



Edge of Heaven (Crimson Edge #2)

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Category: Romance

Description: I have everything I've ever wanted—except the thing that matters most. Her.

Rock and roll is my life.

Playing bass for Crimson Edge is the best job in the world. Even when we're on tour with our musical arch enemies.

Until the woman I've secretly been in love with for years starts dating one of them. I can't stand the way he treats her, and I don't know why she stays.

I can't get involved—the band has too much to lose.

But I'm going to anyway.

One way or another, I'm going to make her mine.

Total Pages (Source): 38

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:31 am

Taryn

Six months ago

“We’re done, Callum.” I throw the last of my toiletries into my carry-on bag and turn to my boyfriend, watching the play of emotions on his face.

He’s not a touchy-feely kind of guy, which is one of many reasons this isn’t working out, but I see something that almost resembles hurt in his eyes.

Geez.

He’s such a jerk ninety percent of the time—why does he have to pick now to show a softer side? I’ve been working up the nerve to leave for weeks.

“You meet someone else?” he asks finally.

I roll my eyes.

“No. When would I have time to meet anyone? You barely give me time to breathe, much less meet other guys.”

He frowns. “I thought you liked spending time with me.”

“I did,” I say, brushing past him so I can slip my shoes on. “But you’ve gotten overbearing, demanding, and if we’re being honest...you’re not nice to me anymore. Why would I stay with a guy who isn’t nice to me?”

He follows me, coming to stand a few inches away. “I’m sorry.”

“I’ve complained before, you’ve apologized before, and things change for a day or two before you go back to how you are.

And it’s okay,” I add hurriedly, hoping to keep him from getting mad.

Angry Callum is a pain in the ass, and I have a plane to catch, so I don’t want this to get long and drawn out.

“You’re really leaving?”

“I need to see Toby,” I say, pulling my two suitcases to the door.

“It’s been too long and he’s starting a new treatment next week.

” Toby is my eight-year-old son. He lives with my mother in Los Angeles, and it’s been a month since I’ve seen him, which is too long.

Callum kept making excuses about why I couldn’t leave him, but I’m over it.

“ That’s what this is about?” He shakes his head. “So go. Spend time with your kid and then meet me in New York.” His band, Karnal Death, is filming a music video there in a few weeks.

“No.” I say it gently. “I’m sorry. I just... I can’t do it anymore. We’re either fighting or fucking, and while the latter is fun, the former is tiresome. I don’t want to be in a relationship where we fight every single day.”

“You know I’m rough around the edges, baby.” He reaches for me. “But?—”

“Just stop. Please?” I move out of his reach and square my shoulders resolutely. “Last night you literally told me you were going to fuck the model in your next video. What does that tell me about how you feel about me?”

“I didn’t mean it literally. You know how I can get when I’m in a mood.”

“I do. And I don’t like it. That’s part of why I’m leaving.”

“What if you took a few weeks to think about it,” he suggests. “And then I can come to L.A., meet Toby, and we can talk things out?”

“You’ve never wanted to meet him before,” I point out.

“We weren’t serious before.”

“We’re not serious now .” I feel a headache coming on and realize I have to leave—he can and will talk me out of this, and I’ve made up my mind this time.

I have to walk away from this pattern of verbal and emotional abuse.

He’s no good for me, and maybe I’m not good for him either.

“You deserve someone who’ll make you happy,” I whisper, leaning up to kiss his cheek. “And I deserve someone who won’t yell at me every day. There are women who are into that—who’ll give as good as they get. That’s just not me. Take care of yourself, Callum.”

Before he can say anything else, I open the door and push my three bags into the hallway. Two large suitcases and my carry-on are going to be impossible to get downstairs alone, but I can’t wait for the bellhop.

“Hey, Taryn.” Dusty Rhimes, the bassist for Callum’s band, is coming out of his room just as the door closes behind me.

“Hey.” I manage a shaky smile.

“Need some help?”

“Thank you, yes.”

We walk to the elevator in silence.

“You’re leaving for good?” he asks once we’re inside.

“Yeah.” I nod. “It’s time.”

“Good for you.”

Dusty’s the only guy in the band I like. The others are all jerks—much like Callum. Dusty is no angel, but he’s always been nice to me, and I don’t see him abusing the crew or groupies like the other guys do either.

My phone rings just as we step out of the elevator.

“Thanks, Dusty,” I say as I answer. “Hi, Mom.”

“Taryn!” She sounds out of breath.

“What’s wrong?”

“The treatment,” she says. “The funding fell through.”

My heart sinks.

Toby has leukemia, and the standard treatments haven't been working for him. There's a new experimental clinical trial going on, and I managed to get him in, but insurance won't pay for it. We thought we found funding, but now...

"What can we do?" I ask quickly. "What do they say?"

"I spoke to the woman in billing. She says he can join the trial, but it's more than ten grand a month. Cash, Taryn."

The air leaves my lungs in a rush, and I stumble to the nearest chair. "Oh shit."

"I don't have it," she says. "I can pay for this month, but after that, I don't know what we'll do, and for the treatment to work, they're saying he needs a year."

A year .

That's more than a hundred grand.

I have a little over fifteen thousand in the bank.

But no jobs scheduled, no way to make more short-term.

As a model, I do okay, but I'm no Kendall Jenner or Cheyenne.

And that's one of many things Callum and I fought about—me leaving to find work. He always whined and complained until I just gave in.

Now I want to kick myself.

“I have about fifteen,” I tell my mother. “That buys us another two months or so. By then, I’ll hopefully find work.”

“They’re going to make me sign a document agreeing to pay them. If we fall short one month, they can take the house, Taryn. And that’s all we have.”

I groan and close my eyes.

This can’t be happening.

My mother is a teacher, so her salary isn’t that much. She owns the house she lives in now because my dad died and left her some life insurance. Otherwise, she never would have been able to afford to buy a house in a decent part of Los Angeles.

I help because she’s raising my son, but I haven’t worked in months, and my bank account is dwindling quickly. Callum keeps a roof over my head and feeds me, but he never gives me spending money or anything.

“I’m going to figure this out,” I promise. “Okay? I don’t know how, but I’ll find work. I’ll get a job waiting tables or whatever it takes. Just get him into the program. I won’t let them take your house.”

“Are you sure, honey?” Mom sounds terrified.

I am too.

“What’s the alternative?” I whisper, my voice breaking. “We can’t let him die!”

Mom starts to cry, and tears fill my eyes too.

Fuck-fuck-fuck.

I don't know what to do and don't have anyone to turn to.

"I'll be home tonight," I tell her. "And we'll figure this out. I'll find a way to make the money—I promise. No matter what I have to do."

"I have to sign the papers today or they'll give his spot to someone else."

"Do it."

"You're sure?"

"Mom!" My voice rises a little. "I'm not going to let my son die, so sign the fucking papers and I'll figure it out."

I hear her sigh, but she knows I'm not upset with her.

I'll do anything to help Toby get better.

I had him when I was sixteen, and his father—my high school boyfriend—went and got himself killed in a car accident when I was four months pregnant. So Mom took custody because I had no way to take care of him—and my parents felt strongly about me having a backup plan.

I had to finish high school.

Go to college.

In addition to starting my modeling career.

It's just been harder than I anticipated.

Then Dad died.

And when Toby got sick, we didn't think about the financial aspect because Mom has great insurance through the school.

This is different, though.

A clinical trial on an experimental treatment that's had astounding results.

So I'll sell my soul to the devil to make sure Toby gets it.

I swipe at my tears as I disconnect, digging in my purse for a tissue.

"Taryn?" I know the voice and though I want to walk away, I'm too upset to fight with him right now.

"Callum, I can't..." My voice breaks, and I start to sob.

"Hey, what's wrong?" He sits next to me and wraps one of his big arms around me. He's six feet five inches and built solidly, so it's easy to feel safe in his arms, even though I should know better.

I sniffle. "It's Toby."

"Is he sick again?"

"The insurance won't cover the clinical trial..." I spill out the story. "I don't know what to do, but I have to go. I have to get work so I can pay for it. I don't want Mom to lose the house..." I'm babbling through my tears and finally he gives me a little shake.

“Hey. Stop crying. It’s going to be okay.”

“You don’t understand.”

“I do.” He forces me to look at him. “I’ll pay for it.”

“What? No. I just broke up with you!”

“Come back to me, baby.” His voice is soft, cajoling...tender. “I love you, Taryn. Let me take care of this for you and prove to you I can be better.”

I should know better.

I really should.

But I’m desperate.

And he’s throwing me a lifeline.

“We’re talking about my son’s life,” I whisper. “You can’t wake up one day in a bad mood and decide you’re not going to make the payment or some shit.” I give him as hard of a glare as I can muster up in my current emotional state.

“I won’t,” he promises. “You’ll see. Things will be good if you give me another chance. Let me handle this and then go spend some time with your son. Then meet me in New York in three weeks.”

I should say no.

But I don’t because...I can’t .

Because I'm scared.

Because I don't have anyone else.

"Okay," I whisper.

"Good girl." He hugs me and then tugs me to my feet. "Come on. Let's get you to the airport."

He's being so nice I'm almost convinced he means everything he's saying.

Maybe leaving him was the wake-up call he needed to realize he doesn't want to lose me.

Maybe things are going to be okay after all.

Or maybe not.

I catch the look of surprise on Dusty's face as we breeze past him in the lobby.

Toby needs me, and I'll do whatever it takes so he has the best chance possible of beating the leukemia.

I'm doing this for him.

It's only a year.

And if Callum goes back to being a jerk, the day the treatments are over, I'm out of here.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:31 am

Mick

Sweat drips off my body as I swing my bass back and forth, my hips swaying in time to the beat.

The encore is always the most fun, and tonight's crowd is into us.

Which is cool because the last few nights have been...

a grind. We're the opening act for a speed metal-style band called Karnal Death. And their crowd isn't always...our crowd.

Tonight, however, they're digging us.

It's probably because we're in Minneapolis, which is our hometown, and even though we played here last summer, we have a lot of fans in this city. Probably more than they do, which is nice for once.

I look down into the crowd and see a pretty lady in the front row, breasts spilling out of her skimpy top as she dances and sings along.

I could take her back to the hotel tonight, show her a good time.

"I love you, Mick!" she yells.

"Love you too, darlin'!" I call back, laughing.

Being a rock star is the greatest job in the world. Even when you're on tour with a bunch of assholes.

Our first album went gold and we're hoping to hit platinum soon. Our record label, Hart Records, seems to think it's going to happen. The first two singles have done well, and we're releasing the third this week.

I tend to ignore the business side of things because I can't control it, so what's the point? We have managers, a record label, and marketing people to do that thinking for us. My job is to write and perform the music.

Everything else is background noise.

I flick a couple of picks toward the girl in the front, and she clutches one to her chest happily, mouthing, "thank you."

Do I need to get laid bad enough to send someone into the crowd to get her?

I've done it before, and I'll do it again, but sometimes it's a hassle.

Because then I'm stuck with them, and if there's no chemistry, I'm screwed.

I'll have to talk to her, placate her, whatever the case may be—and that's not my forte.

I'm pretty much a love 'em and leave 'em kind of guy, at least at this stage of my life.

It sounds like a cliché, but I'm twenty-six years old and living the rock and roll dream. Why would I want to tie myself down?

A flash of red catches my eye in the wings, and I glance in that direction.

That's when I see her.

Taryn Blakely.

The one I never forgot.

Three wonderful days together before we went our separate ways. It's been almost four years, but I still think about her.

Especially now that she's on tour with us, dating the lead guitarist for Karnal Death.

And I just don't get it.

She's so pretty I sometimes have trouble looking away. She could have anyone. She's a model and it's obvious, from her wavy auburn hair to her slender figure and long, toned legs. Every inch of her is perfect as far as I'm concerned.

I don't understand what she sees in Callum Yates.

He's an asshole.

Not because he's dating the woman of my dreams, but because...he just is. He's rude, inconsiderate, arrogant, and a complete jerk. To everyone. His band, their fans, their crew, and definitely to us.

My band, Crimson Edge, is their opening act, and he behaves like we're the fucking help. Beneath him somehow.

Karnal Death has been around for a decade, with six albums under their belts, and a few hit singles. They don't have a lot of commercial success, but they have a cult following that's made them rich.

And because our success came on quickly, without enough time for our management team to put us out independently, unless we want to go back to playing clubs—which we don’t—Karnal Death is our only option. We picked up with them after the holidays, and it’s been a long month touring with them.

For me, the one bright spot—aside from my band and our music, of course—has been seeing Taryn every day.

I don’t get to talk to her often since Callum is so fucking jealous, but I do get to look at her.

Like now.

When I should be concentrating on the crowd. The pretty girl in the front row who’ll spend the night with me if I want her to. My band. The journalists waiting to talk to us after.

Instead, I’m stealing glances at the girl I’m hot for as she sways in the wings.

I don’t care what anyone says, she likes our music way better than theirs.

The song ends and our drummer, Angus, will do his solo. I run into the wings and accept the bottle of water my roadie hands me, gulping it down and mentally preparing for my own solo, which is coming up next.

“Ready for your solo?” Taryn’s voice seems loud amid the cacophony of noise around us.

“As I’ll ever be.” I grin.

“You guys are great. I try to catch your set whenever I can.”

“I like seeing you in the wings,” I say, keeping my tone light. “It’s nice knowing we have at least one fan on the nights no one knows who we are.”

“I’ve been a fan since day one.” Her blue eyes twinkle, and I remind myself I don’t have time to get lost in them.

I’m in the middle of a show.

I have my solo in?—

“Taryn!” Callum comes marching over to us, a scowl on his face. “What the fuck are you doing? He’s in the middle of a set.”

“She don’t bother me,” I say.

He yanks her by the arm, pulling her in the other direction, and I watch them whisper furiously to each other.

What the fuck does she see in that guy?

He’s always yelling, manhandling her, making crude remarks about their sex life... I don’t get it.

“Not your circus, not your monkey.” Our singer, Jonny Gold, nudges me. He knows I’ve got a hard-on for her, and while he shares my confusion about their relationship, he’s a lot more pragmatic.

“I know.” I take my bass from my roadie and bounce on my toes.

But first—I motion to one of the crew.

“Pretty girl in the front row. Red top, big tits, blonde hair. Give her a pass.”

He nods and disappears behind the amps piled up around us.

I have to stop lusting after the one woman I can't have.

There are so many options as a touring musician.

Taryn made her choice, so it's ridiculous to wait around, as if she's going to change her mind.

“You ready?” Sam Fielding, our lead guitarist, is standing next to me, a towel around his neck as we watch Angus winding down.

“Yup.” I slip the strap around my neck and grin.

“Go out there and kick some ass.”

I nod. “That's the plan.”

In my peripheral vision, I see a flash of red again, and despite my promise to mind my own business, my heart rate notches up.

Callum is shaking her, hands on her upper arms, and it looks like he's yelling into her face.

And she looks like she's going to cry.

“Don't,” Sam warns. “It has nothing to do with us.”

I grit my teeth.

“One of these days I’m going to beat the fuck out of him,” I mutter.

I don’t know if Sam can hear me amid the sound of the crowd and the final seconds of Angus’s solo.

“Maybe it’s their kink,” Sam suggests lightly.

“Maybe.”

I say the word, but I don’t believe it.

I know her.

Intimately.

The three days we spent together were intense, both in the bedroom and out. And she’s not into any degradation kink or some such bullshit. That’s fine for people who dig it, but I’ll bet my left nut Taryn isn’t one of them.

“Dude. Get your head out of your ass,” Jonny says, his eyes meeting mine. “You can’t do anything about what’s going on over there. At least not until after the show. Now go out there and show these people what you’ve got.”

I glance over at Taryn and Callum again.

He’s not shaking her anymore, but her head is down, chin against her chest.

She looks completely defeated.

As if he’s somehow broken her.

And I fucking hate him for it.

Someday, sometime, somewhere—I'm going to do something.

But it won't be now.

I have a show to finish.

Fans to perform for.

And a pretty blonde coming backstage afterward to distract me from all things Taryn Blakely.

I close my eyes and breathe deeply.

I hear the crowd.

Jonny's back on stage, mic in his hand. "Who's ready for the ultimate bassist?" Our hometown crowd roars.

"Let me hear you make some noise for Mick fucking Lips!"

Applause drowns out everything else.

It's time to do what I do—it's time to rock.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:31 am

Taryn

“Mommy, when are you coming home?”

Toby sounds tired, which breaks my heart.

“Next week,” I tell him.

His face lights up.

“Can you help me with my fractions? It’s hard.”

“I can try. Math wasn’t my best subject.”

“Grandma doesn’t like it either.” He wrinkles his nose.

“We’ll figure it out,” I promise. “What else are you working on?”

“Cursive.” Another funny face. “It’s hard . Why is Grandma making me learn cursive? And I don’t even get to see my friends anymore now that I’m in this dumb hospital. It’s not fair.”

Every time we have this kind of conversation, it breaks my heart.

It’s so hard to explain why he has to deal with this.

How do you talk about cancer to an eight-year-old?

He knows the basics, but I don't think he truly grasps the severity of his illness.

And honestly, my mother and I have tried to downplay it because he was only five when he was diagnosed with leukemia.

"I know it's hard," I say softly, "but I saw your grades, and you're doing really well this term." He's being home schooled because his immune system is shot during the treatment, so he can't risk being around other kids who might get him sick.

He's been a trooper, though, and we're halfway through the treatment. Six months down, six to go.

But I don't know which one of us is suffering more.

Honestly, the relationship with Callum was okay for a couple of months.

Then he started going back to his old ways, arguing with me all the time, raising his voice, and calling me names.

Now he's started with emotional abuse, guilt trips, and the constant reminders about how much my kid is costing him.

I pointed out that he promised he wouldn't do that, and he hasn't done it since, but it's only been a week.

I'm leaving soon and that always brings out the worst in him.

He hates when I'm gone, and I don't understand it.

He barely acknowledges me when I'm here unless he wants sex, and the rest of the time he either ignores me or talks down to me.

I never thought I'd be one of those women who put up with an abusive man, but here I am.

If it weren't for Toby, I would be long gone, but I'm caught in the worst kind of catch-22.

If I stay, Callum pays for Toby's treatment and I don't have to worry about my child.

If I leave, I don't know how I'll keep paying for everything Toby needs.

I don't have much work lined up—thanks to Callum's possessiveness—so I'm stuck.

And I've never felt more alone.

Even before this thing with Toby started, Callum was one of those guys who talked a good game but didn't usually come through. Now that he knows he has me over a barrel, it's a thousand times worse.

I hear the lock of the hotel room door disengage and hurriedly tell Toby I love him. "I'll see you in less than a week," I tell him. "I love you."

"I love you, Mommy!"

I disconnect as Callum walks in with his usual scowl. "What are you doing?" he demands.

"I just hung up with Toby," I say, pasting what I hope is a sweet smile on my face. "What's up?"

"Kid doing okay?" he asks gruffly.

“The treatments make him really tired, but otherwise, he seems to be responding well.”

“Good.” He nods. “Anyway, we need to get to the arena early. There are a bunch of record label guys coming in from L.A. They want to do some press and have us sign a bunch of posters. Are you ready to go?”

“Of course.” I stand up and stuff my laptop into my bag. “I’m always ready.”

He rakes his eyes up and down, a smarmy smile on his face as he reaches for the button of his jeans.

“You know what else you’re ready for?” He unzips his jeans and slides them down.

Ugh.

And just like that, he’s back to being a jerk.

I manage not to roll my eyes.

“I thought we had to get going?” I ask instead.

“We have a few minutes.”

“Then I’ll need to fix my makeup when we’re done.”

“I can wait. Now, come on...” He motions to the floor with his hand. “Show me how grateful you are to be my woman.”

I pull in a breath and drop to my knees.

This is for Toby.

I'll do whatever it takes to help my baby get better.

I wasn't the best mom when he was born but that changes now.

Six more months and then I'm free.

* * *

Backstage at the arena is mobbed.

Usually, it's just the band and crew milling around, getting ready for soundcheck and the pre-show meal that's always provided.

Tonight there are record label reps, radio personalities, and what appear to be contest winners.

I see the women lining up excitedly, wearing as little clothing as they can get away with, hair and makeup done to the nines.

That was me once upon a time.

So desperate to get Callum's attention.

What a mistake.

I got him and now all I want is to get away from him.

"Things are crazy tonight." My friend Ryleigh Bell comes up behind me with a grin.

She's dating Angus Jeffries, the drummer for Crimson Edge, and we've been friends since college. We were good friends for a while, but I went home to L.A. as soon as I graduated and we lost touch.

Running into her on tour was fun at first, but now it's just stressful because Callum doesn't like her and doesn't want me to hang out with her. She's pretty overt about how much she dislikes him, so even though she toned it down a little once I asked her to, there's no love lost between them.

And he gets cranky when he sees us together.

Luckily, he's distracted right now, in his element as he lords over the conversation with the DJs and contest winners who are hanging on his every word.

"You doing okay?" Ryleigh asks me as I restlessly shift from one foot to the other.

"Yeah." I try to keep my tone neutral. "You know how it is with him. I never know if he wants me close or expects me to hang back."

She purses her lips but doesn't respond.

"I know," I say gently. "Please, just leave it alone."

"I didn't say anything." She shrugs, a faint smile playing on his lips. I see a million questions in her eyes, but she's a good enough friend not to voice them.

"And I appreciate it." I keep my eyes glued to Callum, watching his body language to try and gauge his level of annoyance.

He seems pretty relaxed, which is nice, but that doesn't always dictate his behavior.

“Would he be amenable to an article?” Ryleigh asks after a moment.”

“What?” I turn in confusion.

“For Rock Harder .” Ryleigh is a music journalist and Angus recently bought out one of the premier music magazines in the country— Rock Harder —making Ryleigh the managing editor. I don’t know much about what she does on a daily basis, but she’s been excited about it.

“I could do a story about the band, or about Callum specifically. You think that would play to his ego?”

And ostensibly be nicer to me.

That’s the part of this she doesn’t say aloud, but I appreciate it nonetheless.

“He doesn’t like it when I get involved in band business,” I say quietly. “But he probably would like to?—”

“Taryn!” Callum calls my name loudly, making me jump.

“Gotta go,” I whisper to her, hurrying over to Callum.

“What did I tell you about talking to her?” he growls in my ear, yanking me against his side.

“She was asking me if I thought you’d want to do a feature interview for Rock Harder ,” I say quietly. “I told her I don’t get involved in band business, and to ask you directly.”

His grip gentles and he looks down at me approvingly. “For once, you used your

brains. Good job. Tell her I'll get with her either after the show tonight or tomorrow. Right now, I have things to do. You go handle that for me, okay?" He nudges me back in the direction I came from.

He turns back to the group he was talking to before and I walk back to Ryleigh, who lifts one brow questioningly.

"Don't ask," I say under my breath. "But he'd love to talk to you about a story in Rock Harder ." My voice is soft, but I know she hears the sarcasm dripping from my tone.

"Will do." She nods. "Does that mean you're allowed to talk to me now?"

"Maybe. His possessiveness changes daily."

"Are you happy, Taryn?" she blurts.

The answer to that would be a resounding no.

But she doesn't know about Toby.

No one does.

Well, except Mick.

Mick knows things about me no one knows.

And he's obviously kept those secrets to himself.

I was a dumbass letting him go.

Not that we were ever in a relationship, but we spent three days together doing a photo shoot for a rock and roll themed clothing catalog, and the chemistry was off the charts.

Both in bed and out. But he had music aspirations that kept him in Minneapolis, and I was in college, trying to find my footing as a model.

Our lives were going to take us in opposite directions, so we said goodbye and never looked back.

I can be a dumbass sometimes, but there's no use crying over spilled milk.

Or the one that got away.

I don't have time to think about love or dating in general—Callum is all I can handle right now.

Once I'm back in L.A. and get custody of Toby, maybe then I'll be in a position to meet someone new. Someone who's nice to me.

Just under six months, I remind myself.

Six more months until Toby finishes the experimental treatment and I go home to L.A. to get custody of him.

It's time for me to be the mom he deserves, instead of letting my mother raise him.

That was okay when I was sixteen since I had no way to support myself, much less a child, but everything is different now. More than that, he needs me. And my mom needs her life back. She already raised her only child, so it's time for me to raise mine.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:31 am

Mick

The brunette has been with me for several nights now, and it's time for her to go. I hate being a jerk, but I was up front about the fact that I'd be moving on once we leave the Midwest. And that's happening today. So I'm cutting her loose and there's no doubt she's disappointed.

Three days is a long time for me to be with the same woman, but this one is pretty and sweet and an absolute tiger in bed.

Too bad that's not enough to keep my interest.

"The car service will be here in a minute," I tell her, hoping my voice doesn't give away how badly I want her to go.

She hasn't done anything wrong; I'm just not that into her.

I should have just let her go after the second night in Minneapolis, but I'm not that bright sometimes.

"I'm ready." She grabs her backpack and gives me a sad smile. "You sure this is what you want, Mick? We've had fun together."

I stuff my hands in the pockets of my sweats. "Yeah, we have but I have things to do."

"All right."

At least she's resigned to the inevitable. Not like some girls who cry and beg and make nuisances of themselves.

If I wanted to be honest—and I usually don't—it's time to slow down the groupie game and focus on finding a woman to be with long-term. Someone who understands my lifestyle and isn't interested in my money.

Because I don't really have any right now.

Yes, the album is certified gold and we're close to platinum, but the record label takes their cut from all the money they fronted us for both the recording studio and the tour before anyone else gets paid.

