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Song 26♪ Eye of The Kitten I really wanted to follow Addy's advice and chuck all my reservations out the window, but I still found myself hovering outside our classroom door for as many seconds as I could stretch without being tardy. I'd seen Ashton and Link walk in together ahead of me a few minutes ago, and despite a crappy night of sleep thanks to a head full of thoughts and excuses, I still hadn't thought of what to do when I first saw him. Someone cleared their throat behind me and I found myself faced by Mr. Burlington. "Good morning, sir." He returned the greeting to me, and then with a smile motioned me inside. Every eye was on us as we walked in, only a second before the alarm rang. I paused as I realized that quite a few seats were empty, including Quinn's. Then to my surprise, I found Lincoln sitting behind my desk. He li ed one hand and wiggled his fingers at me, which was kind of funny with the fact that his face remained deadpan. Over the corner of my eye I saw Ashton sitting at the front. I quickly scurried over to sit on my chair. I leaned toward Addy and whispered, "What's going on?" She turned, and was about to say something when the teacher cleared his throat. "Let's all say a prayer for our baseball team, which is preparing to play today." He clasped his hands in front of himself. "Let's hope our boys can leave our school's name in good standing." As he paused and looked down for a minute, I felt Link shi behind me. I turned to him and he passed me a note. A er unfolding it, it read: He said he owed you a favor and that this is probably what you'd ask for tossed him a thank you over my shoulder and he returned it with a second note. This one said, He'll see you plenty once we start band practice "Dios mío," I said. All eyes turned to me. I sank on my chair and said, "Sorry, just praying in Spanish." The most annoying thing was catching Ashton's eye and seeing that he was struggling not to laugh. To top it o, as if she knew exactly what was going on, Addy turned around to me and gave me a thumbs up. I remembered how chummy chummy the three of them had seemed on Saturday and realized that yes, all three of them were in on whatever campaign they had to get me to join this imaginary band. Ridiculous. I needed to focus on what really mattered. Studying my ass o. This, of course, meant that I couldn't concentrate. Between Addy giving me funny looks all throughout, Leti blowing up my cellphone and asking for deets that didn't exist, and the coursework being so tough, my brain had trouble coping with everything. By lunch time I felt like it was beginning to leak out of my ears. Madison and her friends passed me by with trays loaded with miniature gardens and identical bottles of kombucha. I rolled my eyes but then I caught their queen bee smiling at me. It gave me a shudder. "What do you want?" I asked. She shrugged a delicate shoulder. "Nothing, just looking forward to music club today." And then there was that. I grunted and veered away from her to join Addy on our usual table. "Do you think I can tell the teachers that I'm behind schedule on course work and need to skip club today?" She hummed. "My guess is a solid no." I bit into my sandwich with more anger than the situation required. "You're supposed to be my friend, but you're working for him." We turned around and saw Ashton and Link sitting together halfway through the cafeteria away from us. They looked like they were conspiring. I turned back to glare at my roommate. Her angelic smile put me o . "I'm not working for him, that would require some sort of income and the only thing I'm getting out of this is seeing you come out of your shell." I hunched my shoulders and munched on my food. A er a while I said, "But I like my shell." "Maybe you think you do, but it doesn't suit you." That single line stayed dancing in my head the entire a ernoon. I even found myself writing it down on my notebook instead of writing down the math equations. During that period the entire class started to buzz with excitement. It turned out our team won its game and were just a few steps away from a big tournament. Since I had no school pride whatsoever, I kept trying to focus on the curriculum and banish any other distractions from my mind. Okay so I was like a snail. The only way I'd shed my shell was if I found a bigger, more comfortable one. Joining a band with a bunch of rich kids