

Song 38

Song 38 ♪ Livin' On A Dream

We weren't allowed to go home for Thanksgiving. Instead, our parents were summoned to the school to meet with the Mother Superior and Sister Louisa.

They made us sit outside of the headmistress's office as we waited for our parents to arrive. Lincoln, Madison, Ashton and I. Quinn and Ayrton were on the hook because them going to the contest hadn't interfered with any school activity. Still, they were in the hallway with us, waiting to see what the verdict would be for us four.

I took a deep breath, thinking of how important getting into this school had been for me last summer. How I knew, somehow, that it would change my life. Ashton grabbed my hand and laced our fingers together. We looked at each other and for the first time I realized that even though I didn't know what was going to happen to me, if the consequences of my actions would lash out negatively, I was okay with whatever outcome. I wouldn't change a thing.

Yesterday had changed my life. This was a fact I'd remember even in the crazy years to come.

We'd made it to the contest in our full private school uniforms, which was a surefire way to not have been taken seriously. But my roommate had our backs. Just before she led to join her parents for a last Thanksgiving together, she gave Ayr a bag full of t-shirts she'd apparently been working on in secret. Each one was different but all with the same logo she'd designed for Casual Friday Funeral, black and white and as Madison had put it, fancy. We changed in the van and looked at each other with amusement.

Madison had tied a knot at the front of her t-shirt, baring her midri and toeing the line of school girl fetishism. When I pointed it out she said, "That's my plan all along. I'm counting on some sleazy men being part of the jury."

Addy knew I was not for flashy and I just tucked my short sleeved t-shirt into my skirt. I was sure I looked like a little girl in comparison, but that didn't matter. I just had to impress them with my pipes.

Ash and Quinn were showing quite a bit of skin in matching wife beaters with side openings that plunged all the way to the bottom. In my mind I thanked my roommate for the eye candy but I tried not to be too obvious as I stared at them.

"Aw man," Link said then, looking at his simple t-shirt with no frills as he'd gotten out of the car. "Does Addy think I have no guns to show or what?"

Ayrton laughed as he jumped from the driver's seat and locked the van. He motioned down at himself wearing a matching wife beater. "Sorry, bruh. I claimed dibs."

We joined the line of contestants in time before they closed applications and were given the number 63. My nerves ran amok as I watched the other bands give it their all on stage. Some were abysmal but most of them sounded like they had experience. Even I could tell.

The feeling of anxiety propagated among my group of friends until we were all bouncing and jittery with every passing second. It was probably two hours until we had to perform and at some point I stopped realizing where I was and what I was doing.

I only seemed to wake up when I found myself standing in front of the glare of a spotlight. It was so bright that I couldn't see anybody in front of me. Not the judges. Not anybody in the crowd. It was as though the place was full of nothingness, except for that beacon, and thinking that it was just me and my friends calmed me down. I grabbed the microphone.

"Hello everybody," I said. "We are Casual Friday Funeral and we're here to rock your brains out."

I ignored the sounds I heard as that, a strange combination of boos and the indifference of wane applause. I turned back and Link gave me a thumbs up. Madison nodded at me with her little smirk that I'd found intimidating when I first met her. Quinn saluted me with his sticks. Ashton just smiled that placid little smile that reached his eyes and turned them into the Caribbean ocean in a quiet summer morning. I felt myself returning the gesture before I faced the microphone again.

I took a deep breath and we blew up on the stage together.

Figuratively, of course, I thought with a smile as my mind drifted back to the hallway as we waited to find out our fates.

That had been the most intense, incredible moment of my life. How could I possibly regret it?

"I don't want to jinx things," Quinn said with a quiet voice, shifting his eyes to the heavy doors towards the headmistress's office. "But what are we going to do if, you know, they expel you?"

"We won't drop the band, if that's what you're wondering," Ashton said.

The other boy nodded.

As he while the door opened and the headmistress announced that they'd finally been able to connect with Lincoln's parents via Skype. She motioned him inside and closed the door to keep the conversation private. Still, we heard a lot of screaming occasionally arise from tinny voices. We all looked at each other with wide eyes and jumped out of our skins as Link came out, clenching his jaw so tight it was a wonder his teeth didn't break to pieces.

"How'd it go?" I asked him, but he was unable to answer as the senator and his wife arrived then.

I'd never met Ashton and Ayrton's mom before. She was beautiful in that way you could tell that she was a woman who'd grown up with the best care, the best clothes, and the best perfumes, even if the latter was laced with something tangy that seemed like alcohol to me.

Ayrton tried to join them, but his father put a hand up and said, "This doesn't concern you. Stay outside."

I couldn't begin to describe how much my heart broke for the two boys who'd grown up with parents who didn't seem capable of doling out the love they deserved. Ayr's eyes flashed but I distracted him, motioning for him to join me. He did and I held his hand in mine.

As the doors were closed I said, "I'm sorry your parents suck."

He laughed a little. "That's the sweetest thing somebody's ever said to me before."

