



Calm Before the Score

Author: *Kort Combe*

Category: Romance

Description: Violet Evans likes her life of predictability, like a big annotated journal, full of colorful tabs. After losing the only father figure she has ever known, Violet heads to Springs U with her best friend to escape her loss and pain. On her first day of college, the tattooed and mysterious football player derails her set out plans of a calm year.

With a troubled past, Ryan Shane likes to keep his life simple. He only cares about one thing: football. His life is complicated enough, and there isn't room for any more problems. After a tense first encounter and a fiery first kiss, Ryan begins to fall for Violet, hard, but he has a past with layers of secrets to uncover that Violet intends to crack.

As much as the two would rather go their separate ways, something always seems to pull them back together. Can the unlikely pair find their happiness? Or will Ryan's mistakes be the thing that drives them apart?

When a life altering decision is made, will Violet Evans and Ryan Shane make it to their forever touchdown? Or will Ryan's audible be the calm before the score?

Total Pages (Source): 61

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

1

Violet

August

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Slamming on the dismiss button, I jolt out of bed, eager to start my first day of college classes. I've been waiting for this day all summer. I finally have something to look forward to. I can continue to move my life in a positive direction from where it's been the past year.

"Yes," I whisper to myself as I get ready. I keep it simple with jogging shorts and a T-shirt. That might as well be my uniform at this point. I never liked to dress up, especially for school. Dressing to impress was never part of my routine, but I make up for it in all the ways that count. I saunter to the bathroom, brush my teeth, run my hot pink straightener through my tousled brown hair, and head to the kitchen for a granola bar that I carefully chose and laid out last night. My nerves get the best of me, and a big breakfast wouldn't lend well to that.

My best friend and roommate, Hartley, stands sleepily as he makes himself a cup of coffee. He looks completely disheveled, and if I know him, he probably stayed out partying for most of the night—the night before the first day of classes. Yep, ladies and gentlemen, that's my best friend for you. He's probably not worried about it since he's always been handsome and charming enough to talk his way out of anything. His usual games don't work on me. We've known each other too long, been there for

each other through too much to be anything but real with each other.

“Good morning, Hart,” I say as I squeeze by him to grab my granola bar. “Let me guess, up all night?” I laugh lightly as I give him a playful shove.

“Come on, Vi, you know it's too early for an interrogation. I have practice this morning, then a full day. No time for a nap, and you know how I get without a nap,” he says as he yawns loudly in my face. Ugh, he's so annoying.

“Well, you wouldn't need a nap if you got to sleep at a decent hour. It's the first day of class, Hart. You need to take this year seriously. College isn't all about football, you know. You need to bring your GPA up this year to even think about graduating on time.”

“Why are we roommates again?” he says with that smirk that brings half the girls on campus to their knees. I'm not sure why he bothers. I'm part of the other half. A few years ago, we started calling each other brother and sister. It just makes sense.

“Alright, alright, you and I both know you're right. Come give me a hug, will ya? My little sis is headed off to her very first college class.”

I fall into him like I've done so many times in the past. He is home. He's always been my constant. Even more so since my grandpa passed away last year, and I had to figure out life on my own. I've been his anchor every time his dad abandoned him, always left to pick up the pieces. I guess we both were. We're both a little—scratch that, a lot—broken, but all we have is each other, and I wouldn't want it any other way. He's why I'm here at Springs College, not the local community college. I've never struggled in school. I consider myself academically gifted. It's both a blessing and a curse. I'm already a year ahead in college with all of the credit courses I took in high school.

“I’m nervous,” I confess candidly.

“You’re gonna kill it. School was made for you.” He fiddles with my hair giving me confidence in myself.

“Thanks, Hart.”

“Vi, class doesn’t start for another hour. You don’t have to rush out.” He playfully shoves me.

“You must have forgotten that I’m not a football star. Just a regular college girl.” I love teasing him about football.

Perfection is the only option, and I will not let myself down. I can’t. Hartley is the exact opposite. He lacks effort in school and tries his best to avoid work and assignments at all costs. Hartley is exceptional at the game. He’s played since we were little kids. His dad signed him up to keep him out of trouble, and he’s been a star ever since. He’s always been the best and fastest player on every team and is downright amazing to watch. Football keeps him going. Last year was the first of his games I missed because Springs U was too far to travel, so I’m pumped to see him on the field again. If I wasn’t there for him, who else would be? We are each other’s biggest fans.

Hartley is twenty, and I’m eighteen. He always helped pave the way for my decisions because I needed him like a big brother. He makes sure I’m okay. He has always watched out for me since elementary school. He’ll put anyone in their place that gives me trouble. He gave me a place to stay when I suddenly lost mine. Hartley is my protector, so when he got a full-ride athletic scholarship to Springs U in Florida, I made it my mission to get accepted the following year. It wasn’t hard. I’ve always gotten straight A’s because I’m meticulous like that. So here we are—roommates, best friends, and most of all, family.

“See you later, Hart. Don’t be late for class!” I run out the door and hope that this will be the best year of my life.

The dripping condensation from my nine-dollar dose of caffeine in the form of a loaded tea wets my warm hands as I hustle to my first class, ready to take on the world. I’m the first person to arrive, and I like it that way. I need control. Picking my seat gives me that. Being first one here helps me avoid the eyes that would track my entrance making me more self conscious than I already am. I make sure I use the restroom before class and have a chance to set out my notebooks, pens, and highlighters. I have always been like this, needing to control the little things. Does it stress me out? Sometimes. Does it stress me out more if I don’t do it? Definitely.

My professor walks in, sophomore-level English. I earned college credit during my senior year of high school for the freshman-level course. Take that college. So, I’m starting my freshman year as a second-year student.

Fifteen minutes after class starts, I hear the classroom door creak open, inviting my eyes to the late comers. Hartley strolls in with a friend, and they creep to the very back of the classroom. This is why I didn’t wait for him this morning. I look back toward him, and he gives me the goofiest smile as he waves. He doesn’t have a care in the world, but my heart stops when I accidentally lock eyes with his friend.

He is striking. He’s tall, very tall. Hartley is easily a head above me, and this guy towers over him. He has jet-black hair, a black shirt, and athletic shorts. His shirt has a small logo that reads Springs U Football. I’m able to spot that logo from a mile away with the amount of team clothes Hartley leaves around the apartment. Of course, he’s on the team with Hartley. He stares at me as if time has stopped and just the two of us are in the room. His feet stop moving to a desk as he takes me in. I quickly focus back on the professor because I hate missing anything. Shifting uncomfortably in my seat, I reorganize the pens on the desk. My palms are sweaty, and I’m distracted. That couldn’t be right.

He must be staring at the professor, right? Why am I so concerned about this?

I peek back to see if Hartley found a seat. Once again, our eyes connect, and the mystery boy gives me a small smirk. He was definitely staring. I shove mystery boy to the back of my mind and listen to the professor review our class expectations. Tapping my pen keeps me focused and in the moment. When class is dismissed, I make my way to introduce myself to the professor. You know what they say: You only have one chance to make a first impression. As I walk to the podium, I freeze, my head snapping around when I hear Hartley scream my name.

“Vi! Let’s go, lunch on me.”

Why is he so embarrassing? He knows I hate being the center of attention. I reluctantly sigh. I guess the professor knows who I am now. I turn to face Hartley and his intense friend. I gesture for him to give me one minute to properly shake my professor’s hand. After the short introduction, I find Hartley and his friend outside of the classroom.

As Hartley leads the three of us toward the Springs U dining hall, he babbles about his morning practice and how the wide receivers’ coach had no mercy on him or the rest of the team, blah blah blah. I tell Hartley how I arrived early to class to set up my things. He knows this is my ritual by now, so he gives me a side hug. “I want to be you when I grow up.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

His intense friend is still silent. Do I smell? Did I say something wrong? He looks like he's angry about something. How could he be? It's only 11:30 a.m., for crying out loud. We grab the daily offerings from the brunch buffet line and find a spot to sit at an open table.

I take the seat across from Hartley, and his friend grabs the one next to him. He catches me staring at his mysterious friend, clears his throat, and says, "Ryan, this is Violet. Violet, this is Ryan. Keep your hands off my little sis, and we'll be good as gold." He throws a french fry in his mouth. He's so nonchalant, as if he didn't just treat me like a child and embarrass me again.

"Hartley..." I scowl as I give him my meanest death glare, hopefully shutting him up.

"Don't worry, you're not my type," Ryan snarks.

Ummmm, excuse me? Not his type? Who said he is my type? Why is he so incredibly rude when he doesn't even know me?

"Ok, totally unnecessary, but what makes you think I would want to date you?" I ask with fiery eyes.

"Just a gut feeling, sweetheart. I don't date, and you've got stage-five clinger written all over your face." He smirks and takes a long gulp of his water. I try my best not to stare as his throat works the water down. Get it together, Violet.

I hate it, but he's right. He's not my type, and I'm not his. I don't know if I even have a type. I've never had a real boyfriend. I've kissed a few boys at high school dances,

but that's about it. My friends are usually Hartley's friends, and he always forbids his teammates to come within ten feet of me. His protective side started when he caught me kissing one of his teammates in high school. I would always wait around at Hartley's practices until he could drive us home, and it would give me time to get ahead on homework and studying. I had a mega-crush on one of the running backs. We eye-flirted shamelessly in the halls and across the field. One day, he finally talked to me. That practice ended with his tongue down my throat and Hartley smashing him against the brick wall. Needless to say, he never spoke to me again. It's annoying and not his place, but I've allowed him to do this for so long that it's too late to fight him on it.

"Well, you have nothing to worry about, Royce. That was your name wasn't it? I don't date football players. Living with Hartley is enough to handle." Take that.

"My name is Ryan, and yeah, it's kinda weird that you live with your brother." He shoots back at me with glaring eyes and an "I'm better than you" energy. I choose to ignore him and continue the conversation solely with Hartley.

"Anyways, Hartley, what other classes do you have today?" If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all. He really should have learned that long ago.

"I'm headed to Biology, and it's going to suck because I didn't buy the digital textbook yet," Hartley groans.

"Hart, you've known about the class requirement for months. What the heck? You're not nervous going to class unprepared?" I could never attend a class feeling that unprepared. My pulse races for him. I notice Ryan's gaze out of the corner of my eye. He's staring daggers at me. Heat creeps up my neck at the intensity of his eyes on my body.

“He’ll be just fine. You’re wearing Springs U football gear, right?” Ryan asks. Sure, wear Springs U football gear and get preferential treatment. My eyes flash to him with annoyance, my jaw tightening as my teeth clench.

“Are you saying that he should get a pass because he’s a football player?” I ask with passive-aggressive curiosity.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. The minute the professor sees his Springs U football shirt, he won’t question him.” He leans back in his chair with a smug grin. His arms crossing over his chest making his sleeves tighten over his biceps, and I can’t help but stare. His eyes rake down my upper half and halt at my chest for a moment before locking eyes again.

“Some of us don’t have a choice but to be prepared for class. We can’t all be all mighty college football stars.” My voice grows agitated from his blase take on college.

“Chill, sweetheart, you’re wound too tight. If you keep that scowl you’ll develop early wrinkles.” He leans his muscular arms on the table. He’s too close for comfort, and I’m not in the mood to continue arguing with him.

“Well, since it seems you already know so much about me, I think my time at lunch is over.” I give Ryan my best “sorry, not sorry” face.

“I’ve got to go to my next class. See you, Hart.” I hurriedly grab my stuff to get out of the table as quickly as I can. Hartley calls my name as I high-tail out the cafeteria. I went over my class schedule with him before leaving this morning, so he knows I don’t have another class until 2 p.m.

Why was that guy so rude? Does he really treat every girl he encounters like that? Well, Mr. Football can leave me alone from now on. I sure hope Hartley has other

friends for us to hang around with because if he doesn't, this is going to be a long year.

2

Ryan

"Dude, what was that?" Hartley says obnoxiously at me in the dining hall. I sit there stone-faced with my arms crossed over my chest as he flails his hands around in the air. Why is this guy so dramatic?

"What was what? I was being myself. Would you rather me not?" I answer sarcastically because this is who I am. I don't really care about anything besides football, myself, and making sure my mom is taken care of. Everything else is a distraction.

"Well, tone it down a little with Violet. She's fragile, very sensitive, and hard on herself. She will probably analyze this ten times before she gets to her next class and stress about it all night."

I shrug casually. "She seems like she can hold her own," I say to get a rise out of Hartley. He's so easy to work up. He grunts and throws his hands in the air again as he leans so far back that he almost falls out of his chair. Ha.

I like when girls are feisty. The way she didn't back down did something funny to my chest. Not to mention she's beautiful. I'm talking drop dead gorgeous. She looks different than most girls on their first day of college. Her hair was thrown up, but there were these two little pieces that framed her face. That pink shirt paired with tight running shorts hugged her curves in the best way, but the part that stopped me dead in my tracks were those icy blue eyes. Her eyes looked surreal. Most girls at Springs U try too hard with heavy makeup, dresses, the whole nine, and they throw

themselves at me like I care.

Violet seemed flustered when we locked eyes in class. She couldn't look away fast enough to get back to that boring lecture. She would have rathered chat it up with Mr. 'Try Hard' Professor than skirt out of class the minute we could. When Hartley started waving like a complete idiot in class, I had no idea that the girl he was waving to would stop me cold in the middle of the lecture hall. People don't have that effect on me, never did. I can take them or leave them, honestly. I don't like anyone enough to remember their name or what they look like. Girls are girls. They come around, we hook up, they leave, and I never see them again. If I do, I ignore them because they know what they are getting into with me. I don't stick around anyone long enough to care, and I don't do strings, but there I was, staring in class like a fool. Hartley told me his roommate was a freshman, his little sister, someone he would die for because, according to him, they have "been through too much together." I have my own demons and don't plan to dig up anyone else's.

Hartley and I met at summer training camp last year. We were both fresh out of high school on full rides. I knew I couldn't mess this up. I told myself before coming to college that I wasn't here to make friends, but that fool has a way of creeping into your life and staying. He would not leave me alone. He asked questions about football and asked me to hang out with him constantly. He always forgot his practice gear, so I started packing extra for him. I was overly prepared. He was underprepared. Clearly, he didn't take college football as seriously as me. One night, after along and grueling practice, I finally caved and went downtown with him. We both found out that night that none of the downtown bars ID. It didn't matter to me. I don't drink in public, but he drank too much and did not stop dancing the entire night. At 2 a.m., I had to bribe him to leave the bar alone with leftover pizza at my apartment. After carrying his dead weight up two flights of stairs, we ate cold pizza, and the rest is history. He hasn't left my side since. He's an idiot, but I'm stuck with him. None of it matters. He doesn't have to worry about me and his roommate. I made it a point to push Violet away when I met her at lunch, and I'll do it again if I have to. Making a

play on my teammate's little sister isn't in the cards because a face like hers spells out too much trouble.

Violet

Even though I'm feeling accomplished from my classes, when I get back to the apartment, I'm excited to spend the rest of my afternoon organizing my notes and syllabi from the first day. My plan is to color-code my folders and make a schedule for the week, but as I lay out all of my school supplies on the furry rug in the living room, my mind keeps drifting to today's lunch debacle. Why did he feel the need to say I'm not his type? Besides the brief intro Hartley gave him, he doesn't even know me. Did I do something wrong? Say something wrong? And here I go... Down my obsessive rabbit hole of thoughts. This happens to me a lot more than I would like to admit. The only person who knows how bad it actually gets is Hartley. He's had to talk me out of a panic more times than I can count. My thoughts are scattered into a million pieces, and I scream as Hartley busts through the door, "Vi, Ryan is a jerk. It's nothing against you, I swear. He's like this with everyone. Don't take it personally, please." He drops down to his knees with dramatics and grasps his hands together to emphasize his begging. He's loyal, and I love that about him.

"Hartley, it's fine. I'm ok. I just worry that everyone we hang around will be like that. You know how hard it is for me to make friends. I just pray that some of your other teammates are more welcoming and not as... blunt." Hartley stares daggers into my eyes, and I know what's coming next.

"You forgot something, Vi."

"As a friend, Hart. You know this." I throw my favorite decorative pillow at him, and

it hits his head with anoof.

“Vi, I promise they aren’t all like that. Actually, just Ryan is like that. Come with me to a party tonight. It’s the back-to-school bash for the team and friends of the team. I want to introduce you to everyone.”

“No. I’m organizing my notes from class today,” I answer quickly, but I know he won’t stop until I say yes. He’s persistent. He stares at me and juts out his bottom lip, giving me the best puppy dog impression he can.

“Come on. It’s a great place to meet new people. Didn’t you say that’s your goal this year?”

“It was, but I changed my mind.” I smirk down at my notes.

“Please, please, please.” He’s still on the ground, ridiculously begging.

“Fine. Who am I to deny an invitation to the almighty football players’ party? What do I even wear?” I ask reluctantly. You wouldn’t typically ask your guy best friend for fashion advice, but I don’t have any girlfriends here. I didn’t have any at home either. Our dynamic is complicated.

“Let’s go, I’ll help you pick something.”

We stand up from the floor and walk to my bedroom. In typical Hartley fashion, he bulldozes into my closet and starts throwing things out.

“Yes.” He takes out an oversized shirt and tosses it my way. “No.” He shoves one of my favorite rompers to the pits of the closet. “No. We’re not going to church. Absolutely not. We’re not going to the strip club either,” Hartley mumbles to himself as he raids my closet.

“Stop!” I grab him playfully and grab the strip club outfit. “This is what I’m going with,” I say with a small smirk. If Hartley doesn’t want me to wear it, that means it’s cute.

“Don’t yell at me tonight when I have to push someone through the wall for staring at you.” He says it like he’s joking, but I know he’s not. I just hope tonight goes well. I can’t handle another unexpected encounter on my first day of college. Lunch was enough of a mental spiral for one day.

4

Ryan

Parties are my thing. Sort of. I don’t drink in public, but I like being around crowds. It takes my mind off of everything going on in my head. My brain is like that clip art picture of the thoughts scrambled up like strings. No one can untie that mess.

My phone vibrates in my pocket against my leg, and I quickly check to see who it is. Mom appears on my screen with a picture of us from the first game of the season last year. It reminds me every day how things have changed and why I’m here. I run out the back door of my friend’s apartment to answer, dodging drunk, sweaty people in my way. The cool air hits my warm, clammy face—a stark contrast to the overcrowded apartment party. Every time I see her picture on the screen, my stomach drops. My palms get sweaty, and my head gets light. She’s sick, has been for a while. I’m all she has, and she’s my moral compass, pulling me back to righteousness when I stray too far.

“Mom, is everything ok?” I ask, trying not to sound too terrified for an answer.

“Ryan, would you stop panic-answering every single time I call? You’re gonna give yourself a heart attack at twenty years old.” She chuckles into the phone.

Good, she's ok, she's happy...I let out the biggest sigh. My chest lifts, and the blood rushes back to my head.

“I’ll try, Mom. What are you up to tonight?”

“Oh, nothing much. I just made myself a pizza and planned to snuggle in for some of my trashy reality shows until I fall asleep. I called to see how your first day of classes went. How was practice?”

That’s my mom, always worried about me when it should be the complete opposite. She’s the one who needs saving now, but it wasn’t always like that. She worries because she’s had good reason to.

“They were good, boring. Practice was ok. It feels good to be back on the field again. I love it, Mom.”

“I know you do, but promise me one thing Ry: Have fun, have a life outside of football, and take a girl out on a date for me, please!”

I laugh as my mom jokingly begs me. “I have fun. I’m at a party right now. You might be waiting a long time for the girl, though.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“Ry, you’re so stubborn, but I love you anyway. Just remember you’re more than a running back, more than a stat. Don’t put too much pressure on yourself this year.”

“I won’t.”Lies.

“Listen, I’m coming by tomorrow around noon to help with your medicine. Don’t forget to take tonight’s dose and walk to the bed while I’m on the phone.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know the drill.” I hear my mom shuffle to her bed. Once she confirms she’s tucked in, I tell her goodnight and pray for as much time as I can with her and that the next call I get isn’t the worst one of my life.

I walk back into the party and see Hartley from across the room, making his rounds with a beer in each hand. He’s wearing sunglasses inside, but a herd of girls are close behind him. He never gives one girl his full attention. Part of the appeal, I guess. When I get closer, I stop. The petite girl from class. She’s here, next to Hartley. She looks different from this morning. She’s wearing short jean shorts ripped along the edges with a lacy black tank showing off more than I saw today. A small hint of her bra peeks from under the thin lace of her shirt.Jesus.

Her hair is pulled up into a slicked-back ponytail with small pieces dangling on each side that frame her face perfectly. She’s wearing white converse and holding her phone in her hand, no purse. She scans the rooms repeatedly, darting her eyes from side to side. I can tell she isn’t listening to Hartley’s conversation because she’s twirling her hair over and over again, eyes darting to the floor and back up again. She’s hot. The kind of hot that stops you in your tracks and makes you wonder why she doesn’t have a man with her.

I scan the room to make sure no one catches me staring at Hartley's roommate and notice half the defense with their eyes locked on her, too. Hartley doesn't seem to care. He already gave the entire team the hands-off speech. He must be used to it if this is his best friend. She's glued to his hip and keeps looking up at him.

I hear some girl yell for Hartley. He whispers something to Violet, making her eyes widen, and she bites her lip. She looks terrified. She quickly nods and watches him walk away. I don't know what comes over me, but I make a beeline for the girl with the crystal blue eyes. I am NOT letting any of these guys get near her. I don't know her well, but I can read people. She's too pure, too naive, and without Hartley around, they will swarm her.

"Hey, stranger," I say as I gently brush her arm and feel goosebumps raise. She jumps when I touch her, and God, if that doesn't sting a little. Why is she so jumpy without Hartley around?

"Oh hey, yeah, Mr. Football." She looks down and starts picking at her fingernails as soon as she finishes the last word.

"Uh, I wanted to make sure you were ok, with, uh, Hartley walking away and all." Since when do I stumble on my words?

"Why wouldn't I be?" she asks defensively.

"You looked nervous when he walked away. I'll leave if you want." Awesome job Ryan. Is that the best you could come up with?

"You were watching me, Mr. Football?" she answers playfully.

"I guess you can say that. I watch everyone."

“No, you can stay, as long as you aren’t rude to me for no reason,” she sasses back with a little smirk, and I love it. Why do I love it? I feel my lips curve into a smile and chuckle.

“I’m sorry for lunch. I didn’t mean to be a complete jerk to you on your first day of college. Give me another chance?”

“I guess I can spare one more,” she replies with the smallest smile and leans her hips into me. I can feel every inch this girl moves in my direction. I’m in tune with her. My eyes scan her body. The tiniest contact of her thigh brushing mine nearly makes me lose my mind. I can’t think about anything else besides the feeling of her being so close to my body. I want to say something, anything, to get her to smile like that again or get her even closer, but as soon as I open my dry mouth to reply, Hartley returns.

“Vi, come see. I want you to meet some of my friends.” He grabs her arm and pulls her to a crowd of people. I’m left staring at her. My world knocked clean off its axis.

She stops, turns around, and says, “And by the way, you are most definitely not my type either.”

I’m left speechless. This one is feisty. She’s going to give me a headache or a run for my money. We’ll see which one comes first.

5

Violet

Who are you, and what have you done with Violet Evans?! My brain screams as I walk away from Ryan. The same Ryan who was so blunt and condescending to me this morning was stumbling over his words when he approached me tonight. I’m glad

he came up to me. I noticed him before he walked up to me. He wore a black, short-sleeved Henley shirt with jeans that framed his muscles. Three undone buttons at the top of his shirt gave me a small look at his body, but when he lifted his arms up, I saw that sexy V dip that girls go crazy for, accentuated by toned muscles. Am I one of them? I must be if I stared at a boy I barely knew for longer than I would like to admit, like a total creep.

The minute Hartley left my side, I began spiraling. The warning signs of a panic attack. I have those a lot. I begin feeling dizzy, lightheaded, and my breathing becomes quick and shallow. I twirl my hair or pick my nails absentmindedly while I try to take deep breaths. How did Ryan spot that in me? It took Hartley years to start reading my panic attacks. Ryan doesn't even know me.

When he walked up, I jumped at the electricity of his touch. Ryan jolted me from my thoughts. He was much nicer than he was this morning and even admitted how much of a jerk he was. I shouldn't get used to him being nice to me, so as I walked away, I gave him a little bit of what he gave me, and it felt good. Thank god Hartley missed the entire conversation. He would have flipped if he knew we were... flirting? I don't know what we were doing, but I do know Hartley wouldn't have been ok with it.

Hartley walks me over to a group of girls and guys. Yay, I need more female friends. There's only so much Hartley can do when it comes to certain things, and I crave to have a best girl friend. Hartley immediately introduces me to a girl named Liza, who's naturally pretty with bleach blonde hair, tall, a little loud, outgoing and wears a lot of makeup. I don't miss the way Liza levels Hartley with a nervous expression and a slight blush as he approaches her. She asks if I can walk to the bathroom with her after we talk for a few minutes, and I do. Once we get to the bathroom, she asks me the basics: major, housing, and hobbies. When I tell her I live with Hartley, she screams and grabs my shoulders, "What? Okay, I need you to repeat that for me. Slower, please."

Yep, she's definitely had a few drinks. I can smell the alcohol on her breath, but she's fun, so I go along with it. "Yes, I know it's weird, but he's basically my brother. We grew up together, and he's the whole reason I'm at Springs U."

"I love that. He always has tons of girls following him around, and I always wondered what the charm was," Liza says with flushed cheeks as she ducks her head down.

"Woah, woah, woah, first of all, eww. Second of all, vomit. Third of all, can we please never speak of how much of a player Hartley is ever again? I know that he is, but I chose to believe he's an angel who has never even kissed a girl," I chuckle in response.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

She bursts out laughing and grabs the bathroom counter for support. She's laughing so hard that she can't breathe. She grabs onto me, and I join her. Before I know it, we're laughing so hard that we're in tears. "Ok, I'm sorry, I just assumed, but if you ever need a break from Hartley and his antics, my dorm is always open. We should hang out sometime."

"Yes, I would love that," I answer eagerly.

"Let's go back to the party. We can't leave those boys by themselves for too long." Liza loops her arm in mine.

Did I just make my first college friend?

Liza and I shimmy through crowds of people back into the packed main room, where the music has gotten louder, and the people are drunk. More people are dancing, bodies are closer, and hands are roaming.

"Alright it's time for the back-to-school bash tradition: truth or dare! Meet in the living room, and let's get this party started," a random voice yells over the crowd before we can make our way back to Hartley and the rest of his friends. Truth or dare? Did I hear that right?

"EEEEPP! Let's go!" Liza screams and pulls me into the main room. Where is Hartley? My pulse quickens. I can't do this.

Before I know it, I'm sitting in a messy circle in a crowded main room while most of the football team and their friends start the game. I choose a spot on the couch instead

of the floor. There's alcohol bottles and spills everywhere, and I don't want to ruin my new shorts. Liza takes a seat next to me and leans her head on my shoulder as her knees bounce in excitement.

The typical things happen: people kiss, shots are taken, and clothes are stripped. Unfortunately, it's my turn, and I still can't find Hartley. At this point, I'm fuming. He knows all about my anxiety, and he promised not to leave me alone at this party. He used to never leave me at our old high school parties. I still remember those house parties we used to go to. I always tagged along with my best friend and his teammates. I never drank much, so I made sure Hartley got home safe. I didn't mind watching over him. He needs me, and I need him for different reasons.

You're an adult, Violet. You can do this. You can play this game.

"New girl, truth or dare?" an annoyingly loud girl shouts to me. She's sandwiched between two football players and can't keep her hands off them. She's wearing a skin-tight red romper with her black hair curled down her back. Her chest is pushed up in perfect view for the boys next to her to get a closer look.

"I'm Violet, and I guess dare?" I have way too many truths that I do not want to uncover tonight, so dare seems logical. As soon as the words leave my mouth, I want to vomit. Dare, how stupid are you, Violet? You don't do dares.

"I dare you to make out with Locke." She snickers loudly, facing the smirking boy next to her. Am I missing the joke here? Makeout? I don't do things like this. They make me uncomfortable, and this was definitely not in my plans for tonight. I like consistency, control, a plan, and random make-outs with football players are not in the plan.

"Really, Savannah? Locke? You know she's a freshman, and no offense, Locke, but you are disgusting," Liza states strongly towards Locke and rolls her eyes at him. If I

wasn't sure if she was a friend before this, I was now. She clearly has my back.

"We'll break her in then. Locke is perfect for that. You should know that, Liza," Savannah spits back with a wicked smile. I am missing some crucial info here. Why would Liza know that?

Liza softly whispers to me, "You don't have to do this, you know. I'll kiss Locke. He's a major player, but it's nothing I haven't done before." She chuckles uncomfortably, and my cheeks start flaming red. My heart is slamming against my ribcage, making it difficult for me to breathe.

"No, I'll do it." I shock myself when the words come out of my mouth, but I can't let her bail me out. When I get up from the worn-down couch, I leave the safety blanket of my brand-new friend. I walk towards Locke, and my legs turn to jello, and my fingers tingle. Taking a deep breath in, I demand myself to get it together. I have to do this. I need to push myself out of my comfort zone. Locke and I are face to face. He's cute enough with light brown hair styled in a mullet. He radiates comfort with his hands at his side and a goofy grin. This isn't his first rodeo, that's for sure. You're ok. He's harmless.

Right as Locke touches my waist, I close my eyes to make this easier, but his lips never touch mine. His hands yank off the loops of my jean shorts. My eyes shoot open, and I see Locke replaced by another body. A much bigger, tattooed, and scruffy one. Before I can push him off, his soft lips crash into mine. My brain doesn't have time to process what is happening. My ears ring, and I can't hear anyone else in the room. My body immediately reacts to him. I feel him tug my waist closer until we're pressed together. I inhale his scent—woody mahogany. It's intoxicating. I don't taste any hints of alcohol on him, but I feel his tongue weave its way into my mouth. I open slightly, allowing him access. His hands slowly move up the small of my back, touching the skin right above my waist for a second, but they don't stay there. Why do I wish they did? I feel the rough calluses from his giant hands make their way up to

my neck, and his hot skin on mine brings goosebumps back to my arms. This is the best kiss I have ever had, and it's over just like that. It takes a second for my eyes to flutter open, but when they do, I'm reminded that it's Ryan staring back at me.

6

Ryan

I hate games, and I'm done with this party. When I hear someone scream about truth or dare starting in the main room, I decide that this is my cue to leave, but my eyes catch Liza bulldozing her way to the circle with Violet on her arm. You don't care, Ryan.

Instead of walking out the door and to my car, I find myself heading the opposite way in a direct line to trouble. I find a spot outside of the actual circle. They know better than to ask me to join in. After a few classic dares, I hear Savannah's venomous voice ask Violet, "New girl, truth or dare?"

I hardly hear Violet's response before she takes over my eyes. Savannah's next words dare Violet to kiss Locke. Of course she would. Savannah has been in love with Hartley since freshman year, and she throws herself at him at every party. That's why she's wearing what she's wearing tonight. It's pathetic. She was threatened by Violet the minute she walked through the door tonight by Hartley's side. In her mind, Violet is enemy number one because of how much attention Hartley gives her. Wait until she finds out they live together. Savannah has nothing on Violet, and she knows it.

In typical bratty girl fashion, she asserts her female dominance by putting the hottest girl in the room on the spot. Savannah can tell that Violet is shy—anyone could. It's written all over her face. Thank God for Liza. She's the best, and I hope Violet sees that, too. She knows how to stand up for herself and put other girls in their place. I'm close enough to hear her whisper that she would take the dare instead. Knowing Liza,

that's a big deal. Locker room stories have a way of gaining traction, and I've heard my fair share of Liza and Locke's situationship drama. He broke her heart a time or twenty in the past year.

Violet gets up and walks towards Locke. Locke towers over her and looks thrilled with a stupid grin plastered across his face. Violet is a smoke show, and he is going to brag about this for weeks in practice—the biggest dirtbag on the team. He talks—a lot. Where is Hartley when you need him because this wouldn't be going down this way if he were in the room?

Locke's fingers thread through the small loops of her shorts, and I lose it. Before I can stop myself from doing something insane, I shove Locke out of the way. His hands don't belong on her waist. Mine do. Her eyes shoot open, and without hesitation, I kiss her with a reckless force. When her lips connect to mine, my brain short circuits, and I can't stop myself even if I try.

I note every inch of her body on mine. The way she leans into me shows how perfect our bodies fit with each other. Her skin is soft and tender. She tastes like vanilla, and I can't get enough. I slide my hands up her back and rub circles around the skin right above her waist with my course thumbs. I need to stop touching her, or I'm going to throw her over my shoulders and take her to the nearest bedroom.

My hands leave her waist and follow a trail up to her warm neck as I deepen the kiss even further. She grants me access to her perfect mouth with a small sigh. Goosebumps rise on her warm arms, and I graze each one. I smirk slightly knowing her body is responding to my touch. For someone who's so timid and jumpy, she doesn't appear that way right now.

I finally break away from her tender lips and get lost in those icy blue eyes. She's breathing heavily, and I'm holding her arms. I tilt my head gently against hers to get my thoughts together. My mind has completely left my body, and I know I'm in

trouble. My body never responds to a girl like that. I don't feel kisses ripple through my chest like dynamite. This isn't me. I don't make abrupt decisions and bulldoze.

Like the jerk I am, I dash away from her to the door and hustle to my car—slamming it closed without looking back. I'm hoping no one follows. I crank the air to full blast, cooling myself down from the overcrowded party and unexpected makeout session with the one girl I was supposed to stay away from. Drawing attention to myself is something I try to avoid at all costs, so I need to leave before I barge into her space, yet again. I may do something even more stupid than I already have.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

7

Violet

What. Just. Happened.

I find myself standing in the middle of the party, completely dumbfounded by the last ten minutes of my life. One second, I was having an inner crisis thinking about kissing someone named Locke, and the next, a familiar black-haired boy swooped in and gave me the best kiss of my life. He's so much bigger than me, and it was nice feeling him hover over me in that way, almost like he owns me.

No. Stop it, Violet. It was a dare. For you, not for Ryan.

Nothing was real about it, but it felt like it. He touched my hips gently, and my body reacted in a way I had never experienced before. In true Mr. Football fashion, he bolted once he caught my eyes. Hartley warned me about football players since I became old enough to date. He said they're all players who just want to win every girl, him included. So why am I falling so easily for the tattooed running back after one kiss?

After a few more dares, everyone seems to scatter as the loud music picks up from the corner of the main room, but Liza stays by my side. "Violet, what was that?!" she whispers in my ear, excitement written all over her face as she grabs my shoulders to shake me back into reality. She's doing a little dance in front of me. I shrug because I'm clearly just as confused as she is, and my feet are still glued to the floor in the same spot Ryan rocked my world in with one kiss.

“Violet, I’m going to need you to tell me what that was all about right now before I have a heart attack! Ryan doesn’t play games with us. He has never participated in a dare. He usually minds his own business.”

“I don’t know. I’ve met him twice with Hart, but the only other time, he was super rude and blunt with his opinions. He probably just felt bad for me. That’s all. The pathetic girl that can’t get out of her own head to play a party game,” I say reluctantly. I’m always like this. I’m never the prettiest or most polarizing girl in the room. I blend in like a wallflower. That’s what I do best. I wasn’t made to stand out.

Liza scoffs. “Oh yeah, ok. Violet, you are drop-dead gorgeous. Savannah threw that dare at you because she knows you’re hot and can get any one of these Springs U players if you wanted, and she can’t. Even in that slutty outfit.”

“Ok, now I know you’ve drank too much. I am not ‘hot,’ and I don’t date, especially not athletes. Guys don’t notice me.”

“We’ll work on that,” Liza says with a sneaky grin, and I somehow can feel that she plans to break me out of my shell more than I anticipated this year.

Having enough fun for one night, I decide it’s time for me to get back home.

“I’m leaving. Here’s my number, Liza. Seriously, thank you so much for tonight. I can’t wait to hang out again.”

Hartley has been long gone, and I really need his advice on what happened tonight. I think when I came here I expected it to be just like high school with Hartley, but tonight was a reality check. We’re not kids anymore, and I’ll have to surround myself with more girls like Liza. She had my back tonight, and we barely know each other. I appreciate that more than she will ever know.

I walk home from the party in the dark night air, reeling from tonight's events. Hartley and I share a small used car because I can't afford one yet, but we both decided to walk tonight. I couldn't figure out if I wanted to drink or not, and Hartley always goes hard at parties. I walk up the stairs to my apartment and hastily unlock the door.

"HARTLEY!" I scream into our apartment as I slam the door for dramatic effect. It doesn't take me long to find my best friend making out with a random girl on our brand-new couch. Note to self: bleach the couch tomorrow.

She's the typical Hartley type: blonde hair, big boobs, small waist, and up for a wild time. I see her pink crop top is dangerously close to coming off. Hartley is in a hoodie and boxers. His hands are gripping her waist, and she's straddling him, twisted in an intense kiss. They don't bother to break their raunchy kiss until I'm hovering over the star-crossed lovers. I clear my throat to get Hartley's attention. He looks up at me calmly and nods. "Oh hey, Vi, how was the rest of the party?"