was far from that notion. Like a snail, I'd freaking die without my shell. A er last period was done, I jumped on my feet and nearly ran out of the classroom. There was an hour to spare before the orchestra assembled and I intended to use it to put a dent on my homework. "V, wait." My first reaction was to freeze when I heard the words behind me. And my steps faltered, alright, but I kept power walking to the library. I realized he was following when I saw people here and there step out of the way, and then started panicking when we reached an empty patch of hallway with no doors. I had nowhere to hide. "Stop following me." I hissed over my shoulder. He had his hands in his pockets, guitar case slung over his shoulder and didn't seem to be in any hurry, even as he followed me on par to my quick steps. "Why are you even following me?" "Because you're not stopping." I knew that, once more, I was playing right into his trap, but I stopped and turned to face him. He stopped, too. When I felt ages passed without him saying a word, I folded my arms and tapped my foot on the floor. "Well?" His lips stretched into a little smile that made my stomach do somersaults. I couldn't get used to seeing that, as if every time it felt like I was going to burst into a million butterflies that would fly away and leave nothing of me le. "Nothing, just wondering how you're doing." I couldn't believe the nerve on a white boy. I gave him my best resting bitch face and turned around. He fell into step beside me. "Okay, so that wasn't what I wanted to say." A whole lot of silence acknowledged him, so he decided to fill it in. "I also didn't mean for thatto come out the way it did on Saturday. It just, kind of did." I kept walking, my feet moving out of inertia. I said, "Look, it was the heat of the moment. You guys were just trying to get my ma o my back and you said that to shock the fight out of her. Thanks for trying, but let's just move on and pretend nothing happened." "Why?" The sound of his shoes hitting the floor stopped. I turned around slowly, as if expecting an axe murderer. I wasn't prepared for the cocktail of emotions on his face. I wasn't prepared for any of this. A er days of thinking what to say, what to do, when this very moment happened, I had sudden clarity. I'd said so to Addy yesterday. This wasn't about him liking me, it was about him liking the way he felt when he heard me sing. I faced him fully. "Ash, you're just confused." His forehead crinkled as I said this, but at least he didn't contradict me right away. "You don't like me You barely even know me. What you like is whatever fantasy you've made of me a er you heard me sing a few times." It was the same as the crush I had last year on DeAndre. I liked the way I felt around him because he was a pretty boy who treated me nice. I liked thinking of what that could mean, that he maybe thought of me as more than just a friend, but in reality it was all about me. What was in my head. And not what reality really was. It was just mind blowing to think that for the first time this was directed at me. And from the hottest guy in school, no less. I took a step forward and narrowed my eyes as I looked up at his baby blues. "I bet you that if I couldn't sing for shit you wouldn't even know my name." When he didn't say anything to that, I took it as my confirmation that I was right. I nodded once and turned back to head to the library. "Maybe it's true," he said. The unexpected thing was that I felt like a knife was driven right through me. Ashton caught up with me and continued. "Maybe I just have a deep, mad crush on your voice. Maybe it's not at all about you being smart and good and no nonsense, you know, things I didn't have in my previous relationship." Every beat of my heart was painful, like it was trying to do its work even as it bled out from a fresh wound. I was disturbed that I felt so deeply at hearing my own thoughts confirmed back at me from the mouth of the boy in question. I should've been all blasé about it. "What's your point?" There was a lot more bite to that question than I'd have liked to infuse. "Maybe what we should do is for you to give me a chance to figure out which of the two is true." My eyes widened as saucers. He didn't appear half as a ected by this whole thing as I was. Curse him. "So I have a proposal for you," he said, li ing his eyebrows in defiance. "I think we should hang out more, see if I keep liking you

