We thank them for the content while they dismantle the mechanics.”

He turned his exaggerated exasperation, away then back to the camera, “They don’t sell you a game anymore. They now give slavery while calling it a game.”

Two hours later, the light on the camera turned off.

Chase slumped in his chair, exhaling a breath he felt like he’d been holding since Tuesday.

“We survived,” he said.

Amelia came around from her side of the room. She looked exhausted, her hair messy from the headset. “I

watched a parody for ninety minutes, Chase. I analyzed the geopolitical implications of Mr. Popo. I accidentally showed the internet my pet frog from high school.”

Chase chuckled, standing up and stretching. “You were great. I heard you laughing. That’s what matters.”

“And you?” Amelia asked. “I heard shouting.”

“I may have indicted the entire software industry for crimes against leisure time,” Chase admitted.

He walked over and offered her a hand. She took it, letting him pull her up.

“Bed?” she asked.

“Bed,” he agreed.

They stumbled out of the studio, shedding the personas as they went. Amelia pulled off the yellow-and-black sweater, leaving it on the hallway chair. Chase unbuttoned the crisp collar of the "SilverTongue" shirt, rolling his shoulders to pop the tension loose.

In the bathroom, the lights were harsh. They stood side-by-side at the double sink brushing their teeth in silence.

Amelia spat and rinsed, wiping her mouth. She looked at Chase in the mirror.

“Does this feel familiar to you?” she asked quietly.

Chase paused, toothbrush mid-air. “Brushing teeth? I try to do it twice a day.”

“No,” she said, turning to lean against the counter. “The performing. The high. The crash.” She crossed her arms. “It feels like AnimeVerse. Junior year.”

Chase winced. “Please. I had successfully repressed the Homelander Incident until just now.”

“You were so lost in the sauce, Chase,” she said, half-smiling, though her eyes were serious. “Remember? You

spent three days strutting around because some girl dressed as Karin Kanzuki got way into character and dragged you along with her. You adopted that... swagger.”

“We were supposed to have a bit. You were supposed to be StormFRONT, not in full black-face as Ororo Munroe. Besides, she was a fellow Street Fighter Alpha 3 fan.”

“It was an honest mistake,” Amelia corrected. “And I spent the whole weekend playing ‘Mrs. Wright’ because the hotel clerk made a mistake when I told him it was a failed couple’s costume. I didn’t even try to correct him.”

Chase rinsed his mouth and set the brush down. “I remember. You played ‘Mrs. Wright’ so well that when you threw that drink in my face in the lobby, half the con thought it was scripted.”

“It wasn’t scripted,” Amelia said softly. “I was really hurt. You were flirting some Karin cosplayer. You were ignoring me. I felt like... like I was losing you to a character.”

She looked up at him, the vulnerability from that day surfacing again.

“When the camera light went off, I felt... empty. Like my skin was still online. We’re putting on masks again. What if we get lost in them?”

Chase dried his face with a towel, taking his time. He remembered the sting of the vodka soda in his eyes, but more clearly, he remembered the conversation afterward in the quiet corner of the convention center. He remembered telling her that if they were actually married, he wouldn’t be flirting out in the open... He’d just be hiding it better. It was ‘Homelander’. A Cynical, defensive thing to say.

He looked ahead, regret churning in his mind, “I remember you crying in the hallway, Ames. And me choosing some bit instead of choosing you.”

He turned to her.

“It’s different this time,” Chase said, hoping it was true.

“How?” Amelia said, with a twinge in her eyes.

“Because at AnimeVerse, we were performing because we wanted to be other people. You wanted to be a wife. I wanted to be a Superman knock-off.” He stepped closer, crowding her space in the gentle way she liked. “But tonight? I didn’t want to be SilverTongue. I just wanted to finish the job so I could come back to this.”

He reached out, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

“I’m not Homelander, Ames. And you’re not playing Mrs. Wright anymore.”

Amelia searched his face. “No?”

“This isn’t a bit.” Chase said. “It’s more of an audition for both of us to become Mr. and Mrs. Wright.”

She let out a long breath, the tension finally leaving her shoulders. She leaned into his touch. “Okay. Good. Because I really don’t have the energy to throw a drink at you tonight.”

“From my recently cleaned face, thank you.”

They turned off the lights and moved into the bedroom and curled into each other under the duvet, the only place in the world that felt peaceful.

## Chapter 21 – Cooldowns

### \*\*\*Vincenzo & Grey\*\*\*

In the VIM Control Room, the screens were still glowing, bathing the room in a cool, electric blue.

Vincenzo stood with his arms crossed, watching the replay of Amelia flustering over the Nappa dialogue.

“Look at that spike,” Vincenzo said, pointing at the graph. “The exact moment she realized she had the wrong file.”

Grey didn’t look away from the footage. “Confusion is relatable.”

“Relatable sells,” Vincenzo added. “Panic sells better.”

Grey Elwin sat at the console, his face illuminated by the monitor. He wasn’t looking at the numbers, instead was watching the footage of Chase’s rant, playing it frame-by-frame.

Saul Goodman giving a closing argument, Grey thought. But without the jury.

“Chase’s retention is solid,” Grey said aloud, his voice flat. “He captures the angry intellectual demographic. He thinks he’s leading the conversation. Just like he thought he was leading the Team.”

Grey blinked, and for a second, the high-tech control room dissolved.

**[Memory Index: OrangeSide Esports Arena. Many years ago.]**

The smell of stale energy drinks and desperation flooding into his mind.

Dean Starmer had entered the "OrangeSide Fannys" into the regional Overwatch tournament in a manic bid to secure funding (and pay off a questionable mascot costume debt). The prize was \$10,000. The Dean had promised to split what was left evenly.

Elvis Santiago sat in the Captain's chair. He had analyzed every frame of the meta. He had a perfect flowchart for victory.