It could be another six months before we see anything substantial, and anyone I'm with has to be at least somewhat self-sufficient.

"I'll walk down with you," I offer, since it feels like the polite thing to do.

That's the thing with rock and roll—there's a lot of bad behavior.

But there's also a fuck ton of exaggeration and stereotypes that are basically bullshit.

Have I had more one-night stands than any man probably should?

Absolutely. But have I thrown a TV off of a hotel room balcony?

No. Do I know musicians who do drugs? For sure.

Do I do drugs beyond alcohol and occasionally some weed? Never.

I love just about everything about the rockstar lifestyle, but I don't go crazy. I wish

people didn't automatically assume we're all womanizing drug addicts who are going to die when we hit twenty-seven.

That's in a year for me, and I have no intention of ending up dead. Not on my life's bingo card. Not yet anyway.

"It was a nice few days," Lori says quietly as we step out of the elevator.

"It was," I agree. I lean over and kiss her forehead. "Take care of yourself."

"Thanks." She turns and gets into the waiting taxi, and I watch as it disappears down the street.

"Another one bites the dust, eh?" A familiar voice speaks beside me, and I turn to Taryn in surprise.

"Something like that." It's relatively early, so I didn't plan on running into anyone in the lobby. Especially not Taryn. "Where are you off to?" I ask, noting the rolling suitcase she's carrying.

"Going home to L.A. for a week. I have a couple of auditions."

I cock my head slightly. "You going to see Toby?"

Her eyes widen for a fraction of a second and then she nods. "I keep forgetting you know all the secrets."

"Oh, I'm pretty sure I don't even know half of them," I respond. "But I do remember the things we talked about."

"You, uh, you haven't told anyone, right?" Her bright blue eyes meet mine worriedly.

I frown. “Of course not. You told me about him in confidence. It’s not my story to tell.”

“I...appreciate that.”

“Does Callum know?” I ask pointedly.

She nods stiffly. “Yeah.”

“Well, good luck with the auditions,” I say after a moment of awkward silence.

“Thank you.”

Our eyes meet once again, and I really wish I could read minds. There’s something in hers that’s hard to decipher. Worry. Fear. Anxiety. Whatever it is, it’s not good.

“You okay, Taryn?” I ask finally.

She huffs out a little laugh. “I’m going to say no, even though I’ll deny it to anyone else.”

“How come?”

“How come what?”

“Why would you deny that you’re going through something?”

“I can’t afford to do anything that might...upset Callum.”

I stare at her for a moment, the alpha protector in me threatening to rear its ugly head.

There's something going on with her, and she's afraid.

I don't know what exactly she's afraid of, but I have a deep, burning need to find out.

Especially if it's Callum she's afraid of.

It's one thing to be unhappy—it's something else entirely to be afraid.

"Shuttle's here—I have to go," she says, breaking the spell and hurrying outside.

I hesitate for a fraction of a second and then follow her.

"What are you doing?" she asks in confusion.

"I'm going to ride to the airport with you." I shrug. "It's a free shuttle and it'll just bring me right back."

"You don't have to do that."

"But I want to. We never get a chance to talk, so this'll give us the time to catch up." Before she can protest, I take the steps into the van two at a time and sink into the closest seat.

Taryn gives the driver her bag and then follows, hesitating for a beat before sinking down beside me.

We're the only two people on the shuttle, and I can almost see the tension drain out of her as we pull away.

"You're definitely not okay," I say quietly.

She lets her head fall back against the seat and sighs. "I am. Not as okay as I could be, but okay enough to get through, one day at a time."

"If you're just getting through each day, that's no way to live," I say quietly.

She's staring off into the distance at something, her thoughts obviously a million miles away.

"Six months," she whispers. "I just have to survive six more months."

"What happens in six months?"

She doesn't respond, continuing to stare straight ahead.

"Can I help?" I ask finally, when I realize she's not going to tell me whatever it is she's dealing with.

The edges of her mouth turn up, just a little, and she glances at me. "No one can help, but thank you for offering. And for being a friend even though I'm not much of one."

"Why are you with him if you're so unhappy?" I blurt. I should know better than to push, but I can't seem to help myself when it comes to Taryn.

"It's a long story," she says. "And the ride to the airport isn't nearly long enough to tell it all."

"Okay." What else can I say?

"Do you remember the day we met?" she asks suddenly.

That brings a grin to my face. "Do I remember? Like it was yesterday. You walked

outside onto the street where we were about to shoot, and I almost fell off the motorcycle I was on.”

This time her smile is genuine. “And I almost tripped over my own two feet when I saw you.”

“It was a nice few days,” I say. “When we were young and innocent.”

She chuckles. “Young, yes. Innocent, not so much.”

“I knew you were going to be successful,” I tell her. “But you were way out of my league.”

She frowns, cocking her head slightly. “You thought I was out of your league?”

“Still do. Although, to be fair, you’re way out of Callum’s league.”

Her face changes slightly, a mask falling into place, and I want to kick myself for ruining the moment we were having.

“Sometimes you have to do what’s right instead of what’s easy,” is all she says.

“Is it hard being with Callum?”

“You have no idea.”

She’s already said she doesn’t want to talk about it today, so I’m not going to make a big deal out of it. No matter how much I want to.

“Well, I’m always around if you need someone to talk to.”

“Callum wouldn’t like that,” she murmurs.

“We have about ninety minutes every time they have a show. Come find me and we can talk or have a drink or whatever.”

“Why are you being so nice?”

“Because I’ve thought about the time we spent together a lot over the years,” I admit.

“And I regret not trying harder to stay in touch.”

Surprise registers on her face as she stares at me.

“If that makes you uncomfortable, I apologize,” I add quickly. “I just thought you might have... thought about me too.”

“I think about it a lot too,” she whispers as the shuttle starts to slow down.

“Terminal three,” the driver announces.

“Yes, thank you.” Taryn quickly picks up a large shoulder bag and gets to her feet.

“Have a safe flight,” I say quietly.

“Thank you.” She stares down at me for a moment. “And thanks for riding with me. It was nice to have a few minutes...to just talk.”

“Any time. And I was serious about the offer to hang out while he’s on stage. I know what it’s like to be lonely.” It feels weird to have to sneak around to just talk, but if that’s my only chance to spend time with her, I’m going to take it.

“Are you...lonely?” she asks curiously.

“Sometimes.”

Our eyes lock again, and we just sit there for a few seconds as the shuttle driver gets out and goes around back to get her suitcase.

“I’ll see you when I get back,” she says.

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“Play well while I’m gone.”

“I’ll do my best.”

I watch as she gets off the shuttle, gets her suitcase from the driver, and then heads into the airport.

“You’re not getting out?” the driver asks me as he climbs back into the van.

“No.” I shake my head. “I’m going back to the hotel with you.”

He grins. “That’s kinda romantic, buddy, riding with your girl to the airport.”

My girl.

Wouldn’t that be nice?

Too bad she’s already taken.

“We’re just friends.”

He arches his brows. “You for real, buddy? The way you looked at each other—no

way that had a 'just friends' vibe."

"Unfortunately, she friend zoned me. She already has a boyfriend."

He makes a face. "You plan to fight for her?"

That never even occurred to me.

You can't fight for someone who doesn't want to be fought over.

Can you?

"I don't know," I respond. "I guess only time will tell."

"Don't wait too long," he says, pulling back into traffic. "Beautiful girl like that—someone's going to wife her up before you know it."

I don't know why but the thought of her marrying Callum makes me cringe.

She deserves so much better.

Except it's not my business or my problem.

It just feels like it is.

And I'm going to have to figure out why.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:32 am

Taryn

From the moment I step off the plane in L.A.

, it feels like I can breathe again. Not so much because I'm home, but more because I'm away from Callum.

Six glorious days without anyone yelling at me, manhandling me, or making fun of me in front of others.

Six days where I get to spend time with my son and try to get my career back on track.

Things have been tough professionally because Callum is so demanding of my time. He hates when I'm away from him and always complains before I leave to come see Toby. Last night, he threatened to find someone to satisfy his needs while I'm gone, and I didn't know how to respond.

I'm not jealous.

He can sleep with anyone he wants, especially if it means leaving me alone.

But that's the problem—he wants his cake and plans to eat it too.

And since he refuses to use condoms, the thought that he might get something and then give it to me is horrifying.

So as usual, I'm caught between a rock and a hard place.

Less than six months, I think as the taxi drops me off at my mom's house.

She's at work, so I put my things in the guest room, get the bag of surprises I picked up for Toby, and then call an Uber to take me to the clinic where he has to stay while he's in the treatment program.

My mother works until three during the week and then heads over to the hospital to go over Toby's school lessons and have dinner with him. I know it's hard on her and lonely for him, but we talk every day via video chat, and my mom is with him all day on the weekends.

It's a lot for her, but having leukemia is no walk in the park for Toby either. He's exhausted all the time, and recently had to shave his head again, which I know bothers him. He doesn't have many friends anymore, and one of the kids he got close to at the clinic passed away.

"Mommy!" Toby's eyes light up the moment I walk in, and he holds out his arms. I've already washed my hands and put on the mask we're required to wear so I wrap my arms around him tightly.

"I missed you so much," I whisper against the backwards baseball cap he's wearing.

"I missed you too." He pulls away slightly and gives me a gap-toothed grin. "Did you bring me a present?"

I frown, like I'm thinking about it. "Hmmm. Have you been good? Do you deserve presents?"

"I've been awesome!" he responds, and we both laugh.

“There might be something in here.” I lift the large gift bag containing two new Lego sets, two puzzles, and a few other things to keep him busy.

His eyes round as he pulls out a Star Wars Revenge of the Sith Starfighter Lego set. “I wanted this one!” he says happily.

“Keep looking,” I encourage.

He digs in and comes out with the Revenge of the Sith Heroes and Villains figures and clutches the box to his chest. “Yay!”

I chuckle, watching as he gets everything out and spreads it on the bed.

“Can we build the heroes and villains first?” he asks.

“Sure.” I settle on the edge of the bed and open the instructions.

He’s so bored here at this private clinic, basically sequestered from the world because of his almost non-existent immune system, we’re all trying to find ways to entertain him. The nurses are amazing, and the homeschool program he’s in allows us lots of flexibility, but I still hate it for him.

Six months down, six to go.

I think those words a lot these days, and for more reasons than one.

We work on the figurines one at a time until they’re all built and then Toby leans back, clutching one tiny figure in his hand.

“I’m tired,” he says.

“You sure?” I tease. “Because we still have to look at your schoolwork.”

He sighs dramatically, and I bite back my smile.

“Fine.” He sits up again and gives me the side eye. “I hate fractions.”

“No problem.” I put the now-empty Lego box on the counter while he gathers his schoolwork. He was a straight A student last year. Before the leukemia came back. Before all of our lives went into a tailspin.

I was saving money, planning to move back to L.A. and focus on my career.

I’ve wanted to get custody of Toby for a long time, but I don’t have a stable income.

Or enough money to get a place for us. It would be cheaper to live somewhere other than L.A.

, but then we wouldn’t be near my mother, and I’d need her for emergencies or when I have to go out of town for modeling jobs.

My life has been a string of bad luck, and sometimes it’s hard to put one foot in front of the other.

This is different, though.

I’ll do whatever it takes for my son.

And I have a plan.

Or at least the beginning of one.

I've had to use some of my savings to fly back and forth to L.A.

, but I've also made just enough to cover those costs.

And if I can get more work going forward, before I leave Callum, then it might get the modeling ball rolling for me.

I'll move in with my mom short-term and make sure my agent knows I'll take any work that comes my way.

Toby's just opened his math book when I see my agent's name flash on the screen of my phone, and I answer quickly.

"Hey, Diane."

"Guess what?" she asks breathlessly.

"What?"

"Rock Vibe wants you to do another shoot for them." Rock Vibe is the clothing line I did the shoot for when I met Mick.

"When?" I ask carefully. "I'm already pretty booked while I'm here and I have to get back to... my boyfriend."

"They want you to go to the casting call Thursday, but the shoot itself won't be for another month, in New York."

"Okay," I say. "Send me the specifics."

"Will do. And Taryn—Now that you've given me the green light, there's a lot of

interest in you. Just tell me how busy you want me to keep you.”

I hesitate.

Callum will hate the idea of me being gone more than one week a month and I have to manage that—and him—for nearly six more months.

“I guess it’ll have to be on a case-by-case basis,” I admit. “My son needs me and there are a few things I have to take care of over the next few months.”

She sighs. “Do you want me to find you work or not? You can’t keep saying no and expect people to keep reaching out.”

“I know. Believe me, I know.” I clear my throat. “It’s just...I have some responsibilities that I can’t get out of, but they’ll be taken care of within the next five or six months. Please don’t give up on me. I’m working on it. I promise.”

“All right. We’ll figure it out.”

“Thank you.”

I disconnect and stuff my phone back in my pocket.

“Mommy?” Toby looks up at me, his brow creased with worry.

“Just some work stuff.” I sit on the edge of the bed. “Now show me what you did in math today.”

I’m only here for a week, and I have to spend part of that time working, so I need to be present when I’m with Toby.

Everything else can wait.

* * *

I arrive at the casting the next morning a little early, anxious to get in and out.

Sometimes there are dozens of hopeful models, and it's embarrassing to have to compete again, just like I did when I was first starting out.

Eventually, you get to a point in your career where they ask for you by name—which is where I was before I started dating Callum.

Now, after nearly a year of limiting how much work I do, I'm back to square one.

I've just walked into the lobby when I recognize a familiar face.

Stevie Marchand.

What's she doing here?

There's no way one of the top supermodels in the world is at a casting call for a local magazine no one outside of L.A. has ever heard of.

"Stevie, thank you so much for coming in," a woman I assume is the casting director, says warmly. "We'll be in touch."

"Thank you for thinking of me. I've been trying to get myself out there now that I'm healthy again." Stevie was all over the tabloids a year or two ago after her fiancé threw her over a second-floor railing. She dropped off the radar for a while, but she's been popping up everywhere lately.

“Bye, Stevie.” The woman closes the door behind her leaving me standing there, unsure what to do since there doesn’t appear to be a receptionist or anyone to check us in.

“There’s no receptionist,” Stevie stage whispers to me. “You have to just knock on the door.”

“Oh.” I smile. “Thank you.”

“You’re Taryn Blakely, right?” Stevie smiles. “We met in New York a few years ago.”

“I didn’t think you’d remember,” I admit. “How are you?”

“I’m much better now.” She nods. “How about you?”

“There’s a lot going on in my life,” I say carefully. “I really need to get some work, but I’m guessing this one will be a waste of my time now that you’re here.”

Her eyes widen slightly. “Oh! No, not at all. I’m here for something else. That’s why there’s no receptionist or anything. You’re just early. I have nothing to do with the magazine spread. I’m doing an interview that has to do with mental health and domestic violence.”

“Oh. I’m sorry... I guess I thought...” I press the bridge of my nose.

“Are you okay?” Stevie puts a gentle hand on my arm.

“Yeah. I’m just... like I said, I’ve got a lot going on and I really need to get some work.”

She smiles. “Hang tight.”

She knocks on the door she came out of a few minutes ago and the same woman opens it. “Did you forget something, Stevie?”

“No. But I wanted to introduce you to my friend Taryn. She’s here for the nine o’clock casting. She’s been dealing with a personal situation so she’s just now getting back to work. Kind of like me.” She emphasizes that last part. “I’d consider it a personal favor if you could give her a shot.”

“I see.” The woman shifts her gaze to me and looks puzzled. “Oh, yes. Taryn Blakely. I was surprised to see your name—I heard you retired.”

I shake my head. “No, I’ve had to take some time off for a family member with cancer. Things are still a little iffy but... I have to eat in the meantime.”

“Of course, of course. I’m sorry you’re going through that...”

” She rifles through some papers, murmuring to herself.

“Do I have your headshot... oh, yes, here it is! Excellent. Right then. I can slot you in. I’ll reach out to your agent with the details.

Thanks for coming by.” She closes the door again with a little click, and I stand there for a second, trying to understand what just happened.

“It’s all who you know,” Stevie says gently. “I had a lot of people step up for me after my incident, so I’m happy to pay it forward.”

I blink and then turn to her, suddenly too emotional to respond.

“It’s okay,” she says, squeezing my arm. “Don’t cry. Us women need to stick together.”

“Oh my gosh.” I finally come to my senses and manage a tremulous smile. “Thank you, Stevie. I mean, you don’t even know me. Not really.”

“I know enough to know when someone is in trouble. If you ever need to talk, I’m here.” She writes her phone number on the back of a business card. “Call me any time.”

“I owe you one.”

“You owe me nothing. Women have to have each other’s backs. If my friends hadn’t had mine, I’d probably be dead now.”

Her words give me pause.

That’s something I have to think about.

Just not today.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:32 am

Mick

Now that we're no longer in the Midwest, the crowds aren't as friendly, and I leave the stage in Salt Lake City wondering what the hell our management team was thinking.

We knew it was a risk to tour with Karnal Death, but they offered us a good deal.

Except their fans aren't necessarily our fans so it's not working out the way it's supposed to. I'm pissed off about the whole thing.

I grab a towel from my bass tech and rub it down my face.

"This is bullshit," I mutter to Jonny.

"I know." He doesn't look happy either.

"At what point do we call it a day?"

"We're meeting with Sasha tomorrow," he says, referring to Sasha Petrov, the band's manager and record company rep. Her mother, Casey Hart, owns Hart Records, and though they've been extremely good to us, this tour is bullshit.

We're not making money yet either, which pisses me off even more.

"Are we going to say what we're thinking," I ask in frustration, "or continue to toe the line?"

“What’s the alternative?” Tate Jeffries, our rhythm guitarist, asks. “A club tour? The momentum is happening now —we don’t want to lose it.”

“We just got booed ,” I say, throwing up my hands. “What is that doing for momentum? The press is going to have a field day.”

“We’ll give Sasha a head’s-up tomorrow,” Sam Fielding, our lead guitarist, says firmly. “In the meantime, we need to keep our heads down and keep doing what we’re doing.”

“What? Kissing their asses?” I grunt.

“I agree with Mick,” Angus interjects. “We need to think about a change, maybe consider some options.”

“It’s only been a few months,” Jonny protests. “And we’re making money despite the lackluster response from some crowds.”

“If the press keeps writing about those lackluster responses, they’re going to assume we suck.”

“No one is going to assume that,” Tate says. “Come on, it wasn’t a great night, but that happens. Let’s go get drunk and forget about it.”

“We need to be on the same page,” I press. “We have to let Sasha know we’re serious about wanting out.”

“And we will, but nothing is going to change tonight,” Angus says. “We might as well go have some fun.”

I hate to give in, but he’s right.

A platinum album—which means record sales topped a million copies—will give us more of a leg to stand on, both with our label and within the industry in general.

Until then, we have to push forward.

I don't like it, but I understand it.

Maybe getting drunk is a good idea after all.

And finding a pretty lady to distract me from my negative thoughts.

We head toward the back lot where the tour buses are parked and I come around a corner just in time to see Callum—pants down around his ankles, a blonde on her knees in front of him sucking his dick.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I mutter, shaking my head in disgust.

“Gross.” Ryleigh makes a face and pulls out her phone. “I am so texting this to Taryn.” Her voice is loud enough to get Callum's attention, and he growls in her direction.

“You better not,” he says, pointing a finger at her.

“Or what?” Angus asks, putting an arm around Ryleigh.

Angus is the only one in the band who's independently wealthy, so he typically doesn't take any shit from Callum or anyone else.

“God dammit!” Callum roughly pushes the girl going down on him away and yanks his pants up. “You fuckers need to mind your own business.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t cheat on your girlfriend,” I snap.

“ My girlfriend,” he reiterates. “ My business. How about you mind yours?”

“How about you kiss my ass?”

Callum takes a step towards me, but Sam puts himself between us, giving Callum a dirty look.

“Maybe if you’re gonna cheat, you should consider not doing it out in the open where everyone can see you,” Sam says.

“Fuck you.” Callum zips up his pants and stalks in the other direction.

“You okay, sweetheart?” Tate asks the blonde, who fell on her side when Callum pushed her.

“Yeah...I guess.” She rubs her hip. “Thanks, though. He was holding my head and choking me.”

We all exchange glances, but no one says anything.

What is there to say? Callum’s bad behavior is well-known, and we put up with it to keep the peace.

That doesn’t sit well with me anymore, but it feels like I’m the only one.

When no one else says anything, I continue walking toward the bus because if I don’t, I might do something I regret.

Well, I won’t regret it, but it might not be good for the band.

“You can’t keep doing this,” Angus murmurs to me as we get on the bus.

“Doing what?” I ask, irritated. “Worrying about our reputation?”

“Letting Callum get under your skin,” Jonny says pointedly.

“He’s a fucking dick!” I snap.

“And we all agree,” Sam says. “But he’s a bully and it serves no purpose to call him out on his bullshit. Not now anyway.”

“Then when?” I demand. “When the tour is over? After they’ve had time to ruin our reputation and make it look like crowds hate us?”

“The album is selling. People know it’s not about the music. You can’t get people who love jazz to be happy at a Taylor Swift concert, and you can’t expect their fans to love us every night.”

“And there have been some great shows,” Jonny chimes in.

“They loved us in Minneapolis and Des Moines,” Sam says.

“And in New York,” Jonny adds.

“Great,” I say dryly. “That’s, like, four shows out of fifty.”

“It’s more than that,” Sam says, frowning. “And you know it. We knew going in that this tour would be rough but at the time we didn’t have a lot of options. We have to suck it up and you know that. What’s going on with you, dude?”

“This is about Taryn,” Tate interjects, shaking his head. “And dude—she is not your

problem. She's a grown-ass woman who made a choice to stay with him. I know you like her, but we can't force her to leave him. Whatever goes on in their relationship is between them. You have to let this go."

"I'm going to send her the picture," Ryleigh says. "And the rest is up to her."

"Didn't you just interview him?" Tate asks.

"The two things are separate," she says thoughtfully. "That was business, but Taryn is also my friend. I'd expect her to let me know if she saw Angus getting sucked off by someone else while I was away."

"Never gonna happen," he says, pulling her onto his lap and wrapping an arm around her.

She smiles down at him. "It better not. But that's not the point. Maybe this is the wake-up call she needs to dump him."

They continue to talk around me, but I zone out, my thoughts drifting to the conversation Taryn and I had on the shuttle to the airport.

About loneliness.

About how she only has to get through six more months with Callum.

None of it makes any sense, but my gut tells me she's in trouble.

And I want to help.

If she'll let me.

The thing is, I don't know how I can help.

I don't have much money, I'm committed to this tour for at least a few more months, and I'm positive the band will be pissed if I do something to get us kicked off.

On top of that, I'm in no position to be in a serious relationship.

I'd do it under the right circumstances—the right woman—but it feels like the timing would be off.

Granted, Angus and Ryleigh are together, and Sam is doing the long-distance thing while his girlfriend Kirsten is off in college, but relationships are hard on touring musicians. Unless you're rich enough to bring them on tour with you—like Angus—or they have their own money—like Kirsten.

I can barely take care of myself, much less anyone else. Especially when that someone else has a kid.

It's not that I don't like kids, but what would we do with him if we were together?

He's not a baby. If my memory serves me correctly, he's eight or nine now, so he's probably in school.

I seem to recall that Taryn's mother has custody of him, but the details are sketchy.

And Taryn seems pretty determined to keep him a secret.

There's so much I don't understand, and if I were smart, I'd put Taryn out of my mind and move on with my day.

But I can't.

I've been trying for the last six months, and I want her more than ever.

"I just texted Taryn the picture," Ryleigh murmurs to me.

I glance at her. "What did she say?"

"Nothing yet. It doesn't appear she's seen it."

"Do you know when she's supposed to get back?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "I think she said she'd be gone a week, but I don't know if that was exactly or approximately or what."

I nod.

"I guess all we can do is hope she comes to her senses," I say.

"There might be something else going on," Ryleigh points out. "Something we don't know about, you know?"

Like a child back in L.A.

One she never talks about.

And it's not my place to spill those beans.

There has to be a reason she keeps her son a secret, and until I find out what it is, I have to keep my mouth shut.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:32 am

Taryn

The picture of Callum getting his dick sucked seems to mock me.

I stare at it on the flight to Albuquerque, trying to wrap my head around how I'm going to handle this.

He always threatens to cheat, especially when I'm going to be gone for a week, but I didn't think he actually went through with it.

And while I don't give a shit what he does—the more he gets it elsewhere the less he'll demand it from me—I do worry about diseases.

And of course, the money he gives me for Toby's treatment.

If he falls for someone else and dumps me, I don't know if I can get the money together quickly enough to keep Toby in the program.

When I found out I was pregnant, my boyfriend Trevor wasn't happy. His parents told me they wouldn't give me a dime until after the baby was born and we got a DNA test to confirm paternity.

Then Trevor was killed, and they were wracked with grief. I didn't have the heart to ask for anything from them, and they never reached out again. I've thought about calling them over the years, but my mother is against it, and since I technically don't have custody of my son, it's not my decision.

The plan is to change that, but I need money first.

A house or apartment to show that I'm settled.

Some kind of steady income.

Stability .

My mother won't agree to relinquish custody otherwise, so even though I can prove that I've been sending money for most of his life, getting custody is going to be tricky.

It's not that my mother is trying to be difficult.

I know she only wants what's best for him, but I'm his mother.

He's my responsibility and I'm determined to step up to the plate.

