

Song 31

Song 31 ♪ With Lungs Wide Open

The last time I'd been to a party had been momentous. I'd walked in a girl with made up insecurities and had come out with all of them confirmed by a failed encounter with a boy.

Only Leti, DeAndre, that boy and I knew what had happened. I'd come out of the room crying and found my friends, who jumped to conclusions that what had happened had been even worse than it was. DeAndre had got into an argument with the boy as Leti and I bundled into an Uber and went home, and although I never knew what exactly happened a few weeks later, I did notice that he stopped hanging out with us.

Leti had tried and failed to get me to join her at parties a few times. Although I didn't think about that boy often, I did often get swallowed up by the effect that night had on me.

I found my two friends from the barrio when we made it to the house party. I made eye contact with DeAndre as he danced with Leti in the crowd to a song by Nicki Minaj. My best friend had invited herself and dragged him along tonight for the great debut of my band. It only helped to lay the pressure on thicker on me.

He stopped swaying to the music and grabbed Leti by the hand, pulling her to come over. I still found him one of the most attractive boys I'd ever met, and judging by the way he made heads turn as he approached, I wasn't the only one, but talking to him didn't make me nervous anymore.

This whole rock band thing did.

"Are you ready, perra?" Leti asked me with a grin, her voice high over the noise inside the party house. "Show them all some Latin screamo."

I choked. "That is the strangest concept."

"But isn't it true?" she asked, shrugging. "You guys are not a conventional rock band made out of white guys from the Midwest."

The truth was true. I turned back around and saw Lincoln Choi testing his DJ console, a rich Asian American with an online following who seemed to think that we were a solid next step. Then there was Madison Hollingsworth, a rich girl violinist who turned into a different person when the music started playing, tuning her bass as she chatted with her boyfriend Quinn Montgomery, a black boy on a baseball scholarship at a prestigious school that had learned to play the drums so that he could hang out with his rich white friend, Ashton Winters, who stood a few paces away from me plugging his guitar into an amp, chatting it up with his gay twin brother, Ayrton Winters, who'd brought a camera to record our performance next to Adele Holt, who in a short time had designed some merchandise for our newborn band and was trying to sell it among the crowd.

I couldn't help but think they were all so extraordinary that it made me wonder what in the hell I was doing there with them, but then I thought about it objectively.

Finally there was me, Vera Maria de la Cruz Vazquez, born from a failed entertainer. I didn't want to let them down. Not the guys in the band or the ones who were giving us so much support.

I grabbed the mic and asked my friends, "Ready?"

Among various affirmations it was Ashton's that struck a chord with me. He said, "I've been waiting my entire life for this."

So had I.

I turned on the mic. Even though there was no spotlight in the living room of this house, with all eyes suddenly on me it felt like I was on a stage. My very first one.

My normal reaction would have been to break into a cold sweat and freeze. To be caught up between my desire to glow and my fear of being at the forefront of things. But everything in my life had led me here and maybe it was conquering my fear of what I could accomplish what would get me away from the complications of my mother.

Once I realized this, something amazing happened. I disconnected from myself.

My hand gripped the microphone harder and I spoke into it. "Thank you to the Beta Gamma Epsilons for having us tonight. We are Casual Friday Funeral and we're here to rock your brains out."

The lukewarm response to that brought a smile to my face. I had trust in my friends that we'd wake them up.

Quinn clicked his sticks, one, two, three.

I had a moment to enjoy the crowd's reaction as Madison strutted forward, making her bass squeal like it was a guitar with a personal message to everybody listening. A few of the guys at the front took notice of her and I knew they were hooked even before the rest of us started.

The music was as if an explosion was coming right from behind me and I'd become part of the shrapnel. I grabbed the microphone and let loose as though I was on a mission to pierce each and every ear in the room. I closed my eyes, not knowing what happened to me for the next few minutes. I was one with the music, my body moving in its own accord. One moment my back was against Madison's, the next I was facing Ashton as he tore at his guitar. His body barely seemed to contain the energy it stored. His head was thrown back as he stroked the strings like he was alone in his room and it wasn't music he was playing.

I swiveled around letting the music take me back to the front, up against the crowd. My hair bounced on my face as I sang, but I could still see the party goers in front of me. I stumbled upon the lyrics for a second because I was grinning so hard that although they didn't know us, or our music, we'd made them react. This crowd of mostly college kids were hollering and jumping as our music resonated with the pumping of their blood. I threw my head back and let the last note go, a mix between a scream and a growl that hadn't been part of the rehearsals but came from deep within my soul.

