

## Song 24

### Song 24 ♪ The Everlasting Craze

"Holy shit."

That, ladies and gentlemen, was my best friend after the song finished.

She jumped to her feet and started clapping frantically. I threw a look at Ashton and he didn't seem the least surprised at the reaction.

Then DeAndre also joined Leti, eyes wide like he'd seen a ghost but clapping like his favorite team had scored. Link threw his head back and started to laugh.

"Well, no fucking wonder those girls were jealous of you," Addy said, smacking the table with such strength that the drinks rattled. "V

you're amazing. You too, Ashton. You're both out of this world."

I hadn't known until that moment, as I wiped away a sweaty curl from my forehead, that this was what I'd chased for years. This approval. The feeling that no matter where I came from and how I looked, I had one thing that made others accept me. My cheeks hurt from smiling so hard. My heart felt like it was about to gallop its way out of my chest.

I'd never felt more alive.

In retrospective I could suddenly understand why, in a moment charged with adrenaline and giddiness, people did crazy things like marrying in Vegas or bungee jumping. Because at that moment the only thing I could think of to cope with the high was jumping into Ashton's arms, which easily came around me, and I would've kissed him if it weren't for the hooting audience.

I jumped back and hid my face in my hands. "I'm sorry."

He ran his fingers through his hair. "You won't hear me complaining."

Ayrton jumped to the rescue. I didn't know whose. He took the microphones from us and pushed onto the stage.

"Now that the opening act is over, it's time for the real diva to shine. Me!"

I excused myself to the bathroom, where I splashed my face with cold water. I looked at myself in the mirror. At my wide brown eyes that stared back at me with shock. What the hell had I just been about to do? Kiss Ashton Winters in front of everybody? What would that accomplish?

I breathed in deeply for a minute, trying to calm myself down and the warring feelings inside me. The horror that I somehow thought I was entitled. And the hunger that, to quote Leti, holy shit, I wanted him. I wanted him bad.

I redid my pony tail with all the difficulty that came in dealing with a heavy mass of curls that had a mind of their own. It distracted me and when I came out of the bathroom I felt a little more myself. I still sat on the opposite end from Ashton, though. Just to make sure I could keep my hands to myself. DeAndre was beside me, looking at me in a way I'd never seen before.

I did a double take. "What?"

He shrugged and smiled a little. "I mean, I've heard you sing before. Just... never like that."

I rearranged myself on the chair. Yeah, he'd heard me sing at parties here and there. Things like Shakira and whatever the latest reggaeton there was playing in the radio. But none of that had been like this. This was next level. It was also wildly different from anything he was used to and I didn't know exactly how he took it.

"Is that a good thing?" I asked him, eager to hear that just because I wasn't singing a Latin song it didn't mean I was a sell out. "I know it's white people music and all but--"

"Fuck that," he said, cutting me off and though it worked I didn't feel irritated. "It might be, but you made it your own. That was incredible."

My smile was wide. "Thank you."

A movement from the corner of my eye caught my attention but I just saw Ashton shift toward Link and Addy in conversation. Ayr finished his George Michael song then and thanked us all for joining him that night.

Night.

The word registered in my brain like a slap to the face. I jumped on my feet and ran to the nearest window and saw that the sky was pitch black. I positively screamed.

They all rushed to me like they thought I was being held at gunpoint. Which in a way, I was. I knew I'd feel like staring down the barrel of a gun when I got home and my ma started screaming her lungs out at me.

"I have to get home!"

Leti jumped to action. She grabbed our purses and waved everybody off. "It's been great to meet you all, let's do this again but another day. Adios!"

"But--" one of them said, I didn't know who. Because I was dashing out of the karaoke bar and jumping in the back of DeAndre's car like we'd just robbed the place.

"Floor it," I told him.

DeAndre did no such thing, but we were all for sure tense as he drove us back to the barrio. Or at least I was. As I was running through one scenario after the other where I presented my ma a different excuse and got the same result of a chanclata imprinted on my face, my best friend swiveled around on her seat and smiled at me.

"You're so into that boy."

I was so into the certainty that I was going to be the first victim of chanclataz that it took me a second too long to register what she was talking about. When it dawned on me, though, I screamed at her, "am not!" And this only made her laugh.

When we rolled into our street and I saw that the lights in the gringo's house were on, I knew I was fucked.

"Well, it was great to know you all," I said. "Oren por mi."

"You'll be fine," Leti told me as we got out of the car. "I'll just tell your ma that it was all my fault. I forced you to go to some party with me. You didn't want to come but I convinced you."

I grabbed her hands and looked up at her with what I hoped were shiny eyes of gratitude. "You'd do that for me?"

"For a price, perra."

"Anything."