However, that flowchart didn't account for the "Chase and Amelia Show."

"Chase, pull back," Elvis barked into the comms. "They're baiting out your flashbang. Regroup behind Tyrone's shield."

"I got this, Elvis," Chase's voice came through, cocky and loud. He was playing Cassidy, of course. The cowboy. The solo hero. "It's High Noon somewhere."

"It is literally 2:00 PM and you are out of position," Elvis countered.

But Chase rolled forward anyway.

Amelia, playing Mercy, didn't stay with the team and flew right after him, her healing beam attached to Chase, ignoring Wilson's critical health bar entirely.

To Chase and Amelia, the memory of that tournament was a rom-com montage. They remembered the thrill, the saved lives, the "flirting-but-not-flirting" adrenaline of being a duo against the world.

Elvis remembered the math.

He remembered the final push on King's Row. Overtime burning down. Chase went for a highlight reel play and got sniped immediately. Amelia tried to resurrect him in the open and died instantly.

A total strategic collapse born of ego and unspoken sexual tension.

It was down to Elvis (Torbjörn) and Tyrone (Reinhardt). Two against five.

“Tyrone,” Elvis had said, voice dead calm amidst the screaming crowd. “Turret placement Delta. Sit on it.”

“Elvis,” Tyrone muttered over comms, “Are Cassidy and Mercy joining us in the win?”

“We are winning \*around\* them,” Elvis said. “Which is the hardest kind of winning.”

They won by a millisecond. Not because of Chase’s heroics. Because Elvis used a glitched geometry spot for a turret that the devs hadn’t patched yet.

Later, in the chaotic celebration while Dean Starmer tried to crowd-surf, Elvis had found Chase and Amelia celebrating their "teamwork."

“We won,” Elvis had told them, refusing to high-five. “My optimal strategy, adjusted for your sub-optimal interpersonal variables, created a viable, if inefficient, path to victory. Your method had a 12% success probability. We got lucky.”

They had just laughed and hugged him. They didn't understand. They thought they were the main characters.

The Dean did end up splitting the money, but evenly throughout the school and faculty. Everyone got \$16.32.

**[End Memory]**

**\*\*\*The Control Room\*\*\***

Grey blinked, the memory receding.

He looked at the screen now. Chase was ranting about "broken systems." Amelia was apologizing to a chat room for being clumsy.

They were doing it again. Chase was going rogue for glory. Amelia was pocketing him with her vulnerability.

“She’s the breakout,” Grey said, pulling up the footage of Amelia frantically shuffling papers. “The clumsiness? It reads as vulnerability. The audience wants to protect her. They want to buy her things... Help her.”

Vincenzo nodded. “It’s good. But we can optimize it.” He chuckled to himself, “That’s gotta sting.” Vincenzo smiled. “That’s meme-able.”

“We have to optimize it,” Grey murmured. “Or the unmanaged resources will try to co-opt it.”

He tapped his chin. He remembered Amelia in college.

How she used to dress in bright colors to hide her anxiety.

How she used to hide behind the "cute" persona when things got real.

“We lean into the Bee theme,” Grey said, his voice clinical. “Yellow and black aesthetic. It’s disarming.”

He opened a digital sketchpad and started drawing over Amelia’s frozen image.

“We get her a set that looks like a hive. Cozy. Warm. And the glasses...”

He sketched a pair of oversized, thick-rimmed glasses.

“We get her glasses that are slightly too big,” Grey explained. “So they slide down her nose. She has to push them up. It’s a physical tic. ‘Adorkable’. It creates a recurring engagement loop. Every time she pushes them up, the chat types ‘GLASSES.’ It builds community ritual.”

Vincenzo smiled, a shark sensing blood in the water. “You’re designing a character.”

“I’m adding accessibility features.” He looked at the screen, at the friends who had once ignored his orders to play their own game.

Not this time, Grey thought. This time, I control the cooldowns.

“Elvis Santiago would have told her she looked pretty good,” Grey murmured.

“What was that?” Vincenzo asked.

“Nothing,” Grey said, finalizing the sketch. “Just... production notes. Order the glasses. We will run a wider test-stream next week.”

## Chapter 22 – Echo Chamber

The morning after the pilot stream felt less like waking up and more like coming down from a sugar high.

Amelia was in the kitchen, making coffee with her own machine (Chase's truly was tragic), while Chase scrolled through analytics on his tablet at the island.

"Vincenzo just texted," Chase said, not looking up. "He says the test audience metrics are 'beyond projections.' Apparently, people really liked the rant about the battle pass."

"And my bee theme thing?" Amelia asked, wincing as she poured milk.

"He says 'ABeeWin' is trending internally. They want you to wear over-sized glasses next time."

Amelia groaned, leaning her forehead against the cabinet. "I am a grown woman with a degree. I am not a dress-up doll in a box."

"You are now," Chase said, his voice gentle.

He walked over and kissed the top of her head. "Think of it as a costume. Like AnimeVerse. Just... don't throw a drink at me."

"As long as there's no Street Fighter cosplayers around," she mumbled into his shirt.

Chase's phone buzzed again. He checked it, then frowned.

"Speaker," he said. Tapping the screen and setting the phone on the counter.

"Good morning, influencers!" Vincenzo's voice filled the kitchen, rich and overly caffeinated. "I hope you're rested. Because the data? The data is singing."

“Singing is good,” Chase said cautiously.

“It’s better than good. It’s a symphony. Look, I know we have a schedule, but I wanted to drop a little signing bonus on you. A token of appreciation.”

“We already got the bonus,” Chase said.

“Not money. Experience.” A rustle of paper on the other end could be heard. “I have two tickets. Front row. VIP. For the Twenty One Pilots show in Philly coming up.”

Amelia froze. She spun around, nearly dropping her spoon.

“My people scraped your old social profiles,” Vincenzo continued, oblivious to the privacy violation. “Saw you were a fan, Amelia. Figured you two could use a night out.”