A few of us agreed upon half an hour on the stage was done, I was damn sure I was not the same Vera that walked into this party. Like with the last party, I was changed.

I didn't know how many people were in the house, but it sounded like it was coming down in a flurry of screaming and clapping. I wondered if this was what finishing a concert felt like. I was sweating more than when I ran on the treadmill. My throat felt raw, my heart was leaping right out of it. But my face hurt from smiling so hard.

I was nearly knocked out by my feet as someone hugged me from behind, and then someone else. It took me a second to register that it was the guys from the band. We all huddled in the middle of the makeshift stage, hugging each other and jumping awkwardly, stepping on each other's toes. But it didn't matter. This was what true happiness felt like. It was heady and completely new to me. I could get addicted to it.

When we pulled away I found myself face to face with Ash. His face was dripping with sweat and his grey t-shirt was glued to his chest and despite the noise all around us I could make out that he said thank you.

I grabbed his face and pulled him down to my level. My eyes rested on his for a second, waiting for a sign. I got it as soon as his cast down on my lips. These past few months I'd learned that there was blessing to be had in doing what your heart was set out on. That not everything was out of reach. I'd lived my entire life hoping to please others, and that hadn't really got me a whole lot of good for myself. But this summer I decided I had to do me and I'd never been happier.

People could say I, the daughter of an immigrant, a woman who'd gone from dreaming of the stars to cleaning bathrooms, that I, a fat girl with brown skin and kinky, unruly hair, without a father and without enough money to fall dead, couldn't sing or dance or be happy in the arms of a pretty boy.

So fuck it.

I kissed Ashton like nobody was watching. Like it didn't matter one whit what our parents would say, what the whole school would say. Like all the restrictions I'd put upon myself for the past few months, years even, were suddenly turned to dust. His arms came around my waist and he brought me flush against him. My body flared to life, like all of it was a heart that throbbled because of him. I felt him push my hair away and hold the side of my face as my jaw worked at nibbling his lips. He tilted my head back and deepened the kiss like it'd been his idea. He tilted. I tasted the same urgency, the same hunger I felt, in his tongue. It swept almost delicately across my lips at first, but mine met it half way and then we were lost. My fingers ran through his hair and brought him closer. I didn't want this moment to end.

We finally pulled away, eyes wide like people who'd had the first taste of food after starving.

There was a whistle next to us. "Hot, damn. For a second there I wondered if you both were professional swimmers or something, I'd never seen anyone hold their breath for so long."

I turned slowly to see Ayrton filming us with his camera and nearly jumped out of my skin. Ash put his hand on the camera and turned it away.

"A moment, please?" he said.

Ayrton smirked. "I'll give you two, how about that?"

My jaw was hanging open as Ash turned back to face me, his tongue tucked against his cheek. His hands were still on my waist and it didn't seem like he wanted to let go any time soon.

"Well, I'm definitely not complaining but what was that?"

I shrugged and realized my fingers were still tangled in his hair. Slowly I brought my hands down to his shoulders. The brief caress made his eyes darken and his hold tighten. I liked it. I liked having this effect on him. It was almost as good as sharing the stage with him.

"I just kinda think it's time for me to stop being such a coward," I said, trying not to get distracted by how he licked his lips. "I've lived in fear of everything for too long. Fear of what I want, of what happens if I get it or if I don't, and of what people would say. I'm sick and tired of it."

His lips stretched into a smile. "That's exactly what I like about you."

My eyes went wide as saucers. "What?"

"We're all afraid Vera, I'm not the exception and neither are you." One of his hands pushed away a strand of curls that had fallen on my forehead. He swept it back so lovingly that I felt it in my toes. His eyes sought mine again, the digits of his fingers trailing down my cheek and to my chin. "I've seen you make the choice between fear and bravery, over and over. I've admired you for it from the start and I wish I could be more like you."

I struggled with putting thoughts into a coherent string a few times. One way or another, he'd been the one who had inspired me to take risks. What was he talking about?

And then we heard it. The moment was shattered by a curse that came accompanied by genuine terror. And someone screamed, "The cops are here!"

SONG OF THE DAY: Creed - With Arms Wide Open