"We need to talk, Hart," I say to my best friend with a terrifying calmness in my voice.

"Huh?" blondie asks.

"Look, this isn't your problem, and I'm sorry for hijacking your night. I really need you to leave, though." Hartley seems to judge the seriousness in my voice, and he asks the girl to leave after they exchange phone numbers and at least five more quick kisses. My emotions are all over the place, but at least Hartley has the common sense to get this girl out before I break down in front of both of them. The door clicks shut, and I start bawling into my hands. I can't catch my breath. I'm heaving loudly, and my eyes are sore and puffy within a few seconds.

"Vi, come here." Hartley grabs me in his arms and squeezes tight. I nuzzle my head

into his soft hoodie while he brushes the hair back away from my streaming eyes. He knows that I can't talk when I'm like this, so he just holds me in silence and lets me cry into his broad chest.

After I calm down, I give my anchor a detailed recap of the rest of the night. I tell him about Ryan kissing me and bolting like I had the plague. I tell him how humiliated I felt in the middle of the party by myself after Mr. Football darted without a word. I choose to leave out the part where I didn't want the kiss to end. We tell each other everything but now doesn't seem like the time to dive into my mixed feelings about his teammate.

"Hart, I could have really used back up," I whine to my best friend. Finding words after sobbing is the worst. I feel pathetic for needing someone like I need him.

"Vi, I'm so sorry. It looked like you were having fun with Liza, and I wanted to give you space to make a new friend."

"I just panic so easily when something unexpected happens. Liza did try to save me, though." I smile, thinking about having someone in my corner besides Hartley. The bubbly firecracker did stand up for me, a complete stranger, in front of everyone.

"She's cool. I trust her. I wouldn't have left you with anyone else." I choose to believe him because Liza does seem trustworthy, and Hartley hasn't ever left me with anyone who would cause me trouble.

"I may get kicked off the team tomorrow, though..." he replies with a scowl.

"No way! Hart, don't lose your head and do something stupid. It was a kiss. It meant nothing," I plead with him to keep his cool. He has a tendency to fly off the handle at a moment's notice.

“Vi, you know how I...”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

I cut him off quickly. “Hartley. Please. I shouldn’t have been a brat and ruined your night. I’m working on it. When I tell you things, I don’t need you to bulldoze. I just need someone to listen.”

“You did come in like a little tornado, but you know I’ve got you no matter what.”

“I know.” I give him a tight squeeze.

“I’m not tired. Can we binge 90 Day Fiancé to get my mind off of everything?” I ask him with puppy dog eyes. I know he’ll groan but ultimately say yes. He loves the show but will never admit it.

“I’ll get the M&M’s and ice cream. Grab the fluffy blankets from my room!” he yells behind him as he dashes into the kitchen to whip up my go-to dessert. After three episodes, Hartley is snoring on the couch, so I turn the TV off and sneak into my bedroom.

I choose my comfiest pajamas: an oversized T-shirt and boy shorts. Not even mind-numbing reality TV can help me. I toss and turn the entire night, praying to get at least an hour of sleep, but thoughts of Ryan’s lips, his woodsy smell, and the way his head tipped into mine tonight kept my mind racing.

It’s 3 a.m., and I haven’t fallen asleep. My phone vibrates loudly on my worn wooden desk that I use as a nightstand. It’s one of the last pieces of furniture I kept from my grandpa. Each wooden grain holds a different story of us that I hold close to my heart. We spent so much time in his office, and he always let me draw next to him while he worked quietly at this desk. I drew him so many pictures. Most were horrendous, but

he hung up every single one of them around the paint-chipped walls of that room. I snap out of the memory and roll over to see who's texting me. It's odd for me to get texts, especially in the middle of the night. My only friend is Hartley, and he's passed out on the couch.

Liza: Hey girl!!! Let's go grab dinner tomorrow in the dining hall. BTW Ryan came back to the party and demanded your number from me with that hot, brooding scowl. Weirdo. I gave it to him and also told him that you are way out of his league. LOLLLLL

Me: Hahahaha. Sounds good. 5ish? Please tell me you didn't really tell him that.

Me: He left as soon as he realized what he did anyway. I'm embarrassed to even show my face around the team anymore.

Liza: EMBARRASSED?! You don't know half of the things they have gotten into. You have nothing to worry about.

Me: Ugh. I do though. They were prob laughing at me.

Liza: OMG I FORGOT. One of the guys asked me about you!!! He said he's never seen you before :)

Me: Why would he ask about me?!

Liza: bc you were looking like a snack tonight. Duuuuhhhhh.

Me: Snack?

Liza: The kind that all of the guys want to try

Me: LIZA

Liza: What?! You'll see how it is!

Me: haha ok I'll see you tomorrow, and you can fill me in.

Liza: YES MAM! Nighty night :)

I laugh softly because this girl has a way of pushing me out of my comfort zone. I hope I'm ready for it. I put my phone down and adjust my pillow for what feels like the hundredth time tonight. I can't fall asleep unless my pillow is at max comfort. It's a thing. My phone buzzes again, and I chuckle, knowing it's Liza following up on party drama, probably a thread of emojis, but I am wrong, so wrong.

MaybeRyan: Violet, I got your number from Liza at the party. I thought it would be funny to give Locke a taste of his own medicine during that game. Didn't mean for you to get stuck in the crossfire. Anyway, see you around.

Me: Who texts without saying their name?

MaybeRyan: It's Ryan.

Me: I figured. Thanks.. I guess?

Ryan: See ya.

8

Ryan

Early morning practices are my comfort zone. They make me feel alive, and I don't

mind pushing my body to its limit. The pain of my muscles screaming is my drug of choice—the high that I chase every single day. That’s why I don’t drink much. I need to keep my focus on what’s important, and that’s football.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

I do a quick scan of the field to make sure Hartley isn't here yet. I'm not surprised. He rolls up to practice "on time" every day. To me, on time is at least an hour early. I like the peace of working out on my own before the rest of the team shows up. I can't keep my thoughts clear this morning, though. I feel like the biggest jerk in the world. How do I explain myself last night to Hartley?

You felt bad for her. You didn't want to hear Locke's big mouth all week.

I don't know what I was thinking or who took over my body, but that was not me. I don't let girls get inside my head. I'm better than that. I'm the Springs U star running back on track to get drafted once I graduate. I've worked for this for years and can't lose my head over a girl I just met. I need to focus so I can finally give my mom the life she deserves. She won't have to worry about medical bills and can do things she loves. I can bring her on vacation. We've never done that before. I had to send that text last night. I couldn't have naive little Violet getting any ideas in her head that the kiss meant anything other than what it was.

But it did....I shake my head trying to eliminate the thought.

No, it didn't, and it will never happen again. Hartley is probably ready to punch my face in, bright and early this morning. Lovely. Violet is his baby sister. No one messes with her. He made that very clear to the whole team, and I crossed the line. Hopefully, I can spin this in my favor. Better me than Locke. She would have been embarrassed, and he would have taken it way too far. His greasy hands would have touched the velvety skin of her back and traced under her bra strap. His hands don't belong on her. I did the right thing.

But I remember how her lips felt on mine, how she fell into me and allowed me access to her, how I grabbed her hair and made her mine even if it was only for a few minutes....

Right on cue, Hartley's car screeches in the parking lot of the practice facility. He storms onto the field and fists my shirt. I fly across the bench and onto the grass. Hartley is on top of me and screaming like a maniac.

"I TOLD YOU TO STAY AWAY, BUT YOU COULDN'T HELP YOURSELF!" he screams as he charges toward me with white knuckled fists. The fury burns in his eyes right before he pummels me into the freshly mowed grass. I'm not one to start a fight, but I will finish it. Everyone else just watches. I jump off the ground and flip him to his back. Before I know it, we are punching each other senseless. He gets a cheap shot across my jaw, so I reciprocate and get a few more square in in his chest. Coach blows the whistle, jolting us from the fight.

Great, this is exactly what I need this year.

"HARTLEY! RYAN! OFF MY FIELD NOW. If you two want to fight, take it to the locker room!"

We both drop our hands from each other. Now that the adrenaline rush is over, I can taste blood in my mouth. I've never had a fight on the field or at practice before, and Hartley has to lose his cool over a stupid party game. He needs to get a grip. We're Division One athletes hoping to get drafted sooner rather than later. This behavior won't cut it in the NFL.

Once we get to the locker room, Hartley starts pacing and running his hands through his hair. He says, "Dude. I'm sorry. She's got a lot going on in her head without you messing it up for her. She came home sobbing last night."

“I know I crossed a line. I just wanted her away from Locke, but I promise you, man, it will never happen again.”

Hartley takes a deep breath. “Be her friend. She needs that, but don’t do stuff that’ll mess with her head. She needs a fresh start here.”

“I got you.”

“If it had been Locke, I swear to God...” he says with a far-off look in his eyes. We bump fists as we drop our things in the lockers and head to the showers.

After a cold shower and time to think, I pull out my phone to check my messages.

Liza: Wanna meet for lunch?

Ryan: Sure. Where?

Liza: Cafeteria. I’ll grab us a seat close to the window!

Ryan: See ya soon.

Liza is a good friend, and she always reaches out first. I need that push to do anything social beyond parties and practice. She came around the team a lot when she and Locke had whatever they had going on.

I take the short walk from the practice field to the commons area. The smell of fried chicken takes over my brain. After practice meals are huge, even if all I did was get a few punches on Hartley. Liza spots me by the entrance and waves me over to her table. I set my bag down and make a towering plate of carbs. Liza opts for a chicken Caesar salad.

“Long time no see. I miss our lunch meetups. How’s practice been?” she asks as she takes a bite of her salad. Liza used to join in on impromptu team lunches when she and Locke were whatever they were.

“Good. I need to keep my head on straight this season if I want to get drafted in a year. All eyes are on us,” I explain.

“You’ve got it. You know how talented you are,” she says with reassurance.

“Yeah, but talent only gets you so far. When you want to get drafted from a mid-sized school like Springs U, you have to stand out.”

“Sooooooo, did you have fun at the back-to-school bash?” she asks with innocence, knowing what she’s about to stir up.

“Yep,” I shrug my shoulders with nonchalance in an attempt to get her off my back.

“That was quite the show you put on with that kiss, Ryan Shane. It was almost like you were...jealous?” She nudges my shoulder playfully.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“Not jealous. Just trying to save her from Locke.” I scoff, but she’s right. I was jealous, and those aren’t emotions I’m willing to dig up from the grave at lunch.

“Hmm..” She pushes her salad around the plate with mischief in her eyes. “Didn’t seem like she was backing down from the challenge, and I had already offered to take it.” She grins, and her eyes jump to the entrance. My back is facing the door, so I can’t see who she’s frantically motioning to our table. Liza’s bag is occupying the seat next to her, and the only other available spot at our four-person table is next to me.

“Vi, how was class?” Liza asks our new lunch companion, quickly shooting a wink in my direction.

Ryan Shane, your timing is unreal.

She’s standing at the end of our table, gripping both straps of her black Northface backpack. I don’t engage in the girls’ conversation about class in hopes that this will be a short pass by and she’ll leave the table. Instead, I put my head down and continue to finish off my first buffet plate.

“It was okay. Natural Science isn’t my favorite class in the world, but the prerequisites have to get done.” I lift my head from the plate slightly to catch a glimpse of her. She’s zoned in on Liza, trying her best not to look at me.

“Come sit with us. Ryan and I were just catching up about how football is going. Right, Ryan?” She shoots me a death glare. I guess I don’t have much of a choice here.

“Seat’s open.” I gesture to the spot next to me.

“Okay. I have a few minutes before my next class begins.” Being this close to Violet elicits a natural response from my body. Every inch she squirms in her seat sends my eyes in her direction. She mindlessly picks at her nails and keeps her eyes glued to Liza. She seems unsure, and I hate that I put her in an uncomfortable position after the stunt at the party. Hopefully, Liza keeps her mouth shut about the kiss.

“Are you ready for the game this weekend? I’m so pumped. Your first Springs U game is going to be epic.” Liza crosses her hands under her chin and wiggles her shoulders.

“I am. I can’t wait to see Hartley on the field again. It’s been way too long.”

My heart hammers in my chest. Knowing Violet will be in the stands this weekend unleashes a primal need to play well.

“Hartley and Ryan are going to kill it this season,” Liza says with a nod in my direction. I guess that’s my cue to speak since I’ve rendered mute throughout this entire conversation. Every time I open my mouth around Violet, I say something stupid, or my tongue is down her throat.

“Yeah. Should be a good game.” I tilt my neck slightly to Violet, and we catch eyes, but she darts them back to Liza.

“Bust out that jersey, girly, and get ready to scream,” Liza says.

What jersey will she wear to the game?Hartley’s, I’m sure.

Now, I’m consumed with the image of Violet screaming my name in the stands. That’s it. I need to remove myself from this table before I ruin a perfectly normal

lunch.

“I’ve got to get to class. Bye, girls.” I jet out before Liza can twist my arm into staying a second more. In the distance, I swear Liza’s voice says, “Smooth, Ryan!”

Violet

Classes were incredibly long and taxing today. It doesn’t help that my ruminating thoughts have taken over. Thoughts like these have been a serious struggle since I was nine years old. Some days are better than others, but they kick up a notch when I’m under a lot of stress.

Lunch was awkward, but I couldn’t ignore my new friend. I couldn’t risk potentially running off someone who was beyond welcoming. Ryan kept quiet for the most part, but that didn’t stop my jitters from surfacing. I tried my best to keep the conversation between Liza and me, but his presence dominates the room. Every inch he moved elicited a response from my body. He’s also extremely easy on the eyes, so avoiding eye contact is that much more difficult.

I’m spent from that unexpected encounter mixed with the stress of my workload, but Liza invited me to dinner tonight, and I don’t want to bail. The walk from my apartment to the dining hall is a short one, and the weather is nice enough in the evening. On the walk, I run through every scenario that could possibly go wrong.

What if Liza invited others to dinner? Will they like me? Will Ryan be there again?

My breathing becomes short, and a fire flames over my cheeks. My hand instinctively darts to my hair and begins twirling repeatedly. Shoot. I need to calm down and manage my stress. Social interactions shouldn’t send me into a spiral. Before entering the dining hall, I take four deep breaths and practice one of my favorite grounding techniques: feel, see, touch. My body’s feeling more regulated than before, so I take

the opportunity to walk in before I change my mind and run home.

Luckily, I spotted Liza alone at a window seat close to the entrance. She's lost in thought, thumbs racing as she types out a text.

"Hey, Liza," I say timidly.

"Violet! Hi, I'm so happy you're here!" She jumps up and throws her arms around me.

"Thanks for inviting me."

"Let's grab our first plate. Then, we can break down that party," she giggles and leads the way to the buffet options. I opt for veggie pizza, and Liza chooses chicken fettuccine.

"I absolutely love the food here. The dining plan pays off leaps and bounds," she says as she shovels a spoon of noodles in her mouth.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“Agreed. I wanted to skip out on it, but Hartley insisted it was a must.”

“How did you two meet? I love that you have each other. Hartley has always given off that crazy papa bear energy,” she gestures every sentence with her hands.

“Well, I’ve known him for pretty much my entire life.” I pick up my greasy pizza slice dipping it in ranch before taking a bite. “We’ve always looked out for each other, so coming to Springs U was a no-brainer,” I explain without giving up too much about our past and why we had to look out for each other younger than anyone should.

“That must be nice having someone in your corner. Gotta respect loyalty.” She sounds almost sad. Does Liza have anyone to look out for her?

“Why did you come to Springs U?” I ask.

“That’s a complicated story, but let’s just say I stuck it to my dad by coming here, and I have no regrets.” She chuckles.

“I’m glad you love it here. The party was a little overwhelming, and I hate being the center of attention,” I admit.

“Get used to it, girl. You weren’t noticed, and when the football team takes note, you can officially retire from wallflower status.”

“I like being a wallflower, though. It’s less complicated.”

“I can help you. I have plenty of experience with cocky football players, one in particular.” I take that as an opportunity to ask about her past with the team.

“How did you get so close with the team? It seems like they love you.” Liza has that energy about her that is addicting. She’s fun to be around.

“I thought you’d never ask! It all started at last year’s back-to-school bash. A few friends from high school invited me, failing to mention that it was a football player thing. When I got there, Locke was the first person to come up to me, and I stupidly engaged.” She rolls her eyes and runs her hands over her face dramatically.

“Was he a jerk or something?” I ask.

“The exact opposite. He’s so smooth and fed me everything I wanted to hear. We were inseparable the rest of the night. My naive freshman self thought he really liked me and was interested in me.” She scoffs. “A few nights later, he invited me out to the bar. One thing led to another, and we ended up hooking up.”

“Oh, no. Please tell me he didn’t ghost you?” I ask with concern.

“Worse. He kept me hanging, but barely. He made me feel like I was special to him but would flirt with girls in front of my face. We’d argue, but he’d charm his way back into my bed. Hence the vicious cycle of liking someone who doesn’t feel the same way.”

“I’m so sorry, Liza. You don’t deserve to be treated like that.”

“He still gets to me from time to time, but I’m in Locke recovery.” She giggles. “And the best part about this is—I can help you avoid making the same mistakes I made, young grasshopper.” She fake bows and elicits a loud laugh from me.

“Don’t worry about that. I’m steering clear from relationships with complicated athletes. I already have one on my hands.”

“Whatever you say, but sexy men with big muscles can be very convincing.” She winks.

Maybe she’s right because I’m still thinking about the taste of one tattooed player in particular.

Ryan

I try my best to keep my head straight all week. I show up early to practice, go to all my classes, keep my partying to a minimum, and avoid Violet like the plague. The first game of the season is this weekend, and I need to focus. Scouts are watching my every move, and I can’t have another fight on the field like last week at practice. Coming from a small school means I need to outperform all the bigger names. It’s a challenge, but I have a way of standing out on the field. My routes are sharp, and I try to keep every play clean.

I keep my distance from everyone except my mom. She grounds me and reminds me what I’m here for. I take the five-minute drive to her house to bring her some of her favorites:grilled chicken nachos from the local restaurant down the street. She used to go there all the time, but she doesn’t get out of the house much on her own anymore.

Sliding my key into the door of my childhood home, I push it open and immediately feel at peace. The warm smell of her favorite cinnamon candle is burning. The house is clean but lived-in, with pictures littering the walls. I’m greeted by my frail and smiling mom at the door. She’s my whole world. Seeing her like this makes me think back to the day I found out when my whole world changed.

Everything changed during the winter of my freshman year of high school. Mom

started falling, getting dizzy and weak. Something wasn't right. I convinced her to get an annual check-up. I thought it was allergies or maybe the flu. She was diagnosed with ALS, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a month later. ALS is a condition that attacks her nerves and motor functions like her hands and legs. Her body will slowly lose motor function, but her mind will stay intact. It's almost as if her mind will eventually be trapped in a body that can't do much of anything anymore. My future ended that day. Her diagnosis rocked my world.

I was angry at everybody and everything. I started making the worst decisions possible and hanging out with the wrong people. I stopped caring. I partied all night and skipped school. I did my best to keep my downfall a secret from my mom. I didn't need her worrying about me. She had enough to worry about. The medical bills were piling up, and she needed to take off work more to make all of her appointments.

I decided to do quick things to make money. I started reselling some of my things, but that only got me chump change. One of the older guys that I became friends with introduced me to gambling. I started gambling on things here and there under the table through him. My crowd was older than me and had connections to that world. Mom thought I got a part-time job downtown bussing tables. She didn't need to know the details or where I was spending my time. I was the man of the house. I felt responsible for taking care of her, and I couldn't let her down. I was already a failure and had no future beyond this town. I wasn't great in school, my grades were up and down, and I couldn't afford college. I could at least get this right.

My gambling stint lasted a few months, and the bill stack got smaller. I felt like I was finally doing something right by my mom, but like the quintessential screw-up I am, I got caught. My bookie got arrested, and the names of all of his clients got leaked. Since I was a minor, I didn't get arrested, but the sheriff gave my name to the principal. I almost got kicked out of school. They called my mom up to the office. When she found out, she cried and begged for them to let me stay in school. I could

have cared less. I didn't need school anymore. I needed money, lots of it. My saving grace that day was my assistant principal, Coach Damiens.

Coach gave me an ultimatum. He said the only way for me to stay in school would be for me to join the football team. Mom and I spoke at the same time, with contradicting answers. She jumped at the opportunity, and I shot it down. I stared daggers into my mom's eyes. I don't have time for sports, especially football. School sports were a waste of time and money for someone like me.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“No offense, coach, but I don’t have time to run around the field and play games,” I smugly answered him.

He looked me in the eyes, and I’ll never forget what he said to me after that. “You’re going to make it in football, kid. It’ll be your way out of whatever you’re running from, but it’s up to you to give it a fair chance.”

I don’t know why that hit me so hard. I was running from more than anyone knew. I looked over to Mom, tears pooling in her eyes, losing weight, and arms crossed. I couldn’t stand to disappoint her again. I nodded, wiped away a small tear from my eye, and asked him when I could start.

Once I started playing, everything I thought about football was proven wrong. Coming to Springs U was an easy decision for me. I didn’t even think about college until my junior year of high school. That’s when my high school football coach said I had a real shot at a full ride, and I worked harder than ever to get it. My plan was to go straight to work. Help mom pay the bills and bring her to all of her appointments after I graduated.

Slamming me back from my runaway thoughts, Mom swings the door open and shouts, “Ryan, what on earth are you doing here! It’s Friday! You’re supposed to be having fun, son!” she yells as she squeezes me tight in her frail arms, but weaker than she has in the past. I know it’s coming. This doesn’t get better. It progressively gets worse. That’s what terrifies me the most.

“I was out running errands and figured I’d bring you your favorite.” Lies. I came here to check on her, but what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.

“Come sit with me.” She invites me on the couch. She needs to sit. She’s having a bad day. Her legs are weaker than usual, and she doesn’t want me to know.

“Big game this weekend! I can’t wait to watch you live from this dingy couch!” She laughs it off. I know deep down she wants to be there, but she can’t risk it.

“Look out for my heart after I score the first touchdown of the season. It’ll be for you,” I assure her.

My face heats without permission. “I’ll have my eyes on you.”

“Alright, let’s watch that show where all the people yell and fight at each other, you know, you’re favorite.” She smiles as I turn on her favorite show. I don’t leave until she’s into a deep sleep, and I carry her to her bed.

9

Violet

“Weekend time,” Liza yells and does a little happy dance as we meet in the courtyard after our last class.

It’s Friday, and the first football game of the season is tomorrow night. I never missed any of Hartley’s high school football games, so seeing him play college ball this year is a huge deal. He had a pretty good run last season, but he’s the official first-string wide receiver, so that means he’ll be getting the ball a lot more. I watched all of his games last year on livestream, counting down the days until I was at Springs U with him.

“I’m pumped for the game tomorrow. What are you wearing? More importantly, what are you wearing out after?” Liza asks with as much energy as she could possibly

have. I swear she's like the blonde energizer bunny.

"Out? Ummm, I usually just go home after the games and watch some highlights on ESPN," I share shyly.

"Well, get ready because we are going out after all the games. All the guys head out to Downtown Tap. It's a blast."

"I'm not sure," I say reluctantly.

"Come on. What better night to step out than the first home game? You'll love it, and I will be with you the whole time," she assures me.

"Ok. I'll try it." I smile at my newfound friend.

I need to step out of my comfort zone and meet new people. Liza has been a really good friend, and I want to spend time with her, but I immediately feel my chest tense up, and my palms get sweaty.

What if Liza ditches me at the bar? What if Hartley isn't there? What if I run out of things to talk about to the group? I start spiraling.

Liza stops walking and taps my shoulder. "Vi, are you ok? You look like a zombie."

I shake my head and assure her that I'm fine, but I most definitely am not fine. Especially if the night goes as unpredictable as my first college party went. I crave predictability. It helps with my anxiety. If I know what to expect, I don't have to panic. Unfortunately, nothing seems to go as planned at Springs U.

“I’m ready,” I yell to Liza from my bathroom. Makeup and hair products are scattered everywhere. This is what preparing for a night out is like. We decided to get ready here since Liza lives in the dorms and has a roommate. Plus, Hartley has been gone all day for game prep. We both chose short, ripped jean shorts with Springs U football jerseys. These are shorter than I am used to wearing, but I said I wanted to step out of my comfort zone this year.

It doesn’t hurt that there is a strong possibility of running into Ryan at the bar after the game, and I want him to see what he’s missing out on. I haven’t seen or spoken to him since that text. I avoid him in class by arriving early and leaving after most of the class is already gone. I’m wearing Hartley’s jersey, and Liza is wearing...

“Is that Locke’s jersey number?!” I ask as I grab the back of her jersey to get a closer look.

“Uh, yeah, it is. He gave it to me last year when we were a thing. I haven’t had a chance to get another one.” She shrugs, looking defeated. Liza is usually bubbly and confident. I don’t like that the mention of Locke dims her sparkle.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“No way. Let’s switch. You can have Hartley’s for the night, and I’ll wear Locke’s. I barely know him, so it’s fine.” Liza gives me the biggest hug in the world.

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Thank you so much,” she whispers into my ear.

My apartment is close to the stadium, so we decided to walk. Bringing a car would have put us in a pickle later if we got drinks at the bar. We look cute, both of our hair curled half up and half down with two high ponytails. I actually love having a friend that isn’t a boy. Getting ready for tonight was different in a good way. I liked getting Liza’s opinion on my outfit and sharing skin and makeup products.

The music blasts through the speakers when we get to the stadium. It is packed with rows of students ready to watch Springs U kick off their season. We shuffle to our end seats and try to spot Hartley and a few of Liza’s friends on the team. I didn’t realize how awesome these seats are. We are the third row back from the bench.

Springs U is a smaller college, so each player gets two season tickets in a great section. Hartley gave me his for Liza and me to use. We’ll have the perfect view of the team. I love sitting close to the bench. You can watch all of the emotions the players go through during the game. Having family in the stands helps Hartley keep his head on straight. In high school, he used to slam his helmet down when he dropped a pass or ran a route wrong. I told him to look at me when he felt overwhelmed or defeated, and that seemed to help him keep his cool.

Coming back to reality from my zone out, I spot the insanely attractive, tattooed running back. He's facing my direction, and I know he's number nine. He's on the field, stretching away from the others. While the other guys are chatting and running plays, he is silent with earbuds in and a stern look on his face. This man oozes seriousness and confidence. He's a little intimidating, but I've dealt with men like him my whole life. I've always been surrounded by men since I was a little girl.

He's nodding to the music zoned in. Why are guys so attractive while stretching? It's not fair. As I'm shamelessly admiring the way he fills out his blue and white jersey, his eyes lift up and catch mine. I quickly shoot my eyes down to my phone and pretend to text someone.

Great! Now he knows you were staring. He made it crystal clear that he wants to forget about our kiss, and I'm over here being a stalker.

After I deem it safe to look up again, I spot him running drills. He's facing away from me now so I can stare. He's fast. No one running drills with him is even close to his speed. As long as I've watched Hartley play and listened to my grandpa's glory days stories, I know talent when I see it. Ryan is a natural.

"Are you done looking Ryan up and down? Or do you need a little more time?" Liza giggles and nudges me with her elbow.

"I wasn't staring!" I chew on my thumbnail, taking another glance at Ryan. "Well, I guess I was, but I was watching for football purposes," I lie.

"Sure, that body is one hundred percent for scientific purposes only," she says.

"Men like Ryan complicate things, and I don't need my life any more complicated."

"Oh, you're one hundred percent correct. Doesn't stop our hearts from beating for

them anyway.” Why is she so dead on? The timer signals the team to stop and huddle up for the pregame announcements.

Once the game starts, Liza and I don’t sit down again. We scream our hearts out when they storm onto the field to the loud music. The guys are pumped. Hartley dashes out of the tunnel and onto the field, and I’m overwhelmed with pride in him making his dream a reality. During our first offensive possession, Hartley manages to have three receptions. Go bestie.

Locke is doing a great job at keeping the offensive line tight and protected. And then there’s Ryan.

As much as I try to keep my eyes locked in on Hartley or literally anyone else on the team, they constantly drift to Ryan. He’s polarizing on the field. No one can catch him once he breaks free from the backfield. He’s an integral part of the offense. Even though he and Hartley play different positions, they work the offense beautifully together. They are both so talented that the coach uses them as decoys for each other. Just when you think Hartley will get the ball, Ryan takes it for a twenty-yard carry. When the other team thinks it is a surefire running play, Hartley goes outside for the lateral pass. Springs U drives down to the 15-yard line. They are so close to getting the first touchdown of the season. I see the play set up. It looks like Hartley will get the ball, but the quarterback fakes it and hands it off to Ryan. Ryan pummels through the defense and sneaks in for a touchdown! The crowd goes wild. Liza and I jump up and down in a tight hug.

“GO RYAN!” she yells.

“Let’s go, Springs U!” I scream.

The team celebrates in the end zone. They are also doing their individual handshakes with Ryan before he spikes the ball and turns to the crowd. Before I can process what

is happening, Ryan locks eyes with me in the stands, takes off his helmet, and smirks. The loud stadium music and cheers go silent. My heartbeat is pummeling in my ear. At this moment, we are the only two people in the stadium. I give him the biggest smile and wave before he quickly looks back to his teammates.

What. The. Actual. Heck. Is. Life. Right. Now.

Thankfully, Liza is too busy high-fiving with strangers behind us to notice that intense interaction.

It meant nothing, Violet, stop it. He is the star running back, and you are you.

I'm nothing special, the girl next door type, but definitely not like any of these girls that throw themselves at Ryan and the rest of the team at every party. When Ryan turns away from me, I see him walk straight to the live stream camera past the end zone and give a big heart. Why did he do that? Who did he do that for?

Maybe there is more to Ryan Shane than I thought.

10

Ryan

We won our first home game of the season, but I can't celebrate or even think straight right now.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

Why was she in Locke's jersey? Did they hang out? Did he give her one?

I wouldn't be surprised if he made it his mission to hook up with her. Girls are conquests to him, and he does a great job of reeling them in. I saw Violet when she walked to her seat with Liza. I knew she would be here. She would never miss one of Hartley's games. After my mom became too weak to come to my games, I stopped having a reason to search the crowd during pre-game warm-ups.

She didn't see me, but I watched her every move. I saw her laughing with Liza and applying glitter to her face. I saw the jerks around her, staring at her slim figure and jersey falling just above the waistband of her shorts. This is the first time I've seen her hair down, and it's longer than I realized. Her skin is sparkling with glitter, and I catch myself wondering what I did to get myself into this kind of mental torture.

Coming back to reality, I look away to stretch so she doesn't catch me staring. I don't talk much before games. I listen to my pre-game playlist and focus on the game plan. I envision myself scoring and running through every scenario that the defense could throw at me. When I look up, I catch those pools of ice blue locked in on mine. Before I can give her a smile, she darts her eyes down and messes with her phone. I caught her looking at me. I shouldn't care, but being on the football field does something primal to me. The thought of having someone watching me amps me up.

When I scored that first touchdown, I knew who I would be looking for in the crowd. I took my helmet off to get a better look at the stunning girl in the third row. Surprisingly, she waved at me, and my heart nearly jumped out of my chest. The moment didn't last because that's when I realized whose jersey she was wearing.

You're kidding me.

I looked away before I turned into a complete psycho over a girl who wasn't mine wearing my teammate's jersey. Violet has me so out of my mind that I almost forgot to give my mom her heart to the camera. She's messing with my head.

It was one kiss, Ryan. Get your head in the game.

I've never gone this mental over a girl. I need to clear my head, so I jump into the shower as soon as the post-game meeting is over. I need to find someone else to erase this girl from my mind, not only because of Hartley but because she's got some kind of pull on me. Welcoming that into my life is a distraction that is best pushed away. I need a distraction.

I told Hartley before the game that I didn't want to go out tonight, but I've changed my mind. I'm too amped up and annoyed to go home. Downtown Tap will be littered with girls wanting to dance with a football player after the first home game of the season. This is what I need to get past the girl with swimming pools for eyes, soft, dark brown hair, and lips that taste like vanilla.

11

Violet

The game was insanely fun, and I'm excited to go out with Liza to Downtown Tap. She already told me that a lot of Springs U students go there because they'll serve anyone alcohol.

"Please? Just a few drinks. We won, and this is a celebration!" Liza grabs onto my arm and begs as we walk from the stadium to downtown. One of the reasons I love Springs U is that everything is within walking distance. It's a quaint little college

town right off the beach.

I can't stop giggling at my new friend as she continues to beg me to go out with her tonight. She's embraced me so quickly, and I love her for that. She never makes me feel like I'm a bother, and I genuinely like spending time with her. My anxious nerves from earlier are long gone. Liza makes me feel like I fit in for the first time in my life.

"Fine! I'll have one drink just for you, but you need to help me order because I have no clue what to order at bars." I chuckle.

"You are asking the bar queen! I'm so pumped, ahhhh!" She squeals and hugs me.

We walk up the stone sidewalk to the "Downtown Tap" bar, loud music from inside intense enough to vibrate the ground beneath our feet. We make our way to the bouncer, and he gestures for us to head in. He doesn't bother to ask us for our IDs. It seems like everyone here knows and loves Liza enough to let her do anything she wants. When we walk through the door, I see Springs U shirts across the dance floor and barstools.

"How are we going to get a drink? It's really crowded," I anxiously ask Liza.

"Don't worry! I have my ways." She winks back at me.

"Do I want to know?" I shout into her ear because the music is so loud that I can barely hear myself think.

"Probably not, but I told you I'm going to show you the ropes. Tonight is lesson number one." She laces her fingers through mine and weaves us in between rows of drunk college kids to the front of the bar. I've always wanted to be the person that commands a room. Liza is that person. Her presence is undeniable.

“Hey, Payton, Two vodka sodas, please!” she screams to the handsome bartender. Love that they are on a first-name basis. He looks older than us. Maybe in his early twenties?

“I’ve got you, Liza.” He nods back.

“How did you do that? It would have taken me hours to get to the front of the bar and even longer to get the bartender’s attention,” I ask, amazed at how quickly she seemed to move us to the front.

“If you don’t take up space, you’ll get walked all over,” she replies with a hint of sadness in her voice. I don’t want to push her more on that right now, so I let it go.

Our drinks arrive, and I take a big sip. It’s strong, and I debate nursing this drink all night, but one look at Liza tells me that I can let loose around her. Her eyes reflect trust and care.

“Let’s do shots,” I scream above the deafening music.

“YESSSSSSS! Payton, two tequila shots, pretty please?” She flutters her eyelashes at the bartender, and minutes later, we are downing shots back. The burn travels down my throat before settling in my stomach, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth. This is going to be a long night, but I’m ready.

Ryan

Hartley and I pull up to Downtown Tap after our post-game meeting and showers. Once the team arrives, everyone is well on their way to getting wasted. Hartley asked if I could drive him. He knows I don't drink in public, and he told me Violet probably wouldn't come out because it's not really her scene. Don't like the way that disappointed me, but it's perfect timing. I'm looking for a quick hookup tonight, and I don't need her distracting me any more than she already has.

Game nights are the busiest, but Springs U players don't have to wait in line. Being an athlete has its perks. Hartley and I walk in and split up. He goes straight for the bar, and I scope out a table I can park at for the night. Football players are royalty at Springs U. Once I find my spot for the night, girls will find me.

I see some of the offense and join them in the back corner of the bar. We talk about the game for a few minutes before beautiful girls in tight dresses with way too much makeup join us and act like they care about football. I'd rather them just say nothing than act like they care about anything besides getting one of the players to dance with them.

A blonde takes a seat on my lap. Her name is Brittany or Bridget. She hangs around the team. I don't care what her name is, as long as it isn't Violet. She leans into me and starts kissing up my neck while I mindlessly rub circles up her thigh. This is the distraction I wanted, but why am I picturing the frustrating brunette firecracker kissing me instead of the leggy blonde?

When Mason, our quarterback, joins the table, even more people gravitate to us. He's

a jokester and is the life of the party. He loves to mess with Locke, and I love watching it.

“Locke, your girl is here, and she looks just as edible as usual.” Mason elbows Locke’s ribs. He knows bringing up Liza always stirs up trouble. I don’t know what goes on with those two, but they are always fighting, making up, breaking up, or hooking up.

Wait, if Liza is here, that must mean...

I scan the bar frantically to find the one girl I was set on avoiding and forgetting about tonight. When my eyes catch the wild blonde, I see her newfound partner in crime grinding on the dance floor. Every guy within ten feet has their eyes locked on her waist. Her shorts ride up dangerously high. They both have their football jerseys tied above their waist, showing skin. Everyone in the bar has a clear view of the skin that my hands touched just a few nights ago. Her hair is pulled up out of her face now, and she’s sweating with a drink in her hand.

Hartley said this wasn’t her scene. He’s an idiot. Why did I trust that he would know what she would be doing tonight? More importantly, why do I make it my mission to get close to her anywhere on campus? I don’t date, but this is starting to feel real obsessive, and I can’t control it.