“That’s... not a gift, Vincenzo. That’s an invasion of privacy with a secret prize.” Chase said, with mild suspicion.

Amelia’s smile arrived before her suspicion did.

She looked at Chase. Her eyes were wide, shining with a mix of excitement and disbelief. She had literally just bonded with Tabitha over this band. It felt like kismet. Or surveillance. Or both.

“That’s... incredibly generous,” Chase said, though Amelia could see him mentally calculating the cost of “free” tickets from a man like Vincenzo. “But it’s not really my scene. Whining gives me a headache.”

“I’ll go!” Amelia piped up, realizing too late she sounded eager. “I mean... thank you. That’s amazing.”

“Perfect,” Vincenzo said. “Enjoy the show. Oh, and Chase? Grey has some thoughts on the rollout strategy. I’m putting him on.”

There was a click, and then Grey's voice – smooth, dry, and oddly familiar – came through.

Grey said. “The independent streams are good for building individual bases. But the audience craves the crossover. Something to seed a ‘Will They/Won’t They’ dynamic in their minds, we need a crucible.”

Chase blinked. “Did you just threaten our relationship with metallurgy?”

“Metaphorically,” Grey corrected. “We need an event. High stress. High engagement. I’m proposing a location shoot in the next few weeks. Something we could use for a Halloween special.”

Amelia felt a prickle of unease. “What kind of location?”

“Dudleytown,” Grey said.

Amelia laughed once. A sharp, involuntary sound. “Okay. You got me. Great prank.”

“No prank,” Vincenzo said cheerfully.

Amelia stopped laughing.

She froze. The name hit her with dread. “Dudleytown? The ‘Village of the Damned’? We can’t go there. It’s strictly private property. The Dark Entry Forest Association arrests hikers on sight. It’s... it’s cursed.”

“It’s private El Viento property,” Vincenzo cut in, his voice booming casually about ownership. “El Viento Securities acquired the land trust years ago under a pseudonym. We held the deed quietly. No local police will bother you,” Vincenzo said. “We handle the jurisdictional relationship.”

“But the legends,” Amelia stammered, looking at Chase. “People go insane there. The ‘Dark Entry’... Chase, they say it’s actually haunted.”

“Rumors are unoptimized data,” Grey interrupted, his tone dismissive and clinical. “There are no ghosts in Dudleytown, Amelia. Just trees and rocks.”

He paused, and Amelia could practically hear him smiling on the other end.

“However,” Grey continued, “the metrics love a ghost story.”

“So, we’re enhancing the experience,” Grey said. “Audio cues. Environmental effects. Controlled stimuli. You supply the reactions. Fear bonds the audience to the creator.”

Amelia’s breath hitched. They were turning a legendary cursed forest into a theme park attraction for views.

“You really believe its... safe?” Amelia asked, her voice small.

“Always, it’s an El Viento property,” Vincenzo said. “It’s the safest forest in the north east. If there are souls, we own them. We control the environment now. What do you say?”

“It’s just a location shoot,” Chase said, more to himself than to her. “A controlled environment. In and out.”

Amelia nodded, though the excitement about the concert was now tempered by a cold draft. The idea of fake ghosts in a place famous for real madness felt like a bad punchline.

“We’re in,” Chase said.

“Excellent. I’ll get the ball rollin on this. Secure your future, kids.”

The line went dead.

They drove to the café in silence for the first few blocks, the weight of the "Haunted Forest" hanging between them.

"We should tell Tabitha," Amelia said suddenly.

"Tell her what? That we're ghost hunting for clicks?"

"About the tickets," Amelia said, brightening. "Chase, you hate that music. Clearly. And Tabitha... she loves them. We bonded over it. I should take her."

Chase glanced at her. "You want to take the prickly barista to a VIP concert courtesy of our corporate overlord?"

"Yes! It's perfect. It's a peace offering. And... I think she needs a friend. A real one."

Chase smiled. "You're adopting her. Like some kinda stray cat."

"She's not a stray. She's just... guarded."

"Fine. But not right now. We keep the VIM stuff close to the vest," Chase warned. "Until we're 100% comfortable. Snakes is already in her head about 'sugar traps.' If we tell her we're exploring a creepy El Viento forest, she might actually have a stroke."

"Agreed," Amelia said. "Feel it out for now. Concert talk next time"

They pulled up to Summers Brew.

As they got out, the rain started to mist again, bringing back memories from a college day with similar weather.

"Hey, remember that model U.N.?" Chase asked.

"Don't tell me you have to fart," Amelia laughed, adjusting her cardigan.

They walked in laughing, born of the absurdity of their morning.

“...and then Hunt looked at us like we’d personally declared war on Switzerland,” Chase was saying, shaking his umbrella.

Amelia covered her face, groaning-laughing. “Please don’t remind me. I wanted to sink through the floor.”

Tabitha was behind the counter, looking like she’d been waiting for them to ruin her solitude. She scribbled on a cup before they even reached the wood.

### **BRIEFCASE & LUNCHBOX.**

“Morning, Tabs,” Chase said, leaning an elbow on the counter. “Still trying to become the ‘fortune cookie’ of morning refreshments?”

“Use any markers recently to sign important paperwork?” she countered, eyeing his briefcase.

Amelia smiled warmly. “Registrar, right? You know, it does really fit you.”

Tabitha raised an eyebrow. “Finally, Chase’s not alone.”

Maybe it was the relief of the contract signed, or maybe it was just the caffeine kicking in. They talked about college – the Model UN incident (Amelia defended her “crying like a school girl, but not in a ‘hot way’, as Chase put it” valiantly) – and Chase even admitted, with surprising vulnerability, that his teasing back then was a defense mechanism.

Amelia watched Tabitha’s face soften. The girl was listening so intently, like she was cataloging every word for a file.