a er prolonged exposure." a My jaw unhinged. Ashton flashed me a grin that had me clenching my fists. "And the best way to do that is by joining my band." I threw my hands up and screamed in frustration. I felt like I'd been

toyed with and been had. I didn't know if he was the carrot or the

"First of all, it's not stupid." He li ed one finger and then the second. I

wanted to bite them and inflict the same pain on him that he made

me feel. "Second of all, think about it. It's perfect. To make the band

succeed we'll have to work harder than we ever had before. That's for

sure going to make tempers flare. If I still say I like you a er all of that,

"You need to stop saying that." I paused, suddenly catching onto

something. "Just wait a minute. How grand is this fantasy of yours to

He leaned down, as if he were about to share a big secret. I knew the

smile that was coming to him. It was the same one he showed me

I punched him in the shoulder. The blow was hard enough that it

"You're crazy." As he complained about the pain, I added, "And don't

He laughed, understanding my joke. And I liked just a tad too much

"Think about it, what do you have to lose?" His eyes gleamed with

the confidence of someone who knew he could do whatever he damn

"My scholarship if my grades drop?" I shrugged. "My chance at going

stick, but I was definitely the stupid, ignorant horse.

"How does everything lead to your stupid band?"

then you'll have to accept that I like you for real."

think about us succeeding with a band?"

when he was about to take a bite out of life.

"I'm talking triple platinum records, baby."

forced him back, and I could breathe again.

imagining him watching Dirty Dancing.

well pleased.

That wasn't the case for me.

mind. But I quashed that feeling.

call me baby. And don't back me into weird corners."

I put my hands on my face.

far, far away to a good college?" He ran his hand through his hair, looking o into the distance. "All good points, but what I promise that you can ace your exams and also be in the band?" My unamused stare didn't seem to a ect him. "And, what if I tell you, that making music could take you even farther away than college?" My bravado fractured. Music sure had taken my ma far from her homeland, but it hadn't taken her out of poverty. Cleaning houses had. What he was painting wasn't something in my reach. He couldn't just say that, as if it were easy. I walked to him and grabbed his tie, yanking him down to my eye level. I felt a rush through my body at how easy it'd be to wrap my arms around his neck and just kiss him, at how he didn't seem to

"Do you know how many people try to make it into the music

even though they were the best flutist, or the best singer or

He looked down at my lips, then back to my eyes. "What?"

"They have to drop music and start cleaning houses for a living."

Ash pulled my hand away from his tie and straightened up. I noticed a

"Is that what happened to your mom, then?" He squeezed it. "Is that

I didn't know, hadn't realized that this was really what was beneath

composer? Do you know what happens to them?"

why you're afraid to free your voice, and yourself?"

second late that he still held my hand.

the surface. I blinked away sudden tears.

I drew in a sharp breath.

industry, and don't succeed?" I searched in his eyes for any fear. And

didn't find any. "Do you know how many people fade in obscurity,

"I- I have to go study." But he didn't let me go. When I tried to turn away, he tugged at my hand until I faced him. The challenge had taken root in him and wouldn't let go. "Will you at least try?" The corner of his lips li ed. "Who knows, it might just change your life." I sighed. "And bet my entire life on your mad idea? Hell no." "For fun, then?" He blinked innocently. "Surely you want some fun in your life." Since he said this while giving me The Look, the one paired with a

raised eyebrow and a very strategic lip bite, I figured there was

sure that this wouldn't be good for my grades.

and laced our fingers together. I melted.

you and I third?"

Ashton Winters was.

nothing innocent behind his question. And of course I wanted some

fun, mainly involving him and our limbs tangled together, but I was

As if reading my mind he added, "Schoolwork first, band second and

I tugged my hand away, feeling like my face was catching on fire. We

smack him with any decent force. Instead he captured my hand away

both knew he'd won the fucking battle when I struggled to even

I li ed my chin. "There's a major flaw in your scheme."

The smile on his face irritated me just as it delighted me.

"What's that?" "I thought you were missing more people in your band." Ash pressed his lips in annoyance, and I couldn't help but notice them. Bad Vera. "If I find the missing members, will you finally join?" I smirked. There were a lot of musicians in our school. All classically trained and prissy. None of them had the type of people I saw on

Saturday, with their mohawks and piercings, tattoos and all black

gear. Nobody here even wore Vans. He was screwed and we both

knew it. Looking for bandmates in a sea of plastic people would keep

him entertained for a while. His feet would swi ly meet the ground.

His fantasy would vanish and his hallucinations about me with it. I'd

be able to focus on my study and not on what the next drama about

And even though I was probably going to hate being proven right, it would be for the best. Finally I'd get my life on track. I pulled my hand away, adjusted the straps of my backpack and gave him a confident, shit eating grin that hurt me a little on the inside. "Sure." a SONG OF THE DAY: Survivor - Eye Of The Tiger