

Song 33

Song 33: Must Stop

Quinn's mom looked about half his size but twice his might, which had the interesting effect of reducing us all to half our age.

"I didn't raise y'all," she said as she pointed at us, and then pivoted around to face her son. "But you, you I did. And I've told you a million times that if you want a better life than what your dad and I have had, you need to be better than anybody else. That includes no visits to jail!"

He flinched, and so did the rest of us.

"Yes, mom."

"You are lucky that your friend's father is a good man and got you all out of that place without a blimp in your records but Lord help me, that's one too many scares for my poor heart. You hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry."

"We're sorry, Mrs. Montgomery," Ashton said, hanging his head. "It won't happen again."

She harrumphed and didn't continue the speech, like she'd already lost steam. We stood outside of the precinct, waiting for Jem to arrive. The twins' aunt was in town, having driven over from Sarasota with Ayrton and she'd been the one the boys called as soon as our belongings were returned to us. She was picking up the van and driving it over to take us back to the school.

What a fiasco.

I kicked a pebble and looked down at my scribbled on sneakers. Was this what happened when I had fun? If so, I was ready for a life of routine and zero excitement.

Someone slung an arm around my shoulders and I looked up to Leti's grin. I grimaced in response.

"I why do you look so happy?"

She shrugged. "I'm used to being a bit of a troublemaker, tú sabes? So I'm kind of proud that you also have it in you."

I rolled my eyes. "Well, I'm not."

Jem arrived not long after with a grim line on her lips. She parked the van by the curb and got out. When I met her she'd seemed so carefree and full of life, but I could tell by the look in her eyes that we were in for another lecture the entire way back to school. We thanked Mrs. Montgomery before filing into the van. Just before her son did, though, she pulled him back and caught him in a hug. From my vantage, I could see as Quinn's face morphed into shock, but his arms came slowly about her small frame and returned the action. I could imagine how scared she'd been when she got his call. I looked away and decided to stop that train of thought before my mood got any worse. I hopped into the van and noticed that all our instruments were in it. Clearly Jem had rescued them, too.

A few minutes into the drive, Jem sighed really loud. The twins said in unison, "I'm sorry."

"This is a new low, even for you guys," she said. At a red light she twisted around and asked what I then realized should have been the first question coming out of anybody. "Are you all okay?"

We all said yes with various degrees of excitement.

"Sneaking out of school past curfew and going to a college party are not terrible things." I choked as she said this. Then she continued, shaking her head. "But getting caught by the cops? Gee, not even I managed that during my years of rebellion."

Ayrton chimed in. "You make it sound as though your years of rebellion ended a while ago."

Jem laughed slightly, and I felt something uncoil a little inside me. Like I'd been as tense as though I'd been expecting a chancletazo out of nowhere.

"Good point. I guess the rule of thumb is to not do what Aunt Jem would do."

A false sense of security had fallen over us that dried away as if carried by the night breeze as soon as we got out of the van by the school gates. The guard greeted us, along with two women that I could recognize in my sleep.

Mother Superior and Sister Louisa.

I swallowed with difficulty. It wasn't my past what flashed before my eyes, but my future. The future I wanted of finding myself away from my ma's rules and beliefs, which I could only get if I went to college and got a job somewhere else. I needed to stay in this school, that was for sure.

Ayrton chose that moment to say, "Well, it was nice to meet you all but from here on out you're on your own."

"Cut that out, Ayrton Winters," the Mother Superior said with surprising bite. "You may not be my student anymore by your own foolish choice, but you're not getting out of this."

Jem folded her arms. "Agreed."

The boy fumbled with his words. "Wait, what?"

"Follow me," Sister Louisa said. My feet moved automatically. I was hoping that if they saw I was obedient and remorseful and maybe ordered to write a 10,000 word essay that they'd let me off the hook. All of us followed them into the school chapel and stood in a row by the first pew. The younger nun stood by the altar and turned to face us. "I can't begin to express how disappointed I am in all of you." I felt her eyes on me like a burn. I wasn't the only one who couldn't stand them, we all ended up looking at the floor. "Members of our school orchestra, baseball team and an ex-alum, sneaking out a curfew, jeopardizing their integrity and that of the school? This is such an affront to our school honor, we should expel you."

My heart froze in my throat. I looked up, tendrils of fear tightening their hold around me.