“You have to let us check out your little... case files?” Chase teased.

“Absolutely not,” Tabitha gasped, nearly choking.

“They’re not just case files,” Amelia interjected, turning to Chase. “She’s good, Chase. She notices things. She captures people.”

Tabitha looked like she wanted to phase through the floor.

“It’s not just lists, Tabs,” Amelia said firmly. “It’s insight.”

For a second, the armor cracked. Tabitha looked down, scribbling something under the counter, looking flustered and pleased and terrified all at once.

Then the door swung open.

Snakes shuffled in. No chime. Just the squeak of the mop cart and the smell of bleach.

“Wright,” Snakes said, dragging his cart like a weapon. He pulled out a large zip-lock bag of mixed candies – M&Ms, Skittles, Reese’s Pieces, chaos in a bag. “Want some special mix?”

Chase groaned. “Not today, man. Seriously.”

Snakes ignored him. He reached into his pocket and slapped a matchbook onto the counter.

El Viento SECURITIES.

The cover was scratched until the letters bled paper fuzz.

Amelia reached for it. “What’s this supposed to—”

“School days are over,” Snakes cut her off, his voice low.

Amelia froze.

“Gas can change the way the world looks,” Snakes said, looking at the matchbook, then at Chase. “Don’t burn yourself up lighting a match to see the way. One match can turn a room into a story.”

Chase opened his mouth to argue.

Snakes pointed a finger at him without looking. “And you—don’t mistake a spark for a promise. Just because it glitters like gold, doesn’t mean it is. A city spray-painted gold is just a lie.”

He shuffled away, the mop squeaking a dissonant rhythm. At the door, he added: “Registrar knows where to file it. Cabins catch fire.”

The silence that followed rearranged the air in the room.

“That was... ominous,” Amelia whispered, staring at the matchbook.

“Snakes thinks everything is ominous,” Chase dismissed, rubbing his temples. “Yesterday he warned me about the TV in the lobby listening.”

Amelia shivered. They literally are, she thought, remembering the cameras in the VIM studio. And the fact that ‘Smart TVs’ exist.

She shook it off.

When the rush thinned, Amelia lingered at the counter.

“So,” Amelia said, leaning in. “If you liked Twenty One Pilots, I need to ask... How do you feel about Muse?”

Tabitha didn’t look up. “They’re fine.”

“Fine? Tabs, they’re space opera with guitars. That’s religion.”

They went back and forth – Gorillaz, Of Monsters and Men – bonding over the shared language of playlists.

Finally, Amelia played her card.

“You won’t believe it,” Amelia said, pulling out her phone. “The algorithm heard us. East Coast tour dates just dropped for Twenty One Pilots.”

Tabitha’s eyes widened. “Oh.”

“And,” Amelia leaned in closer, dropping her voice, excitement bubbling up. “I actually have an extra—”

She stopped.

From the stool beside her, Chase cleared his throat. Once.

Amelia didn’t notice.

He cleared it again. Sharper.

She froze mid-sentence.

They locked eyes.

Years of shared subtext passed between them in under a second.

She remembered his warning in the car: Keep the VIM stuff close to the vest. Offering VIP tickets from a corporate overlord might be moving too fast. It might look like a bribe. Or worse, it might scare the girl off entirely.

“I have an extra... feeling,” Amelia pivoted, her voice pitching up slightly. “That they’re going to sell out fast. Like, instantly.”

Tabitha blinked, clearly sensing the sentence had been hijacked mid-flight. “Right. Scalpers are brutal.”

“Exactly,” Amelia nodded too quickly, hating when sentences betrayed her like that. “So we should... you know. Keep an eye on it.”

Chase relaxed his shoulders, taking a sip of his coffee. Crisis averted.

Amelia cleared her throat, recovering her momentum. “But seriously. We should plan it. Or even just hang out before then. Listen to music. Compare playlists. Judge each other’s choices.”

Tabitha raised an eyebrow. “Judge?”

“Lovingly,” Amelia said. “Mostly.”

Tabitha tried not to smile. Failed.

Then Amelia held out her phone. “Trade numbers? So we can coordinate. In case... you know, tickets become available.”

Tabitha’s lungs staged a coup. “Oh. Uh. Sure.”

She slid her phone across the counter, trying not to visibly flinch when Amelia’s fingers brushed hers. Amelia typed quickly, handed it back with a smile so bright it felt like an indictment.

“There,” Amelia said. “Now you can’t pretend we don’t exist between shifts.”

Chase made a wounded noise. “She pretends I don’t exist all the time.”

“That’s because you’re annoying,” Tabitha said, tucking her phone away.

Amelia laughed – soft, pleased, warm. “Okay. We should go. But text me. Seriously.”

Tabitha nodded once, businesslike. “We’ll see.”

Amelia stepped out into the gray drizzle, huddled under Chase’s umbrella. As they turned the corner toward the parking lot, she let out a long breath.

“Why did you stop me?” Amelia asked. “I was going to give her the ticket.”

“Too soon,” Chase said, unlocking the car. “Remember, we can’t just drop a VIP El Viento package on her lap day one. She’s suspicious by nature, Ames. She’d think we were trying to buy her off or recruit her.”

“I just wanted to do something nice,” Amelia sighed, sliding into the passenger seat. “She reminds me of

Christina. Back in the Orangeside days. The combat boots. The defiant eyeliner. The way she uses sarcasm as a load-bearing wall.”

Chase chuckled, starting the engine. “She just needs a megaphone and a protest sign, and the transformation is complete.”

“I think she looks at us differently,” Amelia said, watching the wipers swish back and forth. “Not just as customers. I think she really wants friends.”

Chase looked out the windshield, thoughtful. “I saw that,” he admitted. “Way back when I first started coming in. Honestly? When we first met, I thought she had the hots for me.”

Amelia snorted. “You think everyone has the hots for you.”

