

# Song 31

## Song 37 ♪ It's Alive

I'd always thought that there was a proverbial carrot being dangled in front of me, always in sight but never within reach. I'd never stopped to think that there might be two carrots, or more, each one taking me down a completely different path. Somehow I'd put myself in the position where I was always chasing that elusive thing, Self-satisfaction. Happiness. Acceptance. The concept that I could maybe get this through different means had never passed through my head.

Even though that night I made a decision to ensure I didn't lose my scholarship, I hesitated. I knew I was a total noob when it came to music, and that I was maybe wrapped into the newness of it that I placed a lot more value on what we were making than it surely deserved. There were people out there who had this dream since they were kids. Who practiced every day, every night. Who wrote more songs. Played in more events. Had more fans. Were better. And yet... and yet.

The YouTube views count continued to go up. It didn't mean anything. It wasn't like our video had surpassed Despacito. It wasn't also like I'd let the numbers get to my head and inflate it with a false sense of grandness. It was just mind-blowing to see that something I participated in had an impact on other people.

Did I really want to chase the other carrot? The one that would lead me down the path of a quiet life at college and a quiet life thereafter?

"I understand your fears," Addy told me the night before the recital and the contest, as we sat on our beds and chatted. "You have a lot at stake right now, but have you wondered what is it that you really want?"

I thought about it, and the answer shocked me even though it had been there all along.

I didn't want to go to college because it was one of my goals in life. I just-

"I want to get away," I said.

"From where?" she asked. "Or from what?"

I squirmed, picked up the hem of my pajama top and fumbled with it. "It's going to sound really bad."

"Try me."

With a deep breath I said, "From my ma."

But she just nodded. "I feel you. My parents and their divorce are driving me crazy and all I can think of is getting into college and then a job in fashion, preferably in Italy, where I won't be able to hear their drama for a while."

I smiled a little. "I'm sorry, it must suck for you."

Addy shrugged as she braided her hair. "It's not that bad, they're just two big babies."

"Okay, but, how do I do that?" I asked her, worrying my bottom lip.

"Be a big baby? Easy, blame everybody else for your own mistakes."

"Um, I mean, the going away from my ma part, without being a complete and ungrateful child?" I sighed and rubbed my temple. "I've always thought college is the way and now there's the band... but it's stupid to think that this band will go anywhere. I mean, as soon as we graduate everybody will go their way. And even if that weren't the case, so many people are trying to break into the music industry that I don't even think Winters' money can get Ash where he wants to be."

"I don't think that's what he wants. His dad doesn't seem like the pampering type of guy either."

I cringed at the memory of the senator saying things that though subtle made my blood boil. "Yeah, you're right."

"Besides," she added, pointing at me with her finger. "Sure, not everybody makes it, but what makes you think that you guys don't have what it takes?"

My mouth opened, but I didn't know what to say. I'd just never had anything easy in my life. I didn't just decide, bam, I'm going on a diet and the pounds magically themselves away. I had to work hard and in the end, not get results. It was a recurring thing for me.

"Because from my vantage," she continued. "You guys have what it takes. There are heaps of talent just on your hair alone." That made me laugh. "And when you put the rest of them together with you, there's so much spark it actually causes a fire."

My eyes bulged. "For real?"

"For really real. I don't think I have to be some music critic snob to see that." As a last stroke she added, "And if you guys go to the contest tomorrow, I think even the music critic snobs will see that."

I couldn't sleep that night, tossing and turning and fretting over what I should do. My head and my heart weren't talking, but that was because the latter was silent.

I sat on my desk the next day, staring absentmindedly in front of me for the entire day of school. The hours stretched to what felt like years. Several thoughts danced in my head all that time, showing me potential futures, all the carrots, and my sane mind said that the best thing I could do was just join the recital and stick to my plan. It was the surest path.

Mr. Burlington dismissed our class early, as he'd planned. All the orchestra kids met at the lobby as we waited for the school bus to be loaded with everybody's instruments and equipment. Somehow I was surprised to see that Ashton and Madison had joined too. For some reason I thought they'd at least go watch the contest. I looked down at the floor. Ash had traded seats with Link again, and I hadn't felt his eyes on me the whole day. I definitely felt them now.

"How you feeling?" Link asked me.

I looked up at him with a grimace. "Truth talk? Like shit."

"Yeah, same. Try to imagine what it is like to be Ashton's roommate when he's acting like a petulant brat."

"It's his dream," I said. "This matters to him."

"It's mine too, but you don't see me acting like a big baby about it."