Which is one of the things that makes it difficult for me to know what to do.

Even if he cheats, I can't leave Callum.

Not yet.

My trip to L.A. went better than expected, and I've got jobs coming up, both in New York in the next few weeks.

Callum won't be happy about me leaving again, but I may be able to use his infidelity as bargaining power.

Fear churns through my gut, making me queasy, and I breathe through my nose as the

plane touches down.

It's already been a long day and Karnal Death has a show tonight, which I'll be expected to attend.

I close my phone and stick it in my purse as I make my way through the airport.

I wrangle my suitcase and get in a cab to take me straight to the arena. I'm dreading a confrontation with Callum, but I have to find a way to navigate a balance between having him continue to pay for Toby's treatment and me winding up with some kind of venereal disease. Or worse.

Callum is waiting for me the moment I get backstage and immediately wraps his arms around me.

"I missed you, baby doll."

Yeah, right.

I push away, shaking my head. "You missed me so much you cheated on me," I say dryly.

He sighs. "Look, you know how I get. I have needs ."

"That's not an excuse."

"If you didn't leave me for a week at a time, I wouldn't need to look elsewhere for some relief." He looks down at me with what might actually be considered contrition. "And anyway—a little head isn't cheating. I didn't even kiss her. Literally, she just sucked my dick. No intimacy, no diseases."

That, at least, is a relief.

And Ryleigh did say once they were interrupted, Callum stalked off in a huff.

“Come on—don’t be mad.” He leans in to kiss me, but I turn my face.

“Don’t, okay?” I keep my voice low since we’re not alone. “You know how I feel about you sleeping with other people and bringing shit back to me.”

“And I just told you I didn’t. You can’t get a disease from a blowjob.”

Actually, you can, but the edge in his voice is back, and I know to tread carefully—it doesn’t take much for Callum to get mad. Once he goes over that edge, it could take days to talk him down, so I don’t want to risk it.

“Are you going to do that every time I go out of town?” I ask finally.

“Are you going to keep going out of town every month?” He meets my gaze with a fixed stare.

“I have to,” I whisper.

“Then I guess you have your answer. But don’t sweat it, baby doll—no diseases from head.

So think before you start a fight and piss me off right before I play.

” With that, he tugs a lock of my hair hard enough to make me flinch, and then turns and heads in the opposite direction, calling to his guitar tech.

Asshole .

Tears of frustration well up in my eyes.

I don't care if he cheats, but I can't risk having him dump me for someone else. Not yet. Everything is so much more complicated than I anticipated.

On top of that, I don't have anyone I can talk to.

Ryleigh has extended more than one olive branch, but I'm too embarrassed to tell her the truth of my situation.

I know I can depend on Mick, but I have to be careful with him because I think he has a crush on me.

And the truth is, I might have a little crush on him too.

But I can't do anything about it, so it's better to keep my distance.

Five-and-a-half months until I'm free.

* * *

Crimson Edge just finished their set when I see a bunch of missed calls and texts from Diane. Now that it's quieter, I take a moment to call her back.

"Hi!" She sounds breathless. "I have great news."

"Tell me."

"You got everything you auditioned for!"

"Oh." I'm startled. It's been a while since I've had work, and I haven't had multiple

jobs at once in over a year.

“So you’ll need to go back to L.A. in two weeks for the first two, and then you’ll need to be in New York the week after that for the Rock Vibe catalog shoot.”

Crap .

Unease washes over me.

Callum is not going to be happy.

At all.

We’re going to argue, and I don’t know how to manage him when he’s mad. It was never a big deal before because I didn’t care if he dumped me. That was part of the appeal—we would fight like crazy and then the makeup sex was incredible.

Except he doesn’t put the effort in anymore, so the sex has become mediocre while his bad moods escalate to levels that sometimes scare me.

He’s never hit me, but he definitely gets rougher than I’m comfortable with.

His favorite thing is to grab me by both arms and shake me, like I’m some kind of child who’s misbehaving.

It irritates the fuck out of me but no matter how many times I tell him I don’t like it, he continues to do it.

I put up with it for Toby.

I have no other choice.

I've got some money saved but not enough to fly back and forth to L.A. once a month and hire a lawyer and find us a place to live. I'll probably have to move in with my mom for six months to save up even more, but first we need Toby to get through the treatment plan.

"Why don't you sound happy?" Diane demands.

"You know how it is," I murmur. "Callum will be upset and?—"

"What will Callum be upset about?" His deep voice in my ear makes me jump and my hand flies to my heart.

"Jesus, you scared me." I glare at him. "Give me a minute. Anyway, Diane, can you send me the details please so I can figure out my schedule with Toby?"

"Of course." Diane pauses. "If you turn this stuff down, you know they'll never call you again?"

"I know," I say. "Just send me the details. Thank you."

I disconnect and look up at Callum.

"What will I be upset about?" he repeats, his dark eyes narrowing slightly.

"I'll have to go away twice in the next month."

"That's not our arrangement."

"I know, but I have to work."

"Not right now, you don't. I'm taking care of you and in return, I need you here with

me.”

“You put a roof over my head and food,” I say. “But I don’t have spending money or money to send Toby for extras he needs. Or to get my nails done. Or anything else.”

“If you want more money, you need to give more in return.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I demand. “You offered to help me with Toby!” He’s hinted at me doing things I don’t want to do, and if that’s what he’s referring to, the answer is still no.

Tears fill my eyes, and he lets out a put-upon sigh.

“Jesus, don’t start crying again.” He shakes his head. “Look, you’re my girl, so of course I’m going to help out with your sick kid. But I’m not made of money.”

“Which is why I need to work too,” I respond, swiping at my eyes.

“You can’t have it both ways, baby doll.” He shrugs his shoulders. “You want me, or you want to work?”

I open my mouth but close it again.

I don’t want him.

I need him.

It’s not the same thing.

And he fucking knows it.

He's messing with me because he can, and I hate him a little bit more every time he does something like this.

"Why are you always so mean?" I ask softly. "Don't you care about me at all?"

He frowns, as if genuinely confused. "You think I'd be paying for your kid's cancer treatment if I didn't care about you?"

"Then act like it," I whisper.

"Don't tell me how to act," he says, his face hardening slightly.

"I just want us to get along," I say in my most cajoling voice.

He laughs. "Get along? What the fuck does that even mean? I have friends, baby doll. That's not why you're here. There's only one reason I need you around." He pauses. "Okay, two."

"Two?" I already know the first is sex, but I'm genuinely curious about the second.

"Arm candy." He shrugs. "I like showing you off. Other men want what's mine, and you fit the bill."

I stare up at him, wondering—not for the first time—how I ever found him attractive.

He's tall and dark, handsome in a scruffy, tattooed bad-boy way.

But he's hideous on the inside.

Dating him was fun at first.

Now I'm stuck in a nightmare.

"I have to work," I reiterate. "If you decide you get tired of me, I won't be able to eat. So it's not optional."

"Our agreement was one week a month, so you can see the kid." His face is a mask of nothingness.

"Working wasn't part of the deal, so you're going to have to choose.

Work or see the kid. You leave for more than a week, I may need more than head to keep me satisfied while you're gone.

And you know there's a line out the door after every show. "

"Is that supposed to make me feel special?"

"I don't care if you feel special or not. Those are my terms. You're free to leave any time you like."

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Mick

“I don’t care if you feel special or not. Those are my terms. You’re free to leave any time you like.”

I’m just coming around the corner to go find a bathroom when I hear Callum and Taryn arguing.

A moment later, he brushes past me, doing something on his phone.

What a dick.

I slowly peek around the corner and spot Taryn.

She’s leaning against the wall, eyes closed, so much distress on her face I can’t help but approach her.

“Hey.”

Her eyes pop open but she doesn’t move. It’s like she’s rooted in place, big blue eyes brimming with tears.

“You okay?” I ask softly.

“Yeah.” She swallows.

We both know that’s a lie.

“You don’t look okay.”

“How do I look?” she asks.

“Sad. Resigned. Worn out.”

“I guess those are all fair descriptions.”

“What’s going on, Taryn? This isn’t like you.”

“You’re sweet, Mick, but I’m not the same girl I was four years ago.”

“Of course not. I’m not exactly the same either, but I think we’re still the same people at our core. At least, I am.”

“You have no idea what’s been going on in my life.”

“So tell me.”

She doesn’t respond as she looks away.

“Your secrets are safe with me,” I say quietly. “I promise.”

A tiny smile plays on her mouth. “Thank you. I wish we could hang out more, but you know he’ll freak if he sees us talking for more than a minute.”

“He’ll be on stage soon, and then he won’t have time to think about where you are or who you’re talking to. I’ll wait for you out back, near the loading docks. Like we talked about—we’ll have about ninety minutes.”

She seems to consider it.

“Come on... we don’t have to talk about anything serious if it upsets you. We can just hang out and relax. We never had trouble talking before.”

“That’s true.” She seems to be thinking about what to say next but then nods. “Okay. I’d like that.”

“Great. I’ll see you in a few.”

“Mick?” She calls to me as I turn to go, and I glance back at her.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t, uh, don’t tell anyone, okay? The less people that know we’re friends, the less chance there is of Callum finding out. He’s jealous as hell, and he’s always watching. It will just make things harder on me.”

I have a thousand questions about why she’d put up with that, but I keep them to myself. She’ll open up when she’s ready. At least, I hope so.

“My lips are sealed,” I say.

Then I continue down the hall without looking back.

I’m on dangerous ground with this situation.

I’ve never been the kind of guy who likes sneaking around or going after another guy’s girl—but something about Callum and Taryn’s relationship is off. Not just because he doesn’t treat her well but also because she seems almost desperate. Scared .

She’s afraid of something, and I’m pretty sure it’s him.

A long time ago, he and I nearly came to blows in a bar.

I don't remember who the girl was, but I saw her standing at the bar by herself looking a little forlorn, so I started talking to her.

Turned out she was his girlfriend, and Callum nearly lost his mind.

I'm not afraid of the guy, but he's bigger than I am, and a lot meaner.

Luckily, things didn't escalate too badly—thanks to his girlfriend sticking up for me—but I never forgot the wild look in his eyes.

Like someone who gets off on hurting people.

With that in mind, there's no universe where I don't step in when someone I care about—especially if that someone is Taryn—is in trouble.

I don't know if there's anything I can do, but I'm sure as shit going to find out.

Even though I'm pretty sure it won't end well.

Not for me, and probably not for my band either.

But I don't care.

Some things are more important than others—and this is one of them.

* * *

I light a cigarette and hang out back near the bus.

Our crew is busy loading out, but most of Karnal Death's crew is handling their show, which just started.

I don't know why I'm getting involved in Taryn's life, but since I can't seem to help myself, I take a deep drag from the cigarette and blow rings as I exhale.

"It's the twenty-first century," Taryn says as she walks over to me, her legs a mile long in a skimpy little dress that leaves little to the imagination. "Hasn't anyone told you how bad smoking is?"

I chuckle, trying not to stare at her legs. Or her tits. "I know, but I don't have a lot of vices, so this feels like an innocent enough habit."

"It's not innocent at all. And it's horrible for your lungs," she says, plucking the cigarette from my fingers. But instead of throwing it away, the way I thought she would, she puts it between her lips and inhales deeply.

"I thought it wasn't good for your lungs," I point out when she's done.

She just shrugs. "Do as I say, not as I do."

"I'll remember that."

"I smoked when I first started modeling because it kept me from eating. I stopped because it is incredibly bad for us, but a drag now and then won't kill me." She proffers the butt, and I take it back.

"I used to smoke a pack a day, now it's down to about two cigarettes a day. Usually right after a show. Sometimes on my days off I don't smoke at all."

"I'd probably start again but Callum can't stand it, so I can't."

“Does he control everything you do?” I ask.

“Almost.”

“And you’re...happy?”

She snorts. “Not hardly—and don’t ask why I stay.”

“Why not?”

“Because the answer is...humiliating.”

“It can’t be that bad.”

“You promised we didn’t have to talk about anything serious,” she murmurs.

I promised I wouldn’t tell anyone her secrets, but I don’t point that out. “I did. So, tell me something good in your life.”

She hesitates for what feels like a long time before she smiles. “Well, I have some modeling work coming up. Finally. And guess what? I’m doing another shoot for Rock Vibe.”

“That’s cool.” I grin. “I didn’t realize they were still in business.”

“They’re headquartered in New York City now, and I’ll be out there in a few weeks. You should have your agent reach out and see if they’re interested in you. It would be fun to work together again.”

I absently run a hand through my hair, which is shorter now, hanging just over my ears in the back and a little longer on top. “I’m not the stereotypical rocker anymore.

My hair's too short and, well, you know..."

"I don't think there's any such thing as a stereotypical rocker these days. Lots of rock stars have shorter hair now. Look at Adam Levine, Rob Thomas...even Chad Kroger."

She has a point.

"The thing is, they'd have to work around the band's schedule and also..." I hesitate, because there are parts of my life that are embarrassing too.

"Also?" she prompts, cocking her head.

"I can't afford to fly to New York on my own dime."

"Oh, they're paying all my expenses. I'm sure they'd pay yours too."

"I don't even have a headshot anymore. That was really just a one-and-done deal. I'm not a model."

"You could be." She smiles. "You're gorgeous, Mick. You know that."

I shrug. "I'm okay. Not like you, though."

"Stop. I'm nothing special."

"I think you are."

Her cheeks turn a faint pink as she dips her head. "Thank you."

"I can't be the first guy to tell you that," I say.

She takes the cigarette from me and puts it between her lips, looking up at the sky as she inhales. “The first in...a long time.”

“Callum doesn’t tell you you’re beautiful?”

She actually laughs, though it doesn’t sound like she thinks it’s funny. “He barely talks to me, much less gives me compliments.”

Don’t ask.

Don’t ask.

Don’t ask.

“But why—” My mouth seems to have a mind of its own.

“Shh.” She puts a gentle finger on my lips. “Let’s just share a cigarette. Then I have to go back inside and stand on the side of the stage where he can see me. That’s what he expects.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I sputter. “It’s loud and there’s nowhere to sit...why do you have to stand there?”

“Because he wants me too.”

“That sounds selfish as fuck.”

“Ryleigh stands on the side of the stage for most of your shows.”

“Because she wants to, not because Angus demands it.”

“It’s fine. I’m used to it.” She pauses. “Didn’t your album hit gold?”

I nod.

“So how come you can’t afford to fly to New York?”

“Our deal with the record label was they absorbed all the start-up costs for both the album and the tour, and they would take back their money first, before we get any. And while those debts are just about paid, we haven’t sold enough to start making money, so we’re still living on per diems.”

“Ouch.”

“We’re either on the verge or hit platinum this month—the numbers aren’t reported yet—and when that happens, the money situation will change. In the meantime, it’s a little tight.”

“I hear that. Callum doesn’t like when I leave, so I can’t go to many castings. If I don’t go to castings, I don’t get work. Without work, I’m broke too. Which is part of the reason I’m in the situation I’m in.”

“That’s the reason you’re with Callum.”

Her face changes—hard and tight and a little bit angry—before she takes a final drag of the cigarette and then puts it out against the side of the building.

“We all do what we have to do to survive,” she says after a moment. “Don’t judge me, Mick.”

“Judge you?” I shake my head. “Is that what you think? That I’ll judge you?”

“Won’t you? I’m judging myself most days, so it stands to reason you would too.”

“That’s not who I am.” I reach out and gently lift her chin, forcing her to look at me. “You should know me better than that, and if you don’t, I’m telling you now. No judgment. I just want to be your friend. You seem to need one.”

She doesn’t respond, her eyes searching my face, as if she’s going to find the answer to something mystical there.

After a moment, she slowly backs away. “I have to go,” she whispers.

Then she hurries back inside, leaving me with more questions than I had before we talked.

And I have no idea if I just blew any chance of being her friend, much less anything else.

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Taryn

The next few weeks go by quickly. Between shows almost every night and a quick trip to L.A.

for the two photo shoots, I'm burning the candle at both ends trying to stay in shape, make Callum happy, and be as available as possible to Toby.

He calls me multiple times a day with questions about schoolwork, to complain when he doesn't feel good, or when he says the doctors are mean to him.

I'm exhausted, stressed, and overwhelmed, trying to keep my head above water.

I have just under five months left with Callum, but sometimes I wonder if I'm going to make it.

He's been more demanding than ever, wanting sex multiple times a day, making me wear the most revealing outfits imaginable to his shows, and keeping me up half the night because he's drunk or high.

All I can think about as I walk through the airport is that I'll be able to nap on the flight to New York and actually get a good night's sleep while I'm there. It's only three days and two nights, but that's okay. Even one full night of sleep is a welcome reprieve at this point.

I get on the plane and am about to put my carry-on in the overhead bin when a familiar voice says, "Here, I got it."

I turn to Mick in shock, absently watching as he lifts my bag for me.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

He grins. “Surprise. I’m doing the shoot with you.”

“When did that happen?”

“Well, I told our management company that I need some cash and asked if they would be willing to play agent since I don’t have one anymore.

Sasha made some calls and said they were thrilled I was interested in coming back.

They were happy to work with our tour dates, and so, here I am.

” He sinks into the seat next to mine and I stare at him for a second before I realize I’m holding up the line.

I quickly sit down and put on my seatbelt. “That’s amazing,” I say.

He pauses. “You’re not mad, are you? You’ve been avoiding me, and I was worried maybe I overstepped the last time we talked.”

I shake my head. “I’m not mad. I’m just concerned about Callum seeing us together. You know how possessive he is. And when he gets jealous, he gets physical. I’m trying to spare us both a lot of unnecessary aggravation.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Well, it’s not just you I’m worried about!”

The flight attendant chooses that moment to come by with champagne and I take a sip, grateful for the interruption.

I'm trying so hard to be strong, to stay in control of my emotions, but Mick makes me want to throw caution to the wind.

Throw myself in his arms. Let him comfort me, remind me I'm going to survive the next four-and-a-half months.

Like he can somehow save me from the chaos of my life.

Except no one can.

Especially not a hazel-eyed bass player with abs for days.

I have distinct memories of what Mick looks like without a shirt—without anything—and since he often takes his shirt off during shows, I know his six-pack has turned into a twelve-pack.

The silence stretches out for a while, and when I glance at him in my peripheral vision, he's staring out the window.

Fuck.

I don't know if I've hurt his feelings or something else, but I don't want him to be upset with me.

We're going to spend the next two days working together, and I'm looking forward to it.

Not just because of the money involved but also because it's Mick.

Other than my mother and son, he's one of the only people who talks to me without wanting something from me.

Mick is my only friend right now, and I keep pushing him away.

I'm trying to protect myself, but I'm also trying to protect him—I'd never forgive myself if Callum kicked Crimson Edge off the tour in a jealous rage.

Impulsively, I reach over and put my hand on his forearm.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

He covers my hand with one of his. "For what?"

"For being a bitch. I don't mean to take my frustrations out on you."

"I know. It's okay."

"It's not. I just... I'm a mess. And I don't have anyone else to talk to. My mother works all day, and then takes care of Toby, Toby's just a kid, and Callum won't let me get close to anyone else. I'm so damn alone, Mick."

"You're not," he says softly. "I'm here. In whatever capacity you need, you can count on me."

His words bring tears to my eyes, and I squeeze them shut as the plane takes off.

"Why are you so nice?" I finally whisper.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

“We slept together a few times four years ago,” I say. “It’s a fond memory, but it was three stolen days in time. We barely know each other.”

“Not true,” he says. “I know that you were born on Halloween and it’s your favorite holiday.

I know you got pregnant at fifteen by your high school boyfriend and had a baby boy named Toby at sixteen.

I know your boyfriend died in a car accident and his family wanted nothing to do with you or the baby. ”

I swallow.

I shared more than I remembered.

“I know your dad died your freshman year of college and you promised him you’d get your degree.”

“What’s my favorite color?” I ask dryly.

He chuckles. “Turquoise.”

I shake my head in surprise, squinting slightly. “I don’t remember telling you that.”

“You didn’t, but you wear a ton of turquoise, both clothing and jewelry, so it was an educated guess. Some guys pay attention.”

Of course he pays attention.

That’s the kind of guy he is.

“What else do you know?” I ask quietly, my fingers slowly curling with his, even though I know I shouldn’t.

“I know you majored in education but didn’t like it.”

I smile. “I switched majors my junior year and wound up getting my degree in business. I figured it might come in handy if modeling didn’t work out.”

“Sounds about right.” He gently strokes his thumb along the back of my hand, the soft caress making goose bumps break out on my skin.

He’s as intoxicating now as he was four years ago.

“What else?” I can’t look away, and his hazel eyes burn gold.

“Oh, I know a lot of things about you.” His gaze makes me feel like he can see right into my soul. “But those are probably things you don’t want me to say out loud. Not here anyway.”

I flush as heat floods my body.

Because I know exactly what he’s thinking about.

I think about it a lot.

What we did four years ago.

How good he made me feel.

The way he combined passion with tenderness—something no one else has ever managed to do.

Certainly not Callum. When he's inside me, I close my eyes and pretend it's Mick.

Sometimes that's the only way I can get through it.

Only five more payments.

But until that's done, it wouldn't be fair to drag Mick into this.

"We can't... I mean, we shouldn't...please don't..." I stumble over my words because my brain and my body are at war.

"Shh. It's okay." He reaches over and brushes his knuckles across my cheek. "I'm not trying to make you uncomfortable."

"I'm not uncomfortable," I whisper. "I'm sad."

"Why sad?"

"Because I wish I was in a place in my life where I could let you say all those things I know you wanted to say just now."

"It's all right. Our timing is off, I guess."

Why is he so nice?

This would be much easier if he was a jerk too. Like Callum. Because it's easy not to care about Callum.

Although...there is a question that's been lurking in the back of my mind for a long time.

And it seems like this is as good a time as any to find out the answer.

“Can I ask you a question?” I ask quietly.

“Anything.” He cocks his head slightly.

“How come you never called?”

Mick

Well, isn't that a question for the ages?

Why didn't twenty-two-year-old me call the most beautiful girl I'd ever been with?

There are so many answers to that question, none of them satisfying. Not even to me. I'm sure she'll be even less impressed when I tell her.

"That's a tough one," I say after a moment.

"How hard can it be?" she asks. "You must have had a reason for not calling."

"I had more than one, but it's hard because it's not black and white.

There were several different things in play back then, but I guess the most important one was that I was a broke-ass musician working part-time in my dad's auto repair shop.

I had absolutely nothing to offer you, and let's face it—you were way out of my league.

Not only were you this up-and-coming model, you were in college.

Beauty and brains. I couldn't picture a world where we could be together. "

She stares at me, her pretty blue eyes filled with confusion. "You thought... I was out

of your league? Seriously? I didn't care how much money you had."

"I know. But like I said, there were a lot of pieces to the puzzle of why I didn't call.

We both had dreams that were going to take us far away from Minneapolis.

You were already planning to move home to L.A.

as soon as you graduated, and my dream was to go on tour.

We didn't have a future, so what was the point? "

"I see."

Dammit. Somehow, I've screwed this up, but I don't know what I'm supposed to say.
Was there a better answer than the truth?

She looks disappointed in me, which sucks.

"You didn't call me either," I say after a moment.

We exchanged numbers, so it's not like she didn't have a way to get in touch with me.

"There's this unspoken rule," she says thoughtfully, "where the girl shouldn't be the one to reach out.

Especially after she's already put out. I know it's old-fashioned, but the fact is, lots of guys are only interested in sex.

So while everything you said is true, about us going our separate ways and such, deep

down I held out hope that you'd call.

And when you didn't, I convinced myself it was because it was no big deal.

Nothing more than a few days of good sex and companionship. ”

That's an interesting way to put it.

“Was it...more than good sex and companionship?” I counter curiously. It was for me, but I want to hear her thoughts.

“Wasn't it?” She meets my gaze directly. “We knew each other for three days and I told you about my kid. I've known Ryleigh for six years, and she doesn't know.”

Our fingers are still laced together, and I wish I had something more meaningful to say about the past. The time we spent together was incredibly meaningful, but twenty-two-year-old me wasn't mature enough to understand it until a couple of years passed.

Actually, it wasn't until I saw her again last year that I realized how much I wish things had been different.

“I'm sorry I didn't call.” I squeeze her hand. “I wanted to, but I convinced myself there was no point.”

“I guess subconsciously I felt the same way. It wouldn't have been the first time I called a guy... I just, I don't know. I guess I wanted more from you. And that wasn't fair. For whatever reason, I held you to a higher standard. I guess twenty-year-old me wasn't all that mature either.”

“I think we get a pass for our younger selves,” I say gently.

“My younger self was dumb as fuck,” she murmurs. “If I could go back and change things, I would.”

“I wouldn’t,” I say after a moment. “Because those are the things that got me where I am today. On this plane, flying first class, heading to New York to do my second photo shoot ever. On a world tour. About to have a platinum album. If I went back and changed a bunch of shit—I might not be here, in this exact spot.”

With you.

I don’t vocalize that last part, but I know she understands what I’m trying to say.

Our eyes lock, and the intensity that sizzles between us is almost palpable.

Except she belongs to someone else.

And as much as I want her, she has to end things with Callum first.

He’s not a good guy, but I’m not going to be anyone’s side piece.

Slowly, I pull my hand away but change the subject so it doesn’t feel like rejection. Even though it kind of is. Short-term rejection, if nothing else.

I down my champagne and motion to the flight attendant to bring me another. “So what’s going on with your career? Have you been working much?”