“I’m serious,” Chase said, merging into traffic. “She had that look. The one where they insult you because they don’t know how to talk to you. But I made sure to keep a respectable distance. I see her as a little sister. A terrifying, goth flavored, judgmental little sister.”

Amelia smirked, teasing him. “Careful, Wright. I was nineteen once. And I seem to recall I had a pretty massive crush on you, too.”

Chase glanced at her. “That was different.”

“How? We were in college. She’s college-aged.”

“Because,” Chase said, tapping the steering wheel. “You and I... the math was different. Even then. But with Tabitha? She’s nineteen. I’m in my thirties. That felt... distinct.”

Amelia leaned back in the seat, watching the city blur by. It was funny how time compressed things. When she was a nineteen-year-old freshman and Chase was the twenty-seven-year-old "mature student," the eight-year gap had

felt like a canyon. He was a grown man with perfect hair; she was a kid with a meal plan.

But now? She was in her mid-twenties, settling into a new career. He was in his thirties, less schemes and more building dreams. The gap hadn't changed, but the bridge had been built.

They were just...evolved.

"It is different," Amelia agreed softly. "We're now both just boring, responsible adults. We buy the coffee. We don't complicate anything."

She felt a wave of relief wash over her. Chase had boundaries. He saw Tabitha as a kid, as a friend, maybe even a protégé, but nothing else. It meant Amelia could be friends with her, too, without looking over her shoulder. She could adopt the stray cat without worrying about the ecosystem.

"Exactly," Chase said. "No SilverTongue scandals allowed."

They drove off into the rain, feeling safe in their bubble, unaware that back in the café, Tabitha didn't see "boring adults." She saw the only story in town that was worth her time.

## Chapter 23 – Driven to Inspiration

Chase and Amelia walked into Summers Brew. The bell jingling a weak, indecisive note, welcoming them back after a week of test streams and set reconfigurations.

“Top of the morning, Tabitha,” Chase said, placing his briefcase on the counter like it needed caffeine too. “Got any insults saved up?” Chase asked.

“I ration them,” Tabitha said. “It’s a valuable, but volatile resource.”

“Ah,” Chase nodded. “Ethical cruelty.”

Amelia smiled warmly. “Good morning.”

Tabitha scrawled **TUNED OUT** on Chase’s cup and **GOOD MUSIC TASTE** on Amelia’s. She slid them across. Amelia laughed when she read hers.

As Chase fished for change, Tabitha muttered under her breath, “Apparently I can’t get a license,” Tabitha listfully stared at the counter, “because no one has time to risk their life.”

Chase blinked. “That feels... targeted.”

Amelia perked up immediately. “Wait... You don’t have a driver’s license?”

Tabitha stiffened, the sarcasm faltering for a second. “Shocking, I know.”

Amelia’s smile sharpened into mischief. She turned to Chase. “Perfect solution. “You should teach her,” Amelia said.

Chase laughed once. Then stopped. “That wasn’t a joke?”

“You’ll be fine,” Amelia said, nudging his arm. “You’re patient.”

Tabitha snorted from behind the espresso machine. “That’s the funniest lie I’ve ever heard.”

Amelia ignored her. “Besides, you’re always going on about *freedom* and *liberty*. What’s more free and liberating than helping a friend get their license?”

Chase groaned, looking between the two of them. He felt like he’d just lost a bet he didn’t know he was making.

“I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this,” he muttered.

Tabitha arched an eyebrow. “Neither can I.”

By the time Tabitha’s shift ended, the sky had wrung itself into a clearer gray. Chase sat in his Acura, keys in the ignition, with Amelia in the backseat waving Tabitha over.

“Your chariot awaits,” Amelia called.

Tabitha blinked. “I walk.”

“Not today,” Amelia said, grinning. “Today you drive.”

Chase leaned over the console, expression pained. “Against my better judgment.”

Tabitha slid into the driver’s seat like she was taking the stand in a murder trial. She adjusted the seat, looking stiff.

“Seatbelt,” Chase barked immediately.

“She hasn’t even turned the car on,” Amelia teased from the back.

“Seatbelt first,” Chase insisted, tightening his own until it cut into his shoulder. “Safety is non-negotiable.”

Tabitha rolled her eyes, clicking hers into place. “Happy, Dad?”

Chase pinched the bridge of his nose. “Thrilled. Adjust your mirrors.”

“She’s got this,” Amelia said, leaning forward to nudge the rearview mirror. “Relax.”

Chase shot her a look in the mirror. Amelia grinned back, unbothered. There was a static between them today – a shared secret language born of contracts and late-night streams.

Tabitha caught the look. Her stomach twisted as she gripped the wheel. “You two done?”

“Never,” Amelia said lightly. “Go on. Turn him on... I mean turn it on.”

Tabitha turned the key. The engine groaned awake. She shifted into drive and pressed the gas too quickly; the car lurched forward.

Chase clutched the dashboard. “Easy! Gentle—gentle! It’s a gas pedal, not a bass drum.”

“You’re making her nervous,” Amelia laughed. “She’s fine.”

“I am not fine,” Chase muttered through his teeth.

Tabitha smirked, letting the car glide forward slightly more smoothly. “Paranoid much?”

“About my luxury car? Yes,” Chase snapped. “She trained for maybe one hour. ONE. You need years before you trust someone with a fine piece of Japanese workmanship—”

“It’s just a glorified Accord, Chase, it’ll be fine” Amelia said.

Chase threw her a betrayed look. “Spoken like someone who’s never watched a teenager nearly take out a mailbox.”

Tabitha raised an eyebrow. “I would not take out a mailbox.”

The air settled for a moment.

“Unless it deserved it,” Tabitha added.

Amelia laughed into her sleeve. “See? She’s got your sarcasm and my optimism. Best of both worlds.”