That made me smile a little, reminding me of Addy's same comment. We all filed into the bus and I sat together with Link, just behind the two mean girls and several rows in front of where Ash and Madison sat together for the first time in months.

"Do you think they're back together?" one of the mean girls asked the other one, looking back in the least discrete way.

"Oh my God, that'd be like, so crazy."

"Shut up," I told them, enjoying how they started at realizing who the command came from, and even more when they obeyed.

Lincoln sighed. He pulled out his headphones and put them on. I looked out the window for the entire ride, trying to calm my breathing and my heartbeat. It seemed to get louder the closer we got to the venue of the recital.

I was sweating buckets by the time we got there and for a moment I wondered if I was getting sick. I had to sit down for a bit as everybody started setting up on the stage. Even Sister Louisa looked over with some worry. I had to force myself to cast my glare away from her.

It landed on Ashton. He was sitting on his chair with his viola on his lap, looking directly at me. There was nothing in his face. No anger, no disappointment or resentment. No feeling at all. And that gutted me more than any of the alternatives. I wonder what I'd do if we stopped talking, and thinking of my life before him extending in my future made me sad to the bone. Who else was going to encourage me to get out of my comfort zone? Who else could so readily accept me for who I was?

I was sure someone else might, one day. But I didn't want to picture anybody but him.

Was he my other carrot? Could I bet on a crazy boy with a dream? A boy who often fucked things up when he was trying to do good. Who was sweet and bold and shy sometimes, when he was caught unaware and dropped the persona of the son of a senator, responsible for parting the masses as he walked through life.

I clenched my jaw so tight that it hurt. Sister Louisa was already in place to begin the first song. The audience, students like us, sponsors and public, were silent and ready for Holy Trinity High School to open the show.

I'd had enough time to think about it and I got to this realization: just because something seemed like the right thing to do didn't mean it was.

And then with my heart throbbing in my throat, with every eye in the auditorium on me, I started to begin talking about us and told Sister Louisa the words that would seal my fate.

"I can't do this."

She did a double take. Her baton dropped slightly.

"Excuse me?"

"I said," and I enunciated every word slowly, clearly, so it would carry where it had to. "I can't do this. I have somewhere else I have to be."

She spluttered. "Where else could you possibly be?"

I smiled, because I knew she knew exactly where I was going with this. The entire Mr. Burlington dismissed class early was so that kids could travel to meet their families for the holidays. We were not on curfew anymore, and yes, this was an official school event, but I'd read the school code of conduct and it explicitly stated that it respected students' privacy during school hours. If I'd said that I had an important family event and couldn't attend this recital, they couldn't have forced me.

She knew our band had other plans. We hadn't been exactly discreet about it. The entire school had been talking about us and the battle of the new bands competition. She'd carelessly neglected to mention the recital was the same day until it was too late, until we were trapped.

Well, fuck it. There were other things in life than following the predetermined path. I was ready to rebel.

"I have a contest to win," I said.

I twirled around in time to see Ash, Madison and Link stand up at the same time. The first two just left their instruments on their chairs to join me, and Link carefully covered the piano keys.

"So do I," Ashton told her.

Madison grabbed both of our arms and pushed us onto the stage. Link followed, laughing as Sister Louisa screeched our names and the various ways she was going to punish us.

"Ay Dios mío," I kept repeating to myself as we traced our steps back to the entrance.

"That was so cool!" Madison told me, nudging my shoulder. "I didn't know you had the cojones to do something like that."

I appreciated her effort at Spanish, but she pronounced it as cajones which was an entirely different word. It was so ridiculous that I even threw my head back and laughed.

Link cut me off. "Okay, I agree that was major kickass but what now?"

Ashton had the biggest shit-eating grin when he said, "Actually, I was hoping this would happen."

He motioned us to go outside where we saw a familiar van parked by the entrance of the building. The window rolled down and we saw Ayrton on the wheel and Quinn next to him.

I started. "What the-"

Quinn waved. "Well, it's not like I had a baseball game at the same time or something."

Ayrton pushed him back and said, "Get in the van, bitches! We're going to rock and roll this town."

We all hooted and hollered as we climbed onto the van, falling in a haphazard knot of limbs. As we were buckled up and Ayrton peeled off and away, I had no doubts anymore.

My path was to rebel. To be myself. To be different.

I reached out and grabbed Ashton's hand. His eyes turned to me, wide as saucers, and they so ened when he saw my expression.

I was smiling from ear to ear, because at least I wouldn't do this thing alone.

SONG OF THE DAY: P.O.D. - Alive