She sighs. “Not really. Callum is so fucking needy. He hates when I leave him for any amount of time. He’s always grumpy when I go see Toby. And now he has a new thing—apparently, blowjobs don’t count as cheating.”

I open my mouth but snap it back shut.

Not my circus, not my monkey.

If we're going to be friends, I have to keep my opinions to myself. Or at least soften them a little.

"Is that okay with you?"

"You know what? I don't want to talk about Callum." She shakes her head. "I'm sorry if that's rude, but I'm not ready to get into the nuances of our relationship."

That's an interesting answer.

"Okay," I reply easily. "You said you had another job lined up too? Didn't you just get back from L.A.?"

"Yeah, it was for a print ad for a new line of sneakers called Sole Target. They're actually pretty comfortable. They gave me four pairs, which was nice. I even got a pair for Toby, though he'll probably outgrow them in six months."

"Speaking of Toby. He's what? Eight? Nine now?"

"He just turned nine."

"Tell me about him. Last time we were together he was still a little kid. He must be all grown up now." It feels like Toby is a safe topic for us because her face lights up and she smiles fondly.

"He loves hockey and collects Pokémon cards. We also play that silly Pokémon Go game, which is fun because it's something we can do any time, anywhere we are, even when we're not together. We trade and stuff, which he thinks is great."

“I’d play with him if he wants,” I suggest. “I used to play it but haven’t in a couple of years because it feels like I’m a little old for that.”

She grins. “I don’t even understand what I’m doing most of the time, but he loves the fact that I play with him, so it’s all good.”

“You still haven’t gotten custody? Weren’t you talking about that once you graduated from college?”

Her face tightens and she looks down. “My mother is being...cautious, for lack of a better word. It’s not that she doesn’t want to give me custody, but she wants to make sure I’m in a place where I can take care of him properly.

“What does that mean?”

“Well, for example, she has legal custody so she can cover him on her health insurance plan. I don’t even have insurance for myself right now, much less for him.

I don’t have a place to live—other than with my mom—and I don’t have a steady income.

The truth is, I don’t know how I’d take care of him without her.

And I hate myself a little for being in this situation. ”

I have so many questions, but the look on her face—that’s making her look sad and embarrassed—tells me this isn’t the best time to ask.

“But it sounds like you’re involved in his life,” I say. “I think that’s what he’s going to remember. He doesn’t know anything about who’s paying for his health insurance. He just knows Mom is playing Pokémon Go with him and whatever else you do.

Does he play any sports? Baseball or whatever?”

There’s another weird look on her face now as she shakes her head.

“No, he’s...been dealing with some medical stuff.”

“I hope he’s okay?”

“I hope so too.” She gasps as the plane hits some turbulence and drops what feels like twenty feet. Her hand shoots out and grasps mine again, squeezing tightly.

“Easy,” I say gently, covering her hand with my other one. “It’s okay. Just a little turbulence.”

“I hate flying,” she admits, not releasing the death grip on my fingers.

“Ladies and gentlemen.” The captain’s voice fills the cabin. “We’re going through a little bit of rough air right now, so I’ve turned on the fasten seat belts sign and I’m going to delay cabin service until we get through. I think it should only be about ten minutes or so...”

Ten seconds or ten minutes—I’ll take any amount of time if it gives me a legitimate excuse to hold her hand.

I’m a dumbass but I don’t care.

This is yet another stolen moment in time for us and I’m here for it.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:32 am

Taryn

Photo shoots for catalogues can be a slog.

Wardrobe changes, hair and makeup touchups, and then a thousand shots in each outfit.

Today we started with lingerie.

I don't mind wearing skimpy outfits, but it's freezing in here and I'm not getting much coverage from the leather bra and thong panty set or the miniscule black corseted teddy.

There were also thigh-high fishnet stockings with skull clips on the garters, a hot-pink bikini that barely covered my nipples, and heels so high I almost toppled over.

If I wasn't cold, it wouldn't be a big deal because the pay is good and everyone is nice.

Professional, communicative, and respectful of physical boundaries.

No one else is in the room while we're shooting other than the photographer—who happens to be a woman—and the stylist. So I'm not uncomfortable or worried about my safety.

I'm just fucking freezing.

“You’re covered in goose bumps,” the photographer, Linda, says after about three hours. “So much so I can see it on the shots. Let’s take a break and see if we can raise the temperature in here.”

“That would be great,” I say gratefully, pulling on the robe the stylist hands me.

“We’re almost done with this part,” Linda says. “After lunch, we’re going into jeans, leather jackets, and a few dresses. They’re still skimpy but not like this stuff.”

“No worries. It’s just so cold in here.”

“Agreed.” Linda types something on her phone. “I just reached out to Hettie.”

Hettie owns the clothing line and has been in and out all morning, mostly staying out of our way but keeping an eye on things.

“Fuck, why didn’t you say anything?” Hettie comes in with a horrified look on her face. “I’m so sorry, Taryn! I’m turning up the thermostat now. Usually it’s hot as balls when we’re shooting because of the lights and stuff. That’s probably why we turned down the temp, but I’ll turn it up now.”

“Thank you.”

“You hungry or anything?”

I shake my head. “I don’t want to eat until we’re done for the day.”

“We have two more outfits with you alone, and then we’re going to pair you with Mick, if that’s okay? You guys are friends, right?”

I nod. “Yes. We actually met the last time we worked together.”

“I remember.” Hettie grins. “And honestly, I would have used him again, but he made it seem like he wasn’t really interested in modeling.”

“I don’t think he is, in general, but who can say no to a paycheck for one day of work?”

She laughs. “Agreed.”

We finish up the lingerie photos—and it does warm up a little—and then I head back to the dressing room to change into jeans, a halter top, and a leather jacket. And another pair of ridiculously high heels.

“Hey, Hettie—these heels are ridiculous,” I say. “Do you sell them in the store or on the website?”

She shakes her head. “No, but we thought bare feet would look weird in the catalog.”

“For sure, but why heels this high? I’m five nine—these are at least five inches. I think a regular three-inch stiletto would still project the same vibe without me feeling like I’m going to fall over every time I take a step.”

She looks down at my feet and studies them for a few seconds.

“I honestly didn’t give it any thought,” she admits. “It’s just an embellishment, from the perspective of our sales, so it didn’t occur to me you’d be so uncomfortable.”

“And that says something,” I add. “Because I wear heels pretty much every day of my life. For me to be uncomfortable means they’re just too high.”

“You’re right. I don’t know what else we have for you, though.”

“Let me look in the stock room,” the stylist says. “You’re a size eight, right?”

I nod.

“I’ll be right back.”

I sink into a chair and pick up my phone.

There are a handful of texts from Callum.

That’s never good.

CALLUM: Hope you’re having fun without me—because I’m having fun without you.

And there’s a picture attached of a blonde on her knees in front of him, sucking him off.

Gross.

I fight back the torrent of emotions ripping through me.

I have to focus on work.

I don’t care who he fools around with as long as he keeps paying for Toby’s treatment.

But it makes me feel so fucking cheap. Used.

Like some kind of prostitute.

Shame washes over me, and tears prick my eyelids.

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing away the tears.

“Hey...you okay?” The soft voice matches the gentle touch on my shoulder, and I jump, quickly turning my phone over.

“Hi.” I manage a wobbly smile, but Mick doesn’t seem convinced.

“Are you crying?” he asks, worry etched into the features of his handsome face.

“No. Just an argument with Callum. He’s mad that I’m gone.”

“You’re working,” he says needlessly.

“He doesn’t care about that.”

I can see his jaw working, like he really wants to lay into Callum.

How can I blame him? I want to rip Callum a new one too.

Daily .

“Okay, you two, let’s do this.” Linda comes back into the room, the stylist trailing behind her.

“Look what I found!” she calls out happily. “They’re a seven-and-a-half, but they’re open toe, so you might be able to get into these.” She proffers a pair of black, peep-toe pumps with a much more reasonable heel.

“Thanks,” I say, sliding my feet into them. They’re a little snug, but I can manage.

It's not like I'm doing much walking. We're just going to stand and pose.

I stand up and take off the robe, revealing the skimpy red leather dress that laces up both sides and barely covers my bottom.

It's a rock and roll themed clothing line, so everything is a little over the top but Callum's text left me feeling vulnerable, and I'm suddenly anxious for the shoot to be over.

I'm tired, stressed, worried about Toby, and lonelier than I've ever been in my life.

"Smile, beautiful," Mick murmurs in my ear. "Just a few more hours and then you can be as emotional as you need to be."

"Thanks." I give him an appreciative smile and then dig deep, putting on my most professional face. I turn toward the camera, angle my head, and toss my hair.

"Oh, that's pretty," Linda calls out. "Mick, put a hand on her hip. I want you to gaze down at her like she's the woman of your dreams."

"Okay." He does as she asks, and Linda takes a bunch of pictures.

She positions him against a wall, where he bends one knee and plants that foot against the wall. He's wearing black jeans with faux paint splatters on them, no shirt, and a black denim jacket with studs on the shoulders. He looks dark and edgy—the opposite of who he really is—but it's sexy as hell.

"Taryn, put your hand on your hip and look away..."

The shoot goes on for an hour or so, but working with Mick is seamless. Easy. Like we've been doing this forever.

I forget about Callum and the blonde, my worries about Toby's health, and everything else as we fall into an easy pattern, both of us taking direction from Linda effortlessly.

"You guys are so hot together," Hettie murmurs when we finally break.

I go into the dressing room to change into a denim miniskirt that has lightning bolts all over it.

It's paired with a corset-style top and fishnets.

This is the last outfit of the day, and I'm ready to go.

I'm hungry and still a little cold, and I'm looking forward to curling up in my hotel room and ordering room service.

"Taryn." Hettie comes into the dressing room. "I have a proposal for you."

"Sure." I glance up curiously.

"How would you feel about becoming the face of Rock Vibe?"

I cock my head. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know," she admits. "My advertising agency has been bugging me to do actual ads—not just the quarterly catalogs—but ads that we can use not just in the store, but on billboards and magazines all over the country. Social media. All of it. I've been reluctant to take that leap because it's expensive, but it might be time to level up."

And now that I've been reminded how beautiful you are, as well as your work ethic, I

think I want to do this. ”

“I...” I’m a little speechless.

This is amazing news, but it’s also stressful because Callum won’t like it if I have to be away more often.

“There’s a catch, though,” she continues. “I can’t pay you what you might make doing the same thing for other clothing lines. I’m not Michael Kors or someone like that. My clothes are geared toward a very specific clientele that isn’t mainstream. We’re doing well but we’re in a growth phase.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning, we’re making money because we’re spending money and at the moment, we’re spending it as fast as we make it. I haven’t taken a salary yet this year.”

“I see.”

“So I have a proposition for you. What would you think about a ten percent stake in the company instead of cash?”

I stare at her.

That’s definitely not the norm.

“I know it’s not ideal, but I can have my accountant send you financials, along with our expected growth. You can have your people look at them and see what you think.”

My people.

Like I have people.

I have an agent. Period. I don't need an accountant because I don't make enough money for it to be worthwhile. As far as legalities, I trust my agent to make sure any contracts I sign are good for me, and that's as far as I go. But it probably isn't smart to tell her all of that.

She misunderstands my hesitation and continues before I can reply. "I totally understand if it's not a risk you can take—you probably have bills to pay now, and not in a year's time or whatever. So my feelings won't be hurt if you say no."

"My son is sick," I blurt quietly. "He's nine. He has leukemia. No one knows I have a kid—my agent thinks it's better not to advertise that—so I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone. But he's the only reason why I'm hesitating."

"Oh, honey, I'm so sorry." She squeezes my shoulder. "And of course I won't say anything."

"So let me think about it, okay? I need to figure out some upcoming bills and what I'm going to do next. I don't have any other work lined up right now..."

"That's one thing you should think about though—once I put your face out there?

You're going to be in the spotlight. This could help you financially in a roundabout way.

I can't guarantee it, but I'm pouring everything I have into the next catalog.

The designs for this one were already done, and I need money to keep going.

But now I'm going to tell you a little secret...

I'm planning to go a little more mainstream.

I'll still have my rock-themed clothing, but I'm going to try to appeal to the club scene too.

I have big plans, Taryn—and I'd like you to be part of them. ”

Despite my reservations, I'm excited.

This could be the break I'm looking for.

“And one more thing.”

I look up curiously.

“I'm going to make a similar offer to Mick.”

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Mick

The last thing I expected from this photo shoot was to get an offer to essentially buy into a clothing line.

As far as I'm concerned, it's a slam dunk.

I don't need cash right now, and this is an investment that costs me nothing.

If I end up not making money, I didn't spend any either, so I don't lose anything, and Hettie is sweetening the pot by saying I can market the band in any advertising we do.

In fact, she's talking about using our music for a social media campaign she wants to run.

There are a ton of legalities and logistics that have to go through Sasha and Hart Records, but Hettie understands that and she's going to reach out to them next week.

If this works out, it could be a win-win for all of us.

Giving our music that kind of mainstream exposure is huge, and she even suggested a partnership with the band.

I won't pretend to understand that kind of thing from a business perspective, but if Sasha signs off on it, I'm in.

I don't know if the band will want to be part of this but for now, I'm excited about a new opportunity, something that could potentially make me a lot of money in the future.

Not to mention, I'd be working with Taryn.

That's all the incentive I need right there.

I want to talk to her about the deal, but she seems quiet and distracted. My gut tells me Callum has said or done something to upset her, but she's made it clear she doesn't want to talk about him. And I'm trying to respect her boundaries.

We leave at the same time, a car service waiting to take us back to our hotel. Taryn looks tired, and an idea occurs to me.

"Hey... would you want to hang out tonight? We could order room service and just veg. Like put on sweats, or even your PJs, and watch a movie or talk or whatever. No strings attached."

Her eyes meet mine and she seems conflicted.

"Mick, I..."

"It's obvious you have a lot on your mind," I say, "but if you don't want to talk about whatever's going on, I'd love to talk about Hettie's offer. This could be huge for both of us."

"I know." She nods. "All right. I'll come down to your room in about an hour. I want to change, take off my makeup, and call Toby. Then I'll come over. You need to order dinner right away, though." She smirks. "I'm starving."

“I’m pretty hungry too. You can look at the room service menu and text me what you want, and I’ll order it while you do what you need to do.”

“Perfect.”

We ride the rest of the way to the hotel in silence and part ways when we get off the elevator.

“Give me about forty-five minutes,” she says.

“I’ll be there.” I watch her go, making sure she gets into her room before going down the hall to mine.

I flop down on the bed and grab the room service menu, scanning it briefly. A steak with a baked potato and asparagus sounds amazing. And caramel cheesecake for dessert. A minute later, my phone dings with Taryn’s order and to my surprise, it’s the same as mine. Except no cheesecake.

Impulsively, I add a second slice to the order when I call it in, as well as a bottle of champagne. If Hettie doesn’t want to pay for it, I’ve got my per diems for yesterday and today saved up, so I can use those.

I get undressed and pull on a pair of sweats and a long-sleeved Henley. It’s March, so it’s still cold in New York, and I turn the heat up a little. It seemed like Taryn was freezing all day today, even after Hettie turned the heat up, so I want to make sure she’s comfortable here.

There’s a knock on the door twenty minutes later, and Taryn is standing there in sweats, an oversized sweatshirt, and her hair in a ponytail, but she looks as beautiful as ever.

“You’re early,” I say as I move aside so she can come in.

“Toby’s in treatment,” she murmurs, “so I can’t talk to him until later.”

Treatment?

“Uh, what kind of treatment?”

She sinks down on the edge of the bed and rubs her temples. “Toby has leukemia.”

That news comes out of nowhere, and it takes me a second to wrap my head around it.

“Wait—what?” I hurry over and sit next to her. “Oh, my God. Is he going to be okay?”

“I don’t know,” she whispers. “He had treatment a few years ago and was in remission, but it came back. Now he’s in an experimental program. It’s a clinical trial.”

“How’s it going?”

She shrugs. “They don’t give us real-time updates. It’s a complicated process of testing, treatment, a break, and then they start again. It’s been seven months. He has five to go.”

“And then what?”

“Then... we find out if it’s working.”

“What if it isn’t?”

She shakes her head, shuddering a little. “I can’t... I can’t even go there.”

“Oh, honey.” I reach out and wrap my arms around her. “I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you tell me?”

She falls against my chest, and I hear her soft sobs. She tries to say something, but it’s muffled by her tears, and I gently stroke her hair.

“Shh, it’s okay. We don’t have to talk about it.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, rubbing her eyes. “I try to be strong, for him and for myself, but it’s so hard. I’m scared. He could die... and there isn’t anything I can do about it.”

“But you are doing something—you’re getting him the help he needs.”

“It’s an experimental treatment. We have no idea if it’s going to work. But the traditional treatment failed so I was desperate.”

“Is he tolerating it okay?”

“He has good days and bad days.”

“He must have been diagnosed right after we met,” I say thoughtfully.

She nods. “About a year later.”

“What’s the prognosis?”

“In general, it’s good in kids. There’s a ninety-percent cure rate for the type he has. Unfortunately, he went into remission but then it came back. So now we’re trying

this. If this doesn't work—" Her voice breaks and tears leak from her eyes.

"Shh." I hold her tighter. "If it doesn't work, I can talk to Angus—his family has ties to the Mayo Clinic.

There may be some new cancer treatment we can get him into.

I'm sure he knows someone somewhere." The band's illustrious drummer is very well off, though we didn't find that out until recently.

Luckily, he's as generous as he is wealthy.

"Th-thank you." Her voice is hoarse, and she collapses against my chest like no one's held her for a long time. And not for the first time, I wish I knew what the hell she's doing with Callum. He's the one who should be comforting her, but I know instinctively that he doesn't.

Because if he did, she wouldn't be here in my arms.

And we sit like that for a while, until her sobs turn to sniffles and my shirt is soaked.

But I don't mind. I stroke her hair and back, whispering those soft shushing noises you use with a child, and though I'm not trying to treat her like one, it seems like the most appropriate response to something like this.

When the knock on the door alerts us that dinner has arrived, she hurriedly gets up, wiping her face and disappearing into the bathroom.

I allow the room service waiter to set up the rolling cart where I want it, open the champagne, and then quietly slip out.

I don't know how the champagne will go over since I hadn't anticipated a story like the one she told me about Toby.

"You're so sweet," she whispers when she comes out.

Her eyes are a little red from crying, but she seems calmer as she sinks into a chair by the little table.

"I thought champagne was appropriate to celebrate our potential new deals with Rock Vibe," I say sheepishly. "I didn't know about Toby or..." My voice trails because I'm not sure how this looks.

"It's wonderful," she says. "You had no way of knowing about Toby, and anyway, it's not like anything new is happening. I can't help but worry, and sometimes it just...comes out."

Because she can't let it out with Callum.

I don't know how I know this but I do.

"Is Callum not sympathetic?" I ask, because I can't help myself.

She sighs, rubbing her eyes. "The short answer is—no. He's not. But he helps in other ways."

I frown, staring at her.

She lifts big blue eyes to mine. "If I tell you the truth, you can't tell anyone. I'm serious. Not Angus, not your management, not your family—no one."

"Of course not." I sit across from her and wait.

She seems to be gathering her courage, as if telling me about Callum is somehow painful. Embarrassing. And it makes me hate him that much more.

“This clinical trial that Toby’s in is private.

It’s from some new pharmaceutical company called Vita Soleil.

They didn’t divulge any details, but from what I gathered, they had government funding for the first round of trials but instead of going through traditional phases—which I don’t pretend to understand, with the FDA and the CDC and all that—they wanted to do it their own way.

So the government or whoever it was pulled the funding.

Everyone in this new phase has to pay out of pocket.

” She pulls in a shaky breath. “And my mom’s insurance denied the claim, saying it wasn’t covered.

“Oh, no.”

“We had to come up with over ten thousand a month between the cost for him to stay at the facility and for all the different meds. I don’t mean the experimental ones, but stuff for nausea, for the headaches he gets, stuff like that.

Insurance covers those, but there are copays, and some of them are high, like a hundred bucks a pop. ”

Suddenly it all makes sense.

“And Callum is paying for it.”

She bursts into tears all over again.

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Taryn

I hate showing weakness because I'm always so weak and submissive with Callum.

And not in a fun, sexy way either. I have to do almost everything he says, when he says it, and on the rare occasion I stand up to him, he either belittles me, flat out shoots me down, or reminds me who's paying Toby's bills.

Essentially, I'm trapped in a nightmare.

Admitting it out loud is almost as humiliating as some of the things Callum makes me do.

But instead of mocking me or being repulsed, Mick drops to his knees in front of me and pulls me against him.

"Oh, baby, I'm sorry." He strokes my hair and holds me gently, his body warm and strong against mine.

I'm about cried out at this point, so I just rest my head on his shoulder and soak in his embrace. His touch. The way it feels to have someone in my life who's supportive. Holding me. Making me feel like I'm not alone.

Even if only for a few minutes.

"I'm so embarrassed to be in this situation," I whisper. "Where I have to let him treat me the way he does, in front of everyone, watching the disgust and pity in their eyes.

Knowing they don't understand. Knowing they think I'm pathetic."

"I don't think they think that," he whispers. "They're worried. At least, I am. Ryleigh is. The guys in the band think that's just what some women like, that maybe it's some kind of kinky dynamic or whatever."

"Ew. No. I mean, kink is fine—I'm into a little—but not the public degradation in front of people who don't know anything about that kind of power exchange. And just to be clear, degradation is not the kind of kink I'm into. I like a little spanking, a little...well, you know."

He nods—I can feel it—but he doesn't say anything.

Because he spanked me when we were together.

And it was so hot.

He probably doesn't know this, but no one had ever done that before him.

I didn't know I would like it. And if I'm honest, there's only been one other guy who knew how to do it so it wasn't painful to the point where it diminished my arousal.

Callum always makes me cry. But I don't want to talk about that. Not tonight.

"Jesus, Taryn. I wish I could help."

"I know. It's okay. He just made the eighth payment. Only four to go and then I'm free."

"The trial is for a year?"

I nod. “Then they wait three months and do all kinds of scans and whatnot. At that point, we’ll know if he’s back in remission. They did some stuff at six months, to make sure the disease hadn’t gotten worse, and it hadn’t, so now we wait.”

“And you’re stuck with him because you don’t have the money to pay for it yourself.”

“It’s a lot of money. I don’t make anywhere near ten grand a month right now, and my mom’s a teacher who doesn’t have that much extra.

She could pull it out of her retirement fund, and if Callum hadn’t offered, we might have gone that route, but that’s all she has.

My dad passed away and left her enough life insurance for the house.

Beyond that, she has her teaching retirement fund.

We would’ve saved Toby’s life with it if we had to, but then what will she do in fifteen years when she wants to retire? This seemed...easier.”

“Easier?” There’s fury in his eyes when he lifts my chin and makes me look at him. “On who? Certainly not on you.”

“It’s harder on Toby,” I whisper.

He sighs. “I know but... babe, Callum is fucking awful to you.”

“And you don’t know the half of it.”

“Can you get a loan for the balance? Or maybe your mom can? So you can leave him now.”

I shake my head. “No. It’s four more months. I can survive. As long as I do what he wants, it’s not bad. He just gets jealous.” I bite my lip. “Honestly, my biggest worry is that he’s going to find out you were here in New York with me. He won’t like that at all.”

“Hettie said this catalog isn’t coming out for a couple of months. This was for the summer catalog. So it’ll be out in May.”

“Yeah.” I reluctantly pull away and reach for the nearby glass of water, taking a long drink.

“We can figure out a way,” he says. “Maybe Hettie can front you the money?”

I shake my head. “I don’t want to get to the end of this with any debt or anything else to worry about.

It takes everything I have to focus on Toby getting better.

Flying out to see him once a month. Finding jobs in between that work with my schedule and won’t piss off Callum.

I can’t take on anything else, Mick. I don’t have any bandwidth left.

” My eyes fill with tears yet again, and I squeeze them shut, hating my ongoing vulnerability.

“But why not go public with Toby’s struggles? I bet you’d get a ton of work just from sympathy... and everyone would want to help.”

“I’m trying to stay under the radar. My agent thought me being open about having a kid when I was sixteen would mess up my image.

We don't know for sure, but she figured we shouldn't risk it.

You know how judgmental some people can be.

And now I'm walking a really fine line because I'm with Callum, who's notoriously not well-behaved.

If I'm going to get custody of Toby in the next year or so, I can't have any drama in my life. ”

“Being with Callum seems counterproductive in that regard.”

“I know, but publicly, he's not too bad.

The public doesn't see how he treats me, or what goes on with the band behind closed doors.

We've been together over a year, and so far everything has been fine.

Four more months of letting him pay for Toby's treatment and me staying under the radar.

Then I'm free, not just of Callum, but to move back to California and work on getting custody of my son. ”

“Will your mom fight you?”

“She will if she thinks I won't be able to handle it.

Generally speaking, she's on board, but she thinks dating rock stars is bad for me and for Toby.

Obviously, she knows Callum is paying for his treatment, but once we're done, I have to walk the straight and narrow to get her to turn over custody. You know what I mean?"

"Damn, you're just getting it from all over, aren't you?" he murmurs.

"Now you know why I'm a mess." I feel teary-eyed again and try to will them away.

"I'm sorry, babe." I feel his fingers, a gentle brush against my skin, as he wipes away my tears. "Don't cry anymore, okay? I don't want to add to your stress. Tell me what I can do."

