

Song 14

Song 14 ♪ This Is Gonna Suck

We made it back to school from Sarasota with enough time to beat the curfew, to find that the orchestra was already practicing. The plot twist here was that as soon as Ash and I ran into the music room I found that it was Sister Louisa who directed the orchestra. Saturday night and all Sunday was spent practicing a few religious songs for the recital. Those were fairly easy for me to sing because they didn't require great skill. In fact, I added a few touches here and there that I could tell made the Sister very happy.

Monday morning I woke up extra early so that I could catch up on all the homework I had neglected because of the crazy weekend. I was in the middle of it when the scrape of a chair being pushed back made me look up.

Madison Whatsherface sat in front of me, sweeping back her long blonde hair over a shoulder. Unexpected was to put this mildly. I couldn't shake the impression anytime I was around that she was not pleased by my presence. I looked around. There was nobody else in the cafeteria. I didn't know if that was a good thing.

"Um, good morning," I said.

She rested her chin on a hand delicately. Her eyelashes were so long that they couldn't possibly be natural. "Everybody seems to be in love with you, the teachers, the nuns, Ashton."

Her expression was neutral as she said this, but a shiver racked my spine. As if my instincts were warning me that I was treading dangerous territory. I picked my cellphone up and looked at the time. I had a solid hour before the breakfast rush started. I couldn't waste it hearing someone talk crazy.

"Not to be rude but I really need to work on my homework."

"Oh, great. I should catch up with mine too." She pulled out a binder and a couple of notebooks and set them on my and Addy's table. As if this were totally normal. "My weekend was just so busy. I had to rush back to school for practice from Fisher Island, and I'd been intending on doing all of this on a yacht." She smiled at what was undoubtedly a stunned expression on my face. "Of course, that's nothing compared to your entire adventure with Ashton."

I hoped that by sustaining my silence she'd just drop it, but she leaned closer with a certain glint on her eye that made me feel trapped.

"How'd you know?" I asked.

"Oh, so there was an adventure? Are you guys dating now?"

"What? No." I lied my palms up to form a defensive barrier. "How did you even--"

Madison ran her fingers through her hair, combing it to the side. It fell in perfect waves of spun gold and yep, that was me feeling jealous.

"Someone saw you come in with him. One thing you'll learn here is that there's no such a thing as a secret." Her glossy lips curled into an evil smile. "And gossip about the people at the top of the food chain spreads like wildfire."

I looked down at my notes and scratched my left elbow. Worrying my lip, I hoped no one had found out that my ma cleaned houses for a living. It was quite nice of her to give me this warning to cover my own tracks, really.

Her so laughter twinkled. "You don't need to look so worried. That's why I'm talking with you now, when no one can see that I'm with you."

The way she said it made it sound like that kind of gossip would be bad for her image. I shot her a resting bitch face. "Are you done here?"

Madison started picking up her stuff, like she hadn't had any intention of studying in the first place. "I just thought I'd warn you to stay away from Ashton Winters. Hanging out with him is not what it's cracked up to be."

I batted my eyelashes as she stood up. "It can't be any worse than hanging out with cheaters, I suppose."

She froze. Her perfectly made up eyes looked murderous. "Careful. You don't want to alienate me, especially as I was trying to give you advice."

"Well, thanks for the advice. See you in class."

I pretended to focus on my text book until her steps faded away. From the corner of my eye I saw that she left the cafeteria and I breathed a sigh of relief.

It was easy to ignore her during class because I was just so busy trying to keep up, and at the same time ignore Ashton who kept tugging at my hair at random moments. He only stopped a second I managed to sneak in a particularly vicious smack to his arm when the teachers weren't looking. But during music practice, my stand with the sheet music faced the violins directly. And when I caught Madison's eye I felt like I was in the presence of one of the malandros from the barrio. Like she could suddenly pull a knife on me like it was the most natural thing.

Music was hard. We had two hours of practice a day every day. Every break I had, I spent studying the books that Ashton had got me with music theory and the basics of reading music. But it wasn't enough to follow the rhythm of everybody else. We made a lot of pauses because I didn't know what to do, where Sister Louisa or Ash would come to help me. Every time I could feel my face burn with shame. I felt so bad that I was pulling everybody down to my level with me.

I was on the verge of tears when we finished practice on Wednesday. The recital was in three days and I was so, so not ready.

As Madison tucked her violin into her case, she clicked her tongue. "I knew it, with a singer this inexperienced we're all just going to waste our senior year."

My chin trembled as I saw her leave with her friends. Everybody was frustrated, but no one more so than me.

From above the noise of the kids leaving I heard Ashton call for Sister Louisa.

"Can Link and I stay with Vera to continue practice?"

I looked up in a flash.