Before I can change my mind, I stand up and move the girl who’s sitting on my lap off of me. She rolls her eyes and moves on to the next best player at the table. I’m bulldozing my way through the flashing lights, the beat of the music thumping through me, toward the girl that drives me crazy. When I get closer, I get a better view of just how incredibly sexy she is. She is dressed more casually than most of the girls here, but it doesn’t matter what she’s wearing. She could wear a trash bag and still hypnotize every guy in the room. The fact that she still has Locke’s jersey on is really getting to me, and I need to know why she’s wearing it. I squeeze through the tight

crowd and reach for Liza. When she sees me, she squeals and gives me a big hug.

“RYAN! You played amazing tonight! Are the rest of the guys here?” she screams above the music. Violet hasn’t turned around to face my way yet.

“Thanks. Let’s find somewhere I can actually hear you,” I explain, hoping to get these girls off the dance floor quickly. Liza nods and whispers into Violet’s ear. Violet looks back at me, rolls her eyes, shakes her head no, and continues to move to the beat of the music. She’s rolling her hips in the most seductive way possible.

You’re kidding me. She’s not going to make this easy. Any other girl would jump at the opportunity for one on one time with a football player, but apparently, Violet is the exception. Makes me like her even more.

“Sorry. We’re having fun! Dance with us!” Liza pulls me in. Now I’m trapped, but I’m not leaving Violet on this dance floor alone. I guess I’m dancing tonight.

13

Violet

Swaying back and forth on the dance floor, my body tells me I’m drunk. This might be the best night of my life. After two shots of tequila and two vodka sodas, within two hours, I’m trashed. Liza and I have been dancing for a while, and I don’t want to stop. Every song is my favorite. The only downside about this bar is how hot it is with so many people crammed into a tiny space. Liza and I throw our hair up and tie our oversized football jerseys above our stomachs to keep cool.

I never knew how much I needed a female friend like Liza before tonight. She makes everything more exciting, and she’s the perfect dance partner. When we’re dancing together, we don’t have to worry about creepy guys approaching us. Liza taught me

how to twerk, and she said I'm a natural, so that's my new go-to move.

Liza leans in and says, "SOS. Your chiseled football hottie is behind us and wants to go somewhere quieter to talk. Let's go."

She's so excited, but I'm not ready to stop dancing, so I glance behind me and shake my head no. Dang, he looks good, but his ego can take a hit. He's in jeans and a tight gray shirt that frames his muscles. His hair glistens from the post-game shower. His beard is neatly trimmed, and his caramel eyes shoot daggers through me.

Liza laughs and replies, "Haha. He'll just have to stay here with us then."

She drags him closer until we are touching. We don't have a choice. There isn't much room to move. He looks uncomfortable on the dance floor with his hands in his pockets, and the way he isn't moving to the music. Buzzkill.

I lean closer to him so he can hear me, "You know you are allowed to quit brooding and dance, right?" I playfully touch his arm. The heat from his toned muscles ripples through my hand and down my body. His eyes lock with my hand, and carefully take in my body. No one has ever looked at me with this level of intensity. His eyes meet mine, but he isn't smiling. His jaw is locked, and his muscles tense as he stretches his neck side to side. My hand hasn't left his arm, and he hasn't made an attempt to move it off.

He leans in so close that his lips touch my ear. His hot breath sends a shiver down my back, and goosebumps rise all over me. His big hands grip my waist, and unlike the party he kissed me at, he squeezes my hips confidently.

"You know, if you wanted a jersey, all you had to do was ask, baby."

I remember that I'm wearing Locke's jersey. Why does he care? He leans back just

enough to see my entire face. My body is locked in with his, and I'm panting from his proximity. I can't think straight. Not when the sexiest man in this bar is standing in front of me with his hands firmly gripping my waist and his lips dangerously close to mine. I need to answer him or kiss him. That's the vodka talking...

"I'm wearing the jersey I want." I tilt my head slightly and smirk with my arms crossed over my chest. Ryan is much taller than me, and his presence is overwhelming. Even over the strong stench of alcohol, I smell his deep woody scent.

"You're killing me." He groans and tilts his head back. Before I can answer, he spins me around and guides my waist to him, traveling his hands up and down my body from my waist to my stomach.

Higher, please.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

I tilt my head back into his chest and let my body move with the music. My body responds to his touch and makes every decision for me. It's not lost on me that everyone without a few feet shamelessly stare at Ryan and I. I'm not thinking about the consequences of the night or how he humiliated me with that text. Liza's in front of me, giving the most embarrassing gestures of approval. She's dancing with a group of girls I recognize from the back-to-school bash.

At the end of the song, his husky voice is in my ear again, "Come with me."

He grabs my hand and firmly leads me off the dance floor to a less crowded area of the bar. I'm stumbling, and the room is spinning. I'm drunker than I thought. When we reach a place where I can hear him better, Ryan demands, "I need to know why you're in that jersey, Violet."

"Why do you care whose jersey I'm wearing?" I sass. I'm genuinely confused as to why this is the main topic of discussion tonight. Can he just stop talking and go back to holding me?

"It bothers me," he says.

"Does it only bother you that it's Locke's jersey?"

"Yes."

Between this jersey situation and truth or dare, I'm tired of getting in the middle of whatever issue Ryan has with Locke. His emotional whiplash is exhausting.

“Liza and I switched, ok? It’s not a big deal,” I answer.

“It’s a big deal to me.”

“Ok. Then give me a reason not to wear it.” Violet Evans, is that you or the liquor talking?

“Because Locke doesn’t deserve to have you wear his number, but keep it on if you want,” he says with a hint of anger and possessiveness in his voice.

My stomach flutters without permission. I turn to walk away because I’m beyond confused by his back and forth. I’m wasted and want to dance with my friend. I should have never danced with him or walked away from Liza. He took an ego hit when he saw me in Locke’s jersey and not his, the same way he intercepted our kiss at the party. If this is a point he needs to prove to himself that he can beat Locke, I won’t be the one he uses to prove it, nor will I be used by either of those two to assert their dominance over one another. I faintly hear him calling my name, but Raise Your Glass by P!nk just started, and I’m ready to dance.

14

Ryan

She’s the hottest girl alive, but she’s also got me ready to punch a hole through the wall. I was elusive, but what else was I supposed to tell her?

It bothers me because I only want to see you with my number on your back, and if I could rip that one off of you right now, I would. I felt better than ever having you in the stands with your eyes locked in on me.

That would have gone over well. Not to mention that we’re talking about my

teammate's honorary little sister. I already groped her on the dance floor. I need to screw my head back on, stat, but instead, I'm chasing her back onto the part of this place that I hate the most. I can't stand to watch another guy dance on her. I know she can hear me calling her name, and she's ignoring me.

She weaves through the crowd effortlessly while I shove people around to get closer. I'm close enough to see her with Liza and Hartley. Liza screams the words to this obnoxious song loud and proud. They're all wasted, and I know this is going to become my responsibility sooner or later. Hartley is tongue-deep in the girl who was sitting on my lap an hour ago. Isn't he supposed to be babysitting Violet? This isn't my job, but I can't walk away from her.

I swear to God, if any...just as the murderous thought enters my head, Mason swoops in and laces his fingers in Violet's. Their faces are so close that they'll kiss if he leans in more. Where's Liza? I scan the bar to find her also tongue-deep with Locke. Typical. He's too close. My breathing gets heavy, and the room blurs. I dart into the chaos and scoop Violet into my arms.

"We're leaving." Before she can answer, I have her wrapped around me in a bear hug. I head straight for the exit. Mason isn't leaving with her tonight. I am.

"PUT ME DOWN! YOU HAVE NO RIGHT TO TAKE ME AWAY FROM THE PARTY! I DON'T WANT TO GO HOME!"

She's trying to draw as much attention to us as possible outside of this bar. I need her to stop talking and get in my car. The last thing I need is Mason making a move on her. She's wasted and more than willing to engage with his flirting, and Hartley is preoccupied.

"I'm taking you home. You're drunk, and your two best friends have their tongues down other people's throats at the moment." Her small feet are kicking me now.

“I don’t care! That hot guy could have taken me home.”

“You want another football player to take you home? That sounds like an awesome idea. Hartley wouldn’t kill me or anything.” I never thought I would be someone who got into a screaming match outside of the bar, but here we are.

“This has nothing to do with Hartley, and you know it!” She can barely stand without stumbling. I need to take a different approach to get her in this car.

“Violet, please just get in the car. I want to make sure you’re safe and don’t do anything you’ll regret. That’s all.”

“I’m only getting in if you stop for snacks.” She crosses her arms over her chest and shoots me a pouty look.

I exhale a long breath, raking my fingers through my sweaty hair. “Fine.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

I would do just about anything for her at this moment, but she doesn't need to know that. I motion for her to walk to the passenger side so I can help her buckle in.

After we stop at the nearest gas station to get Violet a Coke Icee and M&M's, we pull into the parking lot of her apartment complex.

"Thanks for the ride," she slurs as she grabs the handle of the car door.

"Wait." I grab her arm, jolting to stop her. There's something I need to say.

"I'm sorry for earlier. I didn't mean to go caveman on you."

"Be more specific, Mr. Football."

Why does this girl need so many details? I pinch the fabric of Locke's jersey between my fingers. My brows furrow. "It bothers me." I exhale and meet her gaze. "I'd rather see you in mine."

Her eyes get wide, and her breath catches as she coughs to cover it up. "Ok." She stares at me with an intensity in her eyes that I haven't seen before. "Hartley won't come home until much later. Do you want to come in? I'm not sure I can make the stairs by myself."

Without question, I turn the car off and help her to the apartment door.

Violet

The emotional whiplash is real. I went from grinding against Ryan's muscular body to arguing with him, to screaming at him outside of the bar, to giving up and letting him buy me snacks. The way he ran after me at the bar and demanded I go home with him frustrated me to no end.

I was having so much fun, and he ripped me away from the hot guy flirting with me. The other part of me appreciates that he cares about my safety, but my gut tells me it's more. I fought him because I couldn't have him thinking he could boss me around like that, but deep down, I liked it. The only protection I have ever had was in my best friend, Hartley, but lately, I haven't needed him as much as I once did.

As I stumble up the stairs to my door, I find it hard to believe Ryan is behind me. This is far from how I pictured this night going, but the alcohol coursing through my veins tells me to just go with the flow. I don't know what made me grab his hand. I feel this gravitational pull toward him—the kind that you can't resist even when the whole world feels like it's pulling you apart.

“Hartley doesn't come home after he goes out?” he asks.

“No. It's a Saturday night after a home win. He won't be home until the morning at least.” I giggle because I know Hartley, and he's reckless. “You don't have to stay. I know it's the first home win and all. I wouldn't want to bore you with wine and TV shows.”

“I wouldn't want to be anywhere else,” Ryan replies, and if that doesn't make me melt into a puddle right there in front of him. We head into the apartment, and Ryan darts to the kitchen, “You need to eat something. What do you want?”

“I'm good. I don't think my stomach can handle much of anything at the moment.”

“Trust me, you’ll thank me in the morning. You need something with carbs or grease. Pick one, and I’ll whip it up.”

“Umm.. Ok.. There should be bread left on the counter and cheese in the fridge. What about grilled cheese?” I ask.

“Easy enough,” he replies. I show him where the pans are, and he commands the kitchen. His back muscles flex through his shirt as he flips the sandwich over to get the crisp just right. My face heats at the image of him taking control in other places besides the kitchen. Before long, he’s serving up the most delicious-looking grilled cheese on earth. The first bite elicits a soft moan and is actual heaven on a plate. I think I might die right here, right now. Cause of death: amazing grilled cheese.

“That good, huh?” he asks with a cocky grin painted on his face. Is this man good at everything?

“So good. I think you’re onto something with the food. My head feels less foggy already. Want to know a secret?” I ask, batting my eyes because something inside me is telling me to flirt my butt off.

“What kind of secret? Do I want to know?” Ryan chuckles, and before I can tell him, I jet off to Hartley’s unoccupied bedroom to score his “secret” wine stash.

“The party can continue!” I say, flashing the bottle of wine. Part of me wants this wine to mask my ruminating thoughts that take over at night.

“I think you need to pump the breaks on the alcohol before you’re vomiting all night,” he says with a hint of sincerity.

“Why? I’m having so much fun, though,” I whine.

“Ok, one glass, and then I’m cutting you off.” Reaching over to get the bottle out of my hand, his fingertips brush against mine. I watch as he opens the bottle and pours me half a glass.

I clear my throat. “What about you?” I gesture for him to take a glass.

He hesitates for a moment but nods and pours himself a glass, too.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

After an hour, we're laughing so hard we can hardly breathe. "Wait, so you actually climbed up to your bedroom window because you thought your mom didn't know you went out?" I snort as I ask him the silliest question. This is the best night of my life. I listened to Ryan and slowed my roll with the alcohol after the bar, but buzzed Ryan is hilarious.

"Yep. She was watching me the entire time. By the time I got to my room, she was waiting on the bed with the goofiest smile on her face. She called me the biggest idiot in the world and gave me a huge hug."

"She sounds awesome." I sigh, brushing a rogue tear away from laughing so much. I stare into his intense eyes. "Thanks for bringing me home even though I put up a fight. Why weren't you drinking?" I ask curiously.

"You don't have to thank me. I don't drink in public. Only when I'm at home or with someone I'm comfortable around."

"You trust me?" I ask.

"Of course. I don't know why, but I do," he replies, and I'm shocked by his honesty. When I first met him, I was turned off by his blunt nature, but now, it doesn't seem bad at all.

"I had a lot of fun tonight." I let out a yawn. I can barely keep my eyes open, but I quickly remember to check the lock of the apartment door. Getting up slowly so I don't face-plant, I click the lock back and forth three times to ensure it's locked.

“What are you doing?” Ryan asks.

“Umm, nothing. Just couldn’t remember if we locked the door or not.” Playing it cool, not wanting to reveal too much of my real self just yet.

“Let’s get you to bed. You’re in for a massive hangover tomorrow,” he says. Before I can think about that sentence, he grabs my face with the most tender look in his eyes and kisses me on the forehead of the main room. This kiss is different—he brushes my cheekbones as he takes his time moving slowly over my lips. He peppers my cheeks and forehead with small pecks, lifts me into his arms, and takes me to bed.

This time, I don’t want to fight it.

My eyes flutter open, and I immediately slam them closed. Who invented the sun? Because we need to have a serious talk. My head is killing me, and my hair is tangled against the pillow. I must have skipped brushing it before bed last night. Ugh, I hate myself so much.

I’m in my oversized pajama shirt and polka-dot flannel shorts. I don’t remember changing last night. Liza or Hartley must have helped me. I know I took way too many shots. My mouth is drier than the Sahara, ugh. I need water. I roll out of bed, and THUD! I nearly faceplant on the hardwood floor, falling directly on a man’s body.

Nice move, Violet. The man’s muffled voice comes from under my butt.

RYAN. OH MY GOD, RYAN STAYED THE NIGHT. Ok, remain calm, Violet. Why is he on the floor again?

“Why are you on my bedroom floor?!” I shoot up and scream.

“Good morning to you too, Vi,” he answers softly as he rubs the sleep from his eyes. Why must men like Ryan look so handsome in the morning? I am fairly certain that I look like death on two feet.

“Answer the question. You’re not supposed to surprise attack me first thing in the morning.” I rub my temples, wishing he would quiet down a little.

“Surprise attack? Violet, I slept on the floor to respect you, but you told me you were more than ok with me sharing your bed.” He winks. He has the audacity to wink right now. Who am I kidding? That man can bring me to my knees, but I’m still in fierce interrogation mode.

“You kissed me,” I blurt out. Dang, Violet, you could have blamed it on the wine.

“I did, and before you ask, I don’t regret it—not even a little bit,” he answers with the cutest smile I have ever seen in my life planted on his stupidly hot face. He has dimples for days. Why haven’t I noticed that before?

“You don’t? We drank a lot. We can forget this night ever happened and blame it on the alcohol.”

“Is that what you want?” he asks with sincerity in his eyes.

“I don’t know,” I answered truthfully.

“I don’t either,” he says. “You have no idea how hard it is for me to stay away from you.”

“Why are you telling me this? I swear, Ryan, if this is some joke that you are going to take back in a few minutes, please save it. I overthink a lot, and this is no exception. Be real with me. The back and forth is killing me.”

“I would be lying if I told you I know exactly what this is between us, but I want to spend more time with you to find out. I’ve never been in a relationship, and I don’t know if I even want one. This is new territory,” he answers with no hesitation. I can appreciate how transparent he’s being.

“I don’t know what I want either. I need to focus on school. Without school, I don’t have a future. I can’t let a man get in the way of that. Plus, I’m super hungover and still need to piece together what happened last night.”

I’m giving him an easy out. Isn’t that what guys want? To blame impulsive decisions on alcohol? This should make him leave and forget this ever happened.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“I want you in whatever way I can have you. I have film practice in about an hour, but I’ll be back when we’re dismissed.”

I’m left speechless in my bedroom as the tall, tattooed running back walks out my door. Trying not to put too much thought into Ryan, I proceed with my favorite day of the week. Sundays are my relaxation days. I don’t get out of my pajamas unless there is a very good reason.

My hair is thrown up in a messy bun, and I have my fluffy purple blanket on the couch with me. I’m stirring over last night’s drunken events, along with Ryan’s message to me on his way out the door. Could last night really change things between us? He’s so hot and cold, and I can’t afford to have distractions in my life. I don’t have anyone to fall back on.

Hartley still hasn’t graced me with his presence before his film practice. He parties hard and gets away with more than he should. My mind goes in circles like a fast-paced carnival ride. I have that gut-wrenching sensation right before you go down the biggest turn. A loud knock at the door shocks me from my thoughts. Ugh. I bet Hartley forgot his keys. I get up slowly to open the door, and I’m greeted by a grinning Ryan.

“I thought you were Hartley,” I say as I physically feel my feet cement to the floor.

“Babe, I never will be. Lucky for you, I’m better.”

“Excuse me?!” I answer his self-assured remark, and I can feel my face flushing. I suddenly realize what I’m wearing.

“I’m in my pajamas, so you can wait on the couch until I change.”

“Why would you change?” he asks sincerely, as if I’m not standing in front of his wall of sweaty muscles looking like an absolute troll.

“Because I look like death.”

“Don’t change.”

“I’m changing.”

“Don’t.”

“Give me three good reasons, and I won’t.”

“Easy. Number one, you look incredible, and those shorts let me see your legs. I might die if you cover them up. Number two, I want you to be real around me. Number three, however long you take to change is going to take time with you away from me.”

Well, I can’t really argue with that. He’s got a way with words, and I’m folding easier than I thought.

We silently walk to the couch. He wraps his arms around me, and I let him. He puts on a show that I don’t have to use any brain power to watch. My cheek is nuzzled into his warm body. I can feel his chest moving up and down with each breath. This feels right. Breaking the silence, he says, “Tell me something.”

I answer, “Ok. What do you want to know?”

“How did you end up at Springs U with Hartley? He’s a year older than you.”

I stay silent for a few seconds before responding to him. I'm deciding whether I can trust him or not. Should I let him see through the lens of my past, or should I give him the answer I give everyone else? I decide to step out of my comfort zone and give him the real reason I'm here.

"My grandpa passed away the summer before my junior year of high school."

He's rubbing circles around my cold arm, assuring me I can keep going. Keeping my apartment like the frigid arctic is my preference.

"It was just the two of us. He raised me the best he could. Hartley lived two streets over, and our grandparents were friends. We spent every day together. When Hartley's grandparents died, his dad moved in and took custody of him. He's an alcoholic. It was a really bad situation, so my grandpa let Hartley stay with us a lot. We got really close, and he eventually became a big brother to me."

Hartley is more than willing to share his back story, but you have to ask. I look up to my human pillow giving him permission to answer.

"What was he like?" Ryan asks.

"You would have loved him. He was obsessed with football. He taught me every rule of the game. We would watch football or highlights every night before bed. He played in college and coached a few years after that. He quit when he took me on. I never asked him much more about that. I didn't want to know what my parents were like. He's the only parent I ever had. He was everything to me, and when I lost him, I lost a part of myself with him," I say softly. My heart beats out of my chest, and my eyes well up with tears.

"He sounds great. Please tell me he fussed at Hartley during his Little League games. I would have paid to see that," he playfully chuckles and pulls me in tighter.

I laugh, “Oh yeah, it was hilarious! He would argue with Hartley over plays, and they both wanted to have the last word.”

“Where did you go when he passed away?” Ryan asks with concern laced in his voice.

“That’s when I felt the most lost I have ever been. I had no family who wanted me, so Hartley stepped in and moved me in with him. His dad had disappeared across the country, and he was living on his own. His dad deposited money each month in his bank account. I’m sure it was his way of taking care of him without actually having to be a present father. My great aunt, who lived hours away, signed my custody papers and helped me with money, but let me live wherever I wanted. She saw it as a relief.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“How was living on your own in high school? That seems really hard.” Ryan is still rubbing my arm, and I may faint if he stops. It’s the only thing keeping me grounded.

“It was hard, but we took care of each other. It always felt like it was us against the world. When he got a full ride to Springs U, he promised to get us a permanent place that I could share with him. We used our extra scholarship money to pay rent for the entire year up front.”

“You’re really strong, you know that, right?” he asks.

I turn to face him, and he’s staring at me with so much intensity that the room narrows. He’s gotten me to open up to him about things that live only in my mind. After what I just told him, he should think I’m weak and pathetic for relying on Hartley’s help so much. Instead, he thinks I’m strong.

“What changed?” I ask.

“What do you mean?” he answers.

“With me. I thought you hated me, or at least you were indifferent towards me,” I admit honestly. Part of my anxious thoughts is compulsively needing to know where I stand. I shut out most friendships and relationships because I can’t take the uncertainty.

“I don’t know. I tried to stay away because I wanted to respect Hartley, but you have a pull that I can’t explain,” he says.

“Is this a game?” Get it together. Don’t show him this side of you.

“No,” he says with a clipped tone, “I won’t lie and say I know exactly what I’m doing here, but I don’t play games.”

“Ok,” I say.

“My mom’s sick,” he blurts out. Seeing storms in his lost eyes squeezes my heart. This feels like something that not many people know, and I want him to feel as safe as he made me feel.

He continues, “She has ALS. It doesn’t get better. Today is the best it’ll ever get. She’s on a steep decline, and I’m all she has.” I grab his hand that isn’t curled around me. They are rough and calloused but so warm. I climb onto his lap so that we are face to face. I need him to feel my presence. Words aren’t enough right now. His hands drift to my waist, then to my thighs. He gently rubs the skin just below the hem of my pajama shorts.

“Nothing in my life has ever felt permanent. I don’t take risks.”

“I get it,” I whisper as I assure him with my eyes to keep going.

“The day I got her diagnosis, something died inside of me. I don’t ever think I’ll get it back,” His eyes pierce through my heart, looking for something to hold on to. There’s so much more to Ryan than I realized. He holds it all in. It’s easier for him to push people away than to let them see the real him.

“It’s ok to let me in,” I assure him. I could tell him how it’ll be ok. I can tell him how everything is going to work out, but it’s not. He needs to know that he can trust me and let me into his darkness. I lean into him for a gentle kiss. This one is different from the other kisses we’ve shared. It’s not rough, desperate, or fueled by alcohol.

My arms stay hooked around his neck while his arms are firmly placed on my thighs. I grant him access to my mouth and take in the woodsy scent I love so much. My body fits in his lap perfectly. The way he envelopes me oozes comfort. We don't stay in the kiss for long, not tonight. He places me back on his chest. His strong heartbeat against my ears puts me in a deep sleep.

16

Ryan

The rustling of blankets and sweet vanilla smell of Violet's hair wake me up, but I don't want to move just yet. The night before was full of wine, dancing, and questionable decisions. We needed this power nap. Practice wore me out. I didn't expect to open up to Violet about my mom, but those big blue eyes could get me to do a lot of things. This is the most peaceful sleep I have had in months, with Violet nestled in my arms.

Sleep doesn't come easy to me. I have too much on my mind to put it to rest. Waking up from a nap with a beautiful girl against me isn't new territory. The difference is I don't want this moment to end. Even one more minute next to her is a win. No one stays in my life long enough for me to become attached, and I don't allow myself to let anyone inside my head or heart. I've been through enough heartbreak and letdown to ever open myself up for failure again. I've been done with hope for years, but Violet is a glimmer of hope I've never had.

The pull she has on me is different than anything I've ever experienced. She makes me believe there is still a reason to look forward to the future. Something about her draws me in, even when I try my best to stay away. When she walks into a room, people notice. She'll deny it. Maybe because she doesn't even notice the effect she has on people. That girl has a warm presence about her that makes me want to know every single thing in that pretty head of hers.

She shared a lot with me tonight, and it made my heart grow bigger for her. She's stronger than she looks and stronger than I'll ever be. She tries to blend in, but she does the opposite. She doesn't lead conversations. She surrounds herself with resilient personalities to lean on.

As I'm daydreaming about Violet, I'm jolted by a slamming door followed by a screaming buffoon. I'd recognize that voice anywhere.

Woo hoo, Hartley is home.

"Someone better tell me what's going on right now before I lose my mind."

"You already have Hartley. I'm exhausted, and you're acting like a maniac," Violet murmurs against my chest. She's still half asleep, but Hartley isn't having it.

"I will not lower my voice when my best friend is about to get naked on our couch with my teammate." Hartley throws his hands up and down, pointing directly at us where we are both fully clothed.

"We were not about to get naked," Violet and I answer him calmly followed by a chuckle. She lifts her soft hair off my chest, and I place my hand over hers. The loss of contact hits me hard. I must have a death wish.

"Liars. He's grabbing your hand, and you were all cuddled up against him. I will take you to the ground, Shane." He lunges at me, but I don't move. I'm much bigger than Hartley, and we've been through this stunt before.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“Enough.” She leaves my side on the couch to scream at her best friend. “Cool it. We’re hanging out, and it’s none of your business. I didn’t question you about where you were all night. Let’s not forget that I’m an adult napping with a boy on the couch. No rules have been broken.” I chuckle at how parental Hartley is when Violet is concerned.

The fact that this overthinking, planning, anxiety-ridden girl can have a few moments of peace around me means I’m doing something right.

“Is this a thing? If this is a thing, let me know right now. No sneaking around. Be upfront with me,” Hartley says with an eerie seriousness to his voice.

I’m hanging on to Violet’s answer like it is the most important thing in the world. I want her to tell him that she’s mine. The fact that I’m falling for her so fast is alarming. I don’t allow myself to think too much about that because it’s not who I am. I know she isn’t technically mine. Yet. I need more from her to assure me that this is what she wants.

“It might be. That’s for us to decide. Also, you might want to go on a wine run tonight because I accidentally drank all of yours,” she says as she dashes off into her room, squealing with laughter.

“You did what?” Hartley’s voice trails as he chases after her to the bedroom.

Might. I can work with that. I can change might into something more. She’ll be mine before the school year is over. Guarantee it.

Violet

The next few weeks fly by with a sense of normalcy. Mondays roll around quicker than I'd like, but I'm in the minority of people who actually enjoy attending class in person on a Monday morning. Class is consistent, and I like that. The routine of class eases my mind. What I don't expect is Ryan calling an audible, or quick play change in football terms, to sit next to me.

"Good Morning, babe. I brought you something."

Babe? I selfishly chose not to correct him because I like it.

"A present?" I love presents. I'm too happy about this. He probably thinks I'm desperate. Chill, Violet. This is just the guy who happened to spend the weekend at my apartment, make out with me a few dozen times, and disclose our deepest secrets to each other. No biggie.

"This is the most Violet Evans present I could come up with." He whips out a pack of tropical-colored flair pens from behind his back. I gasp and fight a smile. Colored pens are heavenly.

"How did you know these are my favorites?" I grab the pack and immediately pop them open to organize them in front of me before class starts.

"Because I watch you, Vi, and these fancy pens make you smile."

I stare into his dark brown eyes and process what he just said.

Make me happy? He watches me? Smiling?

“Why would you care if I smiled?” I ask genuinely. No one besides my grandpa and Hartley has ever really cared if I smiled or not, much less noticed what makes me smile.

“Vi, if I haven’t made it crystal clear yet, I would do just about anything to see you smile. If I needed to buy out every pack of these things at Target, I would.”

I giggle in the quiet classroom. That draws attention to us from the other students.

“You deserve to be happy,” he says with that million-dollar smile.

Before I can think about all the reasons why we couldn’t work, class starts, and I can’t remember a single word the professor says that day. Ryan pinches my upper thigh under my desk, and it takes everything inside not to giggle. He can’t possibly be paying attention to the professor, either. I mouth the word “stop” with a small smile, and he winks. Scooting a few inches away from his reach doesn’t help much. My mind continues to drift to different scenarios. All of them involve the tattooed football player sitting next to me.

Class ends, and I’ve retained about as much information as a goldfish. Ryan and I are making the trek back to the parking lot when he abruptly asks, “Do you have any plans tonight?” He slings his backpack over one shoulder.

“Nope. Just getting ahead with studying, but I don’t have any tests this week. Why?”

“I’m taking you out,” he says with confidence.

I tilt my chin down, trying to hide my excitement. It’s just one date. Is it even a date? Or is this an outing between friends? It doesn’t mean we’re getting married. He picks

ups on the worry painted all over my face.

Grabbing my hand, he stops me to face him. “Calm down. It’s nothing serious. Let’s just get out and have fun.”

“Okay. Sounds good. Where to?” Knowing where we’re going is half the battle. The other half takes place in my closet, picking out the right outfit and makeup combo.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“How do you feel about bowling?” he says with the cutest smirk.

“I love bowling. I haven’t been in years, though. Most people hate the bowling alley shoes, but I live for nostalgia.” I giggle thinking about the times I’ve gone bowling in the past.

“A girl after my own heart. I’ve never minded the shoes, either. Brings back memories of when I was little. We used to go every Friday night. There was some sort of pizza and bowling coupon that my mom swears we couldn’t miss out on.”

“No way. My grandpa used to take Hartley and me, too. He would never take it easy on me, so I had to fight for my wins against those two.”

“Sweetheart, you’re going down. I don’t do well with losing.”

Did he just shamelessly flirt with me?

“We’ll see about that, Mr. Football.”

We part ways in the parking lot. Ryan says he’ll pick me up from the apartment at seven. I hop into my old car and mentally debate what I should wear. I want to look good and impress him, but bowling alleys are also more relaxed. I know I need backup, so I text Liza when I get back home.

Violet: SOS

Liza: What?!

Violet: Ryan is taking me bowling tonight.

Liza: Ahhhhhhhhhhhh. Can't say I didn't see this coming

Violet: It's not a "date" really. Just friends hanging out. Who've kissed.

Liza: Sure. We'll go with that. So delulu.

Violet: Can you help me throw an outfit together? I don't know which vibe I should go for.

Liza: OMW

Liza shows up to the apartment minutes later. She definitely broke multiple traffic laws to get here so fast, and I appreciate her dedication to the cause. She flies to the closet and lays out a few outfit choices.

"What vibe are you going for? Do we want the sexytoo good for the bowling alleyoutfit? Or playful,I'm here to win, outfit?" she asks as she continues to hunt through my closet.

"I don't want to look too over the top, but I also want him to see me in something he hasn't seen me in before," I surprise myself with my own words. Impressing men isn't usually on my radar, but here we are.

"This."She holds up a pink crop top. It has cap sleeves with ruffled material over the chest. "This top is perfect. It's not too fancy, but it also shows a little skin, and I love that for you. Pair it with these tight-fit jeans. He hasn't seen you in anything like this before. Right?"

"No. Are you sure it's not too showy?"

“Nope,” she says, popping the ‘p’. “You want to give him a sneak peek of what he’s missing out on. Show a little skin so he can imagine what’s underneath. It works every time.” She purses her lips with sass.

My cheeks flame red at the thought of Ryan undressing me with his eyes. The part that scares me even more? I want him to.

I slip into the outfit Liza picked out, and she begins curling my hair when I hear the apartment door fly open.

“I’m home,” Hartley yells from the living room. He saunters into my room without an invitation. “Playing dress up, Vi?” He laughs as he takes in my room.

“Our girl has a date,” Liza answers before I get the chance to deflect the question.

“A date?” Hartley questions with a scowl painted on his face.

“Chill, Hart. I told you Ryan, and I have been hanging out. It’s nothing, really. Just going to the bowling alley.” I try to brush it off as nothing more than a casual night.

“Let me break this down for you. Nothing is casual for guys. If he asked you out, it means he wants something, and I’m sure this isn’t an innocent bowling match,” he says with trepidation in his tone.

“Oh lay off it, Hartley. She’s always studying by herself in this room. She needs to live a little,” Liza retorts.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“As a matter of fact, girls, I’m in the mood for some lighthearted bowling, too. Think I’ll swing by the alley for a few rounds.” Swinging around to look, I roll my eyes. I can’t believe what I’m hearing.

“Oh no, no, no you don’t. You are not chaperoning Violet’s date.” Liza places the curling wand on the bathroom counter to continue her argument.

“I’m simply going bowling at a public place. No chaperoning involved,” he answers with a cocky grin.

“Don’t bother, Liza. I’m used to it. When his mind is made up, there’s no changing it.” I can’t wait to break this stellar news to Ryan.

“You’re so annoying. Well, if you’re going, I’m coming too,” Liza says. “Look at us. You’re going to chaperone Violet, and I’m going to chaperone you.” Liza gives Hartley a run for his money.

I belly laugh at the predicament I’ve fallen into. This should be an interesting night, for sure. Liza finishes curling my hair and throws on an outfit from my closet. She said she’s going for the same vibe as me so that I won’t feel out of place. Part of me wonders if she’s hoping to get Hartley’s attention. She hasn’t said anything yet, but I get the feeling she might have a crush on him. If there’s any chance he feels the same, maybe her outfit will be enough to distract him so I can enjoy this date.

We sit on my bed and scroll our phones until there’s a light knocking on the door. Hartley beats me to the door.

“What’s up, bro? Ready to head out to the alley?” Hartley can be such a tool. I push him aside and welcome Ryan in.

“Uhhhh, what’s going on?” he asks.

“Liza came over to help me get ready, and Hartley invited himself to tag along. He was being so smug about it that Liza joined in, too,” I say with my hands cupping my face. Heat creeps up my neck at how embarrassing this is.

“It’s okay, Vi. It’ll be fun. You look...” Before he finishes, Liza cuts in, “Incredible, beautiful, drop-dead gorgeous?” She hooks her arms through Hartley’s, and he shoots her an annoyed look.

“I was going to say perfect,” Ryan answers.

I’m officially a puddle.

“Let’s get thisperfectshow on the road,” Hartley says, grabbing our shared key ring off the side table. Before Hartley can protest, I hop in Ryan’s car, and Liza takes the shotgun seat in Hartley’s. She winks at me before they pull off.

Ryan and I are finally alone, and I shoot him a sympathetic glance. “I’m so sorry about this.”

“It’s fine. I know Hartley can get a little crazy. I’ll settle him down.” I can feel my hand drifting closer to his. He looks down from the road and laces his fingers with mine. I don’t question it because it feels too nice having my hand in his.

Ryan

Someone take me to the hospital. My heart jumps straight through my chest when I

see Violet's outfit. I'm so distracted by her that I don't mind Hartley's passive-aggressive attitude. Her crop top shows a sliver of skin just above her painted-on jeans. That one piece of exposed skin is going to haunt me all night. Her body is perfect, her curves in all the right places.

I can't think too much about what this is, or I'll get in my own head. I don't want to think about why I don't want to drop her hand or why I'm so nervous about making this a good night. We pull up to the old bowling alley in town, Hartley and Liza not far behind. I don't make a big deal out of Hartley inviting himself. Violet wears it all over her face that she takes the blame for it, and I want her to feel as comfortable as possible. The four of us stop at the shoe counter.

"Yeah, that's gonna be a no for me. Meet you at the lane, Vi." Liza tosses the words over her shoulder.

"See ya in a few," Hartley says, trailing shortly behind Liza.

Violet's beautiful eyes meet mine as she tries her best to hold in a giggle. "I guess we're the only weirdos who actually like the shoes."

"They wouldn't know a good thing if it hit them in the face." I wipe my sweaty palm on my jeans before taking the opportunity to grab Violet's hand again. Every move I make seems monumental, and I can't shake the nerves. She accepts and gives my hand a small squeeze. I give the employee our shoe sizes and ask for four players on alley eight.

"I've got mine," Violet says, reaching in her purse for her wallet.

"No. I'm paying."

"But, you don't have to. Friends pay for themselves." She tilts her head with pursed

lips and a questioning look. Her arms fold over her chest.

“Friends or not. I’m not taking you out and letting you pay for yourself. That’s not how I was raised.” This is a battle she won’t win.

“Fine, but I’m paying next time. Umm. If there’s a next time. I didn’t mean to assume...”

“There will be a next time.” I place my hand on the small of her back and rub up and down to relax her. She isn’t the only one whose nerves are through the roof. She gives me a soft smile.