They rolled down quiet suburban streets. Chase micromanaged every turn; Amelia countered him with encouragement. It was chaotic, stressful, and surprisingly...nice. It felt normal.

Then Tabitha reached for the radio.

Static. Static. And then – a warped synth groove slipped through the speakers.

“Basic being basic, I don’t want it—”

Chase recoiled. “Oh no. Nope. Absolutely not. Why does it sound like irony learned how to sing? Why is he bored *at me?*”

Tabitha’s hand froze. “...Not a fan of DJO.”

“It’s aggressively self-aware,” Chase said. “It’s like the song knows it’s better than me and won’t shut up about it.”

“It’s called indie pop,” Tabitha muttered.

“It’s called emotional bullying,” Chase shot back. “This is exactly the kind of thing Samara used to play. You know... Music that smirks mocks your day.”

Tabitha’s shoulders slumped. She switched the station quickly, cheeks burning.

In the rearview mirror, Amelia caught Chase’s eye and gave a tiny, sympathetic wince. You hurt her feelings, the look said.

I’m saving her ears, Chase’s look replied.

They pulled into an empty stretch of curb so Tabitha could practice parallel parking. She hadn't even aligned with the curb yet when Chase's phone buzzed.

He glanced at the screen and froze.

"Oh no," Amelia said. "Is it... "

"Yes," Chase groaned. "More VIM talk."

He answered. "WRIGHT!" Vincenzo's voice exploded through the speaker, loud enough for the entire car to hear.

Tabitha winced. Amelia mouthed sorry.

Chase leaned away, practically hanging out the open door. "Hey, man. We were just... Yeah. We're still reviewing the proposal. I'll follow up.."

Vincenzo's response was a muffled roar of enthusiasm.

Chase rubbed his forehead. "I know the earning potential. I know the exposure. Yes. Yes, I remember your TED Talk about 'the future of narrative'—"

Another blast.

Chase's voice dropped, serious and quiet. "...Yeah. It would help. The loans. And the rent. I know."

He stepped fully out of the car to finish the call, leaving Amelia and Tabitha in the sudden quiet.

## Chapter 24 - No Brakes

Amelia sat in the backseat, feeling the weight of the secret pressing on her chest. She saw Tabitha watching her in the rearview mirror.

“So,” Tabitha said, pretending to be casual. “VIM? Really? What would you even do on a stream? Diagnose hamsters?”

Amelia laughed, grateful for the distraction. “Oh God, no. If I streamed vet stuff, people would cry. Or sue.”

“Then what?”

Amelia bit her lip. She couldn’t tell the truth... Not about the bee costume or the clumsy persona. But she could share a piece of it.

“...Cosplay,” she admitted.

Tabitha blinked. “You?”

Amelia nodded, brushing invisible lint off her cardigan. “In high school. And a little in college. I had phases. Lucy Heartfilia. Nami. Sakura. Sometimes all three if the con was a multi-day thing.”

“What?” Tabitha croaked.

“Oh! And once I tried to go as Zelda,” Amelia continued, leaning forward. “Except the costume company sent me a ‘Sexy Female Link’ outfit because they thought the guy in green was Zelda.”

Tabitha stared. “No.”

“Yes,” Amelia said, hand to heart. “Spent the whole convention explaining I wasn’t Rule 63 Link. I was just a victim of bad customer service.”

Something shifted in Tabitha's eyes. She'd found a hidden menu.

Tabitha let out an involuntary snort. "Oh my God."

Amelia smiled. "So... if VIM wanted me to stream? I'd probably do some anime reviews while in cosplay. Something fun. Something stupid."

Tabitha stared at her for a full beat. Amelia saw the shift in her eyes – the realization that "Cardigan Nice" wasn't the whole story.

Chase slid back into the passenger seat with a long exhale.

"Well," he said. "Vincenzo is...elaborate."

"That's one word for it," Tabitha said.

"He means well," Amelia added softly, as if reminding herself. "He just... makes everything sound like camping."

Tabitha gave a confused look.

With a quirky grin Amelia said, "In Tents... Intense."

A mild look of disgust flashed on Tabitha's face as she looked between them. "So you two are really considering VIM."

Chase shrugged. "It's a maybe."

"A heavy maybe," Amelia added. "We're just... trying to stay afloat. Things are tight. This could help."

Tabitha swallowed. "Okay." She didn't sound so much convinced, as decided.

Chase nodded, oblivious to the fact that they had just confirmed Tabitha's worst fears about sugar traps. "Alright. Parallel parking. Attempt two."

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After dropping Tabitha off (she managed to park without hitting a mailbox, though Chase claimed his blood pressure would never recover), they drove in silence for a few blocks.

“That went well,” Amelia said.

“She drives like she’s angry at the pavement,” Chase muttered.

“She’s nineteen, Chase. Everything makes her angry.”

Chase’s phone buzzed again. A text from Vincenzo.

Come by HQ. We need to sync. Bring your A-game.

Chase sighed. “No breaks for us.”

“At least we know where the brake pedal is,” Amelia said, patting his shoulder.

Chase turned the car onto the highway toward VIM Headquarter. “I have a feeling Vincenzo doesn’t believe in brakes.”

## Chapter 25 – Cereal Logic

“It’s about Dudleytown,” Amelia said from the passenger seat, scrolling through her phone. The glow of the screen illuminated her furrowed brow. “He wants to brief us on the ‘hazards.’ Did you know the Dark Entry Forest Association literally arrests people for hiking there?”

“Because it’s private property, Ames. Not because of ghosts.”

“It’s not just ghosts,” she countered, reading aloud. “‘Locals report mass hysteria, phantom noises, and a disproportionate number of accidental deaths. They say the ground itself is sour.’”

“The ground isn’t sour. It’s rocky,” Chase said, turning the wheel. “And the ‘mass hysteria’ was likely ergot poisoning in the rye bread back in the 1800s. It’s biology, not boogeymen.”