I probably should have thought that through and said anything other than that, because Leti was dangerous. But at that moment I didn't care. She and DeAndre flanked me as I walked the front yard to the front door, which my ma threw open because she undoubtedly saw us pull into the curb.

"Vera Maria de la Cruz Vazquez, qué fue lo que te dije esta mañana?"

I cringed and nearly curled into a ball. When my ma switched to full on Spanish it meant that the last rider of apocalypse was about to possess her.

"I'm sorry," I began. All the excuses I'd gone through in my head during the ride flew out of my head. I opened and closed my mouth like a fish out of the water. Oh no, I didn't know what to do next. I saw my ma bend down to grab a flip flop and at that moment a flashing light distracted all of us. We turned to its source and saw a white Jeep pull up in front of DeAndre's car.

"Oh no," I said. "No, please."

But of course, Ashton fucking Winters couldn't hear me all the way from there. All occupants in the car spilled out but it was he who helmed the procession up to our front door.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. Or more like, whined. His eyebrows went up.

But then my ma realized that what she was seeing was so beyond what was normal that, stupefied, she asked, "Why are there two of you?"

It'd have been funny if the circumstances weren't so dire.

Ayrton reached out his hand. "You must have met my brother before. Nice to meet you, ma'am. I'm Ayrton Winters."

She shook his hand, just to be polite. Because I could see that her dark eyes were blazing with the fires from hell. "Likewise, but may I ask what you all are doing at my home?"

Her attention shifted to Ashton as he said, "We just wanted to make sure your daughter got home safe."

I had to give him props. Even though my demise was going to happen any minute, Ashton showed her as much fearlessness as he'd shown when he stole me off his house from under my ma's nose. White privilege, if you asked me, of never having met the dirty end of a flip flop.

"And why would you do that?" My ma narrowed her eyes and looked him up and down with suspicion. "Why is the son of a senator hanging out with the daughter of a cleaning maid?"

My stomach fell into a pit as Addy and Link looked at me. They hadn't known this. Because I never wanted them, or anybody else, to know what my ma did for a living. And although I didn't see judgement in their faces, I did see surprise.

But of course, Ashton always upped the ante.

Just as if they were discussing the weather he said, "Because I like your daughter, and I care that she's safe and--" He looked down at the flip flop in my ma's hand. "Unharmful."

We could've heard the drop of a pin in the silence that followed.

For that same reason I worried that they could all hear how fast my heart was beating. My eyes glued on Ashton's face. It was calm on the surface, but his eyes were full of steel. He looked like his dad probably did when facing a tough political opponent.

Except he'd said something outrageous. My jaw dropped.

"There you have it." Leti smiled and stepped in between Ash and my ma. "We're all home safe and early, right? It's only 8 o'clock or something. Can you please forgive Vera? We're all begging you."

Ayrton won the puppy dog eyes contest by far. He alone so ended my ma's expression. She did give Ashton another up and down scan. The most terrifying words I'd ever heard spilled out of her mouth.

"You and I will have a word alone now." The she looked from him to me. "You, go into your room."

I looked at the others and opened my mouth, but she cut me off with a glare. Leti grabbed DeAndre and headed to her home. Ash gave his brother the keys to the Jeep and followed my ma and I inside.

Once she shut the door I said, "Ma, por fa--"

She lifted a finger. "Vera Maria, grab Victor and go to your room. Right now."

Her Spanish accent was thick and I felt like she was this close to shifting to Spanish curses, so I gave Ashton one last look I hoped conveyed how sorry I was to have the mother I had, and grabbed my little brother. I sat on my bed with him as Victor complained that he left his toy truck in the living room. I gave him one of my stuffed toys and hoped that would distract him.

I couldn't hear shit of what was going on, so I tip toed to the door and opened it just a fraction. I could hear their murmurs but it was too soft for me to discern any words. A moment later the front door opened and closed and there was silence.

Steps were coming from the hallway so I ran to the bed and pretended to play as my ma opened the door and stood there, arms folded. She was still furious, but something was holding back her tongue. I didn't press her for a chancing, but after a moment longer she said.

"I don't want you anywhere near that boy again. Do you understand?"

I knew better than to disagree with my ma, so I just nodded. She picked my brother up and gave me one last glare before she left.

I sat in the dark and silence with her words ringing in my head as loud as the music from the concert. Ashton had just said he liked me in front of everybody and my ma forbid me from seeing him.

I put my face in my hands. "What the fuck just happened?"

My phone vibrated then and I pulled it out from the pocket of my jeans. There was a text from Ashton.

I swiped the screen to unlock it and read it.

It wasn't a lie

SONG OF THE DAY: Smashing Pumpkins - The Everlasting Gaze