

Song 6

Song 6 ♪ Mystery Business

Addy and I grabbed breakfast together the morning before our first class. We sat on one of the tables close to the buffet line, where nobody cool would ever be caught dead. I checked my phone, searching for a text from Leti that never came. I refused to let her tantrum ruin my day, though, so I put the phone away in my backpack.

"See that table over there?" She pointed casually to the middle of the cafeteria as she sipped on an orange juice carton that looked too small for her. "The one right under the third chandelier. Those are the queen bees of our school year."

The five girls looked like copies of each other. Same luscious hair in different colors, but same styles and definitely the same surgeons.

I saluted. "Roger that, avoid at all costs."

"It's like total cliché." She sucked the last few drops of juice, loud enough to attract the attention of a few people around, and grabbed a second carton. "The blonde one is the ring leader and this whole school bows down to her."

I looked at my roommate with a shrewd eye. "Do you also bow down to her?"

She flashed me a grin. "I pretend to."

Good tip, probably. I pulled out a notebook. I had to write all this shit down. "Okay, what's her name?"

"You're seriously gonna make notes?" She laughed. "Okay, fine. Her name is Madison Hollingsworth. She goes by Madison and will destroy you if you call her Maddy."

I snickered. "Her name sounds expensive."

"She is."

Then she listed the names of the other girls. There was a Georgette, a Clara, a Natasha and a Belle. Isabelle. Whatever. I could just see the horror on their perfect faces once they heard I was called something as mundane as Vera María de la Cruz Vazquez. Get a load of that!

Addy grew too excited to contain it. "Oh, check that out. See the guy walking in with the letter jacket?" I did. He gave DeAndre a run for his money. All black and unapologetically delicious. He was actually the first guy of color I'd seen around. "That's Quinn Montgomery. He's the ace of the baseball team and up until last year was the best friend of the hottest guy in campus."

My eyebrows went up as I followed his trek to the buffet line. "You mean there's a hotter guy than him?"

But then the stupid idiot with his guitar came to mind and, yeah. That guy was made of the same things as lightning, cotton candy and sex. And I wasn't even into white boys.

Addy's grin reached all the way to her honey, almost yellow eyes. I followed where they stared at and saw him.

Again.

I pursed my lips, half expecting a spotlight to appear on him. And although that didn't happen, people did clear a path for him as he walked toward the queue. He stopped behind whoever the Quinn guy was and it was like he'd noticed the other boy for the first time. They both stared at each other and the air grew so thick with tension that even I had trouble drawing in a breath.

"What the fuck is going on?" I asked my new friend in a whisper.

"That, is high school drama." She sipped from her juice and pointed at my notebook. "You may wanna write this down. The new guy? That's Ashton Winters. King of the world. Until he was dethroned, that is."

"By..." I trailed off as I pointed at the other guy with my pen. She nodded. "And they were best friends, you said?"

What a shitshow. And here I thought barrio-type of problems wouldn't reach me here.

"Oh, it was incredible. You should've seen it." I could tell she was holding back her laughter by the way her eyes shone and crinkled at the corners. "Madison dumped Ashton in front of the entire school after a baseball game last year, turned and smacked her lips right into Quinn's. So the queen bee chose her new king and the old king became an outcast."

I jotted all this down even as I laughed. I made some funny doodles to go with their names and drew lines leading from one to the other into a big ass triangle. I looked back up at them as they moved in the line. Enough girls looked at the Ashton guy with adoring eyes to make me think he wasn't exactly what I'd define as an outcast. Once I said this aloud Addy just shrugged.

"Well, he doesn't hang out with any of his old crew anymore. Maybe it's just a self-imposed exile." She finished her last juice and then added, "Although that might also have something to do with all the drama that went down with his brother, too."

I was about to ask what that had been about when the first guy grabbed his tray and walked over to join all the jock-looking dudes sitting on the table next to the five clones. Pretty boy Ashton looked at them, tray in hand, in a way that almost made me pity him. Then he made eye contact with me, for some reason, and I looked down at my notes. I made a big X next to his name and jotted down avoid, avoid, avoid.