We head to alley eight with our shoes on, ready to play. We walk up on Hartley and Liza, arguing about who should go first. Violet and I ignore them and begin our game. She’s a better bowler than I thought, and I’m not taking it easy on her. God, just watching her on the lane distracts me from the deafening music and kids screaming to their parents in the lanes beside us. She bites her lip before grabbing the bowling ball and shoots me the prettiest smile before she pivots to face the pins. Each time she bends over to throw the ball down the lane, I get the perfect view of her bottom, and I’m gone. I don’t even let Hartley’s death glares and comments intimidate me.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

Violet returns to the holder to wait for her pink bowling ball to shoot out. I jump out of my seat, wipe my palms against my pants, and meet her on the slick floor of the alley. Our hands graze as I reach around her body to guide her. Her cheeks light on fire. My mouth grazes her ear before she tosses it down the lane, eliciting goosebumps over her arms.

“Don’t miss,” I whisper seconds before she knocks down every single pin.

When the pins clamber down, she turns around, pumps her arms in the air, and does a little happy dance. Lucky for me, her little show rides her crop top up a few inches, giving me even more of a view. God. I’m sitting here hoping for a crop top to ride up a few inches.

I’m down bad.

After two games, I ask everyone if they want drinks at the concession stand. Liza and Violet start a two-player game giving me the perfect opportunity to get Hartley alone.

“Could you come help me with the drinks?” I ask Hartley. He quickly looks at Liza and Violet, clearly distracted by the game, and agrees.

Hartley has this aura about him. He screams, “I could care less”, but there’s lots of hurt under that funny exterior. I would know better than anyone. I’m the same way.

“Considering you took a sudden liking to bowling, I think we’re due for a conversation.” I start off light. I definitely don’t need Hartley swinging on me in the middle of the bowling alley.

“Bowling is for everyone, Ryan,” he says in a passive-aggressive tone.

“I like her,” I confess for the first time.

“It’s pretty obvious how out of your depth you are.”

“I’m trying to do this right. You know I don’t date, but Violet makes me want to commit. I can’t stand the thought of her with someone else,” I explain.

“Is this a jealousy thing? You want to mark your territory so other guys stay away?”

“No. Not even a little bit. Well, I guess it started that way, but I’m trying to figure it out. I want you to know that I’m serious about her.”

“I promised her grandpa I’d take care of her,” he unexpectedly admits. “She doesn’t have much experience with relationships.”

“That doesn’t matter to me,” I answer honestly. I don’t care about Violet’s past relationships or lack thereof. “This isn’t just a hookup to me. I don’t know what it is about her, man, but I can’t stay away. I meant what I said in the locker room that day.”

“Just don’t hurt her, or I’ll have no other choice but to avenge her dead grandpa and beat you to the ground,” he says jokingly, but I know he would kill me if I ever hurt her.

“She means something to me. Just trying to figure out what to do about it.”

“Ryan Shane has a heart. Who would have known?” He punches my shoulder with a laugh. We grab four slushies from the counter and head back to the girls. They’re sitting at an open table smiling and talking. Liza throws her head back and stops her

feet, but my girl has her hand under her chin smirking at her friend.

“Alright, my fellow chaperone. Let’s head out and give these two some time to themselves,” Hartley announces.

“I thought you’d never ask.” Liza leaves the table and gives us a farewell. “You kids have fun. The kind of fun I would have!”

It’s just Violet and I with our slushies left to talk.

“I hope Hartley didn’t give you too much grief.” She bites her pinky nail.

“Nah. I calmed him down.” Standing up to sit next to her, I wrap my arm around her waist.

She turns her head to lock eyes. Her cheeks are a permanent rose color when we’re together. “Good. Now we can get back to our original date without the party crashers. What’s your major? Just realized I’ve never asked.”

“Sports medicine, but I don’t plan to use it.”

“Why?” “I need to make it to the pros. There isn’t another option,” I answer curtly.

“Okay, but what if it doesn’t work out? Shouldn’t you have a backup plan just in case?” She’s nosey and can elicit more out of me than anyone other than my mom has.

“I don’t have one. Anything other than the pros is considered a failure.”

“When did you start playing, then? You must have played for a while, considering your talent.” She places her hand on my leg.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

Now, this is a question I don't want to answer. I shift uncomfortably in my seat/ I'm careful not to move Violet's hand from my leg. The decisions I made in high school leading up to my possible expulsion and the reason I started playing football still stay locked away in a vault. I don't want Violet to see me as the person that I was back then. I hated that version of myself.

"I didn't think anything was meant for me after high school, but football fell into my lap. The only reason I play is to make it to the pros and pay off my mom's medical bills."

"How bad are they?" She looks at me with genuine concern across her face.

"Could be worse, but her PT time has decreased because she's made so much progress. I know her health will deteriorate, and she'll need assistive technology to talk and do other things. I want to give her the option to have those things and live a normal life."

She takes a sip of her Coke slush and leaves a small drip on the side of her mouth. Before I can think, I wipe my thumb across her lips, catching her off guard—andmyselfoff guard. Her breath hitches, and her eyes follow my thumb.

"I really want to kiss you," I blurt out. I need to feel her.

"I think I want you to kiss me."

"Don't think, Vi." Before she can answer, I lean across the table and give her a gentle kiss. We're in public, so I can't kiss her the way I really want to. I want to grab her

hips where that little top exposes her soft skin, throw her down into my bed, and make her mine, but I can't do that in the middle of a bowling alley. I break the kiss sooner than I would have liked and lock eyes with the beauty in front of me.

"You're different than I imagined," she confesses.

"Good way or bad way?"

"Good way," she says. I don't know what this is, but I know one thing for sure. Violet makes me want to be different, and there's not much I can do about it.

I drive Violet back home and walk her to the door. The possessive part of me needs to know she made it inside safe.

"I had a lot of fun tonight. Thank you for everything," She inches closer and closer to my chest.

"You don't have to thank me for anything." I can't help myself. I place my hand on the back of her head and run my fingers through her smooth hair. I bring her mouth to mine. She gasps at the unexpected move, but her body quickly melts into mine, giving me full access to her sweet mouth. The little moans coming out of her during this kiss are absolute torture. I keep reminding myself that I need to be a gentleman and take this slow, but it's very hard to do that with her.

She breaks the kiss and lets out a breathy moan. "You can come in." She gives me the invitation of a lifetime. I hope to God I'm not about to blow this, but I need to force myself to take this slow. For her.

"Vi. I want to— more than you know. I'm dying here, but I want to do right by you." I whisper and nip her ear.

“I love that about you.”

Before Violet can second guess her word choice, I grab her face and kiss her harder this time. Kisses never meant anything to me before her.

I don't want to push her too far tonight, but I really want to stay.

“I'll stay, but I'm stopping myself from losing control. You don't understand how difficult that is when it comes to you,” I say, rubbing her chin with my calloused thumb. Her shoulders loosen. I need more of her, but before I lift her into my arms and carry her through the door, I whisper quietly into her ear, “I love everything about you.”

The next morning, I woke up before Violet. Placing my hand on her flushed cheek causes her eyes to flutter open. I wish I could take a picture of this moment and frame it.

I whisper hoarsely into her ear, “Will you please put me out of my misery and be my girlfriend?”

“Maybe,” she giggles into my chest. Jesus, morning Violet might be hotter than any other version of her. She doesn't have time to have self doubt or overthink her decisions. She's just, her. Why is it that everything she does becomes my favorite thing in the world? I'm so beyond gone for this girl.

“I can't promise I won't royally screw this up,” I say, grabbing her waist and tossing her on top of me. She straddles my hips, distracting me in the best way. “But I promise to give it everything I have.” She leans down, our faces inches apart, but she doesn't kiss me.

“Yes, Ryan Shane, I’ll be your girlfriend,” she whispers, gives me a gentle kiss, and rolls back to my side—nuzzling her head into the crook of my arm. My arm goes numb shortly after, but I could care less. I can’t think of a happier moment. After a few moments, we drift into sleep.

18

Violet

Liza: Wyd?

Me: At the apartment working on assignments. Why?

Page 25

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

Liza: I'll be there in 5. Throw a football shirt on and meet me outside with your assignments.

Me: Where are we going?!

Liza: You'll see ;)

Liza always comes out of nowhere with cryptic plans. She knows I would say no if she gives me too much information, so I guess it's for the best—less to overthink.

Lifting myself off the floor, I gather up my assignments, pens, and highlighters to put in my bag. I throw my hair together in a half-up half-down pony and toss on Ryan's practice shirt he left here a few nights ago. Ryan and I have been official for a few weeks now, and I couldn't be happier. I was nervous what the added attention around campus would bring, being the Ryan Shane's girlfriend, but he always treats me like I'm the only one in the room. Multiple honks blare through the apartment, indicating Liza's arrival. I sling my backpack on and take a few deep breaths before I run down the apartment stairs to hop in her car.

"Hey, girl!" Music blasts from the fruity-scented car, but she turns it down to talk to me.

"Am I going to regret this?" A laugh escapes, and for a moment, I wish I could be as carefree as her. She has genuine fun and doesn't care what others think of her. She makes decisions on the whim instead of overthinking her every move. Life would be more enjoyable that way.

“Absolutely not.” She winks and backs the car out of the parking lot. “We’re headed to football practice. I have a sketch assignment I need to complete for my portfolio. It needs to be a place on campus with different elements.” She keeps one hand on the wheel and talks with her other. “The field with players’ movement will be perfect!” Liza is an art major and possesses serious talent. She drew me once for a portrait assignment, and I couldn’t believe how detailed and beautiful it was.

“Ok.. Why am I going?”

“Moral support. Duh, and your football hottie will be sweaty eye candy.” Laughing and doing a little happy dance while driving, she says, “You know they practice shirtless, right?” She sticks her tongue out and fans herself.

“I’ve never been to a practice. Do you think Ryan will care? Let me text him—”

Liza cuts in and swats my phone out of my hand. “No! He’ll die when he sees you in the stands. Guys go all primal for the stuff.”

I clench my fists tight, a grounding technique. Spur-of-the-moment plans are overwhelming. I run through a mental checklist of things that could go wrong: The wind could blow my papers around, I won’t have enough space to lay out the articles, so I can use multiple sources at once, I’ll have to keep putting my pens in and out of their zipper case so they don’t fall. My hand flies to my forehead, and I begin twirling the baby hairs up top.

Liza reaches over to pat my lap. “I promise it’ll be fine, Vi.” She grins sympathetically. “If you feel uncomfortable, we can leave, and I’ll come back another day to sketch.”

That’s that I’m like this. I wish my mind would turn off and enjoy the moment with one of my best friends. “I’ll survive. It’ll be nice to see Ryan in his natural element.”

“That’s the spirit!” Her hands fly in the air, off the steering wheel.

“Woah! Don’t get us killed.”

We continue the short drive to the field and pull into the almost empty parking lot. We enter through the breezeway and head to the empty bleachers. The sounds of whistles blowing and players yelling ring through our ears. Liza and I travel up and down five different flights of stairs to find the perfect angle for her sketch, and she decides on a seat in the top corner. Setting my bag down in front of me, I kick my legs up and cross them. I’m on the hunt to find my man, and it doesn’t take long to spot him. Covered in ink, he squirts water from one of the shared Gatorade bottles into his mouth. He pours some on his head and shakes it off. Liza was right. He’s shirtless, sweaty, and undeniably hot.

It doesn’t seem like he sees me, and I don’t want to distract him from practice, so I take out one of my assigned reading articles from my bag and begin annotating on my lap. Liza stands on the bleacher seat, her tongue caught between her teeth as she focuses on her work. She scribbles ferociously with her fancy art pencil. As much as I try to focus on my article, my attention is constantly brought back to the field.

Every time Coach yells, “Shane!” My head pops up with interest.

“This is going to be great for my portfolio.” Liza turns to me and flashes her initial sketch of the field.

Leaning over to get a closer look, I’m shocked by the details she included in such a short amount of time. The texture of the grass, the depth of the benches in comparison to the open field, and small pieces of equipment scattered across the sidelines. “It’s incredible, Liza. Are you sketching any of the players?”

“Umm. Yeah. Just one, though.” She tucks her chin down and begins scribbling

again.

“Who are you drawing? You are more than welcome to use Ryan as your muse. The tattoos would really bring this piece to the next level,” I chuckle and stuff my article back in my bag. There are too many distractions here to get any work done.

“Actually, Hartley volunteered to be the male lead in my portfolio. I need to capture the same person in different elements, and I knew he would be perfect for it.” She stares onto the field and plasters a shy grin across her face.

“I’m glad he’s helping. I’m sure he loves the attention. He lives for stuff like that.”

Her brows furrow, and she shakes her head before responding, “You know, Hartley. The entertainer.” She keeps sketching, but something seems off. I don’t know what I could have said to upset her, so I shut up as she continues her work.

“Ladies! To what do we owe the honor?” Hartley yells at the top of his lungs. The players are taking a break. Some are hydrating, stretching, or sitting and talking. Ryan swings around to face us and waves to me. I stand from my seat and shyly waveback. My face is sweltering, but not because of the cool October weather.

“Getting some work done up here!” Liza yells.

“Why are you so far away? Come sit closer to the action.” Hartley motions for Liza and me to move to the first row in front of the benches.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“Nope. The angle here is perfect!” The echo of Liza’s voice travels down to the field.

The whistle blows, indicating that their break is over. Ryan motions for me to check my phone, and Hartley continues babbling about how Liza should move closer to get better details.

“Hartley!” He blows the whistle louder. “Shane!” he screams. “Would you two lover boys stop flirting with your girlfriends and join the rest of the team? Socialize on your own time.”

“Not my girlfriend, but I’m flattered that you think I’m pretty,” Hartley mouths back to his coach before turning to join him at midfield.

Ryan gestures up to the stands and points directly at me, “She’s mine, and I know she’s so far out of my league, it’s not even funny.”

“Yeah. I don’t know what girls would want to date two buffoons like you, but consider yourselves lucky.”

They continue to banter until the drills begin. I’m entranced by Ryan’s body and skill. His muscles ripple each time he gets a handoff from Mason. His strength is put on full display when he plows through the offensive line, creating space to run his route.

“Ready, girly?” She places her sketch pad in her bag and gestures to the exit. “Looks like they’re almost finished.”

“Yep. Let’s go.” We walk down the stairs and back through the breezeway. I

remember Ryan asking me to check my phone, so I whipped my bag around to fish it from under my papers.

Ryan: How am I supposed to practice when you're in the stands looking like a vision in my practice shirt?

Giggling at the text, I respond.

Violet: How am I supposed to work on my assignments when you're running around shirtless and sweaty?

I know he's in a practice debrief, so I won't hear from him for a while, but that doesn't stop my heart from fluttering without permission at a simple text.

19

Ryan

I think I like this boyfriend thing. Having someone to share my days with is something I never knew I wanted or needed. I turn into a goofy fool for that girl, and I could care less what anyone says. Sure, I've heard the rumblings around campus: This will never last. She's not his type. It's just a phase. Actions speak louder than words, so I put my head down and ignore those who don't believe I can be what Violet needs. It's easier for me to ignore the noise. I've gotten used to it being in the football spotlight.

Mason's Halloween party is tonight. I went last year but didn't wear a costume. The minute Violet caught wind about the party from Liza, she was all in on matching couple's costumes, so I'm going as a prince. I would do anything to make my girl smile, even wear questionably tight pants.

Flicking my blinker on to turn into her apartment complex, I take a deep breath, mentally preparing myself for the sight of the ridiculous costume Violet put together for me. To my surprise, the door flings open as I take the last step on the stairs. Blinking the shock from my eyes, the sight of Violet leaning against the door frame is a dream. She's dressed in head-to-toe pink, gold, and glitter. Her hair cascades over her shoulder in a braid with little white flowers poking out. A tight pink dress clings to her curves in the best way. Heeled boots with rhinestones decorate her feet. Her face is porcelain and sparkles when she moves her chin slightly in the light. Someone pick my jaw up off the floor. She's mine.

I stick out one hand to her and bow, giving my best prince impression. "Princess, Aurora. You're breathtaking."

She places her palm in mine and pulls me closer, pecking a kiss on my cheek. "Thank you, Prince Phillip."

"Let's see this outfit, my lady." She leads me to her room, excitement radiating from her body. Lying on her precisely made bed are the tight khaki pants she already warned me about, a blue vest paired with a black T-shirt, and a green chameleon stuffed animal. Her hands fly to her mouth, and giggles escape as she taps her feet from side to side.

"So... what do you think?" She grips my shoulder. "The outfit wouldn't be complete without Pascal." She grabs the chameleon and cuddles it to her chest.

"Let's do this, babe." Peppering kisses across her neck, I reach under her arms to tickle her. She laughs uncontrollably until she fusses with me to get ready so we're not late.

The pants are indeed tighter than I could have imagined, but this costume makes Violet smile, so I'll endure the wrath of tight pants for a night. Violet slicks my hair

down to one side with some sort of hair gel, giving me the trueprince effect,as she says.

The apartment door flies open with a loud bang when it hits the wall. “Harley Quinn has arrived, ladies and germs!” Liza’s scream vibrate through the house. Violet dashes quickly into the main room to meet her friend. I trail close behind my princess.

“You psycho! I love this!” Violet squeals as Liza twists and turns to show off her costume. She nailed the deranged look with two different color pigtails, a top that shows off her stomach, short shorts, a baseball bat, and bubble gum.

“Gotta live up to the hype,” she answers. With all the commotion from the girls in the main room, I didn’t notice Hartley walk in from his bedroom. He makes an unusually quiet entrance, which could spell trouble.

“Liza.” He juts his chin out to her and frowns slightly.

“Hey, Hart. Nice costume.” She grips the bat with both hands and nervously scans the room.

“Thought it'd fit.”he replies with a somber tone.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

Hartley's dressed as some kind of mob boss with pinstripes and a black hat. As the designated driver, I gesture for us to get going. Grabbing my princess' hand in mine, I lead her to the passenger seat while Harley Quinn and the mobster mutter things back and forth behind us. I'm beginning to love this new version of myself. The one that Violet Evans owns every piece of.

Violet

"This is Mason's house?" I gasp as Ryan pulls into the two-story villa. This is not where I expected a college student to live.

Letting out a small laugh, Ryan explains, "Yep. Mason's parents are loaded, so they bought this house for him to stay in while he's at Springs U." He grabs my hand across the seat and shoots me a small smile. "A palace fit for a princess."

Hartley huffs. "Can we cut the lover boy stuff for a night?"

"Let them be. Some people believe in finding their person, and they are it for each other." I glance into the rearview mirror to read Liza's expression. Animosity rolls effortlessly from her tongue.

Hartley leans in dangerously close to Liza's face. "Unless my person is at the bottom of a bottle. I. Don't. Care."

Ryan clears his throat. "Here."

I can't get out fast enough. I do not need to be in the crosshairs of Hartley's weird

mood. I want to enjoy the night with my Prince Charming. Ryan leads us to the mega door and opens it to what I can only describe as a real-life haunted house. Black lights cover the walls, illuminating everything in a neon glow. Music blasts across the house as couples grope each other in seductive dances.

“Want a drink?” Ryan asks.

I nod slightly as we weave through the crowd. I knew Mason was popular, but I didn’t expect this many people.

“Ryan! Violet! What’s up?” My head darts to the noise, sighting a vampire with blood dripping down his chin.

“Mase.” Ryan reaches out to bro hug Springs U’s certified golden boy.

“Mason? I didn’t even recognize you.” I give him a tight hug. Mason has always been welcoming to me and never made me feel out of place. “Thanks for inviting me. Your house is gorgeous.”

“This thing? Nah. Just a place to lay my head at night. Thank you for softening my boy up. Since he met you, he’s much looser on the field.” He shoves Ryan’s shoulder with a loud laugh.

“Yeah. Yeah. This princess does things to me.” He wraps his arms around my waist and nuzzles his chin in the crook of my neck.

Even though it’s dark, I know my cheeks are the color of tomatoes. Compliments and anything to do with Ryan and I’s relationship do that.

“Mase!” Two girls dressed as nurses grab his arms and kiss his neck, moaning seductively. “We’re waiting.”

“Duty calls. I’ll catch you two later.” He nips one of their necks with his teeth and guides them upstairs, undoubtedly to the bedroom.

Ryan’s hands still grip my hips, so I tilt my head to meet his gaze as he rocks me side-to-side. He’s wearing a lazy smile as he whispers in my ear, “You make me feel things.” Goosebumps jump onto my skin as he licks my ear. “That I’ve never felt.” Reaching one hand up, he grips my neck with a purpose. “I’m crazy about you, Princess.”

Words elude me as Ryan continues to whisper the dirtiest things in my ear in a crowd of what must be one hundred people. To him, there’s only me.

20

Ryan

The end of the first semester is quickly approaching, and football has been better than ever. I’m in my prime. My body is healthy, and my mind is laser-focused. We are looking good this year and clinched a playoff spot. I get a week off to go home before I need to report back to campus for playoff prep practices. The past few weeks have been blissfully normal, something I don’t come across too often. My favorite nights are spent by Violet’s side watching her study. She becomes dialed in on her work, and it’s the most attractive thing I’ve ever seen.

I lean against a pole, scrolling my phone and waiting for my girlfriend to leave her last class of the day. This has become my routine. I go where she goes, and I’m not mad at it. I spot her megawatt smile as she walks out of the building.

When she sees me, she quickens her pace and jumps into my arms like the cutest koala bear. If I could bottle up the feeling of having this girl in my arms, I would.

“How were your classes today, babe?”

“They were ok. Not ready for this break. My mind likes it when I stay busy, less time for me to get lost in my thoughts. The holidays aren’t the same without my grandpa here.”

“Come home with me,” I urge.

“What? I can’t do that, Ryan. Your mom, umm, would she want me there? I don’t want to intrude on your time with her.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“Vi, she’ll love you. She’ll like you more than me. She’s been begging me to find someone for years. Let’s go pack. We’ll head there tonight.” Her face lights up, and before she can overthink this and come up with all the reasons this isn’t the right thing to do, I grab her hand and lead her towards my parked car. Movement is good for her. Staying in one place to ruminate is not.

“Are you sure?” She shies away and retreats into that mind of hers.

“I want you there. If you don’t come, I won’t enjoy myself anyway because I’ll be obsessing over the next time I’ll get to hold you.” She darts her eyes down and gnaws on her short fingernails. Grabbing her hands in mine, softly rubbing them before I tilt her chin up to meet my gaze.

“Come with me.” My eyes bore into hers. I have never wanted to bring someone home before. Now that I have Vi, I want to do everything with her, especially meeting my mom.

“If you’re...”

“I’m sure.”

“Ok.”

After a few hours of packing the necessities at Violet’s apartment, we’re off to my childhood home. My mom doesn’t know Violet is coming. I want to surprise her with the best present she has ever received. Mom knows how obsessed I am with Violet, but she won’t believe that I’m bringing her home for Thanksgiving. I’ve never

brought a girl home to meet her.

It's colder than normal for a Florida November, so I crank the heat in my car to make sure my girl stays warm. She has a white knit hat on, and her nose is red from the nipping cold.

"What is she like?" Violet asks.

"She's a little feisty. She loves to mess with me, and she's not afraid to tell it like it is, but she also has the biggest heart and would do anything for anybody."

"Are you a momma's boy?" she says as she nudges my arm playfully.

"Absolutely not," I reply because who wants to be labeled as a momma's boy?

"You are." She giggles. The sound of her laugh sends me into a tailspin. I love hearing her let go of herself for a while and just live.

"I'll be whatever you need me to be, Vi."

"Ryan, there's something I need to tell you." Her mood shifts, and her tone is laced with worry.

"A good thing or a bad thing?" I glance her way trying to remain calm, but my grip tightens on the steering wheel.

"Kind of a bad thing, but I don't know. Not really, just a different thing."

"Vi, you can tell me anything." I grab her hand, trying my best to keep my eyes on the road. She needs the extra reassurance, and I'll give it to her every single time.

“Before I tell you, just know it’s ok if you feel scared or weirded out by it. I won’t be offended.”

“I don’t get scared.”The only thing that scares me is losing you.

“Well, it hasn’t been a big deal because usually when you spend the night, we are either busy doing other things or we’re so exhausted that it isn’t as noticeable, but I can tell that I’m not tired tonight, so there is potential for it to come up.”

She pauses, and I give her time to think about her words. Whatever it is she needs to tell me right now is scaring her. I can feel her hand shaking under mine, and I grab it tighter. I keep my eyes focused on the road ahead. She needs to know that I’m here, but I want to give her the opportunity to finish talking before I cut in.

“When I’m nervous, it’s worse, and that’s why I want to warn you ahead of time. I have, umm, patterns that I follow before I go to sleep.” I can feel her voice sinking lower and her confidence slipping away.I can’t have that.

“Keep going, Vi, I’ve got you.”

“It really depends on the night, but sometimes I’ll check to make sure I turned off the sink more than once. Checking that the door is locked is a big one. Sometimes it’s my thoughts. It’s hard to explain, but I think of every worst-case scenario at night, and it seems like the biggest problem ever at the time. I can’t turn it off, and it won’t stop until I’m so mentally exhausted that I finally crash. It’s a lot, and I wouldn’t blame you if it scared you off.”

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

I don’t know much about it, but I know that this is what she is describing. She thinks this information will make me leave? Who has made her feel like she should be

ashamed of this part of herself?

I pull into the next gas station I see before I respond to her. I need to make sure she hears me clearly. My blood is boiling, but not for the reasons she's thinking. Who has she surrounded herself with that would make her feel this way? I have a visceral need to protect the tiny storm next to me with everything I have.

“Ryan, where are we going?” She moves to look at me with a ball of nervous energy.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“Babe, give me a minute.”

As soon as we pull into an empty pump, I unbuckle my seat belt and adjust the seat back as far as it can go. After creating more space, I gesture for her to climb onto my lap. I need her close. She does without hesitation and opens her mouth to talk. Before any words leave her, I gently place my finger over her lips.

“The reason I pulled off is because I needed to be close to you as soon as possible, and I need to make sure you hear what I say next.” She looks at me with those diamond-cut blue eyes that, I swear, are piercing through my soul at every moment.

“What you told me doesn’t scare me. It makes me fall in love with you more than I already am.”

“L..L.. Love me? You just said you love me. Take it back right now. You haven’t experienced all of me, and you’re not allowed to say that until you have seen everything.” She gapes at me like a deer caught in the headlights.

I shake my head. “Not taking it back.” I grab her hands and hold them tight against my chest. “Never will.” I pepper kisses along her neck. “Do you think that I’m the type to run at the first sight of trouble? I run towards the fire, Vi. Always have. I want to burn in the flames together, you and me. I want us to smolder when it’s over and fade into the smoke with you.”

She quickly cuts in, “It isn’t easy. I can barely handle it, and no one has ever seen it up close and personal like you will this week. I can keep it together for a night or two, but it eventually shows. Hartley hasn’t even seen it all. I keep the worst nights to

myself.”

“I want you. I want every single part of you. The parts that you think are broken are the parts that have patched me back together. Just let me know how I can help you.”

She grabs my neck and squeezes so tight that I think I may lose air. Her fingernails carve little crescents into my neck, and it’s the best type of hurt. If I die like this, I’ll die happy. I pull her away slightly and kiss her soft vanilla lips that grant me access. This is the most vulnerable she has ever been. I love every side of her. Her hips roll into me, and I let out a groan. I tip my head back to collect myself.

We’re in a gas station parking lot, Ryan. Get your head together.

She’s so sexy, and I lose control in her presence. When she’s on my lap, I feel the bond we share. Her body molds perfectly together with mine. We kiss for what feels like hours until we finally break apart.

“Stay right here. I need to run in for something.”

I return to the car with a jumbo pack of original M&Ms and shake the bag between us.

“Yes.” She pumps her fists in the air. “Take some now before I eat the entire bag.” I smile as she giggles and rips the bag from my grip. The candy is fully in her space, and it doesn’t look like she has any intention of sharing. The sound of her laugh is ingrained in my brain as my favorite sound to ever exist. She strategically pulls out each blue M&M first, gathers them in her palm, and tosses them back. How did I miss the signs of my girl struggling with OCD? I guess I haven’t spent the night much, and when I did, we were so consumed with exhaustion that I didn’t bother to notice. She crunches, chews, and swallows as I pull onto the main highway before she touches the base of my neck and whispers, “Ryan, I love you, too.” She stares off

out the window, and I ride the rest of the way with the biggest smile on my face.

Violet

Ryan tells me we are close, but the panic I felt in my chest is completely gone. The drive to his mom's house is about half an hour, but I wish it was longer. I feel relieved after telling Ryan about my struggles with OCD. I've had these rituals for as long as I can remember, but the only person who really knows about it is Hartley. He's the only one who knows has access to my secrets and insecurities, but now Ryan does, too. What I thought would make me want to vomit and cause him to run in the opposite direction actually feels amazing to get off my chest.

It feels good to let someone in and not carry all of the burdens of my life on my own. I gave him a part of myself that no one else has. He's about to experience my deepest flaw and my most irrational mindset up close and personal. In my heart, I know it will be ok. He won't run from me. Ryan has opened up to me about his mom, but I know he still guards secrets tight to his chest.

Ryan turns left into the driveway of his childhood home. The house is made of red, worn-down bricks and a white door. It's more inviting than any place I've ever lived. There's a small wrap-around porch with a "Welcome Snowmies" sign hanging from the door. I hope she likes me. I never had a place that I considered home. Grandpa's house was where I lived, but everything always felt temporary. I wasn't stupid. I knew his age and his health issues.

"We'll get the bags out later. I want to make sure you meet Mom before she heads to bed. Some nights are more exhausting for her than others." He explains. "Oh, and there's no such thing as Thanksgiving then Christmas to her. She's one of those holly-jolly people that skip right over turkey day."

I nod, appreciating him sharing this small detail with me. Before I really got to know

the real Ryan, he masked everything with crude remarks and short answers, but he's different now. He's mine. Before we can knock on the worn door, it flies open, and a petite woman screams for Ryan to give her a hug. My heart melts into a puddle as Ryan embraces his mom, her fragility not well concealed. She has short brown hair, not long enough to pull back. She's wearing black stretch pants and a purple shirt.

"Mom, I want you to meet..." Before he can finish, his mom cuts in and says, "This must be the girl I've been waiting my entire life for! Ahhh! Ryan, why didn't you tell me you were bringing someone?! I would have cooked or cleaned or something!" She fusses at Ryan, but her tone shows it's all in love.

"I didn't want to spoil your Christmas gift. Aren't you glad I didn't shop for clothes again?"

"Blessings come in all forms, love. Violet, I've been dying to meet you. My son is a man of few words, and I needed all the details about his dream girl!" She chuckles as she stares at me with adoration and love. She doesn't know me at all, yet she looks at me like I'm her second favorite person.

"Jesus, Mom, jumping right in, aren't you?" Ryan replies with a hint of embarrassment.

I have never experienced anything like this before. My parents dashed the minute I was born, and all I have ever known was my grandpa. He did a phenomenal job raising me, but nothing really compares to maternal love. She grabs me and wraps me up in her tiny, cold arms. I return the gesture and squeeze her tight enough to let her know I am grateful to be here.

"Thank you so much for having me. I hope it's ok that I'm here. Ryan didn't want me to spend the holiday alone, but I swear I would never do anything to come in between the time he has with you."

“Don’t be silly. You being here has made my dreams come true. You have no idea,” she says as her hands grab my shoulders. Her smile beams wide.

“Grab your bags and come in! We have lots of catching up to do, and I refuse to miss any details.”

“I’ll grab the bags, babe. You can head in.” Ryan paints a soft kiss on my forehead and walks to the car.

I follow his mom into a house that feels like the inside of a Hallmark Christmas movie, dressed in classic decorations, most of them looking vintage. The tree is decked with tinsel and bubble lights. The mantle above the fireplace has five Santas dressed in different outfits, and a candle burning smells like peppermint hot cocoa. Ryan was right about her love for the holidays. I feel more connected to his mom because I’m also one of those Christmas fanatics.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

Grandpa was never a decorator. He preferred things plain and simple. We had a Christmas tree, but that was it. I didn't mind because I didn't know any different. This is going to be the best Thanks-Christmas ever.

The three of us gather in the main room. Ryan's mom sits in the single reclined chair, and Ryan has his arm draped around me, cuddling next to him on the bigger couch. He started the fire, and his mom made us hot chocolate. We are giving Ryan's mom the play-by-play of our first few encounters together. Ryan insisted that we leave out most of the obnoxious details, painting him as a jerk, but his mom caught on pretty quickly that we were purposefully leaving things out of the stories. She would not let it go, so Ryan started with all the details from the beginning.

"Ok, ok, ok, run that one by me again, mister, because I surely did not hear that correctly!" Ryan's mom scolds him, and I can not stop laughing. He's telling her the part where he kissed me at the back-to-school bash and dashed out before saying a word to me. I adore how easy his relationship with his mom seems. This is a more tender side of Ryan that I've been coming to love. He exudes calm in this house.

"Ryan Shane! I can't believe how inconsiderate you were! Look at her! She's perfect, and you just ran out because you were scared?! What is this, some type of rom-com?!"

I love Ryan and his mom's dynamic. They are so comfortable around each other, and he can't help but give in to all of her silly requests.

"It wasn't like that, but I've got her now. I didn't screw up too much."

“And you should be counting your lucky stars!”

“Ok, let’s move on to a topic that doesn’t require you grilling me for my decisions.”

“We cantablethis, but make no mistake, we will revisit it.” She gently leans forward off her chair, steps toward her son, and pushes him back. Ryan grabs his muscular shoulder and pretends like it hurt him.

I can not stop laughing. This is the most fun I have had in a long time. This is what having a real family is like.

When she leans back into her chair, I see her face jerk, and it looks like she’s having trouble getting her next words out.

“Mom,” Ryan jolts off the couch to her side, “Take five deep breaths before you talk again.” Worry is etched in his brow. He’s trying to be calm for her, but the way he jolted off the couch to her side tells me he’s worried. He moves to squat next to his mom beside her chair. He watches intently at her breathing. After a few minutes, she seems ok.

“I’m sorry, Violet. I hope Ryan filled you in on my issues before you came here.” She looks embarrassed, and my heart cracks open a million times. The woman who was laughing and joking with us is long gone, replaced by the somber reality of her illness.

“He did, and I think you’re the strongest person I have ever met. Fighting this and coming out like a warrior.” I get up and walk to her small frame covered by blankets. I touch her cold hand and rub the top to assure her that she has no reason to be ashamed or embarrassed in front of me.

“Mom, you look tired, and I don’t want you losing sleep. I’ll walk you to the

bedroom, and I promise we'll have plenty of time to rehash all the ways I've screwed up so far tomorrow." He laughs and helps his mom off the chair.

She's so tiny compared to her son. He towers over her. Ryan locks his arm with hers to steady her. It takes a minute for her to gain her balance and walk to the bedroom. I don't follow them. When he returns, he approaches me and pulls me onto his lap. He looks like a broken mixture of happy and sad, complete and incomplete, put together and falling apart. I'm a fixer. I try not to take space in other people's lives, but as I rattle ideas in my brain, I conclude that I can't fix this. This isn't fixable. All I can do is hold him and let him know that I'm never letting him go. Giving him false assurances and security about his mom's condition doesn't seem helpful. Instead, I want to be his rock.

Breaking the silence, I say, "She's amazing. I've never had a mom or anyone close to someone like her in my life. You are so lucky to have her." I gently rub the side of his face.

"I know," he answers softly.

He shifts my face slightly away from him. I'm still curled on his lap, but there is distance between us. I can sense him closing himself off. I don't want to lose this moment with him. His chin gently rests on my shoulder. We sit in silence, and I feel my shirt become damp. Wet tears coat my T-shirt, marking me with his pain. This is the first time I've seen him cry. I know he didn't want me to see it. I turn back to wipe his tears away with the pad of my thumb. When I face him, I'm hit with a gut punch. My strong force of a man looks broken. His eyes are in a distant place. His jaw is clenched with a stern look. Silent tears continue to roll down his rough exterior.

"She's not going to get better, Vi. It's getting worse, and when she's gone, I'll lose the final piece holding my life together."

I place my legs on both sides of his muscular thighs and hang both hands on his face.

“You will. I can’t change that or tell you that it’s going to be ok. It’s going to hurt. It’s going to feel like the world is falling apart, and there’s no way to ever put it back together again. The only difference is that now you have an anchor, someone to pull you up from drowning. I’ll throw you a life vest and drag you back up to the shore. You won’t face this alone, Ryan.”

“You’re my anchor,” he whispers softly into my ear.

“I always will be.” I kiss his forehead, and he slowly picks me up and heads to the bedroom. I usually fight off gestures like these. Hyper independence has become the norm of my life, but feeling Ryan’s stronghold on my body assures me that I can rely on someone other than myself for the first time in a very long time.

21

Ryan

This week at home has felt like a dream come true. It’s tough to come home again for Christmas because playoffs are always in full swing. Having Violet here in the home where I spent the majority of my adolescent life feels right. It’s the missing piece to the puzzle. I’m not alone anymore.

Mom makes sure that we do all the traditional holiday things: cooking a turkey, baking cookies, wrapping and unwrapping presents, and watching old movies. I love her and the fact that she still does all of these traditions for us, even though we’re adults. I would usually fuss about how she doesn’t need to go overboard in her condition, but the look on Violet’s face makes it worth it. She hangs on my mom’s every word, laughs at her corny jokes, and volunteers to participate in all of her Christmas crafts.