Mother Superior Evangeline joined her then. "Alas, we're an institution of education, not of punishment. What lesson will you learn if all the example we give you is of taking the easy way out?" She took her glasses off and rubbed at the crystals with the lapel of what I realized was her pajama shirt. She blew on them and put them back on, as if our futures were not dangling on the tip of her tongue. "It'd be so much easier for us, for our school reputation, if we simply kicked you out and put out a statement that you are in no way associated with Holy Trinity High School, huh?"

I sensed a but. There had to be a but.

"But," the older woman continued, allowing me to breathe again. "That is not the kind of example we want to set. We are and will continue to be responsible for you. Even when you disappoint us, like tonight."

My eyes welled up again and I looked down.

"Do you know why you are in this school?" she asked us, and I felt her voice grow closer. I looked up and saw that she was pacing us and down our line, hands clasped at her back as she looked us up and down. "Have you ever wondered why you're in a boarding school in the middle of a city famous for its amusement parks, close to the beach and surrounded by nature?"

She paused in front of me and I shook my head slightly, not knowing where she was going with this.

Mother Superior's eyes softened a bit, or at least I imagined it.

"You're here, children, so that somebody can care for you."

I felt, more than saw or heard, the shock that passed through the entire line.

"Whatever the reason may be, your families are busy or broken or focused on other issues, but they've all placed their trust in us to take care of you, and that's what we'll do."

She said this to two kids whose dad was more focused on his political image than on his family. To two kids of color with few resources. To one whose parents seemed to be on the verge of divorce. Another one whose parents were a continent apart.

"And we'll do this as best as we can, better than your parents if possible." Mother Superior stood in front of the Winters boys. She patted both of their heads with difficulty, since they were a lot taller. The boys had to bend their knees to accommodate the gesture.

"Definitely better than your father, who only seems to know how to brandish his money around."

Sister Louisa raised her chin. "Mr. Winters made a donation to the school in order to, quote, take care of the bad influences in his sons lives, unquote."

We all looked at each other, unable to believe what we were hearing.

My voice was a few octaves higher when I asked, "Me?"

"And probably me, too," Quinn said with a growl in his voice. "He's made sure I know my presence is never welcome."

Ashton said something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like a curse, but it got drowned in the commotion.

"Wow, and people think I'm bad," Madison said.

Addy shook her head, so stupefied she couldn't utter a word. Link spoke for all of us when he asked, "Is this for real? Isn't that blackmailing?"

Mother Superior beamed a smile so bright that it left us silent. "It would be, if we had accepted it and fulfilled that purpose."

"Wait," I said. "I don't get it."

The older woman stood in front of me, pleased as punch. "What we need is for you kids to develop your own moral compass and understand that just because someone is an adult doesn't mean they'll always be right. So, Vera, tell me. What do you think would be the responsible thing to do tonight, in light of all of these events?"

I flapped my mouth open and closed a few times.

She gave me a little hint. "Mr. Winters said, to take care of the bad influences. How can we turn them into good influences?"

From the corner of my eye I could see everybody looking at me. I swallowed and gave it a thought.

"Um, we could try to not sneak out of school after curfew?"

"That's a start." Mother Superior nodded. "What else?"

"Um, do our homework, follow the code of conduct, I don't know..."

"What about the money?"

I snapped my mouth shut because I'd just been about to say stupid up his ass? And then I thought of something better. Something that man would probably hate. This may get me in hot waters with two nuns from the Catholic church, but I still said it.

"How about we donate the money to an orphanage?"

After all, in different ways that was how all of us felt. Parentless.

"It sounds like just the perfect thing to do," she said. "As your punishment for tonight's shenanigans I want you all to write a letter for the recipients on behalf of our school. Show everybody that love is what this world needs."

I was pretty sure that I looked like a cartoon with my jaw hanging a few inches off the floor. This had been entirely different from any outcome I'd have expected.

Sister Louisa smiled her Mona Lisa smile and ruined the moment for me. "It goes without saying that we'll be watching all of you with special interest from now on, especially with the recital we have coming up a couple of days before Thanksgiving where you'll be representing our school. And no weekend passes for a month. You're all dismissed, back to your dorms at once."

We all groaned as we began filing out of the chapel.

"And Ayrton?" Mother Superior asked, and we all stopped to hear what she was going to say. "It might be hard, since you're behind on the curriculum, but we still have room for you if you're ready to come back."

The boy stood there, blinking at her.

"I thought being gay was a capital sin in the eyes of the Church, or something," he said finally.

Mother Superior shocked us all by saying, "Some people believe so, but if you ask me the biggest sin is to leave you adrift."

SONG OF THE DAY: Disturbed - Just Stop