Addy sighed. "I bet you there's gonna be a fist fight between them this year."

After a while the bell rang and we walked together to our classroom, 4-1. We found some good seats by the window. I sat on the previous to last desk, because the very last one already had someone's books on it. Addy turned around in front of me and we kept chatting as the rest of the kids trickled into the room. My eyes, traitorous that they were, latched onto Ashton Winters as soon as he walked in. I hated that he had the same effect on me as any other girl, even though I knew he was a stupid snob. And just why did he have to be in the same class as me?

It didn't matter though, because he was not going to distract me from getting perfect grades.

Except that he sat on the desk behind me.

Addy glanced at me over her shoulder and wiggled her eyebrows. I widened my eyes in that universal way that meant, shut up or else.

To no one's surprise the school queen and king were also in our class. I wondered if there was popcorn in the cafeteria. I had a feeling I was gonna need it.

Mr. Burlington came in last and shut the door.

He beamed at us. "Welcome, senior class. This is going to be your last year and we better make it count." No one made a single noise. I kinda wanted to clap, though. Today was a celebration for me. He stood in front of the class and clasped his hands in front of himself, taking a moment to look at some faces. "I have no doubt in this class. You are without a shred of doubt some of the most talented students we've had in the history of this school, be it at sports," he said, motioning toward Quinn, some other guys and a girl. Then he continued, "The performing or visual arts." At the last one he pointed at Addy, and she sat up straighter. Then I felt his eyes on me. "Or music."

There was a murmur. I looked around and saw that the eyes were not on me, but on the guy behind me. I relaxed. He did play guitar, after all.

"Vera, why don't you stand up?" the teacher asked, and my stomach plummeted to the floor.

"What?"

My reflexive question raised some giggles. I scrambled to stand up, dreading where this was going.

"Everybody, this is Vera María de la Cruz Vazquez." Oh my God, he used my entire stinking name. And with a decent Spanish accent, to boot. Now every freaky eye was on me. "She is a scholarship student that won us over with her voice."

This time I managed to swallow back another, what?

It was my singing what got me in?

His eyes slight up at my WTF expression. "She'll be joining our music department and making our orchestra shine in this year's competitions. Everybody, please, let's welcome her with an applause."

My jaw positively touched the floor.

The applause, that could be described as wane at best, stopped once a hand went up in the middle of the room. I traced it back to the blonde queen bee. She turned back to me and gave me a smile that probably won her beauty pageants on the regular. "As the lead violinist I would like to make sure we only get the best of the best.

Why don't you give us a demonstration?"

I stammered and this only seemed to fuel the malice behind her smile.

"Aw, are you shy?" She cooed and then turned back to Mr. Burlington. "How is a shy little mouse like her take us all the way to nationals?"

One of her cronies giggled. "Not so little, actually."

My face burned and I plopped down on my seat before I was told to.

Mr. Burlington ignored the last comment. "With a little help and polish from her fellow musicians, I'm sure she will shine." He looked my way again and I lowered my eyes to the desk out of instinct. "Vera, I don't suppose you have any music training, so we should probably teach you the basics. Ashton?"

I got whiplash looking up so fast.

The boy behind me hummed a question in his deep voice.

"Why don't you teach her the basics after class?" the teacher asked him. "I'm sure you can put her up to speed in no time."

I sat. Frozen. Looking at Mr. Burlington like he was insane. And he was. I didn't sign up to this school for music competitions. I signed up for a perfect GPA. A great school in my curriculum for college applications. I signed up to be accepted to a good college in California or Oregon. Alaska, even. Somewhere far.

I wasn't breathing anymore.

"Sure," his voice came from behind me. Uninterested. Aloof.

As Mr. Burlington began his history lesson, I kept screaming in my head that this was not what I wanted. I'd stopped singing. I only did it during the interview because I was desperate. But it had made me stand out then. And even though I hadn't opened my mouth, it was making me stand out now. I felt eyes behind me and all around me and I sank into my chair.

This was not going the way I wanted.

SONG OF THE DAY: Paramore - Misery Business