I sneak out of bed early to check on my mom. Waking up at 5 a.m. isn't new for me. Sleep doesn't come as easy as it used to, so I'd rather wake up than uselessly toss and turn in bed for hours.

I tiptoe out of the room and gently crack the door behind me to not wake up sleeping beauty. Before I walk across the house, I peek through the small crack in the door to take another look at my sleeping girlfriend. Her hair is tied in a messy bun above her head. Her small hands grip the blankets just under her chin. The rest of her body is wrapped into a blanket burrito.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

The first few nights here, she went through her rituals. She checked to make sure she unplugged her hair straightener five times and the position of the door lock. After a few times in and out of bed, I grabbed her tight and wrapped my arms around her in silence. Her legs instinctively wrapped around my waist, and her head nuzzled into my neck. I created a barrier around her to make her feel safe. I whispered calm words into her ear until she was too exhausted to stay awake anymore. That has become our norm. If I can be that person for her every single night, I want to be. I'm out of my depth with this one, and I don't know the right things to do or say, but I'm willing to learn.

I shut the old creaky door, head down the dark hall, and into the kitchen. I haven't heard from Mom yet, so I have a few minutes to make my coffee and watch some ESPN highlights before checking on her. I allow my thoughts to wander to the past week. It's been a dream come true.

Jolting me out of my thoughts, a loud buzzing noise fills up the quiet ambiance of the house. I check the pocket of my gray sweatpants to see who's calling, but the sound isn't coming from there. I scan the room to make sure I'm not hearing things and spot my mom's phone on the kitchen table. She must have left it there overnight. I pick it up to make sure it isn't an important call. That's when I see a voicemail from the physical therapist's office. I opened her phone to see five more unanswered voicemails from the same number. My stomach drops, and my body tells me that this isn't a good sign. I unlock her phone and listen to each one over and over.

“Ms. Shane, we are reaching out to make sure you received the letter in the mail about our pricing increase. We haven't heard from you since, and you have missed your last month of appointments. Please call us back so we can get you back on the

schedule. Thanks again.”Beep.

The next four are identical messages with the number of appointments my mom has missed increasing with each voicemail. How many messages has she already listened to like this?

A ringing sound fills my ears, and tunnel vision clouds my sight. I stare at her phone and try to keep my composure and concern under control. I want to launch the phone across the room and break it, hopefully leaving a hole in the old wall.

She hasn’t been going to physical therapy.

That is the only thing that keeps her muscles at the strength they are at now. Price increase? Why wouldn’t she tell me? My breathing intensifies, my palms sweat, and my heart might as well beat straight through my chest. Without thinking about my next move, I barge into her room, holding her phone in my shaky hands. Luckily, she’s awake.

“What is this about?” I’m standing at the foot of her metal bed frame, waving her phone back and forth.

“What is what about, hon?” she asks so calmly that it makes me want to scream. She’s casually lying in bed with a home and garden magazine sprawled across her lap. She’s wearing her readers and looks completely at ease. That makes one of us.

“You have been missing your PT appointments for months and haven’t told me. I don’t care about the money, mom. I’ll figure it out. You need this therapy.” My voice cracks with pathetic desperation.

“Ryan, baby. We need to talk.” She pats the spot next to her, making a noof sound with her thick comforter. I fall into the spot like I did so many times as a kid and

troubled teen. Our talks always grounded me and helped me see things through a clear lens. I'm not so sure today's conversation will go the same way.

"The price increase, it isn't just a few hundred dollars. It's a lot, and I think it's unreasonable. I tried to sign up for insurance, but I got denied because ALS is a pre-existing condition. You know my muscles won't ever get better. I can't see paying for this or putting more pressure on you to find the money when I'll only deteriorate in the end. I even..." I can feel her gently pat my back, but I can't let her finish this sentence.

"Stop," I cut her off.

"Ryan, this isn't going to..."

"I said, stop. You're going to PT. I'm calling them today to get the updated invoice. It's not a choice for you. This is the only thing we can do, and I will die before I let you quit trying to get better. I've been saving up some money giving one-on-one football lessons. It should be enough to cover the difference."

Lies. I'm lying straight through my teeth. I don't have the money, but I know how to get it. I need to make a few calls to people I never thought I would speak to again, but it doesn't matter. I don't care what I need to do to get it. It'll get paid.

"Ryan, I don't want to rely on you for this. You have your own life with a future. Please don't make your life harder for mine," she pleads with me, but I have no wiggle room on this decision.

"It's as good as done," I say with finality. I've always had a fierce instinct to protect and care for her. How could she be so nonchalant with her health?

I storm out of her room, still furious that she kept this from me. Sitting at the kitchen

table, I run through ideas of how I can get money quickly. With football, school, and lessons, I'm slammed. It would take forever to save up the amount of money she'll most likely need for one week's worth of visits. I could reach out to the team. We've done fundraisers in the past for people in need around the area, but then I'll get the looks of pity that I hate, like some charity case that needs saving. I do have a way to get a huge chunk of change in a matter of days. I'll have to revert back to my old ways of lying, cheating, and stealing, but this time, I know how to fly under the radar.

This is the exact reason I never let anyone into my life. I have to make tough decisions like this without a solid plan. I don't get the happy ending. The life I built, or thought I was building, may come crashing down right in front of me, but I'll try my best to save it. I may have to break her trust to convince her everything is okay because I know if I lay it all out on the table for her, she'll do anything to help. The problem is, I can't be saved. I won't drag her into the dark abyss of my old life. I need to do this on my own.

Violet

Turning over in Ryan's warm bed, I reach out to grab my muscular pillow, but my hand hits an empty spot. I lean over for the nightstand to check the time on my phone, 9 a.m. Dang. I woke up later than usual this morning, but I'm surprised Ryan's warmth leaving the bed didn't wake me up. Rolling out of bed, I head to the bathroom and take a look at myself in the mirror. My face looks refreshed. There are no hints of dark circles under my eyes, and I owe my good night's sleep to Ryan's patience and understanding. He's been great with accepting my rituals and compulsions, better than I could have ever imagined. What I thought would drive him away has brought us closer together.

Having someone to turn to that isn't Hartley feels really good. I love Hartley, but my love for Ryan is on a different level. Hartley and I have lived in survival mode for so long that it feels nice to allow myself the comfort of letting Ryan take care of things

for me.

I finish my morning prep by brushing my teeth, running a brush through my hair, and seeing what they are up to in the living room. When I walk out of Ryan's bedroom, I see every muscle in his back rippling taut. His hand grips an ink pen as he's scribbling something down on an old receipt. His shoulders are set high, and he tosses the pen on the table before covering his forehead with his hands. I walk up to him slowly and rest my hand on his back. He jumps a little from his chair and turns around.

"Oh hey babe, what are you doing up this early?" he asks nervously.

"It's already nine. I'm surprised I stayed in bed this late. Are you ok?"

"Yeah, yeah, I just lost track of time. We should start packing up our stuff to head out tomorrow. I want to leave pretty early in the morning." His eyes don't quite meet mine. His jaw is set tight, and the grinding of his teeth doesn't stop.

"Ok, I'll start packing right after I change. Is your mom ok? You seem on edge."

Before I can dig into his mood even more, he snaps back at me and says, "She's fine, Violet. Could you stop with the twenty questions, please? I'm heading out for a while. I have some things I need to get done."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

With his cryptic and snappy answer, he gets up quickly from the kitchen table, not bothering to tuck his chair back into its place, and leaves. I'm left alone, feeling like a confused idiot. Instead of staying at the table for his mom to walk out and see me pathetically staring at the door her son just stormed out of, I go back into his bedroom.

Something is wrong. Did I do something? Why is he so short-tempered today? His behavior this morning reminds me of the Ryan I met at the beginning of the semester. The one that didn't let me into his life and shut everyone out. Now I know that's a facade. I don't want him to go back to that version of himself, but I'm worried he's slipping from me. Is he stressed seeing his mom's condition? Or is it something more?

Violet 1 p.m.: Are you ok?

Violet 5 p.m: I'm starting to worry.

Ryan 5:30 p.m.: I'm fine. I'll be home soon.

Ryan returned home late this afternoon. He sits on his spot on the bed and stares off into space. I'm beyond annoyed that he didn't seem to think it was important to reply to my texts or let me know where he was going. We haven't said much to each other, and his mom hasn't come out of her bedroom today.

While he was gone, I reviewed the syllabi of my new course load and packed my

things to leave in the morning. I kept up the silent treatment and headed into the bathroom to shower for the night, spending more time than usual in the hot water. After my shower, I applied my skincare treatment routine in no rush to return to my moody boyfriend. He has no right to treat me like this, even if he is angry. I can't control that.

I chose to wear one of Ryan's football shirts tonight. Even though I would love to wring his neck, I like the way his clothes smell like mahogany and man. It helps me sleep. Silently walking out of his bathroom, I roll into the queen-sized bed next to the man I desperately love but can't crack open. He gets up to turn the lights off. The bed bends when he returns. He suddenly pulls me to his bare chest and whispers, "Vi, I'm so sorry. For everything. I love you."

I prop myself up on one arm. I can't see his expression in the dark bedroom, so I speak my mind. "Then don't shut me out. I thought we were past this part of us," I plead for him to continue to let me in, but he doesn't answer. His hands find my stomach under his enormous shirt, and he rubs circles on my skin, making it difficult to think straight.

"Why did you apologize?" I ask.

"Because I needed to." His answers continue the vague theme. That's not the answer I want or need.

"You can tell me what's bothering you. We'll figure it out together."

"Everything is fine, Vi. Just promise me something."

"Anything."

"Don't give up on me. P..Please, no matter how much I screw up, don't leave. I..I

need you.” The pain is evident in his cracking voice.

His heart wants to give me the information that I so desperately need, but his head stops him. This man can’t get out of his own way. I change tactics because words are useless tonight. Giving him time will hopefully allow him to confide in me. Instead of continuing my pursuit for answers, I lean on his chest and kiss him softly, nuzzling my head into his neck for the night. I won’t continue to push him, but something unsettling is happening. I hope and pray love is enough for us because I can’t imagine a life without Ryan Shane in it now that I have him.

22

Ryan

I wanted to tell her, but I couldn’t. She would look at me with pity. I couldn’t stomach seeing the broken reflection in her eyes. She would tell me there is another way to fix this. There might be another way for someone else, but for me, in this lifetime, there isn’t.

When I left her sitting at the kitchen table, I wanted to punch a hole through the wall and destroy everything I could get my hands on. I knew I was hurting her by shutting her out the way I did, but I couldn’t see another way around it besides lying. Confusion was written all over her face. Concern etched deep in her brow. I needed to walk out and clear my head. The same conversation kept replaying in my head over and over like a broken record of the worst song ever produced.

“Mr. Shane, yes, your mother’s treatment cost has increased substantially. After running the claim through her insurance, we’re looking at roughly five hundred dollars per visit.”

I called the doctor’s office as soon as I walked out of my mom’s room. The call

ended before Violet snuck up on me in the kitchen. I had already made up my mind that no matter the cost, I would get the money.

A legal way? No. A way that could change the course of my future forever? Yes. Whatever. It needs to be done. I don't have a future anyway if I lose her.

"When is the money due? I can pay one month at a time. Please tell me this will get her back on schedule."

"Yes. We can do that, Mr. Shane."

You know the rest. What you don't know is that after I stormed out of the kitchen and didn't come back until dark. I made a call to an old friend, Logan Jones. Friend isn't exactly the right word. He doesn't care about me or look out for my best interest like a good friend would.

With shaky hands, I jump in my car to minimize the risk of someone in the neighborhood hearing my conversation. I unlock my phone and stare at the contact info of the person I thought I removed from my life permanently. I thought I gave up that part of my life long ago. Springs U gave me a new purpose. If I kept up the football seasons I've been having, I would be a first or second-round draft pick. I thought I had a future with the shy girl that bulldozed my life and turned it upside down. That future may have included a decent house, wife, kids, and a white picket fence. Dreams of a better life disappeared before my eyes when Logan answered the call after two short rings.

"Shane. Long time no see. Whatcha been up to, man? Miss the old game?" He chuckles into the phone as if I'm not single-handedly ruining my life with this call. Logan is twenty-five. When I met him in high school, he had already dropped out.

"Cut the crap Logan. You're still in the books, right?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“Yep. I never stopped. Money’s too good. Whatcha looking to do?”

This time will be different. I know my mistakes last time and won’t let myself get caught this time. I can’t afford to.

“College football bets. Send me the next few weeks on the cards. I need the money.”

“That’s my boy. Wait, I thought you were some hotshot college football star now? You know this won’t fly if the NCAA finds out?” he asks with fake concern. Logan doesn’t care if this ruins my college football career or demolishes my chances at the pros. All he cares about is the next check that hits the banks.

“You think I’m stupid, Logan? Do what you do best and get the odds over to me as soon as possible.”

“Alright, Shane, I’ve got you.”

I end the call, punch the steering wheel until my knuckles bleed, and let out a guttural sob until late afternoon.

Being evasive with my girlfriend today wasn’t on my bingo card for the holidays, but here we are. I know I should end things with her. She doesn’t deserve my complicated life full of lies and questionable decisions. I know I’m doing wrong by her, and she’ll never forgive me when she finds out what I’ve done. That was my plan when I came back home tonight, but when I open my bedroom door and see those crystal blue eyes that have somehow altered my brain chemistry over the last few months, I can’t. Call me selfish, but if our relationship, inevitably, has an expiration

date, I want to spend every waking moment worshiping the ground she walks on.

We said goodbye to Mom bright and early the next morning. She has a flair for dramatics and cried as we pulled out of the driveway. I know I'm doing right by her and giving her every opportunity to prioritize her health, but why does doing the right thing have to feel like I'm dying inside?

I haven't said much to Violet, so she takes that as a cue to connect her phone to my Bluetooth. She blasts Taylor Swift's All Too Well, and if I were a betting man—you are, you moron—I would say this song is predicting our future. Instead of being honest with Violet or breaking up with her to let her find someone who has a secure future, I grab her hand and trace circles on her smooth skin. I'm a glutton for punishment.

"I have practice this afternoon, but I can come by tonight," I say.

"That sounds good. I know playoff season is intense, but you have nothing to worry about. You're talented," she squeezes my hand to reassure me.

My stomach bottoms out at her words because she thinks this is about football. Keeping such a huge part of my life from her is a betrayal, but it's better this way.

"The pressure to perform is always there, but I'll chill out after round one."

She shoots me that smile that I've grown to love more than anything in this world, and the guilt continues to eat away at me. I need to get my head straight before practice. The last thing I need is to blow my cover to the team before I have any cash rolling in.

Before long, we pull up to her apartment. Continuing my tradition of walking her to the door, I give her a gentle kiss and promise to be back later, but before she disappears into the apartment, I remember something important I need to ask.

“Vi, wait. Would you be my date to the football banquet? Coach makes it mandatory for the players, but it usually isn’t too painful.” I chuckle and shove my hands in my pockets.

“Of course. What should I wear?” Her eyes shine with the sun peeping in from the stairwell.

“It’s pretty fancy. Liza went with Locke last year, so she should be able to help better than I could.”

“I can’t wait.” She raises to her tiptoes, locks her arms around my neck, and sends me off with a quick peck.

23

Violet

“Hart, I’m taking the car!” I scream, grab the keys, and run out the door. He doesn’t have class today and didn’t mention any plans. I’ll just assume he shouldn’t need the car for anything. Liza meets me in the parking lot and hops in.

“Liza, thanks for coming with me. I have no clue what to wear, but I know I need to look hot.”

“No worries, girly! I’m super excited to do this together,” Liza says.

I love my new friend. Shopping for a dress to wear to the football banquet isn’t

something that Hartley would be thrilled to do. Sure, he would do it to make me happy, but having Liza try on dresses with me will be so much more fun and exciting.

“I’ve never shopped for a fancy dress before. I didn’t go to the prom or any other school dances. I’m going to need your help, big time.”

“You’re going to be so easy to shop for. Look at your body. I wish I was that skinny, and your butt? Jesus. Ryan is going to die.” She gestures toward me in the cramped car.

“That’s the plan. He’s never seen me in anything this fancy. I want him to love it. Who are you going with?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.” Her giddy demeanor drops and turns serious. Liza is rarely serious about anything.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Locke and I were in a situationship last year, and he brought me as his date. The night ended in an argument, so we both went home with other people.” She shrugs.

“What’s the deal with Locke? He acts like he’s all about you but then does stupid stuff to make you jealous.”

“Locke and I are complicated. We’ve never officially dated, but we hook up off and on. Last year, I was gone for him and didn’t realize what we were at the time. Now I know that we’re nothing to each other.”

“What?! You’re a ten and deserve so much more than his games. He’s an idiot if he doesn’t realize what’s in front of him.”

“Thanks, bestie. I’m trying, but he’s hard to say no to. He’s hot and gets me when I’m weak. I rationalize my behavior by telling myself it’s for the plot.”

“If you’re not going to the banquet with Locke, who are you going with?” I ask with curiosity. Liza doesn’t boy-hop and throw herself at the team like some of the others do. They do all seem to really like her, though.

“Please don’t be mad.” She makes prayer hands and closes one eye.

“You’re making me nervous. Spit it out.”

“Hartley.” She quickly covers her face and peaks through her fingers.

“What?” I throw a quick glance her way before facing the road. “I love this.” My right arm reaches over to squeeze hers. “How did he ask you? Please tell me he did something sweet.”

I mean, Ryan just laid it out there and asked me abruptly, but I expect Hartley to be a little extra. I gush over my two best friends going to the banquet together. For as long as I’ve known Hartley, he has never had a serious girlfriend, but I would ship these two one hundred and ten percent. He's been acting off lately, and I'm wondering if it has to do with Liza being around the apartment more.

“It’s not like that. Hartley and I have been acquaintances since freshman year, and he can’t stand the way Locke treats women. We've been hanging out more since he agreed to help me with my art portfolio. He told me he didn’t have a date and asked if I wanted to go with him. I agreed. For the plot and all.”

“I love this for the both of you and would never be mad. If Hartley screws your night up, I will hurt him.” I look at her with a fake threat in my eyes. We both laugh as we park at the mall. After walking through the mall to assess our options, we decide on a small boutique rather than a bigger department store.

We begin looking through racks of beautiful gowns. They are all different, but I’m drawn to the sparkly ones. Liza encourages me to try on more edgy and sexy dresses than I usually would. We thought it would be fun to pick out dresses for each other. Liza is up first. She comes out of the fitting room with a long satin dress. The deep plum color is mesmerizing and highlights her olive skin. Her blonde hair is the perfect contrast against the dark color. It has a deep v-cut down the front showcasing her filled-out chest. She’s stunning.

“I love it. This is the one,” I say with eager mini claps.

“What?” No way. This is the first dress. You never buy the first dress. Plus, this one is too grandma for me. I need something more dramatic,” she replies while admiring her figure in the mirror.

“Grandma? Hartley will have a heart attack when he sees you in this.” I know his jaw will hit the floor for her. They are going as friends, but he would have to be blind not to be attracted to her in this.

“My friend may love it, but I don’t.” She winks and saunters back into the fitting room.

“Fine. Let me see more options.”

This girl time is all I have ever wanted, and I’m soaking in every minute of this shopping trip. After five more no’s, she comes out in a breathtaking gold gown. This dress is stunning. Instead of a v-cut, there is a low scoop neck that gathers together. It fits her body like a glove and mermaids out at the bottom. It is studded from top to bottom with beaded jewels. When she moves to see every angle of herself in the mirror, the light catches the jewels. She looks like a Greek goddess.

“Liza, it’s gorgeous—” I can’t even finish my sentence. She better pick this dress.

“This is the one.” She admires herself in the mirror and squeals in excitement. Once Liza is changed, it’s my turn to try on the choices Liza picked for me. I start sorting them into a yes and no pile before I try any on. A light tapping hits the door. “Before you say no to any, you have to try them all on first.” She knows me too well.

The first few dresses are automatic yeses for Liza, but absolute no’s for me. I want to look sexy for Ryan, but I feel uncomfortable in low-cut dresses. I don’t have much of

a chest, and dresses that accentuate my boobs bring more attention to that. I've never been confident in my figure. I'm usually the wallflower by my outgoing friend. I've been a staple by Hartley's side, but it's time for me to come into my own.

My final option is a black satin dress. When I put it on and turn to look in the mirror, I barely recognize the girl in front of me. It's a high neck that ties around the back. It makes me look much taller than I am. When I turn around to look at the back, I'm speechless. It is completely open from where it ties at the neck down to the band of my panties. This is a dress I never thought I would be in. I step into the main area to show Liza, really hoping she likes this one. Before I can make it completely out of the fitting room, Liza gasps and puts her hands over her mouth, doing a little tap with both feet.

"What do you think?" I ask with a plastered smile.

"I think you will have every pair of eyes on you. Vi. You look amazing. The back of this dress is hot." She spins me around and prods every inch of the material wrapped around me. We head to the cashier and buy the sparkly gold dress for her and the black dress for me. On the drive home, I anxiously anticipate the moment Ryan sees me in it.

Ryan

It's banquet night, and I couldn't be less excited. I have a lot on my mind. A fancy dinner and glorified prom is not priority number one. Thank god I have Violet to bring with me. I would never make it through the night without her calm presence.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

The negative thoughts have been haunting my mind all week. I can't stop thinking about my decisions. How they will impact my future career and Violet's perception of me nauseates me to my core. I'm a college athlete that's in his prime. The world is at my fingertips. When she finds out, I won't be any better than a scumbag on the street. My mind has been at war, wanting desperately to be honest with her.

Some nights, I want to run to her, throw my guts up, and tell her everything that has been haunting me. Other nights, I stay up plotting how to keep this a secret so she won't ever have to find out. I don't ever ask people for help because they wouldn't understand. Having people in my business and relying on them for help scares me.

Logan confirmed my first round of bets a few days ago. If I win, the payout will come through the night of our game after all the teams finish out. I still have some sort of moral compass and didn't bet on my own game. I couldn't handle facing the disappointment of my teammates, and it was too risky.

What about your girlfriend's feelings?

I'm a screw-up. Before Violet, the goal was simple: make it to the league and pay off the medical bills. Even then, football wasn't my dream. It was a means to an end to provide for my family. Now, I'm realizing that I want more out of my life than going through the motions. I want my relationship to last and come home to her in those flannel pajama shorts after a tough loss. I envision grabbing her by the waist while she's cooking in our kitchen and kissing the sensitive skin on her neck. I want to surprise her with candy and Icees after a long day of studying. I would do anything for her. Anything except confessing my secret.

You're only going to cause her pain. Give it up now. Let her find someone that's worth something.

I hate the voices in my head, but they're telling the truth. I add nothing to Violet's life. She's a rule follower and has a clear path. She'll be disgusted with me if she finds out about my illegal sports betting. She'll never want anything to do with me again, and the blood of our failed relationship will be on my hands.

My thoughts consume me the entire drive to her apartment. This may be the last night you have with her. Make it special. If this is one of my last happy memories with my girl, I want every detail tattooed on my brain. Committing how she smells to memory and snapping mental pictures of how her body responds to mine when I move closer to her. I want the touch of her smooth skin laced in my heart. I knock on the apartment door, and an already buzzed and unruly Hartley answers.

"Come in, dude. We started the party without you." He slaps my back and brings me in for a bro hug. He's wearing a navy blue suit with a shiny gold tie and sunglasses.

"The girls are tied up in Vi's room, getting ready. Want a drink?" He offers me a beer, but I don't want anything to cloud my thoughts tonight. The only thing I want to intoxicate me is Violet.

"Nah, man, I'm good. No drinking in public rule is still in effect." He nods, and we sit on the couch while waiting for the girls to finish getting ready. We make small talk about our upcoming playoff game and game plan. Every time football comes up, bile rises in my throat, and I do my best to throw on a believable poker face. Thank god the sound of heels clicking down the hallway jolts me from this conversation. My beautiful girl turns the corner into a perfect view.

"Jesus." I tip my head back and run my hands over my face. Violet is a ten in anything she wears, but this is insane. My feet move to meet her and instinctively

grab her hips. My hands were made for her body.

“Do you like it?” she asks shyly. She has no idea that she’s killing me, and I’m debating ditching this stupid banquet altogether to spend my sweet time kissing her all night.

“You do things to me, Violet,” I groan into her ear. Those goosebumps that I love so much appear. My hands rise to the back of her dress. That’s when I found my girl’s bare skin exposed to me. Christ, I’m not going to make it through this event. My chin rests on her shoulder while I explore every inch of her exposed skin. “Baby,” I plead with the girl who controls my body’s every reaction.

She turns her head slightly to give me a kiss on the cheek. Her light pink lip gloss imprints on my cheek, and I don’t make the slightest move to wipe it off.

“I picked it out just for you.”

“If we don’t get out of this apartment soon, you and I aren’t leaving.” I groan against her, lift her body slightly off the worn wood floor, and worship the sight in front of me. Her makeup is much heavier than usual, drawing attention to those piercing blue eyes. Once we come back to reality, we leave the hallway, meeting Hartley and Liza in the kitchen. Liza is sporting matching sunglasses with her date, and they are both taking tequila shots. Those two are perfect for each other.

“Woo hoo! Let’s go, guys.” Liza throws her hands in the air and heads out the door, Hartley following behind her. I’ve never seen Hartley hang on a girl’s every move. Before Hartley walks out the door, he turns and stares at me.

“Take care of her.” Hartley glances to Violet as she twirls Liza around to admire her outfit.

He's giving me his trust, and I'm on a straight path to screwing it all up.

Violet

This banquet is bougie. I'm not talking about college girl chic, this is a level of class I've never seen before. I'm not accustomed to fancy things, and taking it all in is a bit overwhelming. Each table is decked out with champagne glasses, faux diamonds, and sleek black placemats. The venue is huge, with enough room for a banquet-style buffet meal and dancing.

All of the Springs U players are here with dates. Seeing the girls with perfect hair, makeup, and stunning dresses makes my heart sink to my stomach. I allow myself a small moment of self-doubt. I don't fill out this dress like some of the others. Liza assured me more than one hundred times before leaving the apartment that I looked hot, but it's hard to believe it. My hair is pulled into a stylish bun with pieces cascading down both sides of my face. Self-doubt isn't new to me, but I restrain it the best I can.

Ryan looks incredible in his dark gray suit, bold golden watch, and black dress shoes. His hair is combed to one side. He's striking, like a male model straight out of a magazine. His tattoos peek out from under his suit, on full display.

Before we find our table, Ryan stops. His hand grazes my back, then carefully rubs across the back of my neck. He pauses for a moment and squeezes my neck tighter than usual. The feeling of his tattooed hand grabbing me sends a jolt of electricity and heat throughout my entire body. He's my kryptonite. Ryan continues and guides us to our table as if he didn't just send me into a flustered spiral. We are seated next to Hartley and Liza. They're both buzzed and on their way to being wasted before the night ends. Hartley parties hard, but I think he's met his match with Liza.

Ryan leans over, kisses my cheek gently, and whispers, "It's taking all of my self-

control not to bring you to the bathroom and show you how much you affect me.” My face flushes with heat, and my belly stirs with butterflies. No one has ever spoken to me like this before, and I love the reaction it elicits from my body.

“What’s stopping you?” I ask with a sultry tone to my voice.

Before I can think about it, he grabs my hand and guides me to a private place. I love this man with my entire soul. Ryan guides us through the throngs of people on the dance floor into the single-stall restroom, not bothering to click the lock behind. He lifts me onto the counter with little effort and pushes my legs open to fit his large body in between. His calloused hands rub up and down my thigh, causing my head to tilt into his chest. Even with the silky fabric of my dress between us, I’m stunned by the heat traveling up my core.

“Ry, anyone can walk in,” I mutter, finding it hard to form a sentence.

“Good. Let them. They’ll see the hottest girl in the building with me. That way they’ll know you’re mine.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

Before I can process how unbelievably sexy that is, Ryan's mouth crashes into mine with reckless abandon. He's kissing me like he's starved for a taste and can't get enough. My hands travel to his hair and grip so tight I could rip it straight out.

It's one of those kisses where time escapes you. I break from his embrace and lock eyes with him. "We should head back to the table before anyone starts looking for us."

Ryan groans in protest and traces my jaw with his thumbs. "I don't want to be around anyone else but you."

"I know." I push him back slightly. He groans in my ear and trails after me.

Hand in hand, we walk back out to our table. After our makeout session in the bathroom, Ryan and I try our best to return casually to our friends. Liza pats my lap and shoots me a knowing wink. I'll save the intimate details for Liza and I's post-banquet sleepover. There's no way she'll let me gloss over this one. The servers pass around plates of every type of food you could imagine. I love to eat, especially carbs, and this is heaven. Ryan takes two of every plate offered. His hands haven't left the bare area of my exposed back since we've returned. Having his touch eases my mind.

Liza cups her hands over her mouth and whispers in my ear, "Check out the bar." I catch Locke staring at Liza from across the room. He's posted at the crowded bar with Savannah. Hartley catches us staring and glances that way. He instinctively wraps one arm around her shoulder—marking his territory.

Ryan chats with some of his teammates at our table. I never feel ignored when I'm

with him because his thumb gently traces the skin of my arm, never losing contact. He leaves a path of fire with each touch. Concentrating on anything besides the man next to me is nearly impossible. While Ryan talks, I focus on the huge stage in front of our tables. An older man makes his way to the podium. He pats the microphone to make sure it's turned on.

"Time for the boring part," Ryan says.

"What is it?"

"Awards," he clips, stretching his neck side to side and running his hands over his face. His hands shoot to his hair and run through, leaving him a little more disheveled than before.

The older man's voice booms through the microphone, "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Springs U Football annual banquet. It's always nice to see my guys cleaned up for the night with their gorgeous dates." The crowd giggles. He continues, "It's been one heck of a season, and it's not over yet. I want to take a moment to recognize all of the team's hard work and dedication to the game. It won't be long before some of them are playing on the big screen."

Ryan coughs, gets up without warning and leaves the ballroom. I don't know what to do. Should I follow him? Does he need space? I don't want to act crazy, but something seemed to make him nervous when the man took the stage.

I listen to the coach drone on and on for another twenty minutes about his team and how well they've done this season. Ryan hasn't returned to the table yet, so I decide to get up and find him. I walk into the empty foyer area. A few girls chat with champagne glasses, but I don't spot Ryan. I check the restrooms, hallways, and bar, and still can't find him. I walk outside in a last-ditch effort to locate him. That's when I'm hit with the sight of him sitting on the ledge of an icy blue lit-up fountain,

hunched over and defeated with his elbows positioned on his knees. I step back a few inches, giving him space, and watch for a moment before I approach him.

My boyfriend is strong, but not just physically. He never shows weakness, so when he does, he tries his best to make sure others don't see it. A beautiful image of a broken soul sits in front of the running water. Ryan must hear my heels clicking loudly against the cobblestone path, but he doesn't make an attempt to look my way. I take a seat next to my beautifully broken boy. His eyes don't meet mine, but his large hand grabs my thigh to pull me in closer.

"What's going on in that head of yours?" I rest my chin on his shoulder, unsure of his current mood.

"Nothing you need to worry yourself over."

"What made you leave the ballroom? You can trust me." Seeing him as a shell of himself is ripping my heart out. It's more frustrating to have no clue how to help him.

"Promise me," he reaches over and threads out fingers together.

"Promise you what?"

"That you won't leave." He meets my eyes under the moonlit sky. The fountain crashes behind our backs, illuminating the courtyard in a blue haze.

"Then don't give me a reason to." I can't promise him blind loyalty when he won't trust me enough to let me into his head. When he doesn't answer, I turn my body, completely facing him. Grabbing his face, I place my forehead against his. His breaths are ragged, and his arms shake against my thigh. Placing my hand over his chest allows me to feel his thumping heartbeat.

“I’m all in. I need you to be, too,” I whisper to the man who came into my life and wrecked everything I thought I knew about myself and what I wanted.

“You’re everything, Vi. There is no me without you anymore.”

“I’ll give you time, but I won’t wait forever.” I kiss his lips and lock my hand in his.

He nods his head in understanding, "I'd never put you through that." He twists a piece of my loose hair through his fingers. “Let’s go back in,” he stands up and guides us back to the banquet.

When we return, everyone is on the dance floor. We must have missed the awards portion of the night. I spot Hartley and Liza front and center. Liza is bent down so low, she is about to hit the floor. Hartley is behind her dancing. His attention is fixed on his date, and I can see something different in him. Something I haven't seen in his eyes before. Their sunglasses are back on—so ridiculous. Liza dances seductively back to Hartley’s height as he throws his arms around her neck and dips her low. The music has cranked up a notch, so I can’t hear what they’re saying, but Hartley has a smile painted on his face that I haven’t seen in quite some time.

I’ll pin that thought for another day.

The song changes from a fast-paced dance to a slow-moving melody. You Found Me by The Fray begins to play through the dimly lit venue.

Ryan extends his hand out to me. “Dance with me.”

“Ryan Shane? A dancer? Who would have known?” I place my hand in his and allow him to guide me to the dance floor.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“For you, I’ll be anything.” He looks straight through me with those piercing eyes. We settle in a spot by the edge of the crowd, attracting little attention. This boy knows me better than I know myself. He leans in for a forehead kiss and places his head against mine. The whole venue goes silent when my body touches his. It’s only the two of us in the room. I listen intently to the words of this song and can’t help but love this moment for us. I wish I could live in it forever with the boy who stole my heart without warning. He holds all of me in the palm of his hands, and if he ever drops my heart, I will be left as a shattered shell of the girl I was before.

24

Ryan

The bartender makes the last calls, signaling that the banquet is almost over. Violet, Liza, Hartley, and myself walk to my car to head back to their apartment. Thank god I’m driving because Hartley and Liza are beyond wasted. They stumble through the gravel parking lot, leaning on each other to keep their balance. Violet and I laugh under our breath at their attempt to walk straight with sunglasses on.

“I’m not cleaning up puke tonight,” Violet shouts ahead.

“Don’t even think about ruining my car,” I warn.

“Ahhh, shut up, Shane. You know you love me!” Hartley slurs. “You should clean up my puke for hooking up with my little sister.”

“Hartley!” Violet scolds, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

Liza chimes in, “Cut it out. They are the cutest couple I’ve ever seen.” She hangs on Hartley’s arm and points back and forth to us.

“Would everyone please get in the car?” My patience has run out, and the last thing I need is Hartley’s drunk crap.

Violet helps Liza get into the back seat. Liza insists that Violet help her so she doesn't accidentally flash anyone, with a follow-up announcement that she has no underwear on. I could have gone without that information, but here we are. Hartley drapes a lazy arm around Liza and leans against her shoulder. It won’t be long before the two of them pass out in the back seat. When we get back to the apartment, my girl and I help our friends up the stairs and into Hartley’s bedroom. Liza makes her second announcement of the night, this time from Hartley’s room, “I’m sleeping on the floor. I repeat—I’m sleeping on the floor!”

To which I add, “No one cares.”

Violet giggles and shoves my shoulder playfully. “Don’t be mean. They’ll be dating before the year’s over.”

“I don’t know if Hartley can make a commitment to anything besides himself,” I say.

“You’d be surprised,” she says with a soft smirk. Hartley loves hard, but I pray his commitment issues get better with the right person.

“I’m going to shower and change into my pajamas. You’re spending the night, right? Liza ditched me.” I would spend every night with her if I could.

“Of course, babe. I’ll change and wait for you out here,” I reassure her, kissing her cheek before she disappears into the bathroom.

I grab my clothes from Violet's bedroom. There's a small nook inside her closet where I keep a few pairs of shorts and T-shirts. I live alone a few miles away from campus. Coach Daniels from high school owns the house and uses it as a rental property. He offered to let me stay there for free during my four years at Springs U. I pay him utilities because the mortgage has been paid off for years.

I wanted to stay home to be there in case my mom ever needed me, but she insisted that I get the "full college experience". She's stubborn, and it was easier to move out than argue with her. I enjoy living on my own, but it gets lonely. Being left alone with my thoughts is suffocating. Violet seems more comfortable in her own bedroom, and I like it here because it's never quiet. Hartley is always bantering about something, and Liza's been hanging around a lot more, too. Being an only child to my sick mom comes with lots of loneliness and responsibility. It's been nice having a distraction from the turmoil in my personal life.

I finish changing in Violet's bedroom and go back out to the main room. Grabbing my phone off the small table next to the couch, I see two missed calls from Logan.

Why is he calling me? I shouldn't hear from him until after the games play out next weekend. I step out onto the balcony to call him back. He's persistent and won't stop calling unless I answer. The shower water begins running, so I know I have a few minutes of privacy before Violet gets out. I click Logan's contact, and he answers on the first ring, "Don't know how to answer the phone, Shane?" He sounds on edge.

"Make it quick. I'm at my girl's house and don't want her to know about our arrangement."

"I just got the odds on your team's game, and it's big money," he probes.

"Don't care. Not happening. I told you that's a hard line for me."

