

## Song 13

### Song 13 In The End (It Was No Biggie)

As the phone rang my hands begun to tremble and my mouth begun a cursing fest all by itself.

"Code red," Ashton told his brother.

Cool like ice Ayrton nodded. "What's the alibi?"

Ashton caught my eye for a quick second as he looked around. He put two fingers in his mouth and whistled so loud that the entire establishment fell silent. All eyes were on him as he climbed onto a table.

"I apologize for the disturbance, ladies and gents, but we have an emergency on our hands."

He waited for a beat until he was sure he had everybody's attention but mine. My eyes had gone back to my cellphone's screen on time to see my ma's name disappear. This was even worse because not picking up right away meant I was not paying attention, which could be interpreted as I was up to something she wouldn't like.

"We need just a second of silence to bail our friend out from the wrath of an evil step mother."

Step mother?

To my surprise the murmur that ran through the tables was one of agreement. Ashton turned back to us and climbed out. He pulled his cellphone out and at the same time told his brother, "We need to pretend we're at music club practice."

My eyes widened. "My ma can snout a lie no matter how many miles are between us."

Ayrton smiled at me. "No worries, we're pros. Call her back."

Ash searched for something on his phone and gave me a thumbs up.

I called her back. My entire body was going through hot flashes as the phone rang.

Then Ashton stuck his phone close to mine, with loud symphonic music. Ma picked up right then.

"Vera Maria?"

The music stopped. But not in the sudden way of someone hitting pause. It stopped in a clash of instruments not being harmonized into a simultaneous end.

Ayrton cleared his throat and then his voice came out in a boom. "And just who said it was alright to take out their cellphone in the middle of practice?"

The haze of fear for my ma cleared up enough then that I could finally catch on. We were pretending to already be in practice. All around me people looked on in interest. I had to put a show for my sake.

I gasped. "Ma, I can't talk right now. I gotta go."

"Oh no, you won't. I asked you clearly for a text message when you arrived."

Ayrton got in my face and said, "Go ahead, we'll just stop our entire practice so you can have your private conversation."

It wasn't hard to feign urgency. I really wanted the call to end. "Ma, I promise I'll call you back tonight. Bye!"

Then I hung up.

We all waited in silence as I looked down at my phone, half expecting that she'd call again. And she normally would, but she must have realized this time that she was gonna get me in trouble with school if she did, because the phone remained still.

"Yes!"

As I exclaimed this the twins gave each other high fives and a few of the customers started clapping. The background music came back on and when I turned I found their aunt fiddling with the sound system behind the bar.

"The trouble brothers are back, huh?" she said with a smile. "I bet you missed this."

Ayrton shrugged and didn't admit anything. "It was for a good cause."

I positively melted on a barstool. My heart was slowing down but that had been a lot more adrenaline than the weather report had forecasted for the weekend.

"Why don't you guys go out to the beach and talk for a bit?" their aunt said. "It'll take me a few minutes to cook up those virgin cocktails I promised and I'm a bit short staffed today."

The reluctance was clear on their faces, but Ashton was the one who followed the instructions and all but hauled his brother outside. A er all, he'd come all this way for that purpose. I saw them go with more awe than I should have. I could just imagine them walking the halls of Trinity together, dropping jaws and panties, and boxers too, le and right. I finally understood why people cleared Ashton's way, no one wanted to stand next to such perfection and be found lesser.

I groaned to myself and put my hands on my face. It was burning hot even though I was in the shade. Just what was I doing here?

Their aunt stood before me with a smile. "I'm Jenina, by the way. But I hate that name, so you can call me Jem."

We shook hands. "Vera."

"Are you a friend of the boys?"

I shook my head. "No, it's kind of a strange story."

She leaned her elbows on the bar, eyes twinkling. "Oh, those are my favorite."

"I thought you were short staffed?" As I asked this I looked around and saw that there were many more waiters available than there were customers. My brow furrowed.

She shrugged one shoulder. "I had to get them by themselves somehow. Ayr's been moping around for weeks, waiting for his brother to find him but without doing anything at all to be found."

I rolled my eyes. "Boys."

Her laugh was hearty and true. "Tell me about it. These two are way more sensitive than they care to admit." She leaned forward. "But anyway, tell me your story as I make those drinks."

I told her my whole story. And I didn't even start by the part where I met Ayrton as I was cleaning his bathroom. I started from way back, from when I was that kid that people pointed to in the line and said, that one, the chubby girl. By the time I reached the part where I met Ashton, I'd already gone through one virgin piña colada and started on the second one, which might have been meant for one of the boys. But Jem didn't complain, she just made more drinks as she listened to me and punctuated her attention in all the right places. She gave me some stink eye at the parts where I told her that it was weird to hang out with such pretty people when I was just... the way I was.

"What do you mean by that?" She put her hands on her hips. "Girl, I wish I had lips like yours and hair with personality like yours. Not the limp noodles that hang on my head."

