

Song 1

Song 1 ♪ My Way or Take a Hike

When your life is more about the stick than the carrot, you expect to be hit by the damn carrot too.

This programming was so engrained in me that I was not shocked that ma forgot I had the Trinity High interview screening on the day not one, but two of her girls flaked out of cleaning a mansion in Winter Park. And she thought I could just sub in. No problem.

"Problem," I told her as she tried to usher me out of the gringo's house. "I have my interview today."

My mum brushed her sleek hair back and rested her hand on the neat bun at the top of her head, looking at me like I was speaking in tongues. Her blue maid uniform was crisp and clean, and it took her a few seconds to realize I was wearing my church dress instead of the maid one. She looked down all the way to the only pair of strappy sandals I owned.

"Vera Maria," she started in the same tone of voice she used to scold me for eating too much. "What in the world are you talking about and why aren't you in your uniform?"

My cheek twitched, and I couldn't begin to say if it was because I wanted to smile in that awkward way people do when encountered with an uncomfortable situation, or if it was because I wanted to scream.

You know what? It was totally the latter.

"Ma, I can't join you today. I have the interview at noon."

She put her hands on her hips with the same look her face took on before she bent down to take out the chancla. "It's 8am, we'll be done before your thing. And besides, we'll be close by."

I fiddled with the hem of my dress. The last part was true, at least. "Yes, but we definitely won't be done before my interview. This house was supposed to be a whole day job with three people and now we're two."

Her chin jutted out. "Exactly, and if you don't help me it will only be me, and it either will take me an entire week to clean a seven bedroom home with six and a half bathrooms and a pool house, or I'll have to drop the job last minute and lose the client. Which is it gonna be?"

"Ay, ma," I said with a cringe. I hated when she made me feel small and stupid. "I'm sorry, I just--"

She turned around and grabbed her bag and basket of supplies. "Get changed and I'll wait for you in the car."

"But, ma--"

With a glance over her shoulder she said, "Don't worry, you won't miss your interview. I don't know why you even want to try to suck up to those fancy people because they won't accept you, but I'll let you try so that at least I can tell you *te lo dije* onwards."

My lips pursed to hold back the words I'd have liked to say, but I've never talked back at my ma and I wouldn't start on the day I needed her to cooperate the most. I just nodded and went back into my room, quickly changing into my maid uniform and putting my nice clothes in a bag to bring with me. I was determined to look my best for the interview because, even though they knew I came from this neck of the woods based on my application, the interviewers at least had to know that I was a responsible person who made an effort. And ma was, too, which was why I couldn't just tell her that no, I wouldn't help because my plans were more important than hers.

I sat on the passengers' seat and we didn't speak a word the entire ride. I pulled the masses of curls atop my head into as best a tight bun as I could and that served to distract me. It was a good thing, too, because I was sure to work up a sweat and didn't want my hair to get all sticky and limp.

I watched as the scenery changed from the small and run down houses of our barrio to old and affluent ones. When I was younger I used to imagine the kind of people who lived in each of the houses. A blue Victorian style house definitely was owned by a couple of hot shot surgeons. The yellow ranch style overseeing the lake was the property of a Hollywood superstar who only visited once during the summers, and loved to spend time at the parks incognito. We almost never met the people we cleaned houses for and ma never told me if she knew who they were. It was much more fun to just fill in the blanks in my mind.

She took a left in the middle of the road and drove through massive iron gates. All we could see was a sprawling garden with old, but well maintained plants that hid the house from view of the outside. I had the impression we were in a country estate, rather than in the middle of Orlando. She finally parked the car where I assumed was the back of the house, because even though I could tell it was an impressive building it didn't have the fanfare I'd expect for what a grand entrance should be.

I helped ma load the car and transport the cleaning supplies inside. She gave me instructions on what to watch out for, where to start and to call her at least half an hour before the interview.

"And remember, *chiquita*," she said, using my childhood nickname to give me what I assumed was a false sense of security. "If you see any of the owners don't look them directly in the eye, don't talk to them except to greet or apologize and move out of their way."

I sighed. This was probably the hundredth time she said the same speech and I was sure I could repeat it verbatim back at her. "Sí, ma."