“Will a possible 2,500 dollar payout blur that hard-line?” I cough to keep from choking on my next words. 2,500 dollars per game can drastically change the course of mom’s treatment. She needs the consistency of PT. She won’t do exercises on her own. If I take this bet, I could quit gambling after this weekend.

“You better not be playing with me, Logan. I swear to God.” Anger laced in my voice. This is serious cash and can change my life in more ways than one.

“I never play when it comes to business. Are you in or out?” he asks.

I left the balcony door cracked to listen for Violet. Faint tapping of feet on the hardwood floor approaches the living room. “Babe, where are you?” Her sweet voice calls out to me. If only she knew how horribly toxic and secretive her boyfriend really is.

I mute Logan’s call and yell, “On the phone with my mom on the balcony. Give me a minute.” My heart thumps out of my chest, and I’m hit with instant nausea. Lying to Violet does that to me.

It’s for the best. I try to convince myself that I’m doing the right thing by keeping her out of this.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

I push the button to unmute Logan. “Send it over.”

I hang up before he can answer.

Walking back into the apartment, I see Violet sitting on the couch, flipping through shows, trying to decide what to watch. My head is all over the place. I push my thoughts and poor decisions aside because I don’t want to ruin this night between us. She already had to deal with my moody departure at the banquet. I don’t want to give her any more reasons to worry or doubt me.

I grab her favorite purple blanket out of the little chest, which she swears keeps the blanket organized, and slip my body beside hers. It’s coated with fur and sheds like a dog in the summer. The fur gets in her mouth when she snuggles with it, and I laugh every time she makes a sour face to get the pieces off her tongue.

She looked sexier than ever tonight at the banquet, but I prefer this version of her. She’s wearing her flannel pajamas and fuzzy socks, hair thrown up in a messy bun, her face shiny and bare with no makeup. She always has a thin layer of chapstick applied, making her full lips glisten. Her head rests on my broad shoulder, with my arm wrapped around her waist. She curls into a little ball under the fluffy blanket. I could care less what is on. Instead, I stare down at the sleepy girl nuzzled beside me. I would watch this on repeat for the rest of my life.

After an hour, Violet's breathing becomes steady— drifting into a deep sleep on my shoulder. I selfishly leave her there instead of waking her up because I love the way her head feels resting on my shoulder. I begin sweating, so I move her an inch to take my shirt off. Now, her cheek is placed on my bare chest. Her soft breaths hit me with

warmth. Focusing on her body's response helps take my thoughts away from the decision I made tonight. I'm betting on a Springs U game, something I swore I would never do, but the money is too good to pass up. Mom's care is more important than my potential football career. Keep telling yourself that. I bargain with my own thoughts and convince myself that it is ok because I'm betting on us to win, not lose. That counts for something, right? This had better be the shortest week of my life so I could move past this without getting caught by the NCAA or the angel lying on my chest.

I stayed at Violet's for the rest of the weekend. We had lazy days filled with binge-watching her favorite shows and ordering late-night pizza in between last-minute playoff prep with the team. Liza and Hartley have been here, too, so it's been nice not to be alone all the time. Spending more time with Violet and Hartley shows me how much they deeply care for each other. Violet keeps him on a straight path, and Hartley pushes her to live a little. I'm such a hypocrite praising Violet for keeping Hartley straight when I haven't given her a chance to help me.

The whole weekend, my mind was at war with wanting to give in to the nagging urge to tell her my secret, but I couldn't do it. Monday rolls around, and I have a packed schedule. Violet and I walk hand in hand to the class we share together. It's quickly become my favorite class of the semester. When I look at her, she seems distant. Her usual frantic body language seems oddly withdrawn. Calm isn't a good sign when it comes to my girl.

"Is everything ok?" I ask.

"Yes." She nods her head a few times, but her face morphs into a frown. "No." She shakes her head. "Not really, but it's nothing for you to worry about," she replies nervously, picking at her fingernails. I pry further. I'm a fixer, after all.

“Please, baby, tell me,” I plead with her. I expect her to share her thoughts with me, but I can’t reciprocate. Hypocrite.

“I’ll tell you, but please don’t worry. I’ll figure it out,” she says dryly.

“Hit me.” I’m not promising anything. I’m a bulldozer, and if it’s something I can fix, I’ll do it.

“I got an email from the financial aid department this morning. They are cutting my financial aid amount because of ‘budget cuts’. I’m just stressed about money, but I applied at a few restaurants downtown. I just hope I have enough time to save up before next year’s fees are due.” She bites her fingernails the entire time she rattles on about this situation.

I’m fuming. How could they take her money away? Violet is wicked smart, and Springs U would risk losing her because of stupid budget cuts? We have guys barely scraping by on the team riding full scholarships. She shows up early to class, takes extra credit hours to get ahead, and completes her assignments weeks in advance. College isn’t fair.

“Let me help you apply for jobs,” I hold both of her hands in mine and rub circles on the back of them with my thumbs.

“This is why I didn’t want to tell you or Hartley. I don’t want you two worrying about me. I can fix this. I just need time to find a job, and then, I’ll be fine.”

“What if time runs out? You’re not dropping out.”

“If I have to sit out a semester, it won’t be the end of the world. I’ll still graduate.” I’m just now noticing the red rings under her eyes. Has she been crying?

My voice goes deep, turning serious, “You’re not sitting out a semester and wasting away. I will find you a job before that happens.” She’s so stubborn. I won’t allow her to sit out a semester because of financial aid money.

“Just let me try to handle this on my own first. Please.”

I look into those beautiful eyes that make my world spin. My shoulders lower as I sigh. “Alright.”

We walk into class and don’t speak for an hour and a half. Violet takes notes, listening to our old professor babble on about a book that is at least one hundred years old. I couldn’t care less about it. My eyes find Violet every few minutes.

There’s no way I’ll let my girl waste away next semester. She’s the most driven person I’ve ever met, and I can’t swallow the thought of her losing her chance at her dreams. I’ll research job openings in the area tonight. I can make calls to the connections that we have through the football team, too. I wish I weren’t stretched so thin with medical bills and hiding how I’m getting the money so quickly. If I wasn’t, I could help Violet more than just searching for jobs to apply for. I would do this for her if I could.

25

Ryan

It’s playoff day. I arrive early to the field to get reps in before the rest show up. I left Violet’s apartment about an hour ago, leaving a jersey for her on her bed. There’s no way she’s wearing some other idiot’s jersey instead of mine tonight. She’s mine, and it’s about time everyone in the stadium knows it. Her eyes sparkled, and she did a little dance when she spotted it. She flew to her closet and threw it on. Seeing her in those itty bitty shorts with my name on her back filled my head with bad intentions.

God, I love her.

Drifting in and out of thought, I run my body ragged on the workout machines to keep my head focused on the present moment instead of my potential downfall. Logan texted me this morning to confirm my picks for the day, and tonight, I should have a good chunk of change in my account to put towards my mom's medical bills. We're three hours away from start time, and I'm buzzing with nervous energy. I put my head down and grind through my workout. My muscles scream at the intense pace, with sweat dripping down every inch of my skin. I usually don't push this hard on game days, but I need it mentally today. Once I'm done, we're two hours out from game time, so I decide to put my earphones in and disassociate.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

Some of my teammates make their way into the workout room and start gearing up for game time. Hartley runs in a minute before report time, sliding next to me on the bench in front of my locker.

“You ready, man?” he asks with a fist bump. Hartley doesn’t show game-day jitters. He’s always ready to take the field.

“Yeah. We’ve got it.”

“We’re the one-two punch. If it’s not you, it’s me. We’ve got to find ways to stay open,” he explains. Gameday Hartley is completely different from weekend Hartley. His personality intensifies, and he’s all in on the game plan.

Coach gives us our game-time speech, and Mason hypes us up. “This is our time boys. Who are we?”

“Vipers!” we chant.

“I can’t hear you. I said who are we?” Mason crouches in the middle of the locker room huddle. We throw our hands in a pile and scream, “One, two, three, Vipers!”

Throwing our helmets on, we run onto the field for pre-game warm-ups to All We Do is Win by DJ Khaled. The crowd erupts in a deafening scream, but the only person I care about spotting is Violet. My eyes trail to her usual seat, but I stop dead in my tracks when I notice who’s next to her. I abandon my team on the way to the bench in an all-out sprint to the bleacher railing. Sporting the biggest smile I’ve ever seen, Violet scoots carefully past the fans in her row, never breaking eye contact.

“Are you serious, Vi? How’d you pull this off?” I’m choked up and overwhelmed with emotion. I can’t believe my eyes because my mom is sitting alongside Violet at my first playoff game of the season.

“Surprise!” She throws her hands up and giggles, pointing to my mom, who is only three rows back. Mom looks amazing in a Springs U jersey and jeans. The sight of her at the game reminds me of old times—when she wasn’t too sick to come to every game.

“Your mom and I have been texting for a week coordinating this. Don’t worry. We have all of her emergency meds, just in case. I knew it would be important to you to have her here.” She beams with excitement and pride.

I’ve never had anyone show up for me the way Violet does. She makes me feel a little less alone in this world, and I never want to let that go. Without a word, Violet shimmies back through the aisle in an attempt to escort my mom closer. She places her hand on Mom’s back, carefully threading her through obstacles. Once Mom makes it down the three small steps, she inhales a deep breath before speaking.

“I haven’t been able to make your games, but this one is special. Violet and I made a plan to get me here, and here I am!” Mom grabs my gloved hand and squeezes tight. She’s always had a way of keeping me present and grounded.

Violet brought my mom here. I’m playing this game illegally, and the two most important women in my life have no idea. I force myself to shake off the intrusive thoughts and live in the moment. If this is my last college football game, I’ll make it the best one I’ve ever played.

“Vi,” I reach for my girl over the railing and kiss her with passion. I’m aware that there’s a stadium full of people watching us, but I don’t care. She deserves to be shown off.

“You don’t know how much this means to me,” I whisper in her ear, eliciting goosebumps over her arms.

“Go kill it, Ryan Shane.” She kisses my forehead one last time.

Coach blows the whistle four times in a row and shouts, “Shane, get over here. This isn’t the time to play house with your girlfriend!”

I take that as a cue that I’ve spent enough time in the stands. With fifteen minutes until kickoff, Coach huddles us up and runsthrough the first-half game plan. We break the huddle, listen to the national anthem, and take the field. We’re matched up against Bayou Woods College. They’re fast and run lots of trick plays, but we’re ranked higher and are more solid overall. We should win this one easily, but in college football, you never know.

The first quarter doesn’t have much action. Both teams exchange three and outs on the first few possessions. This is closer than I thought it would be. We’ve got the ball back, and Mason zones in on the play. He fakes the screen pass to Hartley and tosses the ball to me. I break free from the backfield and dodge a few tacklers before being taken down. On my way up from the grass, I glance at my girls in the stands, and they are both jumping and screaming my name. Liza has joined the crew, and she’s chanting along with them. My heart swells with pride. I never knew how much I needed them in my corner.

The next play doesn’t gain any yards. We’re on the twenty-yard line. We need to score on this possession to go ahead. It’s going to be a low-scoring game, so every possession counts. Mason drops back. I ferociously block the line to buy him time. He throws a long pass down the sideline that lands in Hartley’s hands. Hartley is the fastest wide receiver on the team. Once he’s got a solid foot on the defender, he’s gone to the end zone.

Our fight song blasts over the PA system. Hartley does a backflip to celebrate, and I smack his helmet a few times. After the extra point, Springs U is up 7-0. The next few possessions go back and forth. Bayou Woods scores on a deep pass to their receiver in the end zone.

The game is tied up 7-7 at halftime. We sprint to the locker room to get a few minutes of cool-down time before Coach's speech. I check my phone and notice one text message from Logan.

You better tighten things up if you want to win this money.

I click my phone off before any of my teammates glance over and see. I don't need him badgering me right now. I have too much going on in my head as it is. Coach gives us the usual halftime pep talk laced with calling us out on missed opportunities on the field.

After half, Springs U kicks into gear. Mason is laser-focused and accurate on his throws. I'm finding holes in the defense to gain additional yards, and Hartley gets space on the defenders. We're up 14-7 with the ball back. This drive is heavy on running plays. We're trying to eat up the clock and score again.

As time continues to tick away, I score my first touchdown of the game with two minutes left in the fourth quarter. I throw my hands up to my girls and give them the biggest heart. I love having them here. It feels right.

Springs U wins the game 21-7, and we advance to the next round of the tournament. The crowd goes wild, and no one has made any movement to leave the stadium. I make sure to kiss Violet and give my mom a big hug before heading to the locker room for the post-game meeting and shower. Now that the game is over, my thoughts are locked in on the money about to hit my account.

I quickly check the scores of each game I bet on. It looks like I won all but two bets tonight. This means I'll make roughly five thousand dollars this week. Logan said the money would hit at midnight. The first thing I need to do when it hits is transfer funds to Mom's medical portal. A sense of relief mixed with stress floods my body.

Violet and my mom meet me outside of the locker room. My girl jumps in my arms and wraps her legs around my waist. A few months ago, she would not have felt comfortable doing this in public, but it seems like I'm giving her confidence in herself and our relationship. After Violet jumps off, my mom wraps me in a tight hug. I notice how thin she is. She's losing some of her hair too. Nausea hits me at the sight of her.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“That was amazing, son! I forgot what it was like to see you play in person, but the game was electric! You are so special!” Now she's crying happy tears.

“Don’t cry. You know that kills me.” I need her to stop crying before I break down from the overwhelming pressure I’ve felt these past few weeks.

“These are happy tears. I’m so proud of you.” She shouldn’t be.

“Me too. You were amazing out there, babe!” Violet adds.

“Alright, you two love birds. I’ll have Violet drive me home. Then, you two can go celebrate the big win.” The last thing I want to do right now is hang out in a bar with people who don’t care about me.

“I was thinking we could get dinner instead. I’m over the bar scene after games.” I look to Vi for approval.

“I would love that!” Violet beams. She steps on her tippy-toes to plant a kiss on my cheek.

“No, no, no, you two are young and should be out celebrating until the sun comes up. You don’t need to be stuck with me all night,” Mom rattles on.

“We want to,” Violet and I add. It’s two against one, so Mom finally complies with our request.

We decided on a small Italian restaurant on the opposite side of town from the bars.

Violet and my mom aren't picky. I crave carbs after a game, and pasta sounds sinfully good right now. The hostess seats us in a back booth away from everyone. This restaurant is cozy, with worn-down booths carved with ribs and old lights hanging low from the ceiling. It's dim, and the menus are faded. I love places like this. If the menus weren't worn, that would mean the food sucks. Now, I have time to ask Violet how she pulled this surprise off.

"How did you do this, Vi?" My eyes flash between her and my mom.

"I saw how stressed you were about the game, and I knew your mom hadn't been to any recently. She gave me her number over Christmas break. We figured out what she would need to bring to feel secure at the game, and I drove to her house right after you left this morning. We took our time on the drive and had a buffer to stop for coffee before heading to the field!" I don't deserve this girl. She thinks of everything that would make my heart burst.

"You've got a good one, Ry. She planned it all out. I would trust this one with my life." She leans over the table to grab my girlfriend's hands. Mom has a look of true adoration for her in her eyes.

"Thank you," I say to both of them.

I'm a man of few words, but both of these women know how much this means to me. After we eat our pasta, I request the check. My phone vibrates in my pocket repeatedly. It has to be important, but I don't want to ruin this moment. Pulling it half-way out of my pocket, Logan, flashes on the screen. Pushing off the inevitable a little bit longer sounds good to me. I deny his call and put it to the back of my mind until I get home. I don't need this mess clouding my thoughts while I'm with them. We head to our cars, where I insist on bringing Mom home myself, but Violet refuses the offer.

“We had a fun girl’s drive. I don’t mind at all. Plus, you just played an entire football game. Go home and get some rest,” she insists with sincerity in her voice.

If she only knew what I’d gotten myself into.

“Alright. Thanks so much for this, babe. I can’t explain how much it means to me to have both of you watching me.” That’s about as emotional as it gets for me around other people. Violet knows how I am and appreciates the times when I express myself. I squeeze my frail mom in a tight hug before waving goodbye in my lonely car. I’m headed to my dismal rental house to deal with the demons that face me in solitude.

26

Ryan

I park in my dark driveway, fumbling with my keys to enter my home. I haven’t slept here in a few nights and need to clean a few things before returning Logan’s call. I’m stalling as long as I can. I never know what to expect when I talk to Logan.

After cleaning the kitchen, putting clothes away, and changing into my favorite pair of gray sweatpants, I check the clock to see it’s already past 11 p.m. I guess I have to call him back before he starts calling repeatedly. Sitting at the kitchen table, I tap his contact to call as my hands instinctively run through my messy hair. Logan answers on the third ring, “Nice wins tonight, man!” He catches me off guard with his loud tone. His words slur together with loud music playing in the background of our call. He’s drunk. This should be fun.

“The transfer is coming through at midnight, right?” I keep all of my conversations with him short and to the point. Details with people like him get messy.

“Any minute now! Whatcha got for next week? I already have the betting lines,” he

says. The bumping sound of music continues. The last thing I need is drunk Logan spilling information about my betting wins to random people at a bar. I need to end this conversation.

“We’ll talk soon, not tonight,” I say, hoping to get off the phone as soon as possible.

“Call me tomorrow, winner-” His voice cuts off, and the call ends abruptly. Thank God that wasn’t long, and Logan didn’t drunkenly spill my secrets. The only thing to do in this house without Violet tonight is refresh my bank account until the money hits. Once I get the notification that it’s in the bank, I pass out in the main room and don’t wake up until noon.

Violet

This weekend couldn’t have gone any better. Ryan was completely shocked when he saw me with his mom at the game. I knew this would put him in good spirits for the playoffs. His mom was touched that I offered to bring her and help with her medical supply transport to and from the game. It’s the least I could do for them. They’ve given me something I’ve never known before: a real family.

Sure, I had my grandpa, but I always craved the type of household that others had. The kind that showed up for your school presentations and athletic events. Grandpa had so much on his plate. He tried his best and gave me a stable life. Unfortunately, he wasn’t always there for the little things. Hartley has always been my big brother, but something inside me craved the maternal figure that I never had.

Ms. Valerie, Ryan’s mom, gives me that. She welcomed me into her home with open arms. She’s made me feel so comfortable around her. Before we left during Christmas, she pulled me aside and told me that if I ever needed anything, she would be one phone call away. She also asked me to watch out for Ryan. The wild thing is, I know she means it, and I’m comfortable enough to ask.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

I'm leaving my mid-afternoon class to meet Hartley at the dining hall for lunch. We haven't seen much of each other lately. He has football, and I have school mixed with Ryan time. I know this is a part of growing up and paving our own lives, but I miss him. I spot him across the huge fountain in the middle of campus. When he sees me, he waves at me with that goofy grin. I love him so much. He gives me a big bear hug, enveloping me in his arms.

"I've missed you, Vi. Ryan's stealing all of my quality time with you now." He laughs. He jokes about Ryan and me, but I know he approves our relationship. If he didn't, he would have run Ryan off months ago. The reality of me dating a football player still makes him uneasy, but he knows Ryan treats me well, and that's all he wants for me.

"I've missed you too. We need to block off a night where we order hot wings and play video games," I smile up at my best friend. I'm craving a night with just the two of us. It'll be like old times.

"As long as you're ready to get schooled in UFC Fight Night again!" he taunts.

"I think you meanwin!" UFC Fight Night is our favorite video game. We're both solid at it, but Hartley tends to win more than me. He's really good at most of the video games we play, but I would never tell him that. I don't need his ego to inflate even more. We meander through a flock of hungry college students to the front of the buffet line, make our plates, and find a window seat.

"Catch me up. What's been going on?" he asks.

“Nothing really. My classes are pretty easy, and Ryan and I have been okay.”

"Okay? I'm not satisfied unless it's great." He hits me with a suspicious look.

"Everything is fine. I'm still trying to break down his walls, but I know that'll take time."

“I love that you’re happy. Just be careful. I can’t handle another broken heart,” he adds sincerely. When my grandpa died, Hartley was left to pick up the pieces. I know it would kill him to see me broken again.

“Don’t worry. It’s not like it used to be. I can handle him, and I’m stronger than I used to be,” I assure him. I love that he’s always been there for me, but I don’t want to add more stress to his life. He keeps a lot of his thoughts and worries bottled up. Not many see that side of him, but I know all too well how he processes his emotions.

“I’ll always worry about you.” He hooks me to his side and squeezes tight. He messes up my hair in the process, just like an annoying big brother would.

“What is the match-up looking like this weekend?” Changing the subject to get his mind off his worries. Springs U plays their second-round playoff game this weekend, and we’ll face a tougher opponent each round we advance.

“It’s going to be tough, but I think we can pull it off. Make sure your boyfriend stays locked in and focused,” he teases.

“Noted,” I laugh.

Before long, it’s time to head to our next class. Hartley and I leave with promises of spending more time together. I’m already excited to see my man and best friend play this weekend.

Ryan

“Good morning, sunshine,” I kiss my girl on the cheek, waking her up gently.

She’s usually a morning person, but first-day jitters are setting in. Feisty Violet is the last thing I need this morning. She grunts and flips her body away from me, snatching the blanket and wrapping herself in a ball of warmth. I laugh at the sight of my little burrito.

“Good luck on your first day of work. You’re gonna kill it. If anyone gives you trouble, call me.” I grab her stomach and hone in on her most ticklish spot. She squirms and reaches back for my neck. Once her arms hook around my neck, her eyes flutter open and lock with mine.

“I’m nervous,” she whispers.

“You’ll be the smartest person there. I know it.” She’s the smartest person in every room we enter.

“You don’t know that.” She hits me with a questioning look.

“I do,” I say, kissing her rosy nose.

Violet got hired at an indie bookstore downtown. It was her first choice because she loves to read in her free time. Mason’s sister owns the shop. I may have called in a few favors, but seeing the smile on her face when she got the call was worth it. I was honest with her about who owned the shop and told her I called. She was pouty with me at first but got over it. The thought of working her dream college job overpowered her annoyance with me helping in this situation.

“You have a few more minutes, but I have to go. I’m headed to the field to get in a morning workout.”

“Will you be back before game time?” she asks with the most adorable sleepy eyes.

“Probably not. Coach’s pre-game routine gets longer every round. You better be wearing my jersey,” I tease, tickling her more before she pushes me away.

“It’s dirty. I think I’ll wear Locke’s instead.” This girl. My body tightens, and a sick churning starts taking over my stomach. I’ve got to get a grip. She’s only teasing.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“Tell me whose jersey you’ll wear?” I ask with a more serious tone than I intended.

“Locke’s,” she doubles down, pursing those sassy lips.

Knotting my hands behind her back, I throw her on top of me. She’s straddling me in bed with my practice shirt on. It’s so big that I can barely see her body. Her hair is in a messy bun with her short shorts riding dangerously high. She’s laughing so hard she can barely catch air.

I begin rubbing circles around the sensitive part of her waist as my hands make their way under her shirt and up her bare back. Her laughing stops when my touch causes her head to tilt back. I move my wandering hands from her back up to her neck. She’s frozen and completely tuned in to my movements. I move her head forward toward my lips.

Tilting her ear to my mouth, I whisper, “Don’t play with me, Violet. Who’s the only name you’ll wear on your back?” She takes a big gulp and locks eyes with me, lips parted and ready for me to devour them.

“Answer me,” I say with authority.

“Yours,” she moans softly.

“That’s my girl.”

I kiss her with desperation. Her hands fly to my chest and touch every indent of my muscles. Her thumbs loop in the band of my favorite gray sweatpants.

“You drive me crazy. You know that, right?”

“Mhmmmm.” She's the sexiest woman I have ever seen.

“I wish this counted as my morning workout,” I smirk under her pouty lips.

“Please,” she says. I can't deny her anything, ever.

“Trust me. I would much rather stay here with you than head to the field, but Coach will kill me if I'm late.”

She moans, “I know. I can't wait to see you play later.”

If this is how I woke up every game day morning, I'd be a very happy man.

28

Violet

Ryan left a half hour ago. I was so worn out from our morning escapades that I fell back asleep for a few minutes when he left. My alarm buzzes, telling me it's time to get ready for my first day of work. I can't deny how excited I am to work at a local indie bookstore. I'm still nervous, though. Self-doubt has always been something I've struggled with. My mind runs through a list of things that could go wrong today.

Will I know how to work the cash register? Will I have enough knowledge about the authors that the store sells?

The more I question myself, the more I fall into a mental spiral. I pull out the worn piece of paper my therapist gave me. Grounding techniques don't always help, but I'm willing to try. I mentally flip through which technique will work best for me

today. I land on counting backward from one hundred. After a few minutes, I'm much calmer than I was before.

I hop out of bed and pick out an outfit for the day, choosing a modest pink sundress with yellow flowers and sandals. It's Florida, after all. I apply light makeup: foundation, lip gloss, and mascara, and pop a few curls in my hair. I take one last look in the mirror to double-check my look and say my affirmations. On my way out of the bedroom, I stop in the kitchen to grab a snack, noticing a ripped piece of paper on the table that wasn't there last night.

Stop doubting yourself. You're the hottest person in the room. Love, Ryan.

I must have the goofiest smile plastered across my face. He knows exactly what to say to bring me out of my darkest self-doubt thoughts. I stick the small piece of paper in my purse and jet out.

Hartley left the car this morning and caught a ride to the field. Coastal Books isn't far from my apartment, but I leave extra early to allow for traffic and nerves. I connect my phone to the car and decide on My Tears Ricochet by Taylor Swift. Folklore always settles my nerves because sad songs are my thing. Belting out the lyrics takes my mind off of all my extra worries clouding my thoughts.

Before long, I spot my new job location and park out front. I take a deep breath, check my makeup in the small car mirror, and walk in. Fake it till you make it, T. Swift says. This is the cutest bookstore I've ever seen. I fell in love with the atmosphere when I came to my interview, but now I can really appreciate it. This will be my home away from home.

"Hey, girl!" A woman in her late twenties with jet-black hair, waves to me from the register. I immediately recognized her from my interview. She's Mason's sister, Paisley. I wasn't thrilled when Ryan told me this information, but I would be stupid

to turn down my dream job for my pride, so I caved.

“Hi! Do you remember me?” I ask awkwardly.

“Of course! You’re my new employee of the month. AKA my only employee,” she says with joyous laughter that is contagious.

“It’s just you and me?” This is perfect.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“Yep! Just the two of us. I was getting bored here by myself, so I figured I would hire a friend. When you walked in, I knew you would be the perfect fit for Coastal Books,” she adds with bubbly confidence.

“Thank you so much for this. I love reading romance books, so this is the perfect job for me.” I subconsciously start picking my nails.

“You’re gonna love it here! We have awesome customers and weekly book signings, so you’ll get to meet some of the local authors.”

“What? That is amazing,” I can’t hold back the smile that takes over my face.

“Let me show you around. It’s pretty simple once you know the layout of the books, and the register is fool-proof.” I’m glad Paisley has confidence in me. It’s making this transition easier than I imagined. Paisley spends the next hour or so showing me how the books are organized, the bookmark and stickers section, and the register. She was right. The register is super simple.

“I think that’s enough work for now. Are you hungry? I know the best pizza spot, just a few doors down. We can lock up and enjoy lunch out?” she offers with the friendliest eyes.

“Sure. I would love to.” Everyone at Springs U has been so friendly and welcoming. I could see myself setting roots in this place. First Liza, then Ryan, and now Paisley. I may have finally found the place where I belong.

Paisley locks the door, flips the sign from “open” to “be right back”, and we’re off.

On our walk to lunch, I take in the beauty of this small town. I love it here. Paisley pushes open the door to the restaurant, and we seat ourselves. We decided to share a cheese pizza with cokes.

“So, Mason tells me you are dating one of his teammates?” Her hands lock under chin waiting for my response. I get a really good vibe from Paisley, and I would love to make another friend.

“Yep, Ryan Shane. He’s a running back.”

“Ryan?! Yes, I know him. Ryan and Mason played little league together at the local park. He always came over to the house for lunch after the games,” she says with joy.

Before I can answer, she says, “I’m so glad he found you. He was always so quiet. Like he has the weight of the world on his shoulders. You seem like a good match for him.”

“It wasn’t in my plans to find a boyfriend my freshman year, but he bulldozed into my life in the best way,” I laugh.

“That’s Ryan for ya. I wish Mason would stop messing around and find someone like you.” She picks up a big slice and hovers it over her mouth before taking a bite.

A flashback of my drunken night at Downtown Tap flashes before my eyes. Ryan grabbed me and flung me over his shoulders so I wouldn’t talk to Mason.

“I met Mason once after the first home game. He seems like a nice guy. He introduced himself to me at the bar, and I felt comfortable around him.” I spare Paisley the details of her baby brother’s night out.

“Hmmm. Knowing Mason, he was trying to hook up with you,” she laughs

uncontrollably.

I nearly spit my drink out. “Uh, um, no, I don’t think so. I’m not really most people’s type.”

“You’re joking, right?” She looks puzzled.

“No?” I shrug.

“You’ve already made an impression on my brother, his friend, and probably half of the team. You’re memorable, Violet. Take it from me. I’m married to a former Springs U player. I know how they operate.” She flashes me a huge smile.

“You’re too nice to me,” I responded shyly. I’ll admit I’m the worst at taking compliments.

“I speak the truth.”

We spent the rest of lunch discussing my classes and what brought me here for college. Paisley insists on covering the bill for both of us. I argue with her for a moment but ultimately cave to her generosity. I need to get better at letting people do things for me. We take the short walk back to Coastal Books and spend the rest of the afternoon stocking shelves and helping customers find the perfect book.

When five o’clock rolls around, I help Paisley close the store and head back home to get ready for the game. Liza is meeting me at the apartment. It’s become a tradition to get ready together. I spend my drive home reflecting quietly on the beautiful day and counting the blessings this town has brought me.

Ryan

It's game day, and I'm psyched. Starting the morning off with my girl and an intense workout keeps my head straight and locked in. A few of the guys came to the field early to get reps in. This is a big game. If we win, we move on to the semis. Scouts from the league are watching our every move. Mistakes at this point in the season are costly. My mind is clear for the first time in weeks, that is until I head to the locker room and check my phone.

Logan: We're locked in.

Me: Ok.

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

The pit in my stomach returns in full force. I can't dwell on it. Mom has been going to PT again, and I see an improvement in her mobility and stamina. She hasn't questioned me about the money. She's always elected to only see the best in me. Questions inevitably bring my demons to light.

On game days, our schedule is tight. Pre-morning workouts, a short break, then watching game film. On my way out of the locker room to the film room, I'm greeted unexpectedly by Coach and an important-looking man in a suit. They are both sporting scowls, and Coach takes his hat off repeatedly and runs his hands through his hair.

"Ryan, you need to come with us." My eyes haze over, and my stomach bottoms out. I know what this is about before making it to the administrative office.

Coach doesn't say a word on our walk to the athletic building office space. I've only been in this building a handful of times, and it was all paperwork stuff for my scholarship. If I'm in here, it's serious business. Coach and the well-dressed man take a seat across from me. This office is small, but a massive computer faces both of them.

"Ryan Shane, I'm Lester Miles, head of athletics here at Springs U. We've brought you in here today to discuss recent suspicions of NCAA college football violations that you may be involved in," he says with a fierce seriousness in his voice. I gulp loudly. My palms sweat, and my mind is rolling with hundreds of thoughts. Do I lie? Do I tell the truth? Is there any way out of this?

Coach chimes in, "Ryan, we have evidence that you've been betting on college

football playoff games. Is this true?" The disappointment in his eyes makes me want to vomit.

"No." I quickly decide lying is my only option.

"Mr. Shane, this is not something that you'll be able to get out of. We have the evidence, and it's hefty. You need to come clean," Lester glares at me, folding his arms across his chest.

"What does this mean for the game tonight?" I ask with naivety.

"The game tonight is the least of your worries, son. Your football career may be over. Now tell us the truth," Coach says with authority.

"I.. I.. My mom is sick," I sound like a child, but I don't know how else to explain how ignorant I am to do something like this. Both men stare, hoping I'll continue to explain.

"She needed money to pay for her PT appointments. I made decent money here and there in high school doing it. It was the only way to get a big chunk of money quickly." No explanation will justify my actions to these two. I'm fairly certain my career is over, so I word-vomit the rest of the story.

"I know a guy that does it full time, so I asked him to help me. I knew it was wrong, but my back was against the wall. She's all I have, and losing football was worth the risk. I couldn't lose her," I explain with a stone-cold expression. I can't show weakness.

Coach interjects, "How much money, Shane?"

"Last week, I banked five thousand. It all went to her bills. She started going to the

doctor again, and she's making progress."

Coach and Lester look at each other and sigh.

"Did you bet on our game, son?" Coach asks sadly. I hesitate before answering. Coach bangs his fists against the wooden desk and leans over close to my face. "Be straight with me. Did you bet on our game?"

"You already know the answer to that. I was desperate," I reply with heavy shame laced on my tongue. Coach curses under his breath and folds his arms over his chest. He can't stand the sight of me, and I don't blame him.

Lester cuts in, "Mr. Shane, we are required to report this activity to the NCAA. If we don't, Springs U could suffer a college sports ban for years. We can't risk that."

My vision goes black. I knew this was coming, but the blow hits me harder than I anticipated. This morning was so clear. I was happy for the first time in days. I thought I was invincible. There's no way I would make the same mistakes twice. I was more careful and diligent this time around, but it wasn't enough. Now, my life and everything I've worked for is fading to black. I'll ultimately lose everyone and everything.

"I understand," I say.

"You are one of the top NFL recruits in the nation. This story has the potential to make headlines. Make sure you are prepared for that," Lester says with a business-like tone.

Coach adds, "You are no longer allowed on team facilities, but you knew that before you engaged in something so stupid and reckless."

“You won’t hear from me again,” I stand and walk out of the abysmal office.

I don’t know how I make it back to my car, but I find myself parked at Downtown Tap. My mind is turned off, along with my phone. I can’t speak to anyone. I need to drown my problems away with heavy liquor. I have nothing left to protect, so my self-imposed public drinking rules don’t mean anything anymore. My face will be blasted across ESPN within the next few hours, and my career will officially end with the report. I take a seat at the dingy barstool and order a vodka shot from the middle-aged bartender in front of me. I’m in no mood to talk. I just want to forget.

30

Violet

I meet Liza at my apartment, and we begin our game day routine. Liza brings food and connects her phone to my Bluetooth speaker. Liza has the best playlists. It’s the perfect blend of hip-hop, country, and Taylor Swift. I go heavy on the eye makeup because I’m feeling myself tonight, applying cat eyes with gold glitter eyeshadow, mascara, and pink lip gloss. Liza’s makeup always looks flawless. I’m learning a lot about makeup from her. She introduced me to liquid eyeliner, and it’s been a game changer.

“How do I look?” I ask.

“Like Ryan is going to jump your bones!” she squeals. She’s the best hype woman.

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“Nothing compares to you. Trying to impress Hartley?” I joke with her because she squirms whenever I bring up whatever is going on between her and Hartley.

“Friends, Violet, friends!” she playfully shoves me.

“Whatever you say.” Neither of them are willing to admit it, but I see the way they look at each other. It’s definitely not friendship, but they’ll admit that sooner or later.

“Are we walking or driving?” She looks at me, popping her hip.

“I’ll drive. Hartley left the car.” We swiftly lock up the apartment and jump into my small car. Liza connects her phone and picks up where her playlist left off.

“I’m so excited for the game! If they win, they’ll play an away game in the semis!” she says.

“I know. I haven’t talked to Ryan since he left this morning. I didn’t want to bother him on game day. I can’t wait to see him run on the field.” Seeing my man in full uniform run to me from the tunnel makes me giddy.

We park in the main lot, show our tickets, and find our seats we’ve spent the past season in. I could get used to this routine. The game starts in half an hour, so we join the concession line to get nachos before kickoff. There are so many people waiting in line before the game. The anxious anticipation radiating off the fans is intense in the best way. I hear chatter behind me from a group of guys.

“Did you hear he’s out tonight?” the guys mumble.

“Why?” someone behind me asks.

“Don’t know. Heard it’s team-related issues. Didn’t see anything about an injury,” deep voices continue behind me.

Who could they be talking about? Ryan or Hartley didn’t mention any of the starters being out tonight. I turn to Liza, but she’s too preoccupied on social media to eavesdrop with me.

My curiosity gets the best of me. I turn around and ask, “Who is out tonight?”

One of the guys replies, “Rumor is Ryan Shane is out for the game.”

“Oh, that’s not true. He’s my boyfriend, and he’s definitely playing,” I say with confidence.

“Could just be a rumor,” the guys answer with nonchalance.

Why is there a rumor that Ryan isn’t playing? Weird, but I guess when you’re a top NFL recruit there’s always rumors flying around.

I lean over to Liza and get her opinion on this. “Did you hear those guys? They said there’s a rumor that Ryan isn’t playing tonight.”

“What? No way. Ryan would have told you if he got hurt.” She doesn’t seem phased, so I push it to the back of my mind.