My jaw dropped. I looked at this beach queen. "But you're gorgeous and petite and so colorful."

"Thank you." She smiled. "But I also have cellulitis, stretch marks and not even humidity can make my hair develop some volume. Look," she put two virgin cocktails in front of me. "You need to learn to live and enjoy life in your own body, because it's unique to you and it's the reason why you can do all you can. I'm sure there's something special about it that makes you stand out and be you. Whether that's your hair or your hips, it doesn't matter. You should feel blessed to be who you are."

I grabbed my throat unconsciously. I felt like I'd waited my entire life to meet Jem and hear these words. I'd been living all my life under ma's criticism and Leti's well meaning, but mostly self centered words, and I was starved for someone to acknowledge me

"Promise me that you'll do that," she said, insisting.

I took a sip of my drink and nodded, eyes downcast so she wouldn't see that they were probably brimming with tears. "I'll try."

"Fake it till you make it." She slapped the bar counter. "Now, take these to the boys outside and check up on them."

"Okay."

With some difficulty I grabbed their drinks and mine and went outside. There were still a lot of people lounging in the beach mostly in their bathing suits, which made it easy for me to find the only two boys who were dressed head to toe sitting close to the shore. I waded in the sand avoiding toddlers and limbs of sunbathers. They both looked up at me and I handed them their drinks.

Ayrton was closest to me and he patted the sand next to him, so I joined him.

"Nice to officially meet you," he said. "Ash was telling me how you're basically the only friend he has now."

That earned him a smack to the back of his head from the other boy.

My jaw hung. This one was for sure the blunt one.

"Well, that's sad because we just met a week ago."

Wow, it'd only been one week since I started at Trinity. It felt much longer.

"That's not what matters. You can have friends for years only to realize that they weren't actually that," as Ayrton said this he shrugged. "And the other way around, too."

Ashton snorted. "True."

We all looked into the crashing waves as we sipped from the piña coladas. With the sun over me, the breeze, the sound of the waves and the smell of the salt, I felt like I was home. I'd gone back to Venezuela to visit a couple of times when I was very small, but the most vivid image of it in my mind was being at the beach with a bunch of relatives that I hadn't known until then. I'd felt a lot more acceptance from them, there at the beach, as they danced to music playing from a radio and I ate ice cream straight from a coconut shell, than I probably had in my entire life with ma.

I set my glass on the sand and took off my shoes and socks so that I could bury my toes in the warmth. The beach had a way to make me feel relaxed and a Latin song about it came to mind. I hummed it low in my throat.

"I see what you mean," Ayrton told his brother.

"Right?" Ashton asked.

I sat up straighter and looked at both of them. "Are you having a conversation telepathically?"

They smiled the same smile at the same time, thoroughly creeping me out.

"Fun fact, but you're replacing me in the orchestra," Ayrton surprised me by saying. "Trinity lucked out in finding you a er I dropped out."

I looked from one to the other. Ashton had neglected to mention that piece of information.

Looking at him I asked, "Is that why you're so invested in teaching me?"

He shrugged. "Not really. You do need the help."

"You shut up." I threw one of my shoes at him. As their chuckles ebbed I asked, "So, did you two make up already?"

They exchanged a glance.

"It's not like I was mad," Ayrton said. "A bit hurt, maybe."

Ashton looked down at his drink and picked out the cherry. He dumped it in his brother's glass. "I'm sorry. I was a dick."

"Nah, not a dick. Just self entered." Ayrton leaned back on the sand on his elbows. "Although that's probably unfair of me to say. You'd just got dumped publicly at the same time as I came out."

My jaw dropped.

His eyebrows went up. "You didn't know?"

"Oh, I knew. That's pretty much all the school talks about but, was it all at the same time?"

"Same baseball game," Ayrton replied, looking at his brother. "Our school had just lost and for some reason Madison thought that was the best time to admit to Ash that she'd been cheating on him with our best friend, Quinn. Meanwhile I was in the middle of the stand making out with a cute boy I'd just met and someone posted pictures of us all over social media."

Wow.

Ashton squinted as he looked up at the bright sky. "Yeah, that was quite something."

"That part wasn't anywhere as bad as when mom and dad found out." Ayrton picked the cherry and ate it. "I thought I was going deaf from all their screaming."

That was unexpected. I'd have thought their dad would be all proper and never lose his temper. Or at least that was the impression I'd gotten.

"Was that why you ran away?" I asked him.

"Yeah," he trailed off the word for a while. "If I hadn't done that they probably would've kicked me out anyway. I'm a blight on the family name, to quote them."

I gasped.

"I'm sorry," Ashton said then as he played with his shoe laces. "I should've defended you."

"Then they'd have kicked you out too."

They looked at me as I slurped the last of my drink. "I guess I'm not the only one with a fucked up family dynamic, huh?"

They snorted. "Tell me about it."

SONG OF THE DAY: Linkin Park - In The End