This interview took the longest and it was really the one that worried me the most, so at some point it was not me providing some comfort to Ayrton, but him giving it to me. We stood up as the doors opened and ran to Ashton's side. He was glaring at the back of his parents and we saw his mom stumble for a second. The senator finally opened her his arm for balance and as they left I wondered if that little gesture was maybe as far as the man was capable of showing affection. It was not enough.

"Please come in, Miss Hollingsworth," the headmistress said. "We'll have to connect with your parents remotely as well, since they're abroad."

Madison flipped her hair back and stood up with elegance that was only marred by the roll of her eyes. My ma appeared around the corner then. I saw her eye the twins with something more than dislike but she refrained herself from making a scene right there and then.

"Hola, ma," I said. She just nodded at me.

Ayrton turned to his brother, "So, how'd it go?"

Ash sighed and looked at all of us. "Let's just all get together once this is done and talk it out."

The door opened again and out came Madison with her poker face of a smirk. We all gaped at her.

"Dude, you were there for like thirty seconds, I swear," Ayr said.

"Vera?" the headmistress called. Then her eyes shifted to my ma. "Ah, Mrs. de la Cruz, please come on in."

"Mrs. Johnson soon," my ma said as she bypassed me and stepped into the office. "I'm finally taking my husband's last name."

I looked down so that my hair would hide my huge roll of eyes.

The Mother Superior motioned for us to sit in two chairs by her desk. Sister Louisa was standing across from us, behind the desk. She busied herself pushing the chair in as the headmistress sat, but her eyes blazed with even more anger than I'd seen yesterday when we left her standing in front of an incomplete orchestra.

I probably should've been worried, but even then I didn't feel like I'd done something wrong. Until my ma hissed under her breath.

"Qué te dije, Vera Maria? Que no te juntas con esos niños, que solo te iban a meter en problemas. Y míranos ahora."

The Mother Superior put on her glasses and didn't even bother asking for a translation.

"Ma'am, you're already aware of the reason for your visit. Your daughter here led a school function to go join a music contest with her friends."

My ma's lips pursed for a second so tight that they turned white. "Yes, and I apologize. This doesn't reflect the values I teach her at home. She knows better than to disobey her elders."

I had a feeling she and Sister Louisa would've got along very well if it weren't for me.

Mother Superior Evangeline waved a hand, dismissing my ma's entire argument. She leveled her stare on me. "Vera, what are your thoughts?"

"None that I care to share, so to preserve the integrity of my face," I said, honestly.

The older woman's mouth twitched as the other two gasped. "And how'd you do in the contest?"

I sat up straighter. "We placed second."

I wasn't even disappointed that first place had been in reach, though it eluded us. I wasn't even jealous that another band had been considered superior, or that it won the top prizes we all coveted. I wasn't even consumed by the need to understand what we'd been missing.

I was so overcome by amazement that we'd even been recognized at all. That a monster of Frankenstein band like us, formed in just a short few months, with next to no experience under our belt, had managed to impress a jury with industry insiders.

"And made our school very proud," the headmistress shocked all of us by saying. She laughed. "Why do you all look so surprised? I've made no secret of the fact that I admitted Vera into this school to help her develop her beautiful gifts. If that's in the orchestra or in a rock band, I don't really care."

My jaw dropped.

Sister Louisa bit her tongue and I put two and two together. That was why she'd been so angry all along. Because with each interview, this had been the headmistress's stance.

"To be honest, I know that the responsible thing to do would be to punish the kids. But the fact of the matter is that it's the school who went against our own guidelines." She pushed a booklet towards my ma and pointed at it as she said, "You see, while the kids are on the official school clock, they have to follow this. But the moment class is dismissed or during a holiday, it's personal time."

I felt like my head was exploding. "I thought so," I murmured.

"It's a shame for the recital," the older woman continued. "But there will be others, and I'm sure you can balance the orchestra with your band, just as you've been doing all along. Right, Vera?"

I sat up straight, not even caring to hide my smile. "Absolutely, ma'am."

She nodded and then faced my ma again, who'd been rambling the whole time. "So you see, it should be us apologizing to you for taking away from your child's precious time. I assure you it will not happen again."

My ma nodded in a jerky motion. "Thank you."

The headmistress smiled. "You are free to go."

I jumped out of my chair and ran to the door. All the guys were waiting outside and their light chatter stopped as my ma and I came out.

Her hand wrapped around my elbow with such strength I had no choice but to turn around.

"What's suddenly made you think you can get away with doing whatever you want?" she asked me, shaking her head as if disappointed. "You used to be such an obedient daughter, polite, never talked back. What has this place done to you? I never should have agreed to you even applying here."

I disentangled myself from her hold and took a step back. I felt my friends fall back behind me. Ashton's hand gently rubbed circles on my back.

I lifted my chin and said, "What's changed is that in this place I've finally found people who believe in me. That was all it took."

As my ma's mouth flapped open and closed, stunned by the new world I was showing to her, I realized that this was what I had to do. This was my calling. A dream I could come true with my friends. For so long I'd silenced myself, thinking I didn't have a right to say what was on my mind. But I had a mission now, use my voice for those who felt like they didn't have one.

Let the world know that we the young have shit to say.

SONG OF THE DAY: Bon Jovi - Livin' On A Prayer