We pay for our nachos and go back to our seats. The stadium has filled up now that the game is fifteen minutes away. The team should be coming onto the field any minute. I wait eagerly for Ryan to bust through and sprint onto the field. Seeing him do his thing is sexy. The loud music begins, indicating the team's arrival. Fireworks

set off, signaling that the guys are here. I search for Ryan's number in the crowd of players but can't find him. He should head over to me any minute now.

Liza waves frantically to Hartley, and he blows her a playful kiss. Yeah, those two are definitely "just friends". She leans over to me and says loudly, "Where's Ryan? I don't see him with the running backs."

I begin to panic. Ryan isn't with the running backs. He's nowhere to be found. I need to get Hartley's attention before I pass out from anxiety. My heart will shatter for him if he is hurt. I catch Hartley's attention and wave him over to me. He looks around to make sure he can cut out from warm-ups before beelining it to the stands. Leaning over the metal barrier, I say, "Where's Ryan?"

"Vi, I'll have to explain after the game. Some shady stuff went down. I can't let myself go there, or I'll lose it," he tells me.

"Where is he?" I ask with a clear panic in my voice. Ryan would have told me if he was in trouble. Something isn't adding up.

"Vi, I don't know. No one can reach him. We'll talk later," he begs me, but I'm out of my seat before he can finish. I hear Liza's voice trail behind me.

"Violet, wait! I'm coming with you. What's going on?"

"It's Ryan... He's... I don't know.. Hartley said-" I'm not thinking clearly. My mind is focused on one thing: finding Ryan.

"I'm not letting you drive by yourself. You are too upset!" she yells at me. "Don't fight me. I'm coming." It's not worth the fight right now. The more time I spend arguing with Liza, the more time wasted when I could use it to find my boyfriend.

“Get in,” I say.

I push Ryan’s contact. His phone goes straight to voicemail. Weird, but I guess this isn’t unusual considering he ghosted me for hours at his mom’s house during Christmas break. I try three more times to confirm that my calls won’t go through.

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“Try to call him from your phone,” I tell Liza.

She tries with no luck.

“Let’s go by the apartment and his house first.” My stomach is in knots, and I’m trying my best not to empty my guts in the car. We pass by both places with no luck. I decide to drive downtown next.

“What did Hartley say happened?” Liza asks timidly. I didn’t mean to take my frustration out on her earlier. She is supporting me the best she can.

“He said something sketchy happened, but he couldn’t talk about it,” I repeat what my best friend dropped on me.

“Maybe he’s hurt,” she says hopefully.

“Doubt it,” I gulp, glance at her, then return my focus to the road. “If he got hurt, he would have told me. I have a feeling this is worse.”

“Don’t think like that.” Liza reaches over and rubs my shoulder. I’m glad to have her here. She’s the only thing keeping me from slipping over the edge.

We drive down every street, taking turns checking restaurants, gas stations, and parks. Ryan doesn’t drink in public, but I’m in desperation mode and have to check just to rule them out. We park in the shared lot by Downtown Tap and walk in. As soon as I pass the bouncer, my heart cracks into a million tiny pieces.

I see my broken boy hunched over the bar with his hands laced through his hair. He is surrounded by empty shot glasses and half-naked women draped over him. He isn't giving them any attention, but the sight guts me. He's wearing the same thing he left the apartment in this morning. How long has he been here?

Without thinking, I run to him and grab his shoulders. His delayed response to my touch on his back and glassy eyes tell me he's wasted. He seems completely indifferent about seeing me here.

"Babe, what's going on?" My eyes search his, frantically, for answers.

"Why are you here?" he replies with hollow eyes. I smell the harsh stench of alcohol on his breath.

"Why are you here?" I shoot back at him. Hurt painted on my panicked face. My hands shake like a leaf, and I'm close to falling apart at the sight of him.

"Figured your best friend would have mentioned how much of a screw-up I am," he slurs, and with every word, my heart fractures more.

"He didn't exactly have time to tell me why my boyfriend was a no-show for the playoff game. I was there waiting for you, Ryan." I'm trying to be patient, but I'm wearing thin. I need him to tell me what's going on.

He turns and signals for the bartender. The middle-aged woman wearing a revealing top stops by Ryan. He orders another shot. I glare at the woman and silently signal that he's had enough. She nods in agreement and brings him a glass of water instead.

"Doesn't matter. It's over. If you know what's good for you, you'll leave. I'm nothing anymore. You've always been too good for me, anyway," he spits with a loss of hope in his voice. His eyes aren't the same ones that locked with mine when I

revealed my mental health struggles. His hands aren't the same ones that cradle me safely in my bed every night, shielding me away from my darkest thoughts. This isn't my Ryan. I refuse to let him do this.

"You don't mean that." Silent tears roll down my face. My hand hasn't left his muscular shoulder, and my feet are frozen in place.

"I do. You and I both knew this wouldn't last. Look at us." He gestures at me as if I'm a spectacle on display for him.

"Stop. This isn't you. We both know it," I raise my voice. I'm losing control of my emotions with each word. My breathing escalates, and I begin to see a black rim form around my eyes. Panic and self-doubt sets in like wildfire.

"Look up." He waves to the big TV sitting above the bar. I don't immediately recognize why he wants me to look, but then it hits me. Across the bottom of the screen, there is a little news banner that rolls continuously. I read the tiny letters: Ryan Shane suspended indefinitely for violation of NCAA rules.

My eyes dart to my boyfriend in total confusion. What rules did he break?

"What's happening?" I ask one last time in hopes that he will explain this incredibly confusing mess of a situation to the person he claims to love the most. He continues to ignore me and drown his worries in the bottom of a drink. "Ryan, tell me what's going on."

"If I tell you, will you leave?" he asks, annoyed.

"Yes." I have to remain strong. I can't let him see how heartbreaking it is to hear the love of my life try his best to get me out of his sight.

“I bet on some games. Knew it was against the rules. Did it anyway,” he answers with nonchalance.

“Bet?” I’m still not getting it.

“Yes, Violet, betting. I put money on some games, and now it’s over,” He takes a sip of the water in front of him and loses his mind at the taste of it on his tongue. He waves the glass around arrogantly and screams, “This isn’t vodka. I need a refill.” All eyes are on my out-of-control boyfriend.

“Ryan, stop. Let’s go home,” No matter how much his hurtful words have shattered my heart tonight, I need to get him out of here before someone calls the police.

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“Home? You aren’t in charge of me.” Will he remember any of this tomorrow morning?

“I’m not leaving you here wasted with a bunch of random people who would love to take advantage of the scene you are causing!” I scream, pulling his arms to urge him to leave with me. We can fix this if we get out of here.

“I have nothing anymore. What does it matter? Let them take all the videos they want. I don’t care anymore.”

“You had me.” I’m hysterically crying. My body is shaking so much that I could collapse at any moment. Where is Liza? I need to get out of here.

“It was fun while it lasted. It was only a matter of time before you saw the real me and had the opportunity to run. Run, Vi.” His final statement cracks the last piece of my heart into shambles. I need to get out of here before this spirals out of control more than it already has.

I don’t have a clear understanding of the events that transpired tonight, but I know Ryan’s heart, and I refuse to give up on him. With what is left of my dignity, I turn my back and run out of the bar. I collapse on the brick wall outside and cry so hard that I’m choking. I can’t catch my breath. Liza joins me on the cold cement and pulls me in. I can’t form words. The pain is too much. It’s all rushing back to me like a tidal wave. Ryan made me believe in something again after my grandpa’s passing. He allowed me to put my trust in someone other than Hartley, and he took a jackhammer to all of it tonight.

Liza doesn't say anything, but she continues to hold me in a tight embrace. She simply sits with me outside of the bar and lets me break down in her arms. After a while, she stands me up and helps me get to my car. She takes the wheel without hesitation and drives us back to my apartment.

"C.. Co.. Could you-" I try my best to form the question my brain is thinking.

"I'm staying," she reaches over and gives my thigh a squeeze.

She helps me into my bed and pulls the covers over me.

"I know you can't talk right now, and I know you're far from alright, but when you're ready, I'm here. I'm not leaving. Ok?" I nod my head to acknowledge her words. I'm out of tears for the night, and my soul is painfully dark. I've maxed out hate, anger, sadness, and grief. I have nothing left inside.

31

Ryan

The sun hits my barely opened eyes. I'm on the floor of my house in the same clothes I worked out in the day before. There's trash and alcohol bottles scattered across the main room. Why am I on the floor? Sitting up, I grab my pounding head. My thoughts are unclear and heavy. I reach for my phone on the couch and scroll through endless notifications, mostly from the team.

Mason: Where are you?!

Hartley: What were you thinking?!

Hartley: You're the stupidest collegiate athlete I've ever seen.

Mason: We need to talk.

I can take the heat from my teammates and fans, but one text sends a punch straight to my gut.

Five missed calls from Mom.

Mom: How could you, Ry? Come over.

I can't face this today. Her text, mixed with the worst hangover imaginable, makes me so sick that I run to the bathroom and vomit for the next hour.

I spent the next few hours piecing yesterday's hazy events together. Workout, meeting, bar, Violet..

My brain hurts when Violet's name crosses my mind. I don't remember everything, but I know it was bad. She hasn't texted or called. I remember screaming at her and the bartender. Her eyes were glossy and red. She found me, and I treated her like crap. She cared enough to search for me, and I let her down. Whatever picture she created of me in her mind was shattered into pieces last night. She saw a glimpse of the old me. The broken version of myself that pushes away anything and anyone that could hurt me. It's best for her that she stays far away, but I can't help the magnetic pull I feel when I'm with that girl. She brings out the best in me. That's not something I'm willing to give up.

I push her contact number and call her. Each call goes straight to voicemail. Either her phone's dead, or she's blocked me. I know I broke her trust in a monumental way, but I need her. It's selfish, but I'm addicted to her presence. I need to breathe in her intoxicating scent and feel her warmth around my calloused soul. I want to feel her soft, warm skin and her head nuzzled against my chest. I called her three more times with no luck. I need to shower and go to her. I'm positive that I'm the last

person she needs or wants to see, but I can't help myself from trying.

After a hot shower and fresh change of clothes, I drive to my girlfriend's apartment with full intentions to explain everything and pray that she forgives me.

Is she even my girlfriend anymore after last night?

I'm ready to give her what she needs. I've lost everything, and I can't face the reality of losing her too. I walk up the narrow steps and knock on the door, but I'm not greeted by my lifeline.

"Look who it is." Hartley grabs my shirt and pushes me out of the entryway to the apartment. His eyes are black, his shoulders are tight, and he's ready to beat the crap out of me.

"I'll explain, but I need to see Violet," I beg. I know the way to my girl is through her best friend, and I'm not above begging.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“I’m sure you do, but you lost that right when you abandoned her last night.” His yells echo through the complex. His jaw is clenched, and his face is on fire. He’s barely holding it together. Shoot. I don’t even know if we won last night’s game. If the team lost, I’ll feel even worse.

“Hartley,” I groan and keep my arms down. Hartley’s fists are balled up tight on my shirt. His face is so close to mine, I can feel hot breath on my skin.

“You were supposed to take care of her. Do you know how hot I was when everyone sent me videos of you exploding on her last night? After losing the playoff game. I came home and punched a hole through the wall!” He pushes my chest back, and I tumble back with a hard jolt.

“I’m sorry. So sorry, Hart. I let the team down in a monumental way. I don’t even know what to do or say, but every time I think about it, vomit rises in my throat.” I look down shaking my head in shame. “Look, I just need to talk to her. Please just give me that,” I beg my girl’s brutish best friend. I don’t deserve to see her, but this is all I have.

“Nice apology, but you can shove it where the sun doesn’t shine. Go wreck your own life. I know a thing or two about that but don’t bring her into it,” he spits the words at me with venom.

“I love her. None of this was supposed to happen. I didn’t want her involved in my mess.” The emotions built up inside overflow into anger. “I needed the money and did what I had to do. I kept her out of it to protect her.”

“Protect her? You did a stellar job with that. Keeping her in the dark and embarrassing her. Iknewthis would happen. I let my guard down, and you screwed her over. It won’t happen again.” He points a finger close to my face.

“Did you not hear me? I love her more than anything in my life.” My heart bursts out of my chest. “She’s the only thing that makes sense to me. I know I royally screwed up, but I need to see her. I need to hear from her own mouth that she doesn’t want me here. Then, I’ll leave.”

“Leave.” He walks me closer to the stairs.

“I’m not leaving without seeing her. Ineedto see her.”

“Leave or I’ll—”

Before he can finish, the angelic voice of the only home I’ve ever known appears at the entrance to the apartment. “Both of you, stop!”

Our heads snap to face the girl that we both love in monumentally different ways.

“Vi,” I gasp because seeing her takes my breath away. I’ll never get tired of her, but I have serious ground to cover.

“Hartley, give us a minute,” she mumbles. Her eyes have dark purple circles painted on her perfect skin. Her hair is thrown into the messy bun that I love. Her voice portrays pure exhaustion. You did this to her.

“This isn’t a good idea. He’s lied to you once. He’ll do it again,” he says with anger.

“I can handle him, Hart.” My girl’s voice sounds so small. So entirely broken.

“Are you sure?” She nods. “I’ll be right inside if you need me.”

Hartley eyes me up and down with daggers before heading inside the apartment. Violet sits on the top step right outside her door. I join her and gently brush my knee against hers. I need contact with her, and I’ll take what I can get.

“Why?” She shoots me the prettiest eyes in the world, welled with tears waiting to break free.

“Baby.” I move to grab her hand, and she flinches. Her face scrunches with hurt covering her features.

“Don’t.” She scoots farther away. “You can’t come here and act like we are ok. We’re not.”

“I know we aren’t, and I know I screwed up.”

“Screwed up? You humiliated me. I was so scared that something bad happened to you that I searched the entire town trying to find you,” she explains.

“I’m-”

“Let me finish,” she says with tears rolling down her face. “Only to find you belligerent at the bar, treating me like I’m dirt under your shoe. Did I ever mean anything to you? Or was this just a game?”

“Let me make it make sense. Please, Violet. I owe you that,” I beg her.

“I was there. All I ever wanted was for you to let me in. You chose to shut me out. Ha. How stupid am I? I thought this was about game-time nerves.” She chuckles manically.

“I couldn’t ruin you along with me. You’re inherently good. I couldn’t handle the thought of dragging you into this,” I explain with the most honesty I’ve given her in weeks. “Mom’s bills were piling up, and my back was against the wall. She needed this, and I needed your presence more than I cared about telling you the truth.”

“What does that even mean?” she grabs my hands, twisting her body to face me. Dried up tears mark her face while fresh ones continue to roll down her cheeks.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“I knew when you found out, it would be over. I’m selfish. I wanted to hold on to us as long as I could before you left me.”

“That’s how little you think of me?” she asks with a heart-shattering expression. Her crying has kicked up. She gasps for air in hyperventilation.

“Baby, breathe,” I rub her back gently to calm her down. It’s killing me to see her like this. It’s worse knowing I caused her pain. She takes a few deep breaths to gather her composure before she continues.

“You thought I would bolt if you leaned on me?” she asks the question again.

“You’re too good for me,” I blurt out without answering her question.

“Run then, Ryan. Run from me. All I ever needed from you was the truth, and you shattered my trust.” She stands to leave my side. I know I need to say something to stop her from leaving, but this move feels permanent.

“Please,” I beg.

“You broke me.” She looks back to me. “And I loved you more than anything I ever had.” She slams the door behind her, leaving me on her top step like Romeo. Lost and wrecked so completely.

“Me too,” I whisper under my breath. I make it to my car and collapse my forehead against the wheel. I punch my steering wheel, yet again, opening up old wounds. When my head lifts to start my car, it’s dark outside.

Violet

I sink into my spot on the worn couch. It now has a permanent dent because I haven't moved from it much within the last twelve hours. My hot-headed best friend swarms me instantly from our kitchen table.

"What did that jerk say?" he asks, pacing the space in front of me.

I shake my head. "I don't have it in me to talk about it," I answer with no emotion left to give.

"Violet, I swear if he said anything stupid," he throws his hands in the air.

"I just need time to process this," I square my shoulders.

"Did he explain everything? Most importantly, why did he act like such a tool at the bar?" Hartley's face is beet red. He continues to pace back and forth, increasing my anxiety with every step.

"I don't need all the details to know he lied, and I can't do this anymore." My sky-high walls are rebuilding by the second. Ryan managed to bulldoze them down to a place I hardly recognized. I've learned that people leave more than they stay. Whether that's dying or bolting, Hartley's been my only constant. I thought Ryan would be the exception, but I was wrong.

"It's everywhere, Vi. He placed bets on our games." Hartley is hurt, too. He won't admit it, but his friendship with Ryan was growing. He's all about loyalty, and the team means everything to him.

“I saw it on the TV at the bar last night while I was trying to get him to tell me what was going on,” I explain.

“It’s bad. He won’t be allowed to play anymore, anywhere,” Hartley explains what I already knew in my heart.

“He did it for her,” I try to defend him even though I’m beyond mad at the man who broke my heart mere hours ago.

“Who?”

“His mom.” My eyes meet Hartley's.

“What are you talking about?” Hartley is understandably confused, but this isn’t my story to tell.

“It’s not my place to tell his story, but I know him well enough to know he wouldn’t have done it if it wasn’t his last resort. ”

“No reason is good enough to do something like that to the team. He ruined his career and let us down.” He plops down next to me and runs his fingers through his hair. His eyes are wild. His pupils are dilated from screaming.

“You’re right. I wish I had more answers, but my gut tells me there’s more to the story,” I explain. “I can’t see him right now.” My eyes well with tears. My skin is raw and dry from crying all night. “All I see is betrayal.”

“Come here,” Hartley hugs me tight like a father would if I had one. I cry into his chest until I have nothing left. The last thing I remember is falling asleep against my best friend, wrapped in my favorite fluffy blanket.

My eyes flutter open, and I rub the sleep from my eyes. I was able to get a few hours of solid sleep, but I decided to skip class anyway. I need a solid day to recover from the storm that hit me this weekend. I also don't want to see Ryan in our Monday class. I know we have to have another conversation at some point, but I'm not ready to see the boy I loved so deeply in person. The betrayal is etched in my heart, but I can't help but let my mind wander to the what-ifs.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

What if it was his only option?

What if his mom is sicker than he led me to believe?

Why couldn't he tell me?

My subconscious mind is still giving him the benefit of the doubt, but my heart is aching from his words and actions. I thought we were it for each other. He gave me a family to believe in for the first time in my life, and now it's gone. That's why I can't do this again. I lost one family in my life, and that nearly brought me to the grave.

Liza texts me that she's coming over after class. That gives me three solid hours to wallow in self-pity before she gets here. I decided to have Taylor Swift join me, and I whip up a playlist quickly with my favorite sad songs: My Tears Ricochet, Champagne Problems, So Long, London, Exile, lomi, and All Too Well. I don't plan on moving from this spot until further notice. Losing track of time, I hear a loud knock on the apartment door.

"Come in!" I shout. Liza busts in with her usual burst of energy. Her presence sends the first shot of joy through me since everything had gone down.

"I came prepared with the perfect breakup cure: chocolate, wine, chips, and frozen pizza!" she screams.

I watch as she heads straight for the kitchen. "Aww, you're the best, but you didn't have to do all of this for me," All this time, I thought I couldn't count on people to show up for me when I needed them to, but I'm beginning to realize that I never gave

anyone much of a chance. Sure, Ryan let me down, but Liza shows up time and time again. I'll go through the heartbreak all over again if it means I get to keep Liza in my life.

"Yes, I did. When my bestie is upset, I need to find the cure, hence my breakup items." She waves her hands around with excitement, showing off the grocery bag filled with goodies. Plopping down next to me, she busts open the salty and sweet snacks.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asks tenderly.

"You know what? I think I do." I need a girl's opinion on this mess. Who is better than someone who witnessed it with me?

"Vi, I've never seen him like that. Ryan has never gotten that drunk or acted like that since I've met him. He's always the responsible one. Something was seriously wrong." Her shoulders slump as she continues to tuck loose hairs behind her ear.

"He placed bets on his football games and didn't tell me. You saw how bad it was. Everyone knows and has to be gossiping about it by now."

"Yeah. I heard rumblings on campus, and Hartley texted me the short version this morning." She peeks at her phone, reviewing the information that Hartley sent her.

"To make matters worse, he showed up yesterday morning unannounced. I wasn't planning on going outside to talk to him, but I was terrified that Hartley would get charged with assault. Stopping both of them seemed like the only option."

"Did he apologize?" she asks.

"Yes, but it's not that simple." I look over at my best friend, meeting her caring eyes.

"He broke my heart, Liza." I try my best not to cry for the third day in a row. I can't do it anymore.

"This may not be the popular answer, but he loves you, Vi. Ryan hasn't acted like he does around you with anyone. What would he need to do to make you trust him again?"

"I don't know if anything will ever allow me to trust him again," I say.

"Sometimes the people who push us away the farthest need us the most. It's up to us to decide if it's worth the fight."

"Why should I? I don't know if I have any fight left in me."

"Take it from me. Some things are worth letting go and some are worth trudging through the fire. It's up to you what's most important." She gently grabs my hand and rubs circles around. "Just don't give up on him, okay? Trauma makes you push the people you love most in the world away." I make a mental note to dig into that comment later.

"We all have issues." I add. Walking away from him that night at the bar was the hardest choice I've had to make.

"I think we can both agree that boys suck." She rests her head on my shoulder and twirls little pieces of her loose hair.

I lay my head on her shoulder. "The understatement of the century. I need time to figure out what I want and what would be best for the both of us."

"That's fair. I'm not leaving your side, okay? I'm team Violet, and I want to see you happy. Coincidentally, you seem to be the happiest with Ryan by your side." I hug

the bubbly blonde and start my playlist again.

“Let’s listen to sad music until Hartley gets home. I’ve put him through my playlist torture for the past few days, and I know he’s had his fill,” I laugh and blast Taylor at full volume.

33

Ryan

The past few weeks have been a blur. I’ve skipped all of my classes and turned my phone off more than I’d like to admit. I can’t face the shame that I’ll feel on campus. Everyone knows. It’s across every sports journalism website, show, and podcast. One of the top NFL prospects throws his future away for quick cash. That’s what the headlines say, and I guess they are half true.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

No one except Violet will know the real me or the true reason behind my ugly secrets. I've had hundreds of sleazy reporters reach out for comments, and I haven't responded to any of them. I haven't even talked to my mom. I sent her a few texts letting her know I'm fine, but I know it's not enough. I know she'll never turn her back on me, but the disappointment is too much to handle at the moment. I did it all for her, but she never wanted that for me. She had dreams of me escaping our town and playing in the league. It gave her something to look forward to, to live for, and I managed to screw that up because I couldn't look past fixing her present state.

How could I have looked ahead to my future in the NFL when my mom's health was deteriorating before my eyes?

I knew what I was wagering when I called Logan, and I did it anyway. I know I need to face my mom. It won't be long before she grows impatient and shows up at my doorstep. I force myself to shower and change clothes for the first time in days. My apartment is abysmal, and my facial hair Depression hit me hard. I make the short drive to Mom's house and hesitate before knocking on the door. Taking a deep breath, I gently knock. Quicker than expected, the door flies open, and I'm suddenly ten years old again, wrapped in my mom's arms. The look on her aging face destroys me. I never needed her to worry about me. It should be the other way around.

"Oh, Ryan," she whispers to me. I try my best to hold back the emotions that have been bubbling to the surface. I won't let Mom see me distraught. She leads us through the house into the main room, taking her favorite spot on the recliner.

"I'm sorry," I manage to get out.

“Don’t apologize to me. I’m here, and I’m never going anywhere. I just want to know why,” she asks. Her loving eyes search mine as she grabs my hand in hers. I guess I’ve put her through so many weeks of emotional torture that she’s over the initial shock of it all.

“I had to.”

“No one ever has to do anything. We all make choices in our lives, and you made this one. Now I want the straight answer of why you did it.” Mom has a way of getting things out of me, and she’s relentless when she’s on a mission for answers.

“Your bills. The money didn’t come from a savings account. They came from the bets,” I confess with shame dripping from each word that rolls off my tongue.

“The last few weeks of you ignoring me gave me time to figure it out.” She crosses her arms in front of herself.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to say.”

“You can start by telling me why you sacrificed your future for my present,” she asserts with a scary level of certainty.

“I need you more than I need football.”

“Ryan, I know my condition has been tearing you apart since high school, but I’ve made it very clear that I don’t want you changing the course of your life for mine. ALS doesn’t get better. You know this.”

“Don’t say that!” I point and yell defensively.

“You need to hear it, son. I’m going to be gone, and you need something to live for

besides me.” She walks next to me and wraps her frail arms around my shoulder. I’m shaking, and the walls I’ve built around emotions have officially tumbled down.

“The only thing I have is you. Without you, I’m nothing,” I manage to let out. I’m trying to hold it together the best I can.

“You have made that your story for so long, baby. It’s time to let it go. If this is what it took, I’m glad it happened,” she confesses. “Now go fight for your dream life without me in the way.”

“Football is over, Mom. I don’t know if you’ve been living under a rock, but my name isn’t the most popular at the moment.” I lift my head from my hands to look at the strongest woman I know. I need her strength right now.

“I wasn’t talking about football,” she says.

“Football was my dream, and I ruined it. It’s over, and so is Springs U.”

“Football might be over, but your life isn’t. Don’t act coy, son. That ball of sunshine is something worth fighting for.”

“That’s over.” I know mom loved Violet, but I can’t lie and act like things are ok between us. She’s done with me.

“Nothing’s ever over, now is it?” she smirks.

“I didn’t handle it in the best way, and I broke every bit of trust she had in me,” I explain with embarrassment to the woman who raised me to have integrity, and I’m going along my life with the exact opposite.

“Then fight. You’ve never had a problem with fighting for what you want.”

“What if she doesn’t want me?” I look down at my hands folded between my legs.

“Every girl wants to be fought for. It won’t be easy, and it won’t be a quick fix. Don’t give up on her. I saw the way you two look at each other. Don’t throw it all away,” she yawns, and that’s my cue that I’ve over-exerted her for the day.

“You look tired. Go for a nap, and I’ll head out.”

“Promise me that you’ll fight for a life that’ll make you happy when I’m gone.” Tears flush her eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“I won’t ever be happy when you’re gone,” I answer her truthfully.

“With her, you will.”

“I’ll try.”

That’s the best I can give anyone right now.

I spent the next few weeks after visiting my mom thinking about my life and how I wanted it to look. All I’ve ever known was being a caretaker and football. One of the two is gone, and the other will be one day. How can I continue with my life without the two things that mean the most to me? I need to figure it out. Not for me, but for her. If this is something I can give my mom, I want to try my best to make something of myself.

I’ve received countless emails from my coach and the Springs U athletic director asking for meetings. Ignored. The university has sent me more than one potential class failure email. Ignored. My teammates have blasted my phone with calls and texts to meet up. Ignored. The one person who hasn’t reached out is the only person I care to hear from. I know I’ll have to work on myself first before trying to talk to her again. She doesn’t need this version of me. She deserves better, and I’m determined to make that happen, so I do what I’ve been putting off for weeks. I reach back out to everyone one by one.

I start with Coach and the athletic director because those are strictly business. It’ll be a meeting telling me all the rules I’ve broken and the consequences. I’m prepared for the worst. I pull my phone out of my gray joggers and text Coach, asking for a

meeting with him and the athletic director. The response is instant. We have a meeting scheduled an hour from now on campus. My heart races more than expected, but I have to face everyone I've burned to move forward with my life. This is the starting point to make amends. I change into khakis and a button-down and drive to the athletic building. Waiting for me are two men with disappointment written all over their faces dressed in Springs U athletics gear.

"Morning," I say as I take the same seat that I warmed only a few weeks ago. The day I was busted for all of my violations was a serious wake-up call. Now, I have a chance to explain myself and fix things.

"Shane," they both greet me.

"We've sent you more than a dozen texts, emails, and phone calls over the past few weeks, and we haven't received anything back," The athletic director levels me with a hard look before continuing, "I was starting to think you dropped from Springs U altogether."

"I'm sorry about that. I needed time to process the whole situation and determine my next move," I give them the most honest explanation I can. It's time to stop hiding and own up to everything I've done.

"Not gonna lie, Shane, I'm angry with you. You abandoned the team without so much as an explanation. These are your brothers. They go to war together and fight every week on the field. You owe them more than a disappearing act." The anger is clear in his voice. He's right. I haven't given my teammates the respect they deserve.

"I know, and I plan to explain everything to them, but I would like to start with you two if that's ok?" They both nod with their arms crossed over their bodies.

I start from the day I found out about my mom's ALS diagnosis, sparing no detail through the present. I want it all out in the open. I'm exhausted from the secrets and carrying them on my own. It's time to let other people into my life. They listen without interruption.

"I know it's a lot, and it's no excuse for my behavior or what I cost myself and the team in the process, but I wanted you both to see the full picture."

Coach is the first to speak. "Son, why didn't you tell me? I could have helped. You know my players come first." He's speaking truthfully. He doesn't have kids, and he always treats us like we are his own.

"This was something I had to handle on my own. I've always felt like I've been on an island by myself. Asking for help wasn't an option," I explain.

"I'm glad you've come clean to us. I sincerely appreciate your honesty, but this doesn't change the NCAA's decision. I received a formal decision letter in the mail a few days ago." I know what's coming, and an eerie sense of calm washes over me.

"They've decided to permanently ban you from college football. That's playing, coaching, and assisting the team in any way, shape, or form." He slides the tri-folded paper over the wooden desk. I unfold it in my lap and read the words silently, letting them sink in before reaching for a pen.

"I figured. I'm prepared to take the consequences in stride." I carefully sign the boxes that are required and hand the letter back to the athletic director.

"Thank you both for meeting with me. I'm sorry for this. If I could take it back, I would, but now it's time for me to move forward." I shake both their hands and exit the facility. I find a smile creeping onto my face. This shouldn't be a happy moment, but being fully transparent feels nice.

“Shane, wait!” I hear Coach hollering at me and jogging across the parking lot. I turn and wait for him to approach me.

“Just because football is over for you doesn’t mean I’ve given up on you as a man. You have talent, and it can be channeled in lots of different fields.” He raises one arm to grip my shoulder. “Call me if you ever need anything.”

He pats me on the back and makes his way back to the office.

34

Violet

The weeks since Ryan’s confession weigh heavy on my heart but get lighter with each passing hour. They say time heals all wounds, but time is painfully hard to get through.

Distracting myself with a full class load, homework, and studying has been the best medicine for a broken heart. I still find my mind wandering to the broken man who trampled my heart and left marks forever. I wonder what he's doing and how he is coping with it all. I’ve wanted to call him more times than I can count, but I stop myself before I do. If he wanted to, he would. I keep reminding myself. The last thing I need is my sensible judgment clouded with beautifully broken eyes, his warm arms wrapped around mine, and all the words I want to hear. I’m stronger than that.

Hartley has been doing his best not to bring up football, the team, or Ryan. He’s also reigning in his wild emotions about it all. Liza has spent almost every night at the apartment. I never knew how much I needed her presence before now. Her sunshine, crazy takes on life, and wild plans always take me out of my own mind, which can be a dark place. I’m sitting on my comfy rug, getting ahead on assignments for the semester, when my blonde bestie busts through the door. Did I mention we gave her a

key?

“Alright! The pity party is officially over. We’re going out tonight!” she squeals.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“I’m assuming I’m the pity party?” I laugh because she is the best comedic relief.

“Yep! It’s been a party of one for the last few months, and I can’t take it anymore. We’re changing the reservation to a wild night out party for two, baby!” She jumps up and down, holding a bag in her hand. Maybe I should think about going out. It’s been two months since that day, and I haven’t done much besides go to class and lock myself in this apartment to study.

“I guess you’re right. I’m in,” I say.

“Yes! That was much easier than I thought. Here, I even bought you a little something to wear tonight!” She throws the boutique bag my way. I open it and am greeted with the cutest nude romper. It’s thin-strapped with ribbed material to hug my body. My favorite part is the bow that covers the chest area with a small space for skin to peek through. I’ll admit this isn’t my usual style, but I’m willing to try it on for her. She’s been the most patient and kind friend these past few months, and I want to thank her for that. Liza’s love language is gift-giving, and I want her to know how much I appreciate our friendship.

“I love it.” I pull her in for a hug, and we make our way to the bathroom to begin getting ready for the night.

“Umm, one question. Will he be there?” I glance to her, then back at the ground.

“He hasn’t been out since that day. I would say there’s a slim chance of us seeing him tonight.” She gives me a small smile. This leaves my mind wandering to Ryan again. What has he been doing if no one has seen him? Is he ok?

“I just hope he’s alright.”

“Me too,” she says. After the night Liza asked me to keep an open mind about Ryan, she stopped pushing. I’m grateful for that because I needed time to wrap my brain around everything.

“Who knows, maybe we’ll see some cuties out tonight! A hook-up wouldn’t be such a bad thing, right?” She nudges her hip into me playfully.

“No way. I’m steering clear of hot boys with trails of broken hearts for the foreseeable future.” I really need to focus on fixing my issues before bringing someone else into the mix.

“Ok, but can we still look?!” She gives me that playful puppy dog face that makes me cave.

“Looking isn’t off limits,” I say with a giggle, but I won’t be looking anywhere tonight besides the bottom of a vodka soda.

It’s 10 p.m. when Liza and I hop out of the rideshare to Downtown Tap. Nausea ripples through my stomach. The last time I was here, I was met with the love of my life, down bad in the worst possible way. Now, I walk in with Liza on my arm. I need this girl’s night. Staying locked away from the world in the apartment isn’t going to help me make progress mentally.

Ryan and I haven’t spoken since that day on my apartment steps. Each day brings new challenges and triumphs. We’re greeted by a group of girls that Liza recognizes. She does a quick introduction before heading toward the bar to order for us. Liza has the male bartenders wrapped around her finger. She possesses the magnetic

personality that draws you in. Saying no to her is unheard of. She orders two vodka sodas. I'm staying away from shots tonight. The last thing I need is a drunken emotional breakdown in the middle of the bar. I plan to nurse this drink for a while.

"Mason!" she screams and darts to the quarterback. I follow her with no plans of leaving her side tonight.

"Hey, ladies! I haven't seen you two in a hot minute," he squeezes us under both arms.

Mason is a sweet guy, and his sister has been a great boss. I gave her a brief recap about Ryan and me a few days after it happened, and she granted me extended time off of work. She said I could take all the time I needed, mentally, and return when I was ready. Paisley doesn't need an extra employee but likes the company. I'm finally going back to work this week. I need a sense of normalcy in my chaotic life, and the bookstore is a happy place. I also need to kick it into high gear if I have any chance of affording classes next semester. Summer is also only a month away, and I need the distraction. She already told me I can work as many hours as I want this summer since I'm not enrolling in summer classes, and I'm taking her up on that.

"I finally got this bombshell out of the shackles of school for the night," Liza says, pumping up my ego. She does it the best.

"Well, thank god for that," he winks. "Someone that beautiful should never be locked away." He's smooth, and I can't lie and say it doesn't feel good. Mason is just a friend and a shameless flirt, but hearing those things about me definitely helps.

"She busted me out and dressed me like her personal doll for the night," I wink to Liza.

"Liz, can you do this more often?" He grabs my best friend's hips in a flirtatious way

and gestures up and down my body, showing his approval. That's Mason, a quintessential lover boy.

"Absolutely." She kisses him on the cheek and takes a big sip of her drink.

"Boo!" Vibrates through my ears as big hands grab my waist and twirl me in a circle.

"Hartley! You can't sneak up on me like that. You know I'm jumpy." I can't stop laughing. Leave it to Hartley to scare me half to death in the middle of the bar.

"Come on, sis, you know you love me." Smelling the alcohol on his breath and hearing his slurred speech, I can quickly tell that he's buzzed. Buzzed Hartley is fun. He may make questionable life decisions, but right now I just need fun Hartley to distract me from myself.

"Let's dance!" he shouts and grabs both of our hands.

We wiggle our bodies to the dance floor and twirl around without a care in the world. I need this tonight. I want my mind turned off. After a couple drinks, I leave Hartley and Liza on the dance floor to take a breather. Those two are in their own world together, whether or not they realize it.

I scurry away to the bar to order my third vodka soda of the night. Tonight's game plan has changed to getting drunk and forgetting the mess that is my life. The bar is busier than when we first arrived, so I wait a while before ordering my drink. Taking my drink off the counter, I spin my body around to join up with Hartley, Liza, or Mason again, but my eyes catch the only man to ever own my heart playing pool.

What is he doing here?

Even though we are broken up, my body reacts to his presence. My cheeks warm, taking in his hard muscles captured under a black t-shirt. My eyes wander down his body. He has on jeans tonight, and they wrap perfectly around his firm thighs. I shouldn't have these thoughts, but with Ryan, it's automatic. We are magnetic forces that always seem to gravitate toward each other. I look down at my drink and try my best to disappear before he sees me. I'm too drunk and emotional to see him tonight. I'm not ready to discuss the past, yet.

I spot Liza and Hartley talking on the edge of the dance floor and make a beeline straight to them. Drunk Hartley doesn't need to deal with my drama, so I pull Liza away from him to fill her in.