I slowly open my eyes to find him watching me intently.

"Can you be my friend? Because I don't really have anyone who's there for me. Who doesn't want anything. Who's just...my friend."

"I can absolutely do that."

"The problem is, you can't act like my friend. Our friendship has to be totally in secret. Maybe just when Callum is on stage. And that feels so shitty, but I don't have a choice. You know how he gets."

"Whatever you need. I never want to do anything that could make your life harder."

I reach out and gently put my hand on one side of his face. "You were always so nice... why are you single?"

He shrugs. "A couple of reasons. Partly because I needed to see what was out there before settling down. Being a rockstar and being in a relationship seemed counterintuitive in the beginning."

“That’s just one reason,” I point out curiously when he doesn’t continue.

His eyes grow shadowed, a look in them I’ve never seen before. “The other reason is a lot more complicated.”

“What do you mean?” I frown.

“It has a lot to do with the one who got away.”

He can’t be talking about... me?

Can he?

He’s certainly the one that got away for me, but it never occurred to me he might feel the same way.

“I... does that mean what I think it means?”

He lifts one shoulder. “Probably.”

“But... you never called,” I whisper in frustration.

“I know .” He looks equally frustrated. “Believe me, I know. We talked about this—twenty-two-year-old me was a dumbass.”

“And now it’s too late,” I say sadly.

“Is it?” He cocks his head. “We’re here. Together on tour...”

“I can’t... be like him,” I say slowly. “Even though I don’t love him and I’m starting to hate him, I don’t ever want to be a cheater. And honestly, if we were going to be

together, I wouldn't want to start something in the middle of all this...drama. I would want us to have a fresh start."

"I understand that."

"So...what now?" I'm almost afraid to ask.

"Now, we eat dinner." He motions to the feast laid out before us. "And drink that bottle of champagne to celebrate what might be a lucrative deal with Rock Vibe. Maybe watch a movie. No pressure, Taryn. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. It's been four years. What's four more months?"

How did I let a guy like this go?

Is it even possible for us to be nothing but friends for four long months?

Anything else would be impossible at this point, with Callum watching me like a hawk and me trying to stay under everyone's radar.

But I could really use a friend.

"Come on—let's eat," he says gently, lifting the cover off his plate.

The aroma hits me like a physical blow, and my stomach immediately rumbles. I haven't eaten anything but a granola bar all day so I'm starving, and I quickly take a bite of the baked potato.

"Oh, that's good."

He smiles and pours us two glasses of champagne.

“Shall we toast to Rock Vibe?”

“We should,” I say, taking the proffered glass. “To Hettie and Rock Vibe.”

“And to making a fuck-ton of money.”

“Amen to that.” We clink our glasses and for the first time in months, the tension drains out of me.

For the next few hours, maybe a day, I don’t have to worry about Callum, Toby, or anything else. Twenty-four stolen hours of time, where I can just relax and think about the possibilities of good things in my future.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:32 am

Mick

I wake to feel a warm, soft body pressed to mine, and my eyes pop open.

Taryn's back is pressed to my front and she's fast asleep.

One of my arms is draped over her but we're both fully dressed, on top of the blankets.

We drank the bottle of champagne and sat up half the night talking.

At some point, she dozed off so I put her on the bed, fully intending to sleep on the little couch by the window, but she'd reached out a hand.

Whispered something about trusting me. How it was cold, and I'm too tall for the little love seat.

So I crawled onto the bed without hesitation.

And I don't know if she's truly asleep, but if she isn't, she has to feel the erection pressing against her round little ass. Even with two layers of clothing between us.

I have to move because this is torture.

She asked me to be her friend, asked me to wait until she's officially free of Callum. I agreed, so I intend to stand by my word, but I also need to avoid this kind of temptation. Once we're back on tour we'll never be alone so it won't be like this but

damn, this is nice.

I'm still reeling from some of the things she told me last night, and I plan to wrack my brain to come up with a solution that could potentially get her out of her situation with Callum.

She made me promise not to tell anyone, which is frustrating, but I'm going to figure this out.

I have to.

I never thought I believed in love at first sight, but that's because I didn't recognize it four years ago. Now that I've been able to spend time with her again, it's clear that it's always been her.

It doesn't make sense, but I don't think love is supposed to be sensical—it's just supposed to feel good.

And it does.

Even though we're not together.

Even though I can't touch her the way I want to.

But she feels what I feel.

So I'm going to man the fuck up and wait until she's ready.

I quietly slide out of bed and head to the bathroom, taking care of business and brushing my teeth. I'm not sure why, since sex isn't on the table, but it never hurts to put your best foot forward when it comes to a beautiful woman.

She's still asleep when I come out so I quietly change into workout clothes and then leave her a note, telling her I'll be back around ten and to order breakfast for us if she wants.

Then I slip out and head to the hotel gym.

Our flight isn't until this afternoon, so it'll be good to work out before going to the airport. I try to stay in shape, especially since I still smoke. I know I need to quit, and I've cut down a lot, but it's a process. Maybe someday I'll quit completely, like if I have kids.

Kids.

Does Taryn want more kids?

We're nowhere near ready to have a conversation like that, but I can't help but wonder. Is that our future? Is she the white picket fence I never knew I wanted?

Being with her means I'll immediately become a stepfather, and even though it's never been on my radar before, I'm okay with it. He's nine, so it's not like a newborn. And his father is dead, which means there won't be any drama from an ex.

Other than Callum, of course.

I have a feeling he's going to continue to mistreat her right up until the end, and guys like him piss me off. They get off on the power of belittling the woman in their life. Making her feel small so they can feel bigger—and it makes no sense.

From the outside looking in, Callum has it all.

A successful career as a rock star, money, fame, and a gorgeous woman. What does

treating her so badly add to the equation? In my opinion, there's something wrong with him, some kind of narcissistic, psychotic behavior.

I fucking hate that this is Taryn's reality.

If I could trade places with her, I would.

The strong feelings I have for her may not make sense, but they exist, so it would be stupid to try to deny them. I just have to find a way to live with the status quo—knowing she goes to bed with him every night and puts up with his emotional and verbal abuse—for four more months.

It might kill me, but I'm not going to give up.

And I'm definitely not going to abandon her.

* * *

When I get back to the room, Taryn's gone, but there's a note saying she ordered breakfast and she'll be back after she showers and gets dressed.

I take a quick shower too, and I've just pulled on jeans when there's a knock on the door.

"Good morning," I say when I open it.

"Good morning."

She looks refreshed; the circles beneath her eyes are gone, and she has a twinkle in them that I haven't seen in a long time.

“I ordered us the deluxe continental breakfast,” she says, coming into the room. “There were too many choices otherwise. This way, we’ll get a big pot of coffee and two baskets of different pastries and such. Carb overload, but I don’t care. I can cheat one day.”

“Absolutely,” I agree.

“You should have woken me,” she says, sinking into a chair. “I would have gone to the gym with you.”

“I think you needed the sleep more than thirty minutes on the treadmill.”

She hesitates but then sighs. “You’re probably right. I don’t sleep well most nights.”

“Did you last night?” I ask softly.

“I slept like the dead,” she admits. “Thank you.”

“What did I do?” I ask in surprise.

“Champagne. Conversation. Letting me sleep beside you with no demands.

I scowl. “There will never be any demands in that department. No is fucking no.”

“That’s the problem,” she whispers. “I don’t know if I would have said no.”

“You gave me a boundary,” I say firmly. “Unless and until we have another conversation about that, it’s a firm no. You said you don’t want to cheat, so we’re not going to do that.”

“It won’t be no forever.” Her eyes meet mine.

“I know.” I lean over and brush my lips across her forehead. “Let me finish packing up my stuff. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.” She nods and just as I go back into the bathroom, I hear the knock indicating that our breakfast arrived.

“Looks like Hettie took care of the bill,” Taryn calls out to me. “Including last night’s dinner and breakfast. She just texted me not to worry about any incidentals—she’s covering it all.”

“That’s nice,” I say, coming out of the bathroom with my toiletry bag and dropping it into my carryon.

“She’s really great,” Taryn says, pouring us each a cup of coffee.

“I’m looking forward to working with her. I just hope the band is on board.”

“I’m sure she’ll offer fair compensation,” she says. “Her deal with us is different, but if she’s going to use your music and stuff, she has to know it won’t be cheap.”

“It could potentially give us great exposure,” I say, pulling a raspberry Danish out of the basket and taking a bite. “Damn, this is good. Thank fuck I have a good metabolism.”

“Can I have a little bite? That’s the only raspberry one.” She leans over and opens her mouth.

Jesus .

I swallow as I put the pastry close enough for her to bite it. She takes her time, nibbling a little bit on the edge before slowly closing her lips around a piece and

tugging it free. Her eyes meet mine as she chews, and she giggles playfully.

Fuck.

It's going to be a long four months.

"You know you're torturing me, right?" I murmur.

Her smile vanishes. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't?—"

"It's fine." I put a hand on hers. "Really. Torture away. I'm a grown man. A little teasing never hurt anyone."

"You know that once we get back to the tour I have to... pretend like I barely know you, right?"

"I know the rules," I say gently. "Don't worry about me, okay? We're going to ride out the next four months. You just focus on taking care of yourself and making sure Toby has everything he needs."

"Thank you." She looks like she's getting emotional again, and the last thing I want to do is make her cry. We only have about an hour before we have to leave for the airport, and I want our limited time together to be lighthearted.

"Hey, listen to this. I sent my dad a couple of the outtakes from yesterday's shoot," I tell her. "This is his response."

I hold out my phone so she can read my dad's message.

DAD: You look good with makeup. Maybe wear it more often? You'll probably find a girlfriend faster...

She throws her head back and laughs. “He sounds like a hoot .”

“He is.” I chuckle too. “He thinks there’s something wrong with me that I’m in a rock band and still can’t manage to find a girlfriend.”

She cocks her head, squinting slightly. “He understands that you can , right? You just haven’t found the right one?”

I hesitate but figure I have nothing to lose in laying it all out there for her.

“Oh, I’ve found her,” I say. “I’m just waiting for her to be ready for me.”

“I’m ready,” she whispers. “I’m just not... available.”

“And I’ll be right here as soon as you are.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:32 am

Taryn

The moment I get to the hotel, I'm swept into a party the band's management decided to throw in a private suite.

They want to celebrate the new album going gold, which is a big deal because this album hasn't sold as well as the last few, so they've been stressed about it.

The fact that it took four months to hit gold is a little disappointing, but you wouldn't know that by the way they're behaving tonight.

Champagne is flowing, there are journalists and several record company reps in attendance, as well as their manager and a bunch of people I've never seen before.

Callum is in his element, working the room and being loud and boisterous.

Within the music industry, people like that about him—and seem to like him—so he appears to be in a good mood.

He has his arm around me now, keeping me tight against his side as if he genuinely missed me. I know it's an act, but at least he's not trying to embarrass me. Or even hinting about going upstairs for a quickie or something.

“Taryn, I hear you're working with Rock Vibe,” one of the record label reps says to me. “We've been trying to get them to respond to us for a while. You have an in for us?”

I can't say no, but I'll have to give Hettie a head's-up and explain that they put me on the spot. I'm sure she can take care of herself, but I don't want to do anything that might piss Callum off since he's been in such a good mood tonight.

"Sure," I respond easily. "I'll get you Hettie's contact info. She's crazy busy right now getting the summer collection ready, but I'm sure she'll reach out."

Or not.

"Great, great." He nods happily. "We'd love to use some of their clothes in the next video—there's a lot of buzz about them right now."

"They're great to work with," I say diplomatically.

"Do you get to keep the stuff you model?" someone else asks.

I shake my head. "Not really. Just the thong panties. Obviously, they wouldn't want anyone else to wear them after me. Everything else goes back in the wardrobe closet."

"Bummer. But that's good for you, right, Cal?" He makes a big show of winking at Callum and then the two of them laugh like it's the funniest thing ever.

What did I ever see in this guy?

I just want to go to bed and escape everything. Except I don't sleep for shit when I'm with Callum.

Oh, well, there's no help for that now.

Four more months and it'll be over.

I cling to that thought, keeping a mental countdown that helps me get through each day.

They talk around me for a while, and I realize I'm starting to get sleepy. It's late, I've had a long day, and I know I won't get a lot of sleep because I'm not holding out hope that Callum won't want sex.

"Ready to go?" he asks me when I inadvertently yawn. It's nearly three in the morning and I've been on the go all day. Even though I slept well last night. It's probably the last good night's sleep I'll get until the next time I'm in L.A. Which isn't for another three weeks.

"I'm tired," I admit.

"Well, we're not going to sleep just yet," he murmurs against my ear. His voice is low and husky, something that turned me on when we first met. Now it's just a stark reminder that he isn't Mick.

Mick .

He squeezed my hand before we separated at the airport, promising we'll find a way to spend a little time together, even if it's only when Callum is on stage.

It's not a lot of time, but it's better than nothing.

I was tired and tipsy, but I smile every time I think about falling asleep in his arms. How safe and relaxed I was. No pressure to do anything. Not even talk. It's a distinct difference from how it is with Callum.

It takes almost another hour to leave the party because Callum has to stop and talk to almost everyone. The way he can make people feel like they're the most important

person in the world to him is one of the things that makes him so charismatic. Too bad not one iota of it is genuine.

“You lied to me, baby doll.” Callum says as he closes the door of our hotel room behind us and leans against it, arms folded over his chest.

“What?” I’d been so lost in thought, my head snaps up in confusion.

“You didn’t tell me Mick was doing that photo shoot with you.”

“Because I didn’t know until I arrived,” I say, which is the truth.

“Uh huh. But we texted the whole time you were gone and you never once mentioned it.”

“Yeah, I was feeling really good about those pictures you sent me of other women sucking your dick!” I snap.

His expression doesn’t change. “I told you what would happen if you went away twice in one month. One hundred percent honesty on my end. I wasn’t trying to hide anything. You, on the other hand, kept it a secret.”

“I didn’t lie about anything!” I protest, an uneasy feeling settling in my gut.

“Lies of omission are still lies.” His dark eyes gleam, and I know whatever comes next isn’t going to be good. Not for me anyway. “And liars have to be punished.”

Fuck.

I glare at him. “I’m not a child. You don’t get to punish me for some perceived slight.”

“It’s not perceived. It’s fact. Mick was there, and you neglected to tell me.”

“What difference does it make?” I demand. “We did another shoot for them four years ago. It’s not like we’re friends.”

“But you used to be more,” he says.

“What are you talking about?” I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

How the hell does he know about Mick and me?

“I see the way he looks at you.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m a model, Callum. Half the guys I run into look at me like that, including the guys in your band.”

“Mick is different. He looks at you like a guy who’s fucked you—the same way I look at you.”

I highly doubt that.

Callum looks at me like his property.

Mick actually cares about me.

It’s probably not prudent to point that out.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you he was at the shoot, but I didn’t know until I got there. And then you sent me those pictures, which hurt my feelings.”

“I told you what would happen if you keep leaving me. I have needs and if my

woman can't satisfy them, I'll get it where I can. I kept my end of the bargain by not fucking her since I don't want any unexpected babies and you don't want diseases."

"Can we just go to sleep?" I ask quietly. "It's four in the morning, and I'm exhausted."

"I think it would be better for you to get your punishment over with tonight. Then I'll let you sleep in the morning."

My chest tightens with worry.

I have a feeling I know what's coming.

"Callum, please..." I hate myself for begging.

"Come on, baby doll... you know deep down you like it."

"I like when it's sexy, not when you're punishing me like some sort of errant child!" Tears sting my eyelids, but I blink them away. I refuse to let him see me cry because he gets off on it.

He slowly moves across the room and kicks off his boots. Then he sits on the edge of the bed and pats his lap.

"Dammit, Callum."

He meets my gaze. "You have the option to say no. You can leave right now and go home to California. But come the fifteenth, you're going to need to figure out how to make that payment."

Asshole.

I hate him so much.

“You swore you wouldn’t throw that in my face,” I growl.

“Okay, then look at it this way: You’re my woman and I expect you to take care of me the way I take care of you and your kid.

” His voice is low and controlled, like he’s talking to his agent or a friend.

“Right now, what I need is to give you a spanking. And then I’m going to fuck you long and hard, and you’ll forget all about how much your ass hurts.

Don’t make me ask again, Taryn.” He pauses.

“Now take off your clothes and come lay over my lap.”

Mick

I don't see Taryn at all the next two days, and part of me is itching to reach out. She warned me not to text her—Callum is always looking at her phone—and I don't want to get her into trouble. But not seeing her is driving me nuts.

I'm also worried.

She and Callum are usually all over the place, going to clubs or out to dinner and whatnot. Since we got back, she hasn't been around at all. Not even at the show last night. And I don't know what that's about.

Maybe she doesn't feel good.

Since I can't text her, I approach Ryleigh on the bus as we travel to Denver.

"Hey. Would you do me a favor?"

She glances up from whatever she's doing on her laptop. "If I can. What's up?"

I hesitate. I don't want to divulge any secrets, but everyone knows how badly Callum treats Taryn, so that much at least is general knowledge.

"Taryn wasn't at the show last night," I say carefully. "I'm a little worried."

Her brows knit together a little as she stares at me. "Why are you worried?"

“We had a chance to talk while we were in New York and... well, I’m just worried.”

“Do you think Callum hurt her?” she asks, her eyes darkening with unmasked annoyance.

“Nooo.” I draw out the word because this is so hard.

I have to keep this thing between Taryn and me a secret.

I know Ryleigh wouldn’t do anything to hurt her, but gossip has a way of spreading when you don’t want it to, and I have no doubt Callum might do something to hurt Taryn if he thinks she’s cheating on him.

Not necessarily physically but if he doesn’t pay for Toby’s treatment, it’s not like I have the money to give her.

Hell, the photo shoot only paid me a grand, which is a nice chunk of change in my life but doesn’t make a dent in Toby’s treatment.

Obviously, I’ve hesitated too long because Ryleigh snaps her laptop shut and points to the seat next to her.

“ Sit . Talk to me.”

Angus snorts, not even looking up from the book he’s reading, but Ryleigh can be a force of nature, so I do as I’m told.

“What’s going on?” she demands.

“Look, I can’t tell you things she told me in confidence,” I say quietly. “But I’m worried about her, okay? Can you just reach out? Something innocent, like, hey, you

want to go shopping in Denver? Whatever would be perceived as some girly thing that wouldn't piss Callum off if he sees it."

"Does he check her texts?" Her eyes blaze with intensity.

"I'm pretty sure he does. She asked me not to text her. That's why I'm asking you to do it."

"God dammit." She looks pissed and yanks her phone out of her pocket, typing away on it. "There. Told her I missed her last night and wondered if she wanted to go shopping in Denver. That I'm itching for some retail therapy."

"Thanks." I'm about to get up when her phone buzzes.

"Don't move," she says, eyes glued to the phone.

"She says she caught a little cold in New York and doesn't want to get anyone else sick, but she'll be at the show tomorrow.

She's planning to rest all day tomorrow, so she doesn't think shopping is a good idea but maybe when we get to Reno.

"She holds up the phone so she can dictate her response.

"Do you need anything? I can stop by your room tonight and bring you chicken soup or whatever?"

She waits again, looking at her phone.

"Yeah, I don't like this. She said she doesn't need anything but sleep and she'll see me at the show."

She puts her phone down.

“If he put his hands on her.” I don’t know why I’m so afraid he hurt her, but I’ve never liked the guy and she’s so worried about upsetting him.

My gut tells me he somehow found out I was in New York—I told a few people before I left because I didn’t know it was some kind of secret.

“Dammit.” I drum my fingers on the chair.

“What’s going on?” Angus asks, apparently listening to our conversation.

“Did she say something in New York?” Ryleigh adds.

“She said a lot in New York,” I admit. “But I can’t tell you guys things she told me in confidence.” I rub my hands down my face in frustration. I need help navigating this situation, but I also don’t want to make things worse for her.

“Does he hit her?” Angus asks quietly. “Because if he does?—”

“No. I don’t think so,” I interrupt him. “The abuse is emotional. Verbal. But I know he’s wildly jealous, and I’m afraid he found out I was there and is keeping her prisoner or something.”

“Prisoner?” Jonny, who rarely takes off his headphones when we’re on the bus, has apparently been listening as well.

“Guys, for real—if you talk about any of this, it could make her life a lot harder. Please keep this to yourselves.”

Jonny scowls. “You think we’d do anything that might impact her? You don’t think

much of us, do you?”

“It’s not that. It’s just...he’s not a normal guy. Things that are completely innocent—like me being in New York for the same damn photo shoot—could send him over the deep end.”

“I’m going to call her,” Ryleigh announces. “I’ll know by her voice if she’s okay. All of you be quiet!”

She makes the call, and it seems to take a long time for Taryn to answer.

“Hey.” Taryn sounds... subdued.

Fuck.

“Hey! Are you sure you don’t need soup or anything?”

You guys are already in Denver, right?” Karnal Death flies from city to city—they just didn’t invite us to join them.

Well, they did, but the amount of money they wanted for the extra weight on the jet was exorbitant and Sasha said it wasn’t cost-effective.

Which is fine with me. The last thing I want to do is spend more time with them.

“Yeah.” Taryn doesn’t sound sick—she sounds...defeated. “And no, I’m fine. Callum... is taking good care of me.”

“Damn straight I am!” he calls out.

Somehow, his voice sounds more amused than concerned.

Asshole.

“Okay, well, if you need anything at all, you can call me. We definitely don’t spend enough time together.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I’ve had a lot going on.”

“No worries. Anyway, I’ll talk to you later.”

“Bye.”

She disconnects and no one says anything for a beat.

“She sounds tired,” Jonny says. “But I didn’t hear anything that was a red flag.”

“Well, what is she supposed to do?” I grunt. “Tap out SOS in Morse Code?”

“Look, if you think there’s abuse going on, I’ll be more cognizant of it,” Ryleigh says. “But there really isn’t anything we can do unless she asks for help.”

And I already know Taryn isn’t going to.

Not for four more months.

But that’s one of the things I can’t tell them.

I hate the position I’m in because I don’t want to betray her trust, but I also don’t want anything to happen to her.

“You hooked up in New York,” Angus says after a moment, narrowing his eyes a little. “And you’re worried Callum somehow found out. Or guessed.”

“We did not ,” I say firmly. “We had dinner and talked. That’s it.”

Well, she slept over, but since nothing happened, they don’t need to know that.

“I feel like there’s more to this story.” And now Tate jumps in.

We’ve been working on our personal dynamic after Angus hid his real identity from us, and we all agreed to be completely honest about important things in our lives.

Obviously, we’re not talking about every detail or intimate specifics, but anything that might impact the band or our relationships going forward.

I feel like this qualifies—it’s just not my story to tell.

“I can’t tell you certain things,” I say firmly. “I just can’t. She opened up about a lot of stuff... but it’s not my story to tell. I wish I could. It would make things so much easier.”

“Way to be vague as fuck,” Ryleigh mutters. “Is this stuff I know?”

“Definitely not.”

She scowls. “How are we supposed to help if we don’t know what’s going on?”

“Now you know how I feel.” I blow out a breath. “And I’m not going to bullshit you—I like her. I always have. But she’s in a relationship with someone else, and she asked me to give her time to sort that out. In the meantime, we are not sleeping together. That’s all I can tell you.”

“You really like her,” Jonny says, wrinkling his nose.

As if falling in love is incredibly distasteful.

And maybe it is.

Angus doesn't seem to think so—he and Ryleigh appear incredibly happy—but everyone is different. I've never truly been in love as an adult so it's hard for me to have an opinion. All I know is how I feel right now, and my feelings for Taryn are unlike anything I've felt for anyone else.

Is it love?

Maybe.

But until we can spend more than a day together, it's impossible to know for sure.

“Look, we're not going to say anything to anyone,” Angus says firmly, “but it's kind of tough for us to help if we don't know what's happening.”

“Which is why I asked Ryleigh to check on her,” I reply glibly. “The rest of you fuckers are just being nosy.”

Tate laughs. “Fair enough. I am officially butting out.”

“Same.” Jonny puts his headphones back on.

“If Ryleigh's involved, I'm involved.” Angus shrugs.

“What are we involved in?” Sam sits up in his bunk and yawns. He's been asleep through the entire conversation.

“Nothing,” I say, chuckling. “Go back to sleep, bro.”

“Cool.” He lies down again and I go back to my original seat.

Tomorrow can’t come soon enough.

I won’t be convinced Taryn is okay until I see her with my own two eyes. And maybe not even then.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:32 am

Taryn

The bruises on the backs of my thighs are still visible so I pull on a pair of leggings, a corset-style top, and boots.

Callum prefers me in skirts and dresses, but this is his fault, so unless he wants to answer a lot of questions about the handprint-shaped bruise on my right thigh, I'm wearing tights.

"Still bruised?" he asks when I come out of the bathroom.

I nod curtly.

I haven't been speaking to him since the spanking incident the other night and now he's being contrite.

"I said I was sorry," he says, blocking me from leaving the room. "How long are you going to pout?"

"Until the bruises are gone."

"I didn't realize you bruise so easily," he continues. Like this is my fault. "You've never bruised before."

"You've never been so rough before," I respond tightly.

"I had a lot to drink," he murmurs. "Okay?"

He waits for me to respond and when I don't, he sighs.

"Dammit, Taryn...don't be this way."

"Let's just go," I say. "I'm hungry and catering said there's chicken fried rice tonight."