“You’re no fun,” Amelia sighed, locking her phone. “You’re going to Scooby-screw me out of actually enjoying this aren’t you?”

“If the scares involve pulling a mask revealing ‘Old man Grey’ was behind it all, absolutely.” Chase joked back.

They pulled up to the VIM headquarters. At night, the glass building looked less like a startup and more like a monolith, reflecting the city lights in a way that made the world look distorted.

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They walked through the revolving doors. The lobby was empty, save for the rhythmic squeak-squeak of a mop.

Chase stopped. “You have got to be kidding me.”

Snakes was there, pushing his bucket across the marble floor. Wearing the same jumpsuit he wore at Michael & Cole, and at Summers Brew.

“You get around, don’t you?” Chase called out. “Does El Viento pay overtime, or do you just use shadow clones?”

Snakes didn’t look up from a stubborn scuff mark. “Dirt doesn’t clock out, Wright. Neither do I.”

Amelia giggled, stepping closer. “Hi, Snakes. We’re just here for a meeting.”

Snakes stopped mopping. He leaned on the handle, looking at them. “Meeting. Right. At night. In the belly of the beast.”

“It’s a strategy session,” Chase said. “Standard stuff.”

“Working for these people can be dangerous,” Snakes said, his voice dropping to that low, gravelly register that usually preceded a riddle. “The floor is slippery even when it’s dry.”

“You’re literally the janitor,” Chase pointed out. “If the floor is slippery, that’s on you, buddy.”

Snakes stared at him. “I’m not a janitor.”

“You are holding a mop,” Chase said, gesturing to the bucket. “You are wearing a nametag that says Custodial. You are currently cleaning a floor.”

“I’m tidying the narrative,” Snakes said. He picked up his bucket, which sloshed audibly, and shuffled toward the service elevator. “Watch your step. The nostalgia is sticky.”

He vanished around the corner.

Chase shook his head. “I swear, he practices those lines in the mirror.”

Amelia looked at the empty hallway, a little unease creeping back in. “He seemed... serious.”

“He’s always serious, Ames. That’s the bit. Come on, Vincenzo’s waiting.”

They met Vincenzo and Grey near the elevators. Vincenzo was grinning, dressed down in jeans and a vintage polo.

“Ready to talk logistics?” Chase asked, shifting into lawyer mode.

“Boring,” Vincenzo declared. “Logistics are for emails. Tonight is for vibe curation. Follow me.”

Chase and Amelia exchanged a look – a silent question of what is happening? But Vincenzo was already walking, and Grey was holding the door. With a shrug, Chase followed. What was the harm in a vibe?

Grey, silent as ever, led them not to a conference room, but down a long hallway that ended in a heavy oak door. He opened it.

Amelia gasped.

It was like walking into a time capsule from 2004.

The room was dimly lit by lava lamps and neon signs. Bean bag chairs littered the floor. Posters of *The Matrix Reloaded* and Linkin Park covered the walls. In the center, facing a massive, chunky 52-inch plasma TV, was a sprawling sectional couch.

“What is this?” Chase asked, looking around. “Did we time travel? I feel like I should be concerned about the Mayan Calendar.”

“Atmosphere,” Vincenzo said, spreading his arms. “We call it the ‘Decompression Zone.’ Come on. Sit.”

He led them to the couch. Chase and Amelia sat, looking confused. Vincenzo dropped onto the cushion next to Chase, clapping him on the shoulder. Grey sat on the end, handing them each a wireless controller.

The TV flickered on. A colorful, chaotic menu screen appeared, accompanied by a heavy-metal remix of a familiar jingle.

CEREAL KILLERS: BOWLOCAUST Tagline: The Battle for the Breakfast Table is Crunch Time!

“What is this?” Chase asked. “Some kind of PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale rip-off with cereal mascots?”

The room went silent.

Vincenzo stared at him. Grey stared at him. Even Amelia gave him a look.

“PlayStation All-Stars?” Vincenzo asked, offended.

“That’s your reference point? Not Smash Bros... Or hell Powerstone?”

“I grew up with Playstation,” Chase defended. “Kratos vs. PaRappa the Rapper was peak.”

Vincenzo laughed. A genuine bark of a sound that erased the billionaire persona instantly. He sounded exactly like the kid Chase used to trade hall passes with.

“You are such a contrarian,” Vincenzo said, shaking his head. “This is a prototype from one of our shell divisions. It’s a love letter to the 90s. Satirical mascot fighter. You want to see Tony the Tiger beat up Aunt Jemima? This is the place.”

Chase looked at the screen. He looked at Vincenzo’s grin. It wasn’t the shark-smile from the stream. It was the ‘golden boy’ smile...cocky, sure, but warm.

Chase relaxed, leaning back. “Fine. But I’m picking the Toucan. Flyers tend to be broken.”

Seeing Chase's shoulders drop, Amelia let out a breath she didn't know she was holding. This wasn't a trap. It was just guys being guys.

For the next two hours, the "corporate overlord" vanished. They loaded into the arena: The Silver Spoon Spire.

Chase locked in ***Toucan Sam***.

Archetype: Rushdown/Flyer.

Vincenzo picked ***Tony the Tiger***.

Archetype: All-Rounder/Balanced.

Grey selected ***Count Chocula***.

Archetype: Zoner/Summoner.

Amelia, feeling the sting of familiarity, chose ***BuzzBee***.

Archetype: Wildcard/Berserker.

***The match began in a flurry of colors.***

"Follow my nose!" Chase's character screeched, launching into a flurry of aerial beak pecks.

"You're spamming the aerals!" Vincenzo shouted, mashing buttons as Tony tried to land a hit. "That flight mechanic is cheap, Wright! Flyers should be grounded!"

"It's called air superiority," Chase said calmly. "Maybe if you learned to block instead of just roaring, you wouldn't be dying."