"Can we go to the bathroom? I need to check my makeup," I lie to get Liza away from Hart.

"Sure!" I grab her hand and weave through the crowd to the musty bar bathroom. Once we're locked into the one-stall room, I spill everything.

"He's here," I say.

"Ryan?" she gasps. "I haven't seen him out in months! I'm so sorry, Vi. We can make an escape plan and go back home," she looks at me with genuine concern in her voice. She knows how broken I've been without him the past few months.

"I don't want to run away, but I also don't want to be around him," I say, sounding

pathetic, but I know I don't have the strength to face him tonight, but I'm having fun for the first time since we broke up. I'm not ready for it to end.

"Say no more. We're glued together for the rest of the night!" She laces her arm with mine.

We freshen our lip gloss and walk out of the bathroom. Greeting me outside the women's door is a wall of muscles that scream familiarity. I ran smack into his chest in the tiny hallway.

"I... I... I'm sorry," I fumble over my words, trying to stick to my plan of avoiding my ex tonight.

He clutches my arms and tilts my chin up to his. My mind goes blank when I lock eyes with him, and all the noise from the bar goes silent. It's just him and I in the hallway. I forget that anything bad ever happened between us. I forget that he shattered my heart into a million little pieces. All I see in my drunken stupor is the gorgeous man I adore right in front of me.

"We need to talk," he whispers, gently circling his thumb across my chin.

My best friend cuts in, "That's not happening tonight. She's drunk. I was given specific instructions less than two minutes ago to keep her glued to my side!"

"Liz, I would never hurt her," Ryan replies with a pained voice. His response snaps me out of the trance only this man could lock me in.

I step out of his arms and cross mine over my chest. "You did hurt me."

"I know. Please, just a few minutes. After that, I won't bother you the rest of the night," His pleading eyes search mine, begging, and I'm weak for this man.

“Okay.” I sigh, then point my finger in his face. “But Liza has to stand as a bodyguard to keep me from making bad decisions.”

“Fair,” he replies with that smirk that has brought me to my knees more times than I can count.

“Let’s go out the alleyway. It’s usually empty. Liz, can you wait by this door?”

“You have ten minutes before I bust out and take her. Your time starts now!” Liza says, trying to act tough. She couldn’t be more harmless if she tried.

Ryan leads me out the back. We sit on one of the two wrought iron tables set up. No one ever comes out here. It’s peaceful without the loud noises of the club inside. I wait patiently to let him lead this conversation. I need him to say something first and set the pace.

“First of all, the last few months have been the worst of my life.” He folds his hands on the table in front of him. “I spent some time locked away in my house because I didn’t know how to face anyone after what I did.” His hands clamp together tighter, white outlines framing his knuckles.

“I went to talk with my mom a few days ago. I felt lost, and I needed some sort of direction. I’m seeing things differently.”

“How is that?” I pick what left of my poor fingernails.

“None of it matters. Football has always been just a job. I can find another one. My mom never wanted or needed saving. She’s at peace with her life. I’m the one that did.”

“You never needed saving, Ryan,” I say truthfully. He was always perfect in my eyes,

but I know our own mind can be the darkest of places.

“I’m better, you know? I talked to Coach and the athletic director. I even called the team together to give them everything they wanted to know,” he explains. “Hartley was the toughest. He’s still hurt, and I get it—” Before he can finish, I cut in.

“You talked to Hartley?”

“Yes.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

My heart flutters without permission. Stupid heart. Ryan talks with absolute certainty. It's as if he's a new person. A better version of himself that I never knew existed.

"I'm banned from college football, but I'm ok with it, Vi. I've never felt more at peace with my life because there are no more secrets. No more pressure. I can just be for once."

"If you're banned from football, how are you going to stay at Springs U?" I ask.

"I'm not."

"What do you mean?" My heart hurts because as much as this man has hurt me over the course of the last few months, the thought of him leaving terrifies me.

"I'm taking the rest of the semester off to work on myself. I need to clear my mind before I can worry about school again," he says.

"That's great, Ryan. I'm happy for you." I smile at him.

"I'm going to enroll in online classes next year at the community college in town. I can work full time and bring my mom to her appointments if she needs."

"You seem better," I say. "Not that you weren't ever perfect to me before, but you seem calm, at peace." His hands reach for mine, and I allow him to cradle them in his. I missed this. The rough calluses across his fingertips circle my small hands.

"I am, but I'm missing the most important piece of my life, and--"

“Alright.” Liza bursts through the wooden door. “Time’s up. She’s coming with me!” Liza screams into the empty alley, pointing to her Apple watch timer. I can clearly see that her timer wasn’t set. She’s so ridiculous, and I love her for it.

“Liza, add ten more minutes to that timer. I swear I’m okay. I need to finish this.” I wave my hands to tell her that she can go back inside. She shoots a scowl my way and turns back to go inside. I need to have this conversation to heal and move forward.

“I need you, Violet,” Ryan blurts out. “If it wasn’t completely obvious, I’m a mess without you. You’re the only thing that brings the good out in me.”

“Don’t say that.” I yank my hand from his. He can’t waltz back into my life and say things that make my heart skip more than a few beats.

“It’s the truth. I know I don’t deserve your forgiveness, and I shattered your trust, but please, don’t say no,” he begs.

For a moment, I almost give in and collapse into the strong arms that I once called home, but I don’t. It’s time to fight for myself.

“I need time. I can’t be in a relationship with you right now. I don’t trust you, and without trust, we’re bound to fail.”

“Promise me you won’t shut me out forever. I’ll wait as long as it takes to prove to you how serious I am about us. There’s no time frame on this. I’m here when you’re ready to have me,” he says. I melt at his words, but in my heart, I know I can’t put trust in him. I don’t want to fall back into a relationship without trust. I need space to clear my mind and figure out what I want and need.

“I won’t, but I need space for a while to figure out who I am. Independence is

important to me.”

“I know, baby,” he says with the casual nickname that sends flutters to my stomach. “I’m ready for you when you’ll have me, but is there anything I can do in the meantime to help you?” He holds my hand in a tight grip, questioning his every move to make sure I’m comfortable. My mind spirals to when his lips were on mine, and I want them back desperately. If I don’t walk away from him now, I never will.

“Earn my trust. Show me that you can turn this around.” I kiss him gently on the cheek to show him that there’s still a chance in the future. “See you later, Ryan.” I leave him at the table to join Liza in the bar. My knees wobble, and my head is clouded with confusion. I can’t say goodbye to him, now, or ever, so see you later will have to do.

35

Violet

A few weeks have passed since Ryan and I’s emotional conversation at the bar. That night, I dissected our interaction one hundred different ways with Liza. She listened to me repeat the same story over and over and didn’t complain once. Her advice was to let him come to me. Be open-minded and allow him the chance to win me over. It’s hard when all I want to do is be in control of this situation, but it’s not best for either of us.

Gearing up for class, I throw on my leggings and Springs U baggy T-shirt. It’s a messy bun day because—why not? Slinging my bookbag on my tense shoulders, I fling the apartment door open and stop dead in my tracks. Sitting perfectly on my welcome mat is a vase filled with sunflowers and a card. I grab the beautiful bouquet from the ground and admire them. I lean my nose into the flowers and take a deep whiff. I love the scent of fresh flowers.

I return to the apartment to place the flowers in a vase with water. I carefully empty the little packet of flower vitamins and admire how much brightness they bring to the apartment. Heading out, I stick the card in my book bag and head to class. I'm not ready to open it yet. I know who this is from, and I need to clear my head before reading his words.

Class goes by quickly, and I do my best to distract myself from the card by taking over-the-top notes. Leaving class, I hop in my car and head to work. Work has become a lifeline these past few weeks. It keeps my mind busy from wandering to Ryan and I's relationship limbo. I'm a few minutes early, so I pull off to the beach. The beautiful part of Coastal Books is that you can walk straight out of the bookstore and onto the beach. I park my car and ditch my worn sandals, going barefoot. Before leaving, I grab the card out of my book bag. Now or never. There aren't many people out today, so it's the perfect place to decipher through my thoughts. As the golden hour serenity splashes across the horizon, the waves crash into the bright sand. Finding a spot, I sit crisscross and open the card. Inside lies a handwritten note on a piece of lined paper.

Violet,

I've been thinking about us for the past few weeks, and I finally know what you are to me: sunshine. The beacon of light in the darkness of my mind. I searched the store for the perfect bouquet to represent you, and sunflowers seemed like a no-brainer. I want to give you the time and space you deserve, but I can't lie and say it's easy. If I can't be near you, I'll write to you. I'm figuring out some things on my end and deciding which path I need to take to change my life. I hope to make you proud, but I also hope to make a life that I'm proud of.

Ryan

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

Words elude me at the thoughtful words Ryan expressed in his note. I'm glad he respects my boundaries and gives me space to think about what I want, but he's showing me he still cares. I want him to find a path and love what he does. He deserves to be happy, with or without me.

I fold the note into a small square and lose myself in the waves for a bit longer before walking to work. Inhaling Paisley's diffuser's lavender scent sends a calm blanket over my body. The store is busy this afternoon, so I hop right into customer service mode. The best part of this job is helping each customer find the right book for them. Paisley and I haven't had a moment to talk between register duty, looking up specific books in our system, and straightening the shelves. After about a half hour, we slowed down for the night.

"Phew, that was wild. I didn't expect a rush like that tonight," Paisley says as she fixes books on the center display. It's where we house the new releases and popular reads for the week.

"I know right? I liked it though. Kept my mind busy," I reply as I busy my hands filling out online book orders on the store laptop.

"Want to grab a coffee after we close for the night? I'm exhausted and can use some caffeine before I go home to my wild kids," she chuckles.

"That sounds great. I've been in permanent exhaustion mode lately."

Paisley and I finish closing the shop for the night and head to the coffee shop down the block. The display window of the shop facing the street houses a vintage coffee

grinding machine. The aroma permeates throughout the shop with small cafe tables and soft jazz music playing. Paisley orders a black coffee, and I order an iced mocha latte. We wait patiently for our drinks and find a cutout seat in the back.

“So, what’s been going on with you, girly?” Paisley asks hesitantly. I can tell she doesn’t want to open new wounds by bringing up Ryan, but she also cares about my well-being, which I appreciate. We haven’t talked about him or the situation, but everyone knows the basic story.

“Just trying to take it one day at a time. The whole Ryan situation totally blindsided me, so we’re taking a break to figure out what we both want.”

“That’s good. Take care of yourself first, always.” She grins and maintains eye contact. “My husband was shocked by the news. Mason came over for dinner a week after the news broke, and he was torn up about it.” She leans forward over the metal table.

“I was, too. It’s been a mess, but he actually left this note by my door this morning.” I pull the note out of my pocket and unfold it tenderly. I didn’t expect to show Paisley, but it wouldn’t hurt to get her opinion. “I love him so much, but I also know I need space.” I pass the worn note over to Paisley, so she can read it.

“Wow, Violet. This is very heartfelt, but I agree with your need for time and space. You are both so young. Don’t rush things. I would give Mason the same advice, but he would never listen to me,” she rolls her eyes.

“I’m happy that he’s putting forth effort to show me that he still cares. I want the best for him.”

“Mason texted my husband about an event this weekend at the community center. Apparently, the team is rallying Springs U Football alums to go. Are you going?”

“What kind of event?” My face scrunches in confusion.

“He said it’s a youth flag football game. Ryan invited the team to go out and watch his team play.”

“Ryan’s team?”

“I thought he would have told you. Mason said that Ryan has been volunteering at the community center twice a week. He signed up to coach the flag football team, and their first game is this weekend.”

“Wow. That is really great.” This is an amazing opportunity for Ryan. I’m glad he didn’t tell me about it. It shows that he’s better himself for him and not just to salvage our relationship.

“Well, if you want to go, I’ll be there for support. My husband wouldn’t miss it for the world.” She reaches over the table to pat my shoulder.

“Thanks, Paisley. I’ll think about it.” Part of me wants to stay away so I don’t fall back into his arms, but the other part wants to see him in this new role.

36

Ryan

“Alright, guys. We’ve been practicing for two weeks, and now it’s our time to shine.” I huddle the team together for a pre-game pep talk. “Who remembers the most important thing?” I crouch down to their level.

“Winning!” Jett says with a snarky laugh. This kid always needs to be the center of attention. Little Hartley in the making.

“No,” I drag out. “Winning is nice, but it’s not the most important part of the sport.”

A few of the other boys yell out, “Have fun!”

“Yes. Having fun is the key to football. There is no football without fun, and if you make a mistake? Brush it off. Don’t let it ruin your game.” They each throw a tiny hand in. My huge one tops the group. “Scorpions on three. One, two, three.”

“Scorpions!”

Taking the field these days looks a lot different than I imagined, but I love every minute of it. A few weeks ago, I googled volunteer opportunities around the area. The community center’s website showed an at-risk youth program. After reading the blurb about the program, I sent the director an email asking to meet with him to discuss volunteer opportunities. He was a cool guy and knew exactly who I was, being in the media for a hot minute. We talked for hours about football, life, and the program’s needs. He started the program a year ago to help at-risk youth in the area find a purpose. Turns out, we have similar backgrounds—both being raised by a single mom.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

The program has different facets: sports, art, and academics. He expressed that he was in dire need of volunteers in all areas to ensure its continued success, and he thought I would be a perfect fit. My first few visits to the community center were spent getting to know the kids and their personalities. The boys took to me right away, and I couldn't believe how incredibly talented some of them were. They just needed an opportunity to showcase themselves. Flag football seemed to naturally fit my skill set, so I asked the director if I could Coach the team. We've been practicing the basics for the past two weeks, and now it's game time.

"Let's go, Coach!" a deep voice shouts from the bleachers. I dart my head to see Mason and a slew of guys from the team hooting and hollering as they slam their feet onto the metal bleachers, chanting, "Let's go, Scorpions."

A goofy smile covers my face. I don't know what I did to deserve teammates with this level of unwavering loyalty. After everything went down, Mason reached out to me and told me he wasn't giving up on me. We've gotten closer over the past few weeks, and when we talked about my involvement with the community center, he invited every Springs U affiliate to the game. Jogging to the metal fence, I lace my fingers through the holes to greet the team.

"Hey, guys. Thanks for coming. It means a lot."

"We wouldn't miss the little Scorpions trashing their opponents for anything," Mason says.

Before I can reply, My heart stops as I catch a dash of brunette and blonde through the cutouts of the bleachers. The crew circles around and grabs an open seat next to

Mason's sister, Paisley.

"Vi." I'm at a loss for words seeing her. How did she know about the game? More importantly, what made her come? My stomach flutters at the sight of her. No matter how many times I see her, she'll always catch my breath. She's smiling ear to ear, waving at me. Hartley shoots me a chin nod, and Liza sticks her tongue out at me.

"Go get em, Coach," Violet answers, and the sound of Coach rolling off her tongue is almost enough for me to abandon my assignment, throw her over my shoulders, and take her home. Space. I remind myself. My heart swells with appreciation for everyone who came out to show their support for the kids.

"Talk after?" I ask, hoping she'll give me just a few minutes to soak in her presence. She nods twice with a grin, and I take that as my cue to return to the Scorpions before they start getting nosy.

After a hard-fought battle, the Scorpions lose by a touchdown, but I believe that sometimes losing is better than winning. It teaches you how to deal with adversity and come back from it stronger. I wish I had someone in my life to teach me these lessons when I was their age.

"It's not about winning or losing. It's about how we come back to the field next time. Trash it from your brain, and have fun this weekend. Got it?" I roar to the group of ten through twelve-year-olds kneeled in muddy grass in front of me, coming from all different walks of life.

"Yes, Coach!" They scream.

"Can we get snowballs now?" Jett asks.

"Snowballs on me for having great attitudes," I announce, and the team high-tails it to

the park snowball stand. I've made it a tradition to treat them when they display positive character traits throughout the game.

Packing up my small bag of coaching gear, I exit the field and make a beeline to my friends. There's an enormous collective clap, and I do my best to keep it together. I've gotten sappy. My eyes search for Violet, but I don't see her anymore. Shoulders slumping, I inhale deeply to remind myself that she's not mine. I spot Hartley, immediately registering how big of a deal it is for him to be here today.

"Hart," I call to get his attention. Making my way through throngs of children, parents, and oversized college football players, I extend my hand to him for a bro hug.

"Shane, don't corrupt these kids too much, ya hear? Or maybe they need a coach that can show them how it's really done." He winks as he punches my shoulder.

"I'll try my best, but I'm sure they would love the famous Hartley Knox to make a guest appearance every now and then." I throw the idea out there because I believe that everyone could benefit from volunteering at the center. It changes you in a good way and puts life into perspective.

"I'll think about it," he says as he turns his back to walk away. Throwing a peace sign over his shoulder, he casually says, "You may want to go out to the parking lot. There's a crazy stalker fan beside your car."

Immediately registering that Hartley is talking about Violet, I sprint to my car before she second-guesses herself and leaves with Hart. Standing in the gravel parking lot behind a cloud of dust from all the cars peeling off is the most beautiful girl I've ever laid eyes on. I'm completely out of my depth in this situation.

Slowing my sprint down to a walk, I make the first move, "Vi, thanks for coming." I

state awkwardly because, at this point, I don't want to push her farther than she's ready for.

"Yeah, of course. You looked happy out there, and the team is so cute." Arms crossed over her chest, she shifts her weight back and forth.

"I am happy. Didn't think Mason would invite the whole town, but seeing all the guys in the stands gave me a sense of pride. Like I'm finally doing something good in the world," I confess. "How did you find out?"

"Paisley let it slip one night after work. She was surprised that I hadn't heard." She bites her bottom lip so hard, I'm surprised it doesn't draw blood. "She invited me to come, but I told her I would need to think about it."

"I'm glad you're here." I slip my thumbs in my pockets and grind my teeth with nervous energy.

"I'm glad I'm here, too."

"Would you want to grab a bite to eat? I'm starving, but if it's too much for you, please say no." My eyes pierce through those sad baby blues. God, I miss her more than she knows, and I would love to spend time with her.

"Umm. Yeah. That'll work." She nods, and I gesture for her to hop in my car. "Let me text Hart and Liza to let them know where I'll be."

I'll take any time with Violet. Her giving me this chance means everything and more.

Violet

Sitting in the passenger seat of Ryan's car is not how I saw my afternoon panning out. I had a clear plan going into this: go to the game, share pleasantries, and leave with Liza and Hartley. Ryan's presence often derails my plans. Seeing the way he interacted with the kids on his team, encouraging them when they made mistakes, lifting their spirits when the other team scored, and allowing each player to shine did something funny to my heart. A sense of pride washed over me, recognizing that he was making positive changes to better himself and others around him.

"What are you feeling foodwise?" Ryan asks, jerking me out of my daydream.

"As weird as it sounds, I'm really craving loaded cheese fries," I shamelessly admit.

"Pat's Diner it is." He shoots me a smirk, white-knuckling the steering wheel the entire drive. Pat's is a small, family-owned diner in town. You can get just about anything there, and it's open twenty-four hours a day. Liza works there, so I've come to love all of their greasy food choices.

Ryan leads us in and asks the hostess for a booth for two. We slide across from each other and grab menus from the black and white checkered booth. Silence fills the air. I guess we're both a little anxious about what to say to each other.

"How have you been?" Ryan asks as he rests the worn menu down on the table. He folds his arms on the table-top and fiddles with his thumbs.

"Good." My head nods hesitantly because I really haven't been the best. "Okay." I tilt

my head to one side. "I honestly don't know," I explain.

Before he can answer, the waitress approaches the table to get our drink orders. We both order water and a loaded cheese fry appetizer. She scribbles the order down and returns to the kitchen.

Before he can answer my cryptic response, I rebuttal with, "How have you been?"

"I'm okay for the most part. Some days are harder than others, but I'm trying to rebuild my life into something I'm proud of."

"That's really great, Ryan. You looked at peace on the field. It's clear that the kids love and adore you. They were glued to your hip from the time you got there to the time you left."

"I love those little dudes. They've taught me more about myself than I think I've taught them."

I smile and reach across the table for his hand. I have no clue what came over me, but being close to him is instinctual. Without hesitation, he cradles my hands in his across the table and begins slowly rubbing circles with the pads of his thumbs. I missed this.

"Why didn't you tell me about the game in your note?" I blurt out.

"I didn't want you to think I was doing it to win you back."

"So, you really didn't know I was going to be there today?"

"No clue, but thank god you were."

The waitress returns with our drinks and lets us know that the fries won't be too much

longer. I peel a small piece of the napkin off and begin mindlessly rolling it between my fingers.

“I miss you a lot,” he admits, never losing eye contact. “My mind is on you, constantly.”

“I miss you, too, but a little space has been good for both of us.”

“It has.” He unwinds his hands from mine and grabs his cold water, gulping half the glass. I’m entranced by the way his throat bobs as he swallows.

“How’s your mom?”

“She’s doing about the same. I’m learning to allow her the space to decide her treatment plans on her own. It’s harder than anything I’ve ever done, but I’m learning to loosen the reins.” He chuckles.

“Good. I can just picture her smacking you over the head when you get too bossy,” I giggle.

“Bossy? Is that right?” He leaves his spot and joins me on my side of the booth, tickling my side.

I shriek in laughter and beg him to stop before I pass out. I begin to notice the rest of the customers staring at us, and I shove Ryan to indicate that we’re making a scene. He returns to his side of the booth just in time for the fries. We dive right in, me stealing the jalapenos and him hoarding the bacon.

“Vi, I know you need space, and I want to respect that, but would you want to get together every now and then? Not dates, but maybe friendship hangouts? I want to take this slow with you, and I’ll wait as long as you need me to.” His voice trembles

as the question hangs.

“I’d like that.” He drops the heavy stuff for the rest of the night.

His smile grows ear to ear as we inhale the rest of the loaded fries. It started to rain while we were in the diner, so we dash to Ryan's car. I managed to get soaking wet in the process. I'm sure I look like a sewer rat, but Ryan pulls off the disheveled look as water trickles from his hair down his neck. We take the short drive back to my apartment, and before I leave, he reaches over and grabs my cold hands.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

"Today was everything, Vi," he says, never losing eye contact. "I really appreciate you spending time with me. I don't deserve it, but thank you, anyway." He takes a big gulp and breathes in deeply.

"You deserve everything good that comes to you, Ryan. I hope you can see that one day." I peck a kiss on his cheek before darting out the car and running up the wet stairs into my warm home.

38

Ryan

One Year Later

"Alright, have a great summer! Come prepared to hit the ground running next year with field experience." My professor sends us on our way to enjoy our summer break away from classes.

I'm not getting much of a break, though. I doubled down on summer courses to make up for the debacle that was my sophomore year at Springs U. None of my credit courses counted since I dropped all of them after the scandal. I've kept a low profile this past year. Sports media still uses my story to warn potential NCAA football prospects and current players of the dangers of sports betting. I don't mind it as much as I used to. The thought of my story keeping other athletes on the straight and narrow brings me peace.

A year ago, I thought my life was over without football. I was ready to throw in the

towel on school altogether and settle into the role of the town screw-up. Talking to Violet at the bar all those months ago put things into perspective. She didn't take me back, and that was a punch straight to the gut. Part of me knew that she wouldn't fold that easily, but the more optimistic part prayed that she would fall into us again. The truth is, I need her more than she ever needed me. I still do. Her rejection forced me to work on myself. I wanted to become better for her. Be the man she needed in her life.

My path wasn't heading anywhere, and I needed to find my passion again. I spent those next few weeks at my childhood home. The space from Springs U was good for me, and I needed to decide for myself who I wanted to be. I spent hours researching potential careers, programs, and colleges that would accept me. I even toured local facilities of careers I was interested in to see if it would be a good fit. I made my way through lots of dead ends until I found my passion in the most unexpected place. Bringing my mom to her physical therapy appointments brought a new-found passion to the surface.

As much as I liked the PT office and was interested in how things worked, I never believed I could actually pursue it as a career. Everything changed when one of her therapists told me, "You are a natural at figuring out how her muscles respond to treatment. If you're interested, you would have a bright future in this field." That's all it took for me to dive head-first into physical therapy schools and programs. Luckily, I was accepted into the local community college to finish off my undergrad credits. Next year, I'll apply to physical therapy schools, and I've never been happier. I still volunteer at the community center. I've developed a bond with those little dudes. They need consistency, and that's what I've given them.

Jumping into my car to head home from the last day of the spring semester, I ceremoniously check my phone. My lips curve into a smile when I see a missed call from Violet. We've officially been back together for six months. Six long months without being able to call Violet mine was a special kind of torture, but it helped grow

our relationship in the long run. I kept my distance for the first few weeks, but without Violet in my life, a piece of myself would always be missing. Life didn't feel the same without her in it, but I knew she needed this space. After our lunch date at Pat's Diner, we began seeing each other once a week. Not kissing or holding her hand was a test of my self-restraint, but I passed with flying colors.

I click her contact, and she answers on the second ring.

"Hey," she says.

"Hey, Vi." I'm so lucky to have her back in my life. I thought I lost her forever, but as much as I pushed her away with my decisions, she never relented. It was always only ever her, and I wish it didn't take my stubborn heart this long to realize it.

"How does it feel to be done for the summer?!" she squeals. She doesn't know it, but I have a big surprise for her.

"So good. Only online classes this summer, so you won't be able to get rid of me," I reply with the giddiest smirk only Violet Evans can evoke from me.

"I never want to get rid of you. I would have been gone a long time ago." There's that smart mouth that I love so much.

"You mouthing off to me, Vi? What happened to the past stays in the past?"

"You know I need to keep you on your toes. I love you, though," she says. I'm such a sucker, but hearing her say it warms me all over. I need her words to keep me grounded more than ever nowadays. We took one of those little online tests a few weeks ago to see what our love languages are. Turns out mine is words of affirmation and Violet's is acts of service.

“I love you, baby. I’ll call you later when I get home.”

Little does she know, I’m heading straight to her.

39

Violet

Hearing Ryan’s voice makes me mushy inside. He’s always had an effect on me, and no matter how much I tried to push the feeling away, it always came back.

After that night at the bar where he spilled his guts to me, I was so lost. I didn’t know what I wanted or needed and fell into a loop of obsessive behavior. My ticks got worse. The sleepless nights grew longer, and my mind had no off switch. The ruminating thoughts kicked up a notch. After a month of torture, Hartley finally forced me to get help. He was seriously concerned for my well-being.

We researched doctors around the area and fielded which ones I would feel most comfortable with. Finally, I found Dr. Heally. To say she’s changed my life is an understatement. I’ve been through a few therapists and never stuck with one. That is, until Dr. Heally. I always thought my issues were too deep and complicated for anyone to unwind, but Dr. Heally did. She’s helped me work through the root of my OCD and anxiety. We’ve practiced coping mechanisms to use when things feel out of control inside my mind.

Every day isn’t perfect. I have ups and downs, high days and low days, but the difference is I now have the confidence to face them on my own. I’ve always relied on others to be my backbone. My trust wasn’t easily given, but once you had it, I had unwavering loyalty to you. Broken trust sliced me open and bled me out. We’ve worked through that, too. I realized how hard the situation with Ryan must have been for him, and I acknowledge that I didn’t handle the aftermath in the best way. Even

though he broke my trust, he's only ever had himself to rely on. That's a huge cross to bear. The six months spent working on myself and my inner demons were the best thing to ever happen to me. It killed me to cut contact with Ryan during that time, but I needed it for myself and my mind. I couldn't be what he needed back then, and the time apart did him good as well.

"Hart! Want to grab pizza for dinner? I'll call Liza to come!" I scream to my bestie from the couch. He's lounging in his bedroom, scrolling his phone.

"Nah. I think I'll chill here tonight. Not feeling up to going out," he says soberly. Something has been up with him the past few days. To say they've gotten themselves into a sticky situation is the understatement of the century. And they said my love life was complicated. Ugh.

"Ok. I'll order in. Wings?"

“Sure.”

I tap out the order on my phone. It’s the first day of summer break, and I want to celebrate with greasy food. This year has been tough, but I made it out with a 4.0. Next year, I start my junior-level courses at Springs U, and I’ll be that much closer to graduating. I quickly decide not to invite Liza over. Whatever this weird tension between her and Hartley is doesn’t need to dampen my mood tonight. Since we’re not leaving tonight, I throw my hair into a messy bun, throw on my comfiest pair of plaid sleep shorts and black silk tank.

“Vi! Can you get that? I don’t have pants on!” Hartley screams.

“Since when do you care if you have pants on?” I chuckle as I throw that witty response to him. Someone is beating on the door. It can’t be the delivery driver already, and I’m not expecting anyone else tonight. When I fling the door open, I’m left breathless.

“Ryan!” I launch into my man’s arms and wrap my legs around his waist. His strength and muscles contract around me. He’s warm and smells like mahogany. It’s my favorite smell in the world.

“Hey, baby. I wanted to surprise you tonight,” he replies as he nuzzles his chin into my neck. His beard stubble scrapes me in the best way. I miss him so much when he’s gone.

“You scared me,” I lock eyes with him and laugh. “I’m so happy to see you!” I giggle as I hold onto his broad shoulders tightly.

“I’m all yours for the weekend,” he says but makes no move to let me go.

“Eeeek!”

These days, seeing each other has become harder. I finally chose a major and career path while Ryan hunkered down to fix his year of dropping out of Springs U entirely. Facetime has become our best friend. We also didn’t want to rush into a relationship again. We both needed time to find direction, heal our past wounds, and become our own people. I missed him like crazy, but I also needed to find myself away from our relationship. He needed to sort things out, and we’ve both come out the other end better versions of ourselves. He slams his lips on mine like it’s the last time he ever will. Ryan kisses me like that all the time now. We’ve lost each other once and cherish our time together now more than ever.

“Looks like I picked the perfect time to fix a drink,” Hartley saunters into the living room kitchenette area. You guessed it, he’s in his boxers with no shirt. Stress is written all over his face. His hair is messy, and he has dark circles under his eyes.

“Hart, long time no see.” Ryan walks over and gives him a bro handshake. These two have come a long way since last year. Hartley hated Ryan’s guts for what he did to me and the team. He doesn’t like to show it, but he’s very sensitive and a little broken—we all are, it seems.

“When you grace us with your presence, you can’t come up for air long enough for more than a few words.”

“Can’t say I’d ever want to.” Ryan fixates his eyes back on me and stares through my soul. Those caramel-brown pools hold so much pain, resilience, and determination.

“Whatever. Keep it down, you two. Some of us have things to do in the morning.” Hartley runs a glass of water from the sink and trots back to his bedroom. I make a

mental note to figure out what's got him in such a slump lately.

The next morning, I woke up in Ryan's muscular arms. I spend the better part of the morning tracing lines across his chest tattoos. Each holds a special meaning to him, and I commit each one to memory. I freeze my tracing when my eyes catch a new tattoo. I've memorized all of the lines and details in each of his inked features. This one is definitely new. My cold fingers find a cracked heart with stitches binding each of the shattered pieces together. My eyes well with tears.

"Babe, wake up." I gently pat my boyfriend's shoulder. I can't wait a minute longer to find out when he got this and what it means. His groggy eyes bat open as he wipes sleep from his eyes. He runs a hand through his disheveled hair. One thing that hasn't changed, Ryan Shane is sexy from the minute he wakes up.

"Good Morning, sunshine," he says as he grabs the base of my neck to pull me closer.

"How long have you been up?"

"About an hour. You looked so peaceful. I didn't want to wake you," I answer.

"I don't want to waste a second with you ever again," he whispers, as he peppers kisses against my warm neck.

"When did you get this one?" I point to the broken heart on his chest.

"Last week."

"What does it mean?" I lean my head over to get a closer look at his new ink.

“Before I met you, my heart was scattered pieces. They didn’t have meaning, and I didn’t have a reason to put them back together again.” He leans up on one arm and rubs from my shoulder down to my waist. “I didn’t know if I’d ever have another chance with you, but I kept hoping that I would. I got it to show what you did to my heart without even realizing it.” He places my hand over the mended heart. “I wanted to mark myself permanently to represent how much you changed me.”

I’m a sniffing mess with tears trickling down my bare morning face.

“Shhhh,” he says as the pads of his thumbs wipe away the happy tears. “Don’t cry, baby. I hate it when I make you cry.”

“These are good tears, Ry. Why didn’t you show me sooner?”

“I wanted you to find it organically,” he says with the sweetest rasp to his unsure voice. I didn’t know how you would feel about me marking you on myself permanently.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:17 pm

“I love it more than anything.” I place a damp kiss on his stubbly face.

“I love you more than anything.”

40

Ryan

“I need to know. The suspense is killing me.” My girl giggles and squirms in the passenger seat. She’s blindfolded because I have a surprise for her tonight.

She’s in a silky black tank with jean shorts and flip-flop sandals. It reminds me so much of the first night all that time ago at the back-to-school bash. She was wearing something similar. Whether I admitted it to myself then or not, I was gone for her that night, and I’m just as gone for her now. I would do almost anything for the breathtaking girl next to me. We’ve fought for this, and I couldn’t be prouder of the version of ourselves we’ve grown into. She can’t see me, but I’m smiling ear to ear just looking at her. Her knee bounces with nerves and excitement .

“We’re almost there, babe. I promise it’ll be worth it.” I’m so excited to bring Violet here. I’m driving her an hour out of town to where I spent most of my childhood years. I haven’t been back in so long. The good memories are not something I wanted to remember much of, but now I’m ready to welcome happiness back into my life.

It’s ok to be happy. My mom’s words ring in my mind. For so long, I denied myself happiness. The guilt I felt of her being sick weighed on me for so long. It made me hate the world. Losing everything I thought was important put things into perspective

and made me realize how tired I was of holding it all together. I wanted a life where I could love and be loved. Violet gave me that. I lost it, and I'm a lucky guy for having a second chance at my happy ending.

"Alright, we're here. I'm going to help you out, ok, babe?" I jump out my seat and make my way over the passenger side to lift her from the car.

"I trust you, Ryan." Those words send a shot straight to my soul. She trusts me. Earning that back hasn't been easy, but I've never shied away from a challenge. Days of small talk and building a friendship again were torture. All I wanted to do was wrap her in my arms and claim her as mine, but trust is earned slowly. I needed to earn it in a way that she was comfortable with by letting her set the pace.

I guide her through the cool sand and onto the dark beach. I used to come here by myself all the time to do homework, listen to music, and think. Bringing Violet here just feels right. I pull out a thick blanket and spread it out across the sand. I lay her favorite fluffy one on top and instruct Violet to sit. She slips off her sandals and criss-crosses on the blanket.

"Ok, are you ready to see?"

"I was born ready!" she squeals. I carefully remove the blindfold from those eager blue eyes.

"Wow," she gasps. "This is beautiful. Where are we?" This place is special. Not many people know about it. It's my own slice of heaven. The waves of the water on this secluded beach hit the pebbled rocks with the most calming sounds. The air is cool, and the sand is soft under our toes. You can see the stars clearly at night, and my girl loves the stars.

"We're an hour out from Springs U. I used to come here all the time as a kid. It's special to me, and I wanted to share that with you."

“The stars. Oh my gosh. I love it so much.” She points at the dark sky, lit up with millions of stars.

Small gestures like this mean the world to Violet. She’s never had anyone in her life to think about her in this way. We snuggle up, wrapped in her favorite blanket. She points, and her mouth forms a little ‘o’ every time she spots a new constellation she likes. While she’s gazing at the stars, I’m watching her. She is the brightest star in the galaxy. The guiding force always making sure I make my way home.

“Vi, I didn’t just bring you here to see the stars. I have something to ask you.” Her head jolts away from the stars to lock eyes with me. Her lips purse in confusion. Even in the dark of night, that look does unspeakable things to me.

“Ask me something?” she mutters.

“We’re inevitable, Vi. From the second I laid eyes on you in class, I knew you were special. I never thought I would ever be good enough for a girl like you, but you prove to me time and time again how much you love me so deeply.” I inhale a deep breath. I’m not one to shy away from big moments, but this one has me rattled. Emotions still aren’t easy, but I’m trying. For Violet, I would do anything.

“I’ve always loved you. Even when we were apart.” She grabs my arm to scoot closer and steadies me. She always grounds me. This moment is for her, and she is making sure I’m calm and present.

“I don’t think I’ll ever quite deserve you, but I’m beyond lucky that you are willing to love me anyway. You’ve taught me what unconditional love is. You’ve shown me what’s important and changed my life for the better, Vi.” Her hands clamp over her mouth, and her body shakes. I slowly lift her up into a sitting position.

I pop onto one knee and ask the most important question of my life, “Violet Evans, would you make me the luckiest man to ever live and be my wife?”

She's audibly crying and then kissing me ferociously. My hands slide to the small of her back, and I gently nip at her ear. My favorite girl in the world. I know every inch of her and plan to spend the rest of my life exploring it. I pull away for a second, realizing she never gave me an answer.

"Is that a yes, baby?"

"One thousand times yes," she leans her head against mine and whispers with certainty.

I never imagined my life would look the way it does today. Sometimes it throws you way off course and forces you to reimagine yourself like you never dreamed, but it led me to my happy ending. For that, I owe it all to her.