He hesitates but then nods. "All right. Just don't be mad, okay? I'm not going to apologize again."

Whatever.

He's making Toby's payment in a couple of days—and then it'll be down to three months.

Maybe two if I can get decent priced flights back to L.A.

the next two months. I might have enough left in my savings to pay for the last month of treatment myself.

I'll be broke, but I'll be free of Callum, and that's all I care about.

"All good," I say stiffly.

"That's my girl." He wraps his arm around my shoulders as we walk out to the elevator.

I stay quiet on the way to the venue and when we arrive. Callum heads for soundcheck and I hang out in their dressing room until I hear the music start. Then I peek into the hallway and immediately spot Mick. Like he knew where I would be and was waiting for Callum to get on stage.

We don't have much time—because they don't usually have long soundchecks—and I hurry over to him.

“I only have a few minutes,” I whisper. “I think they're just doing the one song.”

“Find me when they play their set,” he says softly. “I was worried about you. How are you feeling?”

“I'm okay.”

“Are you?” His eyes bore into mine and I know he doesn't believe I had a cold. I don't want to tell him the truth because I know he's going to be upset, and I can't risk him confronting Callum.

“We'll talk later,” I say, gently squeezing his arm.

“Taryn! There you are!” Ryleigh comes over and gives me a hug. “How are you feeling?”

“I'm on the mend,” I say.

“Walk with me.” She tugs me away from Mick, and we walk toward Crimson Edge's dressing room.

“I don't have a lot of time,” I murmur. “Callum will be expecting me to eat with him.”

She stops and puts her hands on her hips, facing me.

“What kind of controlling, possessive bullshit is that?” she demands.

“What’s happening to you, Taryn? One minute you told me you were just dating him because he has a big dick.

Now you’re letting him control every facet of your life.

And don’t give me any nonsense about being in love.

Everyone can see what’s happening. Everyone is talking about it. Except you.”

My face feels a little hot as embarrassment hits me like a physical blow, but it’s none of her business.

“I have my reasons,” I say tightly. “And if you’re really my friend, you’ll leave it alone.”

“Does he hit you, Taryn?”

“No.”

Not unless he disguises it as a little bedroom kink.

“You’re lying.” She searches my face intently.

“I’m not.” I scowl at her. “And even if I was, it’s none of your business!”

“If you need help getting away from him, just tell me.” She lowers her voice. “Angus and I can help you. We can?—”

“Stop.” I squeeze her arm, probably a lot harder than I squeezed Mick’s a few minutes ago. “Please, just stop. You have to trust me. I know what I’m doing. And I’m fine. Please, if you care about me at all, don’t cause trouble for me.”

“How can helping you cause trouble?” she asks, her eyes filled with concern. “Taryn, I’m worried about you.”

“I know. And I appreciate it. But there are things going on I can’t talk about right now.”

“But you could talk about them to Mick.” She actually looks a little hurt, adding something else for me to feel bad about in my life.

“He knows things because of when we met before,” I say. “So he already knew about... some of it.”

God, this is complicated.

I know I can trust her, and I’m probably a shitty friend for not telling her about Toby or the situation with Callum, but I’m teetering on the edge of my sanity right now. It takes all my strength to deal with him, and the last thing I need is for other people to get involved.

“Taryn!” Callum’s voice is laced with annoyance—what else is new?—and I give Ryleigh an apologetic smile.

“I’m sorry—we’ll talk soon. I promise.”

She smiles brightly, as if she understands how precarious things are with Callum, and waves at him. “Hey, Callum!”

“Hey, Ry.” They’ve come to what I can only describe as an understanding now that she interviewed him for her magazine. He behaves around her for the most part, and she doesn’t give him any shit.

Hopefully, that continues.

“You guys planning a shopping trip?” he asks in a lighthearted tone that isn’t typical for him.

“Nah.” I shrug. “I don’t need anything.”

“You should go anyway,” he says magnanimously. “You’ve got to be bored on tour. And a few of us are talking about golfing when we get to Reno.”

I blink.

Golfing?

Since when?

“It’s a charity event,” he continues. “Rockers for Rugrats or some shit.”

“Rockers for Childhood Cancer,” Ryleigh corrects him under her breath.

“Yeah, that.” He grins. “Anyway, Dusty and me are gonna do it.”

“Have you ever golfed before?” I ask curiously.

He shrugs. “I’ll figure it out. How hard can it be?”

“It’s harder than it looks,” Ryleigh says, falling into step with us. “But I’m actually going to be there covering the event for the magazine.”

“I’m sure Taryn will be bored. She’s not the outdoors type.”

That's true, but he says it like it's a character flaw and I remind myself that I don't care what he thinks of me.

"I'm not the outdoors type either," Ryleigh says, "but I'll be in the VIP area most of the time. Maybe we can get Taryn a VIP pass so she can hang with me."

He shakes his head. "Nah. Not her scene. That's why I thought you girls might do some shopping or something. But she can just stay at the hotel."

I can stay at the hotel?

Since when?

I don't say anything in front of Ryleigh, but something about that rubs me the wrong way.

He always wants me at his side, showing me off.

So making me stay behind on a day that will undoubtedly be full of opportunities for him to be in the press makes no sense.

Not that I care about any of that, and staying behind is actually a relief for me—but I know him well enough to sense there's another reason he doesn't want me there.

Has he met someone else?

That would be great if not for the four remaining payments for Toby.

Christ.

I have to tread carefully, but I need to know what's up.

“What’s going on with the golf event?” I ask him once Ryleigh’s gone. “And since when do you want me to stay at the hotel?”

He shrugs. “It’s not your scene. It’s going to be at some swanky country club. I mean, what would you even wear? Your whole wardrobe is out of that Rock Vibe crap. And that’s not the atmosphere of the event at all.”

I open my mouth and close it again.

He’s ashamed of me ?

The last time I tried to wear a cute little summer dress with cap sleeves and a moderate hemline he laughed so hard I thought he would hurt himself. Then he made me change into something short and skimpy.

I love clothes—all kinds of clothes.

I have suits and summer dresses and khaki shorts that go down to my knees.

I have heels, boots, sneakers, and sandals, in all different colors and heel heights.

Yet Callum doesn’t let me wear anything except the highest heels, the slinkiest clothes, and the most outrageous items in my closet.

I know I look like a stereotypical rock and roll groupie most of the time, but it’s just become part of my life that I accept because it’s almost over.

I’m embarrassed about the situation I’m in, but I always keep in mind that I wouldn’t be here—and certainly not doing the things I do—if not for Toby.

But Callum’s comment leaves me feeling a different kind of shame.

That I've become someone I don't recognize.

Someone who's so inappropriate that even my rock star boyfriend doesn't want to be seen in polite company with me.

How the hell is a judge going to grant me custody of my child if that's my image?

At the same time, I can't get custody of a child who's dead. I'd rather him be alive and healthy and thriving, living with my mom, than me getting custody of a child I can't afford to properly take care of.

"You told me to dress this way," I say, unable to keep the hurt out of my voice. "You make fun of me whenever I wear something more modest, less rock and roll. And now you don't want to be seen with me? That's rich, Callum. Even for you."

And because I'm hurt and angry and dealing with a plethora of emotions I know he won't be sympathetic to, I turn on my heel and stomp in the other direction.

"T—wait!" He only calls me "T" when he knows he fucked up.

But I don't care.

I'll make nice later.

Right now, I have to lick my wounds in private.

Before I say or do something that will come back to bite me later.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:32 am

Mick

I barely remember our set, my mind a million miles away as I play. My hands know exactly what to do since my bass is practically another limb for me, so I don't have to put a lot of effort into the music. That's probably a shit thing for me to say, but tonight it's the truth.

All I care about is getting off stage and finding Taryn.

Ryleigh found me just before the show, telling me she's worried about Taryn too.

Secrets suck, and I now have a much better understanding about what Angus went through when he didn't feel like there was a good time to tell us his true identity or about his billionaire family.

It's different because it was his own situation, not someone else's, but it's similar in theory.

“Hey.” Ryleigh comes over to me once we're done playing and whispers in my ear.

“If you go to the green room, there's a private dressing room in the back.

It has two doors—one leads back into the green room and the other leads out to a back hall they use to sneak VIPs out to the exit.

I don't know exactly where it goes but if you and Taryn lock yourselves in the dressing room, you can go out the VIP entrance and figure it out while she can go

through the green room.

Even if someone sees her, they won't think anything of it because you'll be far away.
”

“You are the best!” I lean over to kiss her forehead.

I grab a towel and a bottle of water so I can hydrate while I wait for Karnal Death to get on stage.

I feel like a teenager trying to sneak out of the house in the middle of the night without my parents finding out, and I never even did that then, much less now.

Normally, I wouldn't play games like this but Taryn's situation with Toby is different.

He's just a kid—a really sick kid—and I understand that she'll do whatever is necessary to make sure he has what he needs.

If it was my kid, I'd beg, borrow and steal to make sure he gets the right treatment.

But if Callum is hitting her... that's a different level of abuse. Verbal abuse is bad, but it's not the end of the world since there's an end date. Emotional abuse is worse, and while it makes me want to beat the shit out of him, she only has three or four months left.

Physical abuse is a big fat no.

Except Toby's life is on the line.

If I had the money—or even the credit to borrow it for her—I would.

But short-term, I'm broke as fuck.

There's no way I can ask my parents for ten or fifteen grand, and while I could potentially ask Sasha for an advance, I know how ridiculous it sounds to do something like that for a woman I've spent a total of about a week with over more than four years.

I'm crazy about her, but am I in a position to sacrifice my financial stability for a kid that's not mine and someone I've never even met?

I make my way to the dressing room attached to the green room and sink into one of the chairs. Both doors lock, so once Taryn gets here, we might have a modicum of privacy to talk.

The knob turns, and I look up as she comes into the room.

Damn, now that she's up close in bright light, she looks tired. Like she hasn't slept since New York.

And all my doubts begin to melt away.

"Hey." I reach out a hand but instead of taking it, she vaults herself against my chest. My arms close around her and I hold her tight. "It's okay, babe. Whatever it is, we're going to figure it out."

"Just hold me," she whispers. "Please."

"I'm right here."

We stay like that for a long time.

I'm perched on the edge of a dressing table and she's nestled against my chest, her head resting on my shoulder.

"You want to tell me what's going on?"

She shakes her head. "No."

"Babe, I can't help if you don't talk to me."

"You can't help even if I do. I asked you to be my friend. To let me vent. To give me a shoulder to cry on. That's all anyone can do. Please don't ask for more, Mick."

"Babe." I pull away enough to force her to lift her head. Once she's looking at me, I take her chin between two fingers. "Did he hurt you?"

"Not the way you're thinking," she whispers, her eyes puddling with tears. "I'm okay. Everything is status quo. He makes the next payment day after tomorrow and then we're down to three."

"Tell. Me. What. He. Did." My pulse is racing, but I try to keep my voice neutral as I stare into her pretty face. I know we're getting into dangerous territory, but I can't sit by and do nothing. I just can't.

"He..." She swallows. "It doesn't matter."

"It does."

"What are you going to do?" she asks. "Confront him? Go kick his ass? Call the cops? Like, what is your plan, Mick? I know you're mad."

I'm upset too. But it wasn't what you're thinking—okay?

He has four payments left. That's a lot of damn money.

Toby needs me and I'm not going to do anything to fuck that up.

You can't either. Do you understand? If you're going to get riled up every time Callum does something that upsets me, we can't keep doing this. ”

I close my eyes and try to breathe through the whiplash of emotions I'm feeling.

He hit her.

And if I do anything to take care of the situation, it could make her situation worse or cost Toby the treatment he needs.

I feel angry and helpless and guilty—a cocktail of emotions I don't like. Especially feeling helpless. I don't do helpless.

I'm the kind of guy who takes action and—there are tears streaming down her face.

Dammit .

I grab a tissue and hand it to her, kicking myself for making her cry.

Callum does enough of that, and I don't want to be another person in her life she can't count on.

“I'm sorry,” I say quietly. “I just—I can't stand the thought of him laying a hand on you.”

“I know.” She dabs at her eyes. “But it's not a huge deal. He's been extra nice the last couple of days, so it's okay. He won't get grumpy again until it's time for me to leave

for L.A. I figure I've got two good weeks."

"Taryn, what am I supposed to do?" I ask in frustration. "I care about you. A lot. You can't expect me to sit here and do nothing."

"If you care about me, that's exactly what you're going to do." She puts her hands on either side of my face. "You know why I put up with it. The clock is ticking. It's almost over. If I can hang in there, so can you. Otherwise, then we can't...do this."

"I don't know what we're doing!" I grumble.

"No?" She cocks her head. "I thought we talked about this in New York?"

"It was different when we were together. Now that we're back under his thumb, it's..." I don't even know how to express what I'm feeling.

"Hard." Her lips tilt up ever so slightly. "Trust me, I know."

We stare into each other's eyes and my heart slams against my ribs.

"I want to kiss you," I rumble. "So fucking much."

To my surprise, she leans up and in, her lips lightly touching mine. "I want that too."

"I thought we were waiting."

"To be together, yes. But every time I leave to see my son, he sends me pictures of women sucking his dick. I think I'm entitled to let the guy I want to be with kiss me."

Fuck. Yes.

I continue staring into her beautiful face for a while, one hand cupping her cheek, drinking in every line of her face. She's so pretty, and such a sweet, kind soul. When she looks at me like she is now—as if I'm the only man in the world—everything else slips away.

I don't care about Callum or the band or anything else.

All I want is her.

And this kiss—this first kiss after what feels like a lifetime since I last kissed her—is important. It's not our actual first kiss, but it's a different kind of first kiss. The kind that holds a promise of more. A promise of something I've never given anyone else.

Even though we have to wait.

“You know how long I've waited for this?” I whisper, my mouth just an inch from hers.

“Four years, two months, and...” She wrinkles her nose like she's thinking really hard. “Twelve days? Maybe ten? I don't remember the exact date we said goodbye. It was mid-February.”

“Yeah. It was.” I press my lips to hers gently, a delicate reminder of what we had four years ago. And maybe a whisper of what we might have again.

We nuzzle and explore, keeping our mouths closed as we reconnect, and her arms wind around my neck.

I love how her body fits against mine, how it feels for us to be close like this. I never realized it before, but I've unconsciously compared every woman I've been intimate with since we were together to Taryn.

No one else ever had a chance.

And now that I have her back, I'm not letting her go.

I slide my tongue along the seam of her lips, teasing for entrance, and she opens for me. But still, I don't rush. I can't.

This kiss has to tell her everything I'm too afraid to vocalize.

“Michael.” My name is a breathy whisper against my mouth.

Ah, fuck.

She only ever calls me by my full name when I'm inside her.

Since this is as close as we're going to get to that for a while, I understand what she's trying to tell me—she feels it too.

I slide my tongue against hers and grip her firmly by the waist. She melts into me, and everything becomes a blur of lips and tongues and hot, whispered moans.

“I believe there's a reason they call you Mick Lips,” she murmurs when we finally break apart.

“You mean other than the fact that my legal name is Lipson?” I tease, pressing my forehead to hers.

“Smartass.”

“I could kiss you all night, babe.”

“And I can’t wait until we can.”

Taryn

The next few weeks are tricky.

I'm happier than I've been since I met Callum, but also more anxious. I know he'll lose his mind if he finds out about Mick and me, so we've had to be extremely cautious. I can only spend about an hour with him on the nights they have shows, and it's exhausting for both of us.

Mick's not happy with the situation, but so far, he's keeping his word and staying away from Callum, which is all I can ask for. Our stolen moments and kisses and conversations are the only things keeping me sane, other than my daily conversations with Toby.

As expected, Callum got grumpy in the week leading up to my going back to L.A. and I breathe a sigh of relief now that my plane landed. My mom is at the airport picking me up so I don't have to rent a car and can save a little money.

"You look tired, sweetheart," Mom says, leaning over to kiss my cheek.

"I am tired." I lean back in the seat and pull in a deep breath.

Last week was harder than usual.

Callum is partying more than he ever has, and he's meaner than ever when he's high.

The worst part is that he wants me to party too, but I draw the line at drugs.

I'll drink all night long, and occasionally grab a cigarette, but drugs are a hard no.

Mostly because they're bad for you but also because I can't risk being seen doing drugs.

It could impact my ability to get custody of Toby, and though my mother would never keep him from me, she's been incredibly protective.

"It won't be much longer," she says as she pulls into traffic. "I know this has been hard on you."

"Toby's worth it."

"I'm sorry it came to this."

"I'm not. I'll do anything for him."

"I know. But it shouldn't be...like this."

Mom and Toby met Callum last year and neither of them liked him.

My mom and I have never discussed the details of my relationship with him, but she knows he's mean and verbally abusive, and though I've never told her about the things he makes me do, or the spankings that leave bruises, she has to know how difficult this has been.

"Three more months. Maybe two if I skip the visit next month. We'll be back on the east coast so the flights will be a lot more expensive." I flew in from Oklahoma City today, so it wasn't too bad.

"Next month is when he'll be at his most vulnerable immunity-wise," she says

thoughtfully.

“It might actually be better if you don’t come.

Save the money and give him a little more protection.

I’m going to visit less too. I know it’s hard for him to be alone, but we have to make sure he doesn’t get sick. ”

“Of course.”

“Are you planning to move home once you break up with Callum?”

“Yes.” I glance at her. “Why? Don’t you want me to?”

“I do. I just...” Her voice trails and she stares straight ahead. “Toby and I have a routine. It might be confusing for him to have you around full-time. You haven’t lived with us full-time since you left for college, and he was little then.”

“Mom, I’m planning to take full custody once this is over,” I say slowly. “That’s always been the goal.”

“You still don’t have a full-time job. Where are you going to live?

How are you going to continue his medical care?

You live life one day at a time. You don’t save, you don’t have a home, and you seem to enjoy the rock and roll lifestyle.

How are you going to add a child to the mix?

I don't mean to sound harsh, but he needs me more than he needs you. ”

A tightness fills my chest, and I don't say anything as I try to gather my thoughts.

“Mom, we talked about this. I'm not living and sleeping with a mean, abusive drunk because I want to party and have a good time.

I'm literally prostituting myself to save Toby's life, and you're throwing it back in my face? !”

My mother sputters for a moment before glancing at me. “What are you talking about? You were dating Callum long before we lost the funding for Toby's treatment.”

“And I'd just broken up with him! I was literally in the lobby of the hotel waiting to take a cab to the airport so I could come home when you called and told me about the funding.

He used this as a way to not only keep me with him but to control every facet of my life.

He tells me what to wear, who I can be friends with, even how much I can eat.

On top of that, he humiliates me daily—in front of his band, our friends, and the press.

His new thing is that he wants me to fuck the other guys in the band while he watches.

I've managed to put him off but he keeps asking. Do you really think I'm having fun?”

I can't see it clearly because she's wearing sunglasses, but I'm pretty sure my mother's face is red.

"What?" I ask after a long, awkward silence. "You thought Callum is paying Toby's bills out of the goodness of his heart? You met him—you know exactly what kind of man he is."

"Then why were you with him in the first place?" she cries. "What does that say about you, that you would date a man like that?"

"When he didn't have anything to hold over my head, he wasn't like that.

He was a little crass, but we were just having fun.

It's not like I was in love with him. And when it stopped being fun, I ended it.

Except then we needed money for Toby and he offered.

So don't you dare try to make me feel bad about this.

What would you have done if I didn't come through?

Huh, Mom? Were you going to pull money out of your 401K, or were you going to let him die? What were the options?"

Her knuckles are white from gripping the steering wheel so hard.

"I know you're doing what you need to do, but it just reinforces my feeling that Toby needs to stay with me."

"How does me doing what I have to for my son make me the bad guy?"

“I didn’t say you were the bad guy—I just think he gets more stability with me.”

“You’re almost fifty,” I say quietly. “This is how you want to spend your middle age? Taking care of a nine-year-old? He’s my son, Mom. And I’m going to get custody of him.”

“Only if I allow it.”

“Seriously? You’re going to keep him from me?”

“You can see him as much as you like, but I think he’s better served in the stable environment I’ve always provided. Unless and until you can provide that for him, I’m not letting you take him.”

I want to scream and cry and rage, but I’m so tired. Dealing with Callum takes up every ounce of energy and fighting with my mom while I’m helpless to change my circumstances serves no purpose.

Once I’m free of Callum, she and I will revisit this conversation.

Until then, I don’t have the strength to argue with her.

“I know you’re upset,” she says when I don’t respond. “But you have to look at your track record, Taryn. You’ve always made bad decisions.”

Despite my vow not to engage, I can’t help myself.

“Absolutely,” I agree. “Letting you have custody so I could go to college was the worst decision I ever made.”

Before she can respond, my phone rings and it’s Diane.

“I have to take this,” I tell her. “Hi, Diane.”

“Hey!” Diane sounds excited. “I have good news.”

“I could use some,” I say dryly.

“Well, I got your payment from Rock Vibe, so I’ll be depositing that into your account soon. And get this—there’s a last-minute opening in an Alexa Humboldt fashion show in Vegas tomorrow night!”

“Holy shit.” I’m shocked because Alexa Humboldt is huge. Walking in one of her shows could change everything for me.

“Right? Anyway, you can do it, right?”

“Absolutely.” I don’t even hesitate. If my mom is going to make it hard for me to get custody of Toby, I need to make all the money and contacts that I can.

“There’s a catch, though.”

“Of course there is.”

“Pay is a flat fee.” The number she names is embarrassing. “You’re an unknown in the fashion show world so that’s the standard.”

Jesus. That’s less than Rock Vibe pays, and they don’t pay much.

“Will they provide transportation to the airport?” I ask quietly. “Because I’m broke.” That’s not entirely true, but I’m not about to ask my mother for anything the way I’m feeling right now.

“Of course. You leave all that to me. I’ll be in touch and text you the details.”

She disconnects and I look at my mother.

“I’m going to Vegas tomorrow to walk in an Alexa Humboldt fashion show.”

“Really?” For once, Mom sounds impressed.

“Yup. And I’m going to spend the rest of today with Toby.”

“All right. We can go there now if you like.”

“Yes, please.”

I’m so tired of everyone in my life trying to fuck me over.

I know she wants what’s best for Toby, but the fact that she’s minimizing the sacrifice I’ve made with Callum hurts.

It’s becoming increasingly obvious that the only person in my life I can trust is Mick, but he scares me because I don’t know how we can be together if I have to be in L.A. with Toby.

This is something we’re going to have to talk about at some point.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:32 am

Mick

She's got the lips, baby grinds and dips

But all I see is the sway of her hips.

She's not mine, but my baby's so fine

And I'm ready to sign that dotted line.

Let me touch you, baby, let me hear you sigh

Let me touch you, pretty girl, I'll never make you cry.

Let me touch you, baby, take you for a ride

I'm always gonna touch you, baby, no one's gonna hide.

I don't write songs on my own these days, it's usually a group effort, but this one came pouring out of me. I hear the melody in my head, a grinding beat with a lighthearted melody—exactly the kind of music we play and what our fans expect from us.

Obviously, I have Taryn on the brain, and while this isn't a love song, per se, it comes pretty close from my perspective.

We only have one ballad because it's not really our thing, so that would be off-brand

both for me and for the band, but she'll know what I'm trying to say the minute she hears it.

There's something about your eyes, they never tell me lies,

Your body makes me cry, our love is never gonna die.

I'm stuck on the next line when I see the WhatsApp on my phone flashing.

Taryn.

We decided to communicate that way when she's out of town, and then she'll delete the app before she gets back to Callum. That way, there's no easily accessible record of our conversations.

"Hey, beautiful," I say as I accept the call. "I was just thinking about you."

"Yeah? What were you thinking?"

"About kissing you."

Oh, that's a good line...

It's the edge of heaven when we kiss, closest thing to bliss,

I'm not a patient man, but you know we're doing this.

Okay, maybe not exactly what I want, but it's close.

"I think about that a lot too. But right now, I have exciting news."

“Tell me.” I put down my pen.

“I’m walking in an Alexa Humboldt show tomorrow.”

Even I know who Alexa Humboldt is. She’s big-time, right up there with Michael Kors and Vera Wang.

“Babe, that’s amazing! Congratulations!”

“It doesn’t pay much but they’re covering my expenses, and the exposure could be huge for me.”

“I didn’t know you were up for that.”

“I didn’t either,” she says. “I ran into Stevie Marchand a couple of months ago and I think she must have thrown my name in the hat.”

Stevie Marchand is another well-known name. She’s one of the top supermodels in the world, so the fact that she vouched for Taryn is a big deal.

“Good things are happening,” I say. “And maybe you’ll be able to get away from Callum sooner than you thought. Things may be looking up.”

“I hope so.” Her voice is suddenly a little subdued.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, always in tune with her changes in mood.

“Oh, nothing new. I had a fight with my mom earlier and then when I told Toby I was going to be gone for two days, because it turns out tomorrow is the rehearsal and then the next day is the fashion show—he was really upset. And then my mom turned it around and made it sound like I’m putting my career before spending time with Toby.

”

“Does she have any idea what you’re going through with Callum?” I demand incredulously.

“She knows, but I think she’s minimizing it in her head because she doesn’t want to think about it or acknowledge it.”

“Why the hell not?”

She sighs. “She’s having second thoughts of turning over custody to me.”

“Why?”

“She says I make bad choices. Like I should never be forgiven for getting pregnant at sixteen.”

“Fuck. I’m sorry, honey.”

“It’s all right. I just wish one damn thing in my life was easy.”