"That'd be great." She smiled, looking as exhausted as I felt. "I'd love to stay and join but I'm afraid my feet are killing me."

"We'll be good, I promise." Link snorted at Ash's words. The latter raised his hands in peace. "For whatever my word's worth."

The nun nodded. "Very well, I'll send somebody up to check up on you every few minutes. Behave and remember to be in your rooms by curfew."

We saw her leave. I grabbed my sheet music and flung it to the floor. "Sorry to make you waste your time but I'm done."

Ashton rolled his eyes. "Look, you're not bad. You're just scared of music you're not used to."

"And it really sucks that you can't even read basic music," Link added from his piano.

I frowned at him. "I'm used to him giving me crap, but why are you here?"

He shrugged. "I had enough of him complaining every day and every night."

My eyebrows went up.

Ashton ran his hand through his silky auburn hair. "He's my roommate."

"I appreciate the help but you won't make me learn faster in three days."

"We are," Ash's eyes shone as he said this. "The class isn't working for you because it's pandering to people with experience. But I know just how you can learn."

"Hearing memory." The other boy said as he cracked his knuckles. "This idiot says yours is excellent."

Said idiot picked up my sheet music from the floor. "I'm going to sing and you're going to imitate."

I looked from one to the other. "Okay, I can try that."

Link said, "Just keep in mind that his vocal range is vastly different from yours. Imitate him, but using your own."

"Got it."

That actually went over okay. We got so into it that we almost didn't notice the time and ended up running to our rooms at breakneck speed. I got to mine panting and sweating like I'd just finished an olympic sprint.

A sandwich was pressed onto my hand as soon as I stepped into my room.

I looked up at Addy with tears in my eyes.

She shrugged. "I didn't see you over dinner so I figured practice ran long."

I flung my arms around her and squeezed her hard. A thank you profusely and eating, I told her everything about practice, which segued into me giving her a demonstration. I only went to sleep when a teacher came to scold me for being noisy, and even then I couldn't sleep with all the music dancing in my head.

Thursday morning I woke up to a barrage of text messages from Ashton to get ready to meet him and Link for practice in the music room ASAP. There were a few texts from Leti sprinkled in between, but in the haze of panic that enveloped me I didn't pay attention to them. I jumped out of my bed, picked up all my stuff and ran into the bathroom, breaking a personal record with how quickly I washed and dressed. My hair was wet and soaked through the back of my shirt once I made it downstairs and found them prepping up their instruments.

Link warmed up in the piano and Ashton picked up his viola. There were no greetings exchanged, he just asked, "Ready?"

I took a deep breath and answered, "No, but here goes nothing."

I let my voice loose for two hours before class, then again after class, rinse and repeat on Friday.

Until Saturday finally came.

I saw the members of the orchestra file into the nicest school bus I'd ever seen, and felt like my feet were made of lead.

"C'mon," Ash said next to me. "It's time."

"I can't." I was sure I was trembling. "I'm way in over my head. I'm going to make a huge mistake and embarrass the whole school."

I felt him take a deep breath. "No, you won't. You're ready for today. Every song is engrained in your head."

I turned to him and could feel that I was coming undone. "You don't get it. You're like, made for the spotlight." I motioned at him, up and down. "I'm a hack who has no idea what she's doing while pretending to be some sort of urban Disney princess."

He didn't say anything for what felt like a long time, just looked down at me as I hyperventilated. We both ignored Mr. Burlington as he asked us and a few other stragglers to board the bus. Ashton tilted his head and looked down all the way to my shoes and back up.

"Whoever made you feel like this is the real hack, because I've never met anyone more amazing." He startled me by holding my face and tilting it backward. For a second I felt like he was going to kiss me, but he used to motion just to look deep into my dark eyes. He sought for something in them, I didn't know what. "There's someone inside of you who is much greater than they, or any of us, can even imagine."

Let her out, Vera."

I swallowed hard. My heart was beating hard in my ribcage to a rhythm that I couldn't decipher. I closed my eyes and pulled his hands away from my face.

"Okay, I'll try."

If only, because for the first time someone was hell bent determined that I was better than I was. I didn't want to let him down.

"Good, now come with me."

As he said this he tugged my hand to follow him into the bus. Every eye was on us as we walked down the aisle and sat together.

Well, he'd successfully chased away my panic. The problem was that he'd replaced it by an entirely different feeling that had no room in my life. I willed my heart to calm the fuck down and listen to reason.

We couldn't develop a crush on a rich gringo. That was just disaster waiting to happen.

SONG OF THE DAY: Hoobastank - This is Gonna Hurt

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happy labor day weekend! i just bought me a DVD and a handful of Marvel movies, so see you in another lifetime, lol.

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