We started upstairs. Her logic always was to clean the most personal spaces first, so that the clients could return to enjoy them right away. We started from the living wing, where ma went into the master's suite and I went to a different room. This one was larger than our entire house and I couldn't imagine how much bigger was the master's. I had a feeling it'd take me an entire day to make this room spotless and the feeling of despair that I'd sure miss my interview washed over me. I squeezed my hand tight around the duster and swore to myself that I wouldn't miss it, no matter what, not even if this room turned out to be filthiest on earth. I had to escape for the interview and then I could come back and clean until the sunrise if necessary.

With that determination I headed to the bathroom first because my personal philosophy was to finish up the parts I hated the most first, that way I had a lot less to complain about for the rest of the job. I was pleasantly surprised when I found that it wasn't super nasty. One could almost enjoy cleaning when everything was already spotless.

I put on gloves and set out to get the shower and tub done with first. I went over the questions Leti, my best friend, had helped me practice for last night. When they asked me why I believed I was the right candidate for the open placement, I had to make my life story sound way worse than it was. Like I was some sort of Cinderella waiting for her shot, and that that was it. As I scrubbed the walls of the shower that probably had capacity for an entire classroom, I kinda thought of myself as one. Except that there were no friendly mice to help me. Or a crab under the sea. Or seven dwarfs.

I snorted and said, "If anything, I'm the dwarf." I put my hands on my hips. "But at least I can sing like a princess."

The chorus to A Whole New World came to my mind and I belted it out. The acoustics in this bathroom were fantastic and I wondered if the owner used it as a recording studio.

"Nice voice."

I screamed and turned around so fast that the entire world spun. I fell back against the soapy wall, holding my chest as if it could keep my heart from jumping out, for the most beautiful creature stood before me. And he was wearing only pants and no shirt.

He lifted both hands in a defensive gesture. "Whoa, are you okay? I didn't mean to scare you."

What were ma's rules again? Right, not look at the clients directly. But I already had, and the face of an Abercrombie model in the flesh was not something one could forget easily. Or the sight of his sculpted upper body. But I still looked down and saw that even his bare feet were pretty.

"I'm sorry, sir," I said and cringed at myself because I sounded breathless. "I didn't mean to intrude, I'll leave now."

"No, no, you're good. I'm the one who's not supposed to be here." I made the mistake of looking up at him as he brushed the auburn hair out of his forehead. He smiled. "Please don't tell anybody you saw me."

My lips were sealed, and not because I wanted them to be, they just couldn't recover their movement. So I nodded.

His own lips curled into a smile that reached grey eyes. "Right, I'm just going to skip over to my brother's bathroom before I take off. If you see him, don't tell him I was here."

I nodded again, not having a clue what was going on. He bent down to grab the t-shirt he'd dumped on the floor and left without a further word. I turned back to face the soapy wall that somewhat now had my silhouette imprinted on it. I jumped out of the shower and raced to the mirror, cursing aloud as I confirmed that the back of my hair was now a soapy mess. I'd have to do some serious improvising before the interview. My dark skin looked flushed and it wasn't because of physical exertion. I'd only just got started working. That stupid hot boy screwed me over in the, like, 20 seconds I saw him.

It was unfair how rich people were good looking on top of having boatloads of money. And to keep the money rolling in and not out they were probably smart, too. And those were precisely the kind of people I had to impress in order to get into that school. I definitely couldn't come across as a resentful person. And I wasn't, not to them at least. The gringo was poor, not a looker and definitely not smart, but he sure soaked up all the resentment I had in me.

"Where was I?" I muttered to myself as I stepped back into the shower. I picked up the sponge and kept scrubbing, recalling my previous train of thought before the song had burst forward. I cleaned and practiced my answers, and the hours passed me by without me noticing until my ma came running at me as I was vacuuming a hallway.

"Vera Maria!" she screamed so loud that I could hear her over the noise. I turned the machine off and turned to her. "Don't you have the interview in ten minutes?"

I nearly passed out. "Oh my God."

"You better run, *mija*, or I won't get to say I told you so at all."

SONG OF THE DAY: Limp Bizkit - My Way