“There is,” I say gently. “Me. I’m the easiest thing you’re ever going to have. Whatever you need from me, all you have to do is ask.”

“You know that saying about how love is wasted on the young?”

I chuckle. “Yeah.”

“That’s us. Too stupid to know what we had at twenty and twenty-two.”

“But look at us making up for lost time at twenty-four and twenty-six.”

“I’ll be twenty-five later this year.”

“And I’ll be twenty-seven. We’re growing up. Finding our way back to each other, even if it’s taking longer than we wanted.”

“How do you always know the right thing to say?”

“I guess because this thing between us is real, you know?” I pause. “So, you want to hear the song I’m writing?”

“Sure.”

I put her on speaker and then pick up the acoustic guitar I borrowed from Sam.
“Okay, it’s rough and not finished, but here goes...”

She’s got the lips, baby grinds and dips

But all I see is the sway of her hips.

She’s not mine, but my baby’s so fine

And I’m ready to sign that dotted line.

Let me touch you, baby, let me hear you sigh

Let me touch you, pretty girl, I’ll never make you cry.

Let me touch you, baby, take you for a ride

I’m always gonna touch you, baby, no one’s gonna hide.

There's something about your eyes, they never tell me lies,

Your body makes me cry, our love is never gonna die.

It's the edge of heaven when we kiss, closest thing to bliss,

I'm not a patient man, but you know we're doing this.

"Mick." Her voice is rough, as if she's too emotional to say anything but my name.

"You like it?" I ask softly.

"You wrote that about me."

"I did."

"Michael...you're going to make me fall in love with you."

I love hearing her say my full name.

"Would that be so bad? It's only fair since I'm falling in love with you."

"But we haven't even...been together again," she protests.

"You think the sex is suddenly gonna be bad or something? I remember every detail of what it's like to make love to you. And when we can finally be together, it's going to be just as incredible as it was four years ago. There is no doubt in my mind about that."

"Mick..." There's a sadness to her voice I've never heard before. "You know if I'm going to get custody of Toby... I have to be in Los Angeles. I can't be on tour with

you. I have to be with him and we don't know what's going to happen with the leukemia."

I hadn't considered that but from where I'm sitting, it doesn't matter. All I care about is her—and Toby. Kids aren't on my radar, but if Taryn and Toby are a package deal, I'm all in.

"We'll figure it out," I say quietly. "Right now, we have a lot of things working against us, especially finances. But that's going to change soon.

Now that we've got a platinum album under our belts, the money is coming.

Sasha said next quarter we should all see nice checks, probably in the six-figure range."

"Oh, wow."

"So once you're away from Callum, all you need to think about is Toby getting well. And when I get that money, I can help you get set up in an apartment or a house or whatever you need. We can?—"

"Wait, wait." Her voice is shaky again. "Mick, you can't just give me your money."

"Why? I can do whatever I want with it, and what I want is to make your life—and Toby's—better."

"You don't even know him."

"Not yet, but I will. And I'll win over your mom too. Just wait and see. I'm a nice guy, you know."

She snuffles. “You are. A really nice guy. Maybe the best guy I’ve ever known.”

“We’re going to find a way to make this work, babe. Trust me. It might be tough in the beginning, while we figure out the logistics, but it can’t be harder than what you’re going through now, right? We can survive a long-distance relationship while we sort things out.”

“I fall a little more in love with you every day,” she whispers.

“Ditto.”

“I have enough money saved for the last month’s payment,” she says. “So instead of three months, let’s count on two. As soon as he makes that payment in June, I’m leaving.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m not going to fly to L.A. next month, so that’ll save me about a thousand dollars, and I’m pretty frugal right now in general. My agent is depositing the money from Rock Vibe into my account soon, and I’m not making much for the Alexa Humboldt event, but every little bit helps.”

“If you need my Rock Vibe money, it’s yours,” I say and continue before she can protest. “I know you want to say no, but if you need it, you can have it. There is literally nothing I need. I get a per diem from the band, and they feed us on show nights, so I’m good.

I’m frugal right now too, so let’s look at our finances together and see what we can do to get you away from Callum. ”

“Oh, Mick.”

“I like when you call me Michael,” I say softly.

“Only when we’re alone,” she whispers. “That’ll be part of our love language.”

“Yes. Yes, it will.” I desperately want to tell her I love her, but the time isn’t right, and I don’t want to say it for the first time on the phone.

“Kick ass for Alexa,” I say instead. “And I’ll see you in a few days.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” she promises.

“Give Toby a high-five from me,” I say.

“Good night, Michael.”

“Good night, beautiful.” I hang up and pick up my guitar again.

I’m going to finish this song and play it for the band tomorrow.

And whenever she finally leaves Callum, I’m going to talk the guys into playing it live for her.

A public proclamation of my feelings.

That’s my love language.

Taryn

I'm nervous as I walk into the event venue for rehearsal. Alexa Humboldt is a big deal—and while I've had some success as a model, this is next level for me. I was so excited I barely slept last night, and I'm just grateful Callum's handprint bruise has finally faded.

"Taryn!" Stevie's familiar voice calls to me and I hurry over to greet her.

She gives me a quick hug before introducing me to Cheyenne—literally the biggest supermodel in the entire world. I'm rarely starstruck, but it's hard not to be with Cheyenne. She's tall and blond and absolutely breathtakingly gorgeous. The kind of woman the rest of us want to be.

And yet, she has a warm smile as she greets me. "Hi! Stevie told us so much about you. Alexa is really grateful you could step in at the last minute."

"I'm so honored to be here," I say warmly. "Thank you for inviting me."

"We'll see how thankful you are in about four hours, when she's made you change two hundred times because one stitch in one blouse is slightly off-center."

"Don't sass me, woman." Alexa Humboldt appears out of nowhere, a tiny wisp of a woman with glasses almost as big as her head. "Hi! You must be Taryn! Thanks for coming. And don't listen to Chey. She thinks because she's famous she doesn't have to work."

“And she thinks because she’s Alexa Humboldt —” her voice gets high and whiny when she says Alexa’s name, “—she can work us to death. For free, no less.”

“You don’t have to be here, Cheyenne Marie.”

Cheyenne sticks her tongue out at her and Alexa does it back.

I stare at them in confusion for a moment, but Stevie nudges me. “Don’t mind them—they’re like toddlers together. You’ll get used to it.”

“I made her career!” Alexa says.

“I made her career!” Cheyenne says at the same time.

“Yo mama,” Alexa tells her and then turns to me. “Okay, since we haven’t worked together before, let’s get you in with the stylist first. I need to see how my designs fit you. Also—I think there was a misunderstanding with your agent about payment for the show—walk with me.”

I’m whisked away with Stevie trailing after me, immediately stripping down to my underwear.

“Let’s get body makeup over here!” the stylist, Susanna, says. “Girlfriend, you have a wicked bruise on your back.”

“Do I?” I feign innocence. That bruise didn’t come from Callum’s spanking but from me stumbling into the bathroom afterward. I was in so much pain I just wanted to get into an ice-cold shower, and lost my balance as I was getting in. “I can be clumsy sometimes.”

There’s a weird look on Stevie’s face, but I smile and chat with everyone like it’s no

big deal because I'm not going to bring the drama of my life into an exciting opportunity like this. And I sure as shit am not going to tell them about Callum.

"Oh, that color looks amazing on you," Alexa says about an hour later when I walk out in an emerald-green, form-fitting dress that flares mid-calf.

"And it fits you perfectly—let me adjust that strap on your shoulder." She steps on a little stool and starts fussing with the strap, eventually calling for a needle and thread and actually detaching it and sewing it back on.

"What did I tell you?" Cheyenne quips, walking past us.

"You're lucky my hands are full," Alexa tells her without looking up.

"Yeah yeah." Cheyenne is laughing, talking on the phone to someone as she waits for her turn with the stylist.

Everything is so casual here, it's hard to believe Alexa is one of the top designers in the world. She isn't a Versace or Gucci, but she's become increasingly popular over the last decade and I'm still a little shocked that I'm here.

Cheyenne and Stevie are literal supermodels. There are a handful of other ladies here that are well-known as well, having appeared in Sports Illustrated or the covers of magazines like Cosmopolitan .

And everyone is chill. No one seems to question my being here or that I'm not nearly as successful as they are, and Alexa spends a long time making sure the dresses I'm going to wear fit me perfectly.

She's also paying me a lot more than Diane told me so that makes me happy.

“You doing okay?” Stevie asks me around three in the afternoon. We’ve been at this all day and while it’s a lot of work, it’s also fun.

“I’m great,” I tell her. “This has been incredible.”

“Alexa is wonderful. That’s why I mentioned your name when Joanna had to drop out at the last minute.”

“I appreciate it,” I say, turning to look at her. “Truly. I owe you one.”

She shakes her head. “Like I told you before—you owe me nothing. I recognize the pain in your eyes... and those bruises that don’t really tell a story, but for those of us who’ve read the book, we know.”

I swallow. “Please, I don’t want anyone to pity me or?—”

She reaches out and squeezes my hand. “No one here will judge. Chey is my best friend in the world, and she’ll have your back if you need her to.

Don’t let the lighthearted blonde persona that’s always messing around fool you.

She is one of the strongest, most loyal people you’ll ever meet.

When my ex tried to kill me, she literally threw herself at him, trying to help me.

She was there even though I was too stubborn to ask for help.

” She meets my eyes. “And I know damn well you’re not clumsy. So if you need help, ask for it.”

I look down at the diamond glittering on her left hand, opting to change the subject.

“Are you...engaged now?”

She smiles. “Yes. Marty Nadeau plays for the L.A. Phantoms. We’re getting married in Paris in June.”

“Congratulations.”

“He was my light at the end of the tunnel.”

And Mick is mine.

Two more months.

* * *

The show is amazing.

The clothes, the lights, the music—it’s a magical cocoon of new friends and endless possibilities. At least, that’s how it feels until I go backstage at the end and see Callum standing there with a huge bouquet of flowers.

What the fuck is he doing here?

I manage to paste a smile on my face even though I feel sick to my stomach and hurry over to him.

“Hi.” I frown as he leans over and gently kisses me.

“Hey, beautiful. Congratulations.” Callum being charming is always dangerous. I can tell by the brightness of his eyes he’s high, and when he’s doing cocaine, you never know what’s going to happen.

“Thank you.” I accept the flowers because I have no choice. “What are you doing here?”

“Did you think I wouldn’t be here for my girl’s big runway debut?”

Of all the bad luck, the band has the night off tonight. It never occurred to me he would fly out for the evening, but now he’s here and my good mood evaporates.

“Taryn!” Alexa comes over to hug me. “Thank you so much for an amazing show. You were incredible out there!”

“Thank you.” My voice sounds weird even to me, and I catch the look of concern on her face.

“This must be your boyfriend.”

I clear my throat. “Yes. Callum Yates, Alexa Humboldt.”

He takes her hand and kisses it—something I’ve never seen him do before. “I’m incredibly grateful to you for giving Taryn a chance.”

“She’s talented and beautiful—why wouldn’t I?” Alexa smiles. “We’ll talk soon, Taryn.” She moves off to someone else, leaving me with Callum.

“You ready to go party?” he asks me.

“I can’t party,” I protest. “I have an early flight back to L.A. in the morning. I have to see Toby and?—”

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head. “We’re in Vegas and I have the day off. We’re going to party. End of story.”

He stops talking as Cheyenne approaches, a tall, broad-shouldered man behind her. “Taryn, I want you to meet my husband, Ivan. Ivan Rochenko, Taryn Blakely.” She turns to Callum politely. “And you are?”

“Callum Yates.” He pulls the same move on Chey as he did with Alexa, kissing her hand. “And you’re the incredible Cheyenne.”

“I am.” She smiles politely, but it doesn’t reach her eyes.

“Nice to meet you.” Ivan holds out his hand to Callum, and Callum slowly shakes it.

“You’re that guy from the Phantoms,” he says. “Seen you on TV.”

“I am.” Ivan seems to be assessing him, and Callum straightens up to his full six-foot-five-inch height. As if that somehow gives him an advantage since Ivan is a couple of inches shorter.

“We’re going to a late dinner,” Cheyenne says. “I thought you might like to join us.”

I know better than to answer for us, so I look to Callum. His eyes gleam as he nods. “Absolutely. Let’s party!”

Cheyenne and I exchange a look, and I give a tiny shake of my head, praying she doesn’t say anything that will get me into trouble. Thankfully, she doesn’t.

“We have a limo,” is all she says. “Marty, Stevie, and Alexa are all coming along. We’ll see you outside in fifteen.”

“Now this is cool,” Callum says after she walks away. “You’re finally pulling your weight around here.”

I don't say anything, because there's no point.

He's ruined the evening for me, and I have a feeling he's going to make a major nuisance of himself for the night.

I just hope he doesn't ruin my relationships with Alexa, Stevie, and Chey. He doesn't like for me to have friendships with strong, successful women, which is why he doesn't let me spend time with Ryleigh, but this might be different if he thinks he can use them to somehow further his career.

I have to find Stevie and warn her, so this whole thing doesn't blow up in my face.

"I have to use the bathroom," I tell him. "Go mingle. There are lots of interesting people here."

"And lots of beautiful women." He looks around like he's a hungry bear at a buffet.

Gross.

But I don't care.

I just need to talk to Stevie before he can fuck up any more of my life.

I've worked too hard, and put up with too much, for him to blow things up when I'm this close to the finish line.

I also need to message Mick to let him know what's going on before I delete the app we communicate through off my phone.

I'm so fucking tired of sneaking around.

Two. Months.

I've made the decision I'm going to pay that last month on my own, even if it depletes my savings.

My sanity is worth it.

Mick

Now that I'm no longer on the prowl for female companionship, I'm a lot more focused on the music. And since we have today off—and a band meeting to boot—I decide to play “Touch Me” for the guys.

“I like it,” Jonny says, nodding and humming along. “This is good stuff.”

“You write this for the new album or something else?” Sam asks.

I shrug. “I wrote it because the words and melody wouldn't leave me alone.”

“We should run it past Sasha,” Angus says thoughtfully. “See if releasing another single could give us a boost. Make it available as a bonus track on the album or something.”

“Whatever you guys think.” I pause. “I'd like to try it out live, get a feel for the audience reaction. The problem is that these last shows have been...rough.”

Everyone nods.

The last couple of weeks of the tour have been disappointing.

The crowds have been lackluster at best, and we even got booed in Oklahoma City, so there's been talk about leaving the tour in the next month.

I've wanted to get the hell away from them from day one, but at the same time, that

would mean leaving Taryn, which I don't want.

"Sasha's calling." Angus has a laptop with the biggest screen so he usually takes the video calls, and he turns the monitor so we can all see her.

"Hey, guys, ready to get going?" She's all business sometimes.

"How's it going, Sasha?" Jonny calls out. "You're looking particularly mommy-ish today."

Her hair is in a ponytail, and she's probably forgotten about the burp cloth on her shoulder.

She lifts her middle finger in response, yanking the cloth from her shoulder and tossing it aside. "I have three under four. Talk to me when you have a house full of kids."

We all laugh.

"Okay, so there's a lot to talk about. Number one—Mick."

I arch my brows in surprise. "What's up, boss?"

"I heard from a men's clothing line called Barely Rockin'.

It's comfortable clothes that look edgy and modern.

They saw some comps from your Rock Vibe shoot and want you to do a test shoot with them.

They're offering a decent contract for a year if things work out.

I told them that anything you sign has to have conditions built in for the tour, and they're okay with that.

So when we're done with the group conversation, you and I need to talk privately. ”

“Oh, yeah. Thanks.” That came out of nowhere.

“You gonna leave us for your modeling career?” Tate teases me.

“No, but I'm never going to turn down money. If they think my ugly mug is good for their products, I'm in.”

Everyone nods in agreement because money is something they understand.

“Speaking of money.” She thumbs through some papers. “I have numbers for you. Deposits will be disbursed June fifteenth.” She tells us how much we made and while it's a little less than I'd hoped, it's still a lot of money. Ninety thousand dollars will go a long way in my life.

It'll also allow me to help Taryn, if she'll let me.

I respect the fact that she's proud and wants to do this on her own without being beholden to yet another man—it makes sense—but there won't be any strings attached if she takes money from me.

I just have to find a way to convince her of that.

“Speaking of money,” Sasha continues. “Rock Vibe has reached out. They want to license ‘Rough Around the Edges’ as part of their next marketing campaign. They're going to do commercials, print, and social media—they don't have details yet—but they want to work with us.

The money isn't as much as it should be for something like this, but it puts you guys fully in the black and allows us a cushion to talk about what's next. ”

“What's next?” Jonny asks.

“Whether or not we continue on the Karnal Death tour.”

Everyone is quiet.

We knew this was coming because things haven't been great, but she's been struggling to find another band for us to open for that will be a good fit. Both bands we've worked with in the past are on hiatus, so it's been tough to find us a slot on an existing tour.

“We knew it was a gamble to tour with them, but we didn't anticipate the success of your album. Now we have to pivot and to be honest, there's no one touring that has an opening.”

“Club tour?” Angus asks.

She nods. “I think it's a step backward, but we don't have much choice.

I've run some preliminary numbers, and if we use the money Rock Vibe is offering to get you started, and we can book through the summer, Nobody's Fool is going to do a three-month European stint starting in September, and they're happy to have you. ”

It seems like we all let out a collective sigh of relief.

We toured with Nobody's Fool last fall, until their lead singer, Lexi, had to go on maternity leave. She gave birth at the end of December, and, based on Sasha's announcement, she's not even taking a year off.

“Yes,” Sasha says, chuckling, “Lexi is chomping at the bit to get back out there. She’s going to bring the baby and a nanny, and it’s just for three months. It’s a trial run to see how it feels to tour with an infant. If it doesn’t work out, they’ll take more time off.”

“So when would we break off on our own?” I ask quietly.

“The first date that’s penciled in, assuming I can fill the calendar through the beginning of September, is June eighth.”

“That’s more than a month,” Angus says. “Have you told Karnal Death yet?”

She shakes her head. “No. And we’re not going to until we know for sure we can pull off an entire summer tour of club dates. It will mean playing almost every night if we’re going to make a profit, and that will be hard on Jonny’s voice.”

“I’m good,” he says firmly. “I’ll do whatever I have to so my voice stays healthy.”

“We’re ready,” Angus adds. “Whatever we need to do, because this has become a toxic environment. The crowds in the Midwest were happy to see us but since we came west it’s been different.”

“They’re from Texas,” Sasha says, nodding, “so it makes sense that this is where their diehard fans are. Plus, I think they’re jealous. They’ve been talking a little shit behind the scenes. They think we don’t know but I have eyes and ears everywhere.”

“They’re talking shit?” Tate asks, his eyes narrowing. “What the fuck?”

“Yes, but we’ve made enough money for you to be debt-free and getting nice paychecks next month. So shut your mouth and suck it up.” She pauses. “I know they’re not great to work with but they’ve been good for our bottom line. You’ve

only got a few weeks left, so play nice. I mean it.”

“Easier said than done,” I mutter.

“We have a lot of good things happening, a platinum album, a potential deal with a clothing line, and even though we’re giving him shit about it—Mick’s face in clothing ads can only help us.

Adding your music to the mix? That could be huge, mainstream exposure.

So keep your heads down, play the music, and let me work my magic behind the scenes.

Three weeks, tops, and you’re out of there.

But that’s when we get our cut of the merch, so don’t fuck it up.

That’s going to be tens of thousands of dollars in addition to the numbers we already talked about. ”

Essentially, a lot of money for us.

We talk for another couple of minutes and then disconnect, with Sasha promising to call me in an hour.

Everyone is quiet for a while before Tate finally looks at me. “What does this mean for you and Taryn?”

I stare, unsure where he’s going with this. “What are you talking about?”

“Come on, man. We’d have to be blind not to see the way you look at her—and the

way she looks at you when she thinks no one is watching. We want you to be happy, but you know Callum is going to blow his top if he figures it out.”

I huff out a breath. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“We do,” Angus says. “Come on, Ryleigh has been running around at every venue looking for places where the two of you can be alone without being seen together. You need to talk to us, man. You can do what you want but this is important. Your private life is your business, but in this case, there’s a lot of money at stake.

If Callum wants to screw us out of the merch money because he’s pissed you’re fucking his girlfriend?—”

“It’s not like that, dammit!” I growl, scowling at them.

“Taryn and I want to be together but... there’s something she has to take care of first. Until then, she can’t leave him.

She’s taking care of a family member with cancer, okay?

” I hate divulging information she made me promise to keep to myself but the band isn’t going to let this go unless I give them at least part of the story.

“But why is that a secret?” Tate asks in confusion.

I give him a dark look. “Would you want to tell the world that you’re fucking some guy so he’ll pay for cancer treatment you can’t afford and essentially admit to everyone you know that you feel like a prostitute?”

He grimaces. “Jesus. Is that what’s happening?”

“She swore me to secrecy, and I just fucked that up, so I’m asking you guys to respect her privacy.

And mine. I’m only telling you so you understand that this isn’t some stupid relationship game we’re playing.

I love her. She’s going through something serious and humiliating.

She’s trying to come out of this with some semblance of her pride intact. Can I trust you guys to respect that?”

“Absolutely,” Jonny says. “I mean, I had no idea...”

“Yeah, we’re cool.” Tate nods.

“Of course.” Sam leans forward. “And if there’s anything we can do...”

“If she needs resources,” Angus adds, “I might be able to help.”

“I’ll let you guys know. Just give me a week or two to figure out how we’re going forward.”

I’m already considering asking Sasha for an advance. I’ll even pay interest if that’s what it takes. And if she won’t do it, I’ll go to Angus.

Taryn has to be okay with it, though.

I don’t want her to feel like she’s trading one overbearing man for another.

I hate everything about her situation, but I understand that she needs to take her power back. Her mental health depends on it. So as much as it pains me, I’m going to

support her as best I can without overstepping the boundaries she set.

As long as I have a backup plan.

Just in case.

Because if Callum hurts her again, all bets are off.

Taryn

White powder is arranged in thick, vertical lines on the glass coffee table.

Callum rolls up a hundred-dollar bill and uses it to snort the first line.

He passes the bill to Dusty, who does the same thing.

The rest of the band follows suit before turning to me.

Callum's drummer, whose nickname is Joker, proffers the makeshift straw to me and I shake my head.

"No, thanks."

"God, you're a fucking killjoy!" Callum snaps, scowling at me.

Using drugs is one thing I won't let him manipulate me into, and he seems to understand that's an area where I've drawn a firm line in the sand.

"I'll do her share!" A perky brunette with the biggest breasts I've ever seen steps forward. Joker hands her the bill, she snorts a line and then sighs happily.

Like it's the best thing ever.

At least no one is looking at me anymore.

The past week has been a nightmare.

Callum has been insufferable since the fashion show, constantly asking me if I've heard from Chey or Stevie, making plans to go to L.A. with me on my next trip so we can hang out with them again, and making a nuisance of himself any time I talk about anything work-related.

He's suddenly fascinated by my career—the same career he wanted me to give up so I wouldn't be away from him so often—and he hovers more than ever. I have a feeling he's looking to see if my career can in any way help his since the band's new album hasn't sold like previous ones.

“Hey.” Ryleigh's voice makes me jump, and I turn in surprise.

I didn't realize they'd invited Crimson Edge to the party, and I'm momentarily relieved.

Now, at least, I have something of a buffer.

Callum doesn't care what other people think for the most part, but he does behave a little better around Crimson Edge.

From what I understand, there was something in the contract drawn up when they invited Crimson Edge to be their opening act—any aggressive behavior could result in a fine, so that keeps things on an even keel.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, giving her a quick hug.

“The guys wanted to make an appearance so it doesn't seem like they're snubbing them.” She looks around. “But my gut tells me we're not going to stay long. At least, Angus and I aren't.”

“Please stay for a little while,” I beg softly. “He’s doing coke, which means he’s going to be an even bigger asshole than usual in about thirty minutes.”

She grimaces. “We’ll stay for a little while... drugs just aren’t our scene. That’s not part of the band’s image. They like to party but no drugs.”

“Mine either,” I murmur.

Her expression changes, like there’s something on her mind, but then she smiles. “So tell me about the Alexa Humboldt fashion show—how exciting!”

“It was!” I tell her about the clothes and all the fun people I met. “And Alexa’s itty-bitty, like probably four-eleven. She’s tiny but fierce as fuck. When she walks into a room, people pay attention.”

“I love a woman with a commanding presence!” Ryleigh says, fanning herself playfully.

“You’d like her,” I say.

“I wonder if there’s a way for me to spin an article about her in Rock Harder,” she says thoughtfully. “I’m trying to incorporate as many stories about strong, successful women as possible but there just aren’t that many in the music business.”

“She’s the one who dressed Casey Hart from the beginning of her career,” I tell her. “And since Crimson is signed to Casey’s label, you might be able to spin it in some way to focus on that.”

“Hmm.” Ryleigh nods. “I’m going to have to think about that. Thank you. I didn’t realize she used to design Casey’s clothes.”

“I guess Alexa was just starting out and Casey gave her a shot.”

“I love that.”

As we talk, more and more people arrive, and pretty soon I don’t even see Callum, which is nice.

“Hey, beautiful.” Mick’s voice gives me chills.

I smile, though I don’t turn or acknowledge him in any way.

“If we get a chance,” he continues. “There’s a little alcove in the hallway that’s hidden. Maybe we can talk for a few. Let’s see what happens in the next twenty minutes or so... Callum is completely wasted. I think he’s going to pass out soon.”