“I’m trying to use my Grrreat! stun!” Vincenzo argued.  
“But you won’t stand still!”

Amelia was cackling, mashing buttons. On screen, BuzzBee’s meter filled up, and he entered a frenzied, uncontrollable spin.

“I don’t know what I’m doing!” Amelia yelled happily.  
“I’m just a bug having a breakdown!”

“That’s the meta,” Grey said dryly. His Count Chocula was standing at the edge of the stage, safely throwing chocolate bats at everyone else while they fought.

“Grey is zoning us,” Chase warned. “Don’t let him build meter for the Cocoon of Darkness.”

“Good opportunity assessment Mr. Wright,” Grey nodded.

“That’s his entire personality,” Vincenzo told Amelia, gesturing to Chase. “High school. Junior year. We’re on the wrestling team. I’m trying to pin him, using actual strength. And what does Chase do? He tickles me. I lose the match because I’m laughing.”

Amelia burst out laughing. “You tickled him?”

“It was a psychological tactic,” Chase claimed, executing a Fruity Cyclone recovery move to save himself from falling off the stage. “And it worked. Flawlessly.”

“He was a menace,” Vincenzo said fondly. “The teachers couldn’t handle him. He’d argue his way out of everything. ‘Mr. Spaulding, is it really worthy of a detention if I’m learning a valuable lesson about civil disobedience?’”

Chase grinned. “I got us out of that suspension, didn’t I?”

“You did,” Vincenzo admitted. “Silver tongue even back then.”

Amelia smiled, watching them. It was nice to see this version of Chase. The one who had friends who knew his tricks and loved him anyway.

“He was worse in college,” Amelia offered, taking a sip of soda. “He didn’t just talk his way out of trouble. He talked the faculty into inventing it.”

Vincenzo paused the game right as a Marshmallow Grenade exploded near his character. “Meaning what?”

“He treated the curriculum like a suggestion box,” Amelia explained, animating the story with her hands. “He actually convinced Dean Starmer to institute a ‘Wine Tasting’ class. And a ‘History of Ice Cream’ class. For credit.”

“No way,” Vincenzo laughed. “A legitimate college offering credit for eating sundaes?” Then unpaused the game.

“It was an exploration of culinary heritage,” Chase air-tech’d back onstage like it was muscle memory. “And for the record, it was a massive success. The ‘History of Ice Cream’ was full. First come first serve only. The Dean even made a wait-list for it.”

“I’m still in shock he fell for it,” Amelia said, shaking her head. “I walked past the lecture hall once, and it was just thirty students eating Rocky Road while watching a documentary about cows.”

“It’s called immersive learning,” Chase said. “Wilson Firestone took the Wine Tasting class. He said it was the most educational experience of his life.”

“Because he was blasted by noon on Tuesdays,” Amelia countered.

“He passed, didn’t he?” Chase grinned.

“Yeah, passed out.” She smiled.

“I create opportunities, Ames. I’m a facilitator.” Chase said slyly.

“You’re a hustler,” Vincenzo corrected, but he looked impressed. “I wish you joined us sooner. We could use a ‘Value of Pizza Parties’ seminar in HR.”

## Chapter 26 – Dream Cast

From the far end of the couch, Grey Elwin watched them.

He wasn't playing actively anymore. His Count Chocula was hovering in a Milk Puddle, slowly charging his Sugar Rush meter.

He watched Chase and Vincenzo bicker like the old rivals they were. He watched Amelia laugh, leaning into Chase's side, her guard completely down.

Data point: Rapport is high, Grey noted internally. Nostalgia is the ultimate lubricant.

He glanced at the game screen. The tagline for the Story Mode scrolled by in the ticker: The Great Cereal Rebellion. Mascots fighting against the Board of Breakfast to avoid being homogenized.

It was ironic. Chase and Amelia thought they were playing a silly game about rebellion. They didn't realize they were currently sitting in a very real Silver Spoon Spire, being fed snacks by the Board.

They don't see me, Grey thought, a flicker of amusement crossing his mind. To them, Elvis Santiago is just a blurry background extra from a previous season. No longer part of the dream cast.

"Hey, Grey!" Vincenzo called out. "You awake over there? You're losing."

Grey blinked, sliding the mask back into place. "I'm lurking," he said dryly. "Waiting for the third act twist."

He tapped a button combo. On screen, Count Chocula unleashed his Final Smash, trapping Vincenzo's Tony in a chocolate coffin that exploded.

“GAME!” the announcer shouted.

“Okay,” Chase said, staring at the screen. “That was rude.”

Grey allowed himself a small, genuine smile. “Just don’t call it a comeback.”

The car ride back was lighter. The rain had stopped, and the city lights reflected on the asphalt.

“He’s not that bad,” Amelia said, staring out the window. “Vincenzo. I mean, I know he’s... intense. And the contracts are scary. But tonight? He just seemed like a guy who misses his friend.”

“Yeah,” Chase said. He sounded relieved. “I forgot that side of him exists. The branding, the streams... I think it’s just an act, Ames. A really loud, expensive act. Underneath, he’s still the guy I used to cut class with.”

“I’m glad,” Amelia said. “It makes the Dudleytown trip feel less... ominous.”

She thought about Snakes in the lobby, muttering his strange prophecies. She thought about Tabitha’s smoking cabin doodles.

Weirdos, she told herself. Just dramatic weirdos who don’t know him like Chase does.

“Except Tabitha,” Amelia murmured aloud.

“Hm?” Chase asked.

“Tabitha,” Amelia said firmly. “She’s not a weirdo. She’s just a friend who cares.”

“Agreed,” Chase said, reaching over to squeeze her hand. “A friend who cares. And who is getting a T-shirt from a Twenty One Pilots concert.”

They drove on, comforted by the nostalgia.

Nostalgia worked. It always did.