That would be amazing.

“I’ll be around,” I whisper before heading for the ladies room.

I touch up my lipstick and look in the mirror. There are faint bags under my eyes, but there’s also a twinkle now. It’s because of Mick, no doubt about that, but that’s okay. He brings joy to my life, something I haven’t had much of in the last couple of years.

When I leave the bathroom, even more people have shown up, and now the hallways are crawling with guests. The party is up in one of the presidential suites that the guys rented out for the evening, but there have to be over a hundred people here, so it’s spilling out into the hall.

I make note of the alcove Mick mentioned, but it’s not private enough now that there are so many people—and the elevators just opened, another group spilling into the hall.

The smell of marijuana wafts through the air, sweet and heavy, and I wrinkle my nose in distaste. I would do anything to be back in L.A., at my mom's house, curled up on the couch reading Toby a story. Or watching one of his favorite movies. Making popcorn together.

Despite Mick being a touring musician, I can't help but think that he would enjoy being there with us too when he's not on the road. He's the kind of guy who has balance, and who knows when to turn off his rockstar persona and just be... Michael.

Someone's calling my name, and I look over at Callum. He has a blonde on one side and a redhead on the other, motioning for me to join them.

Ugh.

I don't know why he's so determined to have threesomes and gang bangs and all kinds of other sex that includes multiple partners.

Like having one person at a time isn't enough.

I've always been firm about that kind of thing, but unlike with drugs, he keeps trying.

And now we're in a big group where I'm going to have to turn him down in front of his friends—something I know he won't like.

"All I'm missing is the brunette, baby!" he calls to me. "Come sit on my lap and show us a good time."

"Now you know I don't like to share," I say, keeping my voice light. I eye the two girls he's with. "Beat it—before I beat the shit out of both of you."

The girls look surprised, but there must be something in my eyes that tells them I

mean business because they scatter. Pretending to be jealous saves face for Callum and gets me out of an awkward situation as well.

“Now what’d you go and do that for?” Callum complains, but his head lolls to the side and his eyes flutter closed.

He’s definitely fucked up, drunk and high on who knows what.

Which bodes well for me since I have no intention of having sex with him in front of people or joining him in any of the shenanigans he talks about.

He seems to doze off, and I make a show of smoothing his hair back from his face and kissing the top of his head. The band seems to be constantly watching me and if they remember anything tomorrow, I want it to be of me being nice.

“Smooth,” Ryleigh whispers in my ear.

“Not my first day as Callum’s girlfriend,” I mutter. “I’ve had to learn some tricks to survive.”

“Someday, you’re going to tell me the real reason you put up with him.”

I nod. “I will. Promise.”

It’s nearly two in the morning, and I’m trying to decide whether or not I can escape back to our room. Callum will wake up soon—no way he’s out for the night—but then he’ll drink some more, smoke more pot, and pass out again. He usually starts the night with cocaine and ends it with weed.

“Taryn!” I hear my name and whirl to see Mick, a look of panic on his face. “Cops are on the way up. Someone complained—they’re going to raid the place, and there

are drugs everywhere.”

Our eyes lock, and mine must be filled with panic.

“Let me get you out of here.”

“Yes.” I don’t have a choice because just then, someone yells, “Cops!” and everything goes wild.

“Come on.” Mick closes his hand around mine and pulls me out of the room, down the hall, and around the corner toward what appears to be a freight elevator. Angus, Ryleigh, and Tate are already there, motioning for us to hurry.

“Come on!” Angus hisses.

We run into the elevator and the doors close behind us.

“Fuck.” Tate shakes his head. “That would’ve been a disaster. Drugs fucking everywhere.”

“The head of security at this hotel knows my dad,” Angus says. “He texted me to give me a head’s-up.”

“Thank you,” I whisper. I’m not talking to anyone directly, just grateful they included me in their escape plan. Well, I’m sure it was Mick’s doing, but Angus and the others didn’t have to wait for us.

We exit in the shipping and receiving area, and there’s a guy in a suit who nods to Angus.

“There’s a taxi waiting to take you for a drive around the city,” he says with a smile.

“I’ll text you when the coast is clear.”

Angus shakes his hand. “I owe you one, man.”

“I’ll hold you to it!”

We climb into a van that pulls around the corner.

Even from here, we can hear the sirens and I’m eternally grateful I got out of there.

Getting arrested during a drug raid would be disastrous in my bid for custody, not to mention a blow to my reputation.

Supermodels aren’t necessarily meant to be angels—there are certainly a ton of them who’ve behaved badly over the years—but I don’t want to be one of them.

That’s not the image I want for myself or the example I want to set for my son.

I’m so thankful that Mick’s first thought was to get me out of there, because there’s no doubt in my mind I would be in jail right now if he hadn’t.

And I have to take some time to think about what that really means.

Mick

We drive in silence for a while, everyone seemingly lost in thought. I can't tell what Taryn is thinking, but she's nestled against my side, her fingers still twined with mine. I feel like I need to say something, an explanation of sorts, but I can't.

So we just sit there for a bit until Angus says, "My buddy just texted. There are a lot of arrests. I asked him to see if he can find out specifically about Callum, and he said yes. He and Dusty were just taken out in handcuffs."

"What does that mean?" Taryn asks quietly. "Can he get out tonight?"

"Probably not. They'll arraign in the morning."

She lets out a sigh of obvious relief. "Thank fuck."

"Any other news?" Tate asks.

Angus types something into his phone. "It's a clusterfuck. Adam says they're arresting everyone they can round up. People scattered, like we did, but they arrested at least twenty-five or thirty people. Including the band."

"Thank you for getting me out of there," Taryn says quietly. "It could have been a disaster for me if I'd been arrested. Both personally and professionally."

Angus nods. "You're welcome."

“And thank you.” She looks at me, a soft smile on her face.

“You think I’d leave you behind? Not in a million years.”

“Are we just going to drive around?” Sam asks, looking out the window. “It’s late.”

“Adam says we need to give them about an hour to clear out the police and such.”

“I might take a nap,” Ryleigh says, yawning and resting her head on his shoulder.

“I’m not used to all this excitement.”

“We really need to get the fuck off this tour,” Sam mutters.

“A couple more weeks,” Jonny says.

“A couple more weeks?” Taryn asks, confusion on her face. “Are you leaving the tour?”

Crap.

I haven’t had a chance to talk to her about this.

“Yeah,” I say gently. “Things haven’t been going well for us.”

“The crowds have been rough on you,” she says, nodding. “But I didn’t realize you could just... leave the tour.”

“It’s not that simple,” Angus says, “but we can’t keep playing to crowds who boo us.

The fact of the matter is, we were never a good fit with Karnal Death.

They play speed metal with a much harder edge.

Our music is a lot more melodic, contemporary rock, for lack of a better term.

Our fan bases are totally different. But with Nobody's Fool and Onyx Knight both on hiatus, our label couldn't find us a tour we could just step into.

And they offered us a sweet deal with merch and such. ”

“But now we know why,” Sam says. “I’ve done some digging, along with Angus, and it turns out no one likes touring with them.”

“Wait—I didn’t know about this,” Jonny says, looking up.

“Just came to light yesterday,” Angus says.

“Haven’t had a chance to tell you everything I found out.

Anyway, their fans are essentially as big of assholes as the band is.

Not all of them, obviously, but they have fan clubs who go out of their way to bash their opening acts unless it’s someone Karnal Death personally asks them not to. ”

“What the fuck?” I mutter. “That’s bullshit.”

“Exactly.” Sam nods. “So that’s why we’re trying to get the hell out. We have a platinum album, so we really didn’t want to do a club tour, but that’s looking like our only option for the summer.”

“Is that bad?” Taryn asks. “I mean, clubs are smaller, so you’ll sell less tickets, but they’re probably less expensive?”

Angus nods. “That’s the thing. Sasha is running numbers to figure out how many nights we have to play to pay all our expenses.

We don’t pay transportation costs right now because that was part of the deal—our equipment travels with Karnal Death’s.

That was a big selling point. Now we’re going to have to hire trucks and drivers and whatnot to go solo. Costs go up exponentially.”

He could singlehandedly run a tour for us himself—he’s richer than God—but we agreed that Angus wouldn’t throw his money around unless we’re desperate for it. We want to do this without him. So to speak.

“I didn’t realize,” Taryn is saying. “I guess there’s a lot to touring that most of us don’t know anything about. I’m going to miss you guys, though. You’ve made this leg of the tour bearable.” She glances at me, and I lean over.

“We’ll figure something out for us,” I say against her ear.

“I’m working on an exit plan,” she whispers back.

“We’ll talk later. Stay with me tonight?”

She nods. “Absolutely.”

I know the others are watching and listening, but I don’t care. They might give me shit privately, but they won’t embarrass Taryn or do anything to get her into trouble with Callum. I trust these guys with my life, so she can too.

* * *

It's after four when we get back to the hotel.

We're all tired, but Adam brings us in through the shipping doors and puts us on the freight elevator again. My room is on the eighth floor, and we head in that direction as we all say good night.

"You look tired, babe," I tell Taryn after I close the door behind us.

"I'm exhausted," she admits, sinking into a chair and kicking off her heels. "But we don't get to spend much time together, so I don't want to sleep."

"Okay." I pull off my shirt, toe off my Chucks, and make my way to the bed. "Come here. We can talk while we get comfortable."

"I better set an alarm, in case we fall asleep," she says. "I can't be gone when Callum gets back."

"Do what you need to do." I fluff up a few pillows and then lean back against them. She types something into her phone and when she's finished, I hold out my arms.

She slides onto the bed and immediately nestles against my chest.

We sit like that for a few minutes, and I stroke her arm, waiting for her to say something. I'm wiped out, but she's right that we get so little time together.

"How long do we have before you leave the tour?" she asks finally.

"Around the first week of June."

"I may have to move up my timetable," she says quietly.

“What timetable?”

“I have about twelve grand in my savings account. I’m getting a few thousand from Alexa, and just under a grand from Rock Vibe.

That other photo shoot I did will bring in another fifteen hundred, so that’ll put me around fifteen, so with my mom’s help, I should be able to pay the last two months of Toby’s treatment without Callum. ”

“Babe, let me help you so you can get out now. I can ask Angus or?—”

“No. Please.” She sits up, shaking her head.

“Look, you’re important to me. Like, probably the most important person in my life other than my son.

And I don’t want us to start a relationship based on...

me needing you. I want us to be together because we’re in love.

Because we can’t stand to be away from each other.

I don’t want there to be this money thing hanging over our heads. ”

I start to protest, but she puts a gentle finger over my lips.

“I know you wouldn’t do what Callum does.

I know that. But you’re too important to me to start our relationship based on need.

Not again. It’s different, but in my heart it would be us starting off with something

between us—and I don't want that.

I need to figure this out on my own. I have to. Can you understand?"

I sigh. "I do and I don't. I'm in love with you, Taryn. I know it's soon and crazy and all the things our friends would tell us, but I can't pretend like I'm not."

"I'm falling for you too," she whispers. "That's why it's so important to me that I get myself out of this mess I'm in."

"Okay." I nod, even though I hate it.

Now that I know for sure she feels what I feel, I need to get her away from Callum.

Sooner rather than later. I respect her wishes, and I understand the idea that she wants us to basically start with a clean slate.

But this seems like such a big sacrifice on her part.

The idea that he touches her every night—forces her to do things she doesn't want to do—it just rubs me the wrong way.

"Michael?" Her voice changes slightly, one of her hands on my face.

"Yeah, baby?"

"Will you kiss me?"

"I'll do anything you want." I lean in and capture her lips with mine. It's late and we're both exhausted, but my heart—and regions farther south—are extremely excited about this turn of events.

I pull her astride me and the kiss deepens, a soft whimper escaping her as we explore each other as thoroughly as we can without taking things to the next level.

“Been a long time since I’ve been relegated to second base,” I murmur playfully.

“Third base is on the table,” she whispers.

“Yeah?” I smile. “You know I can wait, right? We don’t have to do anything if you’re not comfortable.”

“It’s not about comfort. Initially, I didn’t want to be a woman that cheats, but I don’t feel that loyalty to him anymore.

Not with how he treats me. The fact that he doesn’t hesitate to get blow jobs when I’m away and then spanked me so hard he left bruises.

I’m done with him. Me wanting to wait goes a lot deeper than whether or not I’m technically cheating. ”

“I understand all of that, and I’m okay with it. What I’m not completely sure about is what third base entails.”

She giggles. “I’m not completely sure either.” She runs a hand down my chest, over my abdomen, and to the area just above my groin. “Hand jobs? Fingering?”

I chuckle. “You tell me.”

“I feel like we’re in high school again, trying to figure out how far we want to go.”

“So you don’t get pregnant.” I grin.

She laughs and holds up her arm. “I know what you’re trying to say, but just FYI—I have a birth control implant. No matter what happens, you don’t have to worry about that.”

“Good to know, but I’m a big proponent of condoms.”

“I remember.”

“So tell me about third base. I don’t want to overstep any boundaries.”

“How about we play a game?” she suggests, a wicked gleam in her eye. Then before I realize what’s happening, she slowly pulls off her dress, leaving her in nothing but a tiny black thong.

I swallow, eyes glued to her beautiful body. “What, um...what kind of... game?”

“The everything but game.”

Taryn

I watch as his eyes go molten.

He's hard—I can feel him pressed against my backside since I'm straddling him—but it's the look in his eyes that gets to me. No one has ever looked at me the way Mick does. Like I'm the moon, the stars, and all the constellations of the universe. And I'm his.

It's hard to describe the adoration, and sheer desire, in his expression.

I'm so close to throwing caution to the wind but deep down, I really do want to wait before we make love. Maybe I'm just rationalizing, but in this instance, there's a difference between fooling around and having intercourse.

Does oral count as sex?

I don't know and right now, I don't care.

I just want to be intimate with him, in whatever way works for us.

There's something romantic and special about waiting before we go all the way, and the fact that he's willing to humor me in this makes me fall a little harder. He just told me he's in love with me, so now all I can think about is finding a way to get out from under Callum's thumb.

No matter what it takes.

“You’re thinking way too much,” he whispers, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me closer.

Our mouths fuse together, and my mind goes blank, completely under the spell of this beautiful man.

We kiss and touch and explore, like the first time all over again, and soon we’re sprawled on the mattress, face to face.

“I think we’re wearing too many clothes,” he whispers.

I chuckle. “Speak for yourself.”

He grins and wiggles out of his jeans and socks. He’s wearing boxers, and I motion with my hand.

“Those too.”

“You first.”

I reach down and hook my thumbs in the sides of my thong and slowly inch them down, my eyes never leaving his.

The best part is, he’s completely focused on my eyes, instead of what I’m revealing down below, and then he’s kissing me again.

At some point, his boxers disappear, and our naked bodies are pressed together.

Warm, callused fingers trail the curve of my backside, my hip, and the side of my breast. He inches his thumb between us, rubbing it gently on my nipple until it pebbles into a hard peak.

A soft moan escapes me and I arch my chest, anxious for more.

He dips his head and sucks a nipple into his mouth.

His lips are warm and wet, the pressure perfect, and I dig my fingers into his hair.

I love looking down and seeing his dark head attached to my chest, and I groan when he releases my nipple with a little plop.

Then he moves to the other, sucking and nibbling, each swipe of his tongue shooting straight to my core.

“Fuck, Mick, don’t stop.” My breasts are sensitive, so most guys are too rough, but Mick senses exactly how much pressure is perfect.

Or maybe he just remembers.

“I need to taste you,” he growls.

“I want to taste you too.”

He smiles. “Does third base include sixty-nine?”

“I think it does tonight.”

He flips onto his back and motions for me to climb on. “Drop that pretty little pussy right over here and see if there’s anything you like down there.”

I scramble into position, and before I have a chance to think about what’s coming, I feel his fingers. Stroking, separating and—his lips. Right. There. Teasing and taunting, gentle kisses, tiny nibbles.

“You’re so wet,” he murmurs, swirling a finger around the juices pooling at my entrance.

“Oh, fuck,” I pant.

He plays for a few seconds, taking his time as he slides his finger up to my clit.

“Oh, God,” I whimper.

“I’m going to need a little reciprocation if this is going to continue,” he whispers in a gruff voice.

My eyes open and I stare down at his thick, beautiful cock. Hard and already leaking, I dip my head and use the tip of my tongue to get my first taste. He hisses in response, and then it’s a game of cat and mouse, chasing each other toward ecstasy while simultaneously backing off one at a time.

His tongue moves inside me, in and out, forcing my hips to grind in response. Then he slows down and I focus on wrapping my hands around him, stroking up and down before nibbling the tip. He simultaneously increases the pressure of his mouth, devouring me like a man starved.

There’s a finger inside me, moving in and out steadily—in time to the bobbing of my head around his cock. When I pick up speed, he does too, and I can’t control the trembling of my legs. I’m embarrassingly close to the edge, and it’s only been a few minutes.

So I suck harder, hands and mouth working in tandem, but just when I think he’s going to shoot, he backs off.

“Mick!” I whimper with distress.

“I want us to come together,” he whispers gruffly. “Are you close?”

“So close.”

“Here?” He curves the finger inside me and I moan.

“Yes. Please. Don’t stop.”

“There’s no stopping now.” He adds a second finger, and I open my mouth, taking his cock as far as I can.

Using my free hand, I reach down, cupping his balls and then slowly increasing pressure until his hips shoot up.

He simultaneously bites down on my clit and the world splinters into beautiful, sexy pieces.

“Michael!” I cry out his name, probably more than once, but I’m oblivious to everything but pleasure. The somersaults in my belly war with the pulsing between my legs and it seems like a long time before I can breathe again.

“That’s my girl,” he whispers, gently rolling me to the side and then tugging me up and against his chest.

“Damn. I forgot how good you are.”

He chuckles. “You forgot? I guess I’m going to have to spend some time reminding you.”

“That sounds good.”

“I don’t want you to go back to him.”

I stiffen. “Mick, you know I have to.”

“Why can’t we figure out how to pay for Toby’s treatment together? Maybe I can borrow against my upcoming royalty. You can pay me back.”

“I thought we already covered this?”

“It’s a loan. It’s not the same thing as fixing it for you.”

“Do you have to ruin a beautiful moment talking about this stuff?”

“We don’t have a lot of opportunities to talk about anything,” he protests. “When else are we going to do it?”

“I’m close to getting away,” I promise. “I’m going to sit down and run some numbers after I get some sleep. See how close I am to coming up with the final two payments.”

“And then?”

“If I can swing it, I’ll leave him. I need him to make this week’s payment and then I’ll reassess. It takes so long for payments to come in from the different clients, so I’m not sure when I’m getting what, but once I have that sorted out, I can work on my exit plan.”

“No plan is necessary,” he rumbles. “You tell me you’re ready and I’ll come down there and get you. I dare him to try and stop you with me standing there.”

“He can be mean. Especially when he’s high.”

“And I can handle myself. I also don’t plan to come alone. My band has my back, always. If I need them, they’ll be there. For me and for you.”

I bury my face in the hollow of his shoulder and hold on for dear life.

I don’t know how I got so lucky to find a guy like Mick, but he gives me the strength to get through whatever is waiting for me between now and when I can leave. Callum will be surlier than usual today but knowing Mick is on the other side of this is something to look forward to.

“Taryn?” His voice is almost as warm as his body and it’s going to require Herculean strength to get up from this bed and go back to the room I share with Callum.

“I’m just thinking how lucky I am,” I whisper. “To have found you again.”

“Everything is going to be okay, babe.”

I’m trying really hard to believe him.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:32 am

Mick

I hate waking up alone, but I can't help but grin when I think about last night.

This morning, I guess, but whatever. Being with Taryn was incredible, and watching her leave was a lot harder than I anticipated.

She needed to get some sleep because she doesn't know what to expect when Callum gets back.

Personally, I wish they'd let him rot in jail, but we got a text from Angus letting us know that the band's attorney had been called and they were assuming Callum would be out by noon.

So Taryn left, I slept for a few hours, and then my eyes popped open.

I don't know if it's stress or worry or something else, but I gave up on sleep and took a quick shower before going downstairs in search of coffee.

Now I'm heading up to Jonny's room for an early dinner meeting.

Sasha is ordering takeout for us, and we're getting an update on both the tour and last night's clusterfuck.

"Hey." Jonny opens the door, and I step inside.

Ryleigh is handing out our meals from the Chinese restaurant Sasha ordered from and

Angus is setting up his computer.

“How’s Taryn?” Ryleigh asks me.

“I don’t know,” I admit. “She went back to her room around eight this morning. She didn’t want to risk not being there when Callum got back.”

Ryleigh’s face tightens. “I fucking hate this for her.”

“Me too.”

“Hey, guys.” Sasha comes up on the screen with a big smile, a tow-headed toddler on her lap. “Say hello to Phoenix.”

“Hey, Phoenix! How’s it hangin’, little dude?” Tate asks him.

“Pop-sicle!” Phoenix responds, holding up a red bar that appears to be melting all over his hand.

“That looks good,” Tate says. “Can I have a bite?”

Phoenix holds it up to the screen, and Tate pretends to take a bite.

“Yum!” he says. “Thank you!”

“Bye bye!” Phoenix squirms to get down and runs out of the room.

“Welcome to my life,” Sasha says, laughing.

“He’s cute,” Sam says. “But I bet he keeps you busy.”

“We spend a lot of time chasing them around.”

“So what’s going on?” Angus calls out. “Do we have a solo tour?”

“We do.” Sasha nods emphatically. “But first, let me update you on last night’s insanity.

Luckily, you guys weren’t part of any of it, and today’s media reports are all about Karnal Death.

And the general consensus isn’t that positive, so it’s a good thing you’re breaking free to do your own thing. ”

“It’s definitely happening?” I ask with a mix of excitement and dread.

“It is, but I have to warn you—it’s going to be a bear.

I’ve got you playing five, sometimes six nights a week.

And travel is going to be rough. You’ll be sleeping on the bus more often than not.

You’re going from one city to the next. I don’t think you have gigs on any Mondays, and at least a few Tuesdays.

But the rest of the week is just go-go-go. ”

“It’s less than three months,” Sam points out. “We’ve got this.”

“Are you guys sure? Before I officially pull the trigger, you need to be sure this is a sacrifice you want to make.”

“Can we get a bigger bus?” Ryleigh asks dryly.

“So everyone has a bunk to stretch out on? Angus is way too big for us to share. If not, I’m going home for a while.

” There’s nothing accusatory or demanding in her tone, just a reality that we all understand because the bunks on a tour bus can be tiny.

“Don’t sweat it,” Sasha says. “We’re definitely upgrading the bus if you’re going to be sleeping on it every night. And you’ll be at hotels on Sundays and some Monday nights so everyone can get a good night’s sleep once or twice a week.”

“Are we good with this?” Jonny looks around.

“I’m in,” I say firmly.

“Ditto.” Tate lifts a hand.

“You know I’m in,” Angus says.

“Me too.” Sam nods.

“All right, I’m going to firm up these dates and work on the hotels and catering.”

“Are we still looking at a June eighth start date?” I ask, wondering how the hell I’m going to get Taryn away from Callum in the next four or five weeks.

“Yup. The first gig is in Atlanta. Then we’ll go down to Florida for four or five dates before heading up the Eastern Seaboard.” She discusses a few more logistics and promises to email us the schedule as soon as it’s ready, and once she logs off we all sit there looking at each other.

“To our first headlining gig,” Angus says after a moment, lifting his soda can.

We clink our cans and water bottles together.

A club tour isn’t like a stadium or arena tour, but it’s still a pretty big deal to be on a self-sustainable tour with our first album.

“To double platinum,” Jonny says.

“To a bigger tour bus,” Ryleigh adds.

“And a lot of fucking money,” I say.

“Crimson Edge for the win!” Tate yells.

It’s a damn good day for us.

So why is Taryn the only thing I can think about?

* * *

I don’t see her for a couple of days. Karnal Death delayed the show in Houston since none of them were in any condition to perform after spending the night in jail, so now we’re in Dallas.

The press is having a field day covering the situation, and we’re all grateful no one from Crimson Edge was caught on camera leaving the party.

More than anything, I’m glad no one saw Taryn with me.

Not because I give a shit about being seen together, but because Callum would lose

his mind, and deep down, I'm worried about her. I know he's been abusive to women in the past—we've run in the same circles for a long time—so I don't trust him much.

And with the woman I'm in love with? Not at all.

It's taking all my self-control not to get involved, to ask Angus or Sasha to lend me the money for Toby's treatment and get her out of there. I understand her pride and the desire for us to start a relationship with a clean slate.

But is it worth her safety?

Now that we've been intimate again, she's fucking mine.

I'm not letting her slip away a second time, no matter what it takes.

Things will undoubtedly be complicated for us since she has a kid she wants full custody of.

Having a long-distance relationship won't be easy, but it'll be manageable once we have some money.

She still has to work, and I can fly her and Toby out to shows whenever he has time off from school. He's being homeschooled right now, and I don't know what their plans are in that regard, but I'm sure it's going to have a lot to do with his health and the results of this treatment.

I can't even think about what will happen if she loses him, but I'm going to be there for her no matter what.

I'm already trying to think about things I can do to bond with Toby. He likes Pokémon Go, so I've downloaded it onto my phone and started hunting for the little

guys. It's kind of funny when you open the app and there's a character in the room with you. Then I snatch up the little bastards.

Of course, I have no idea what I'm supposed to do with them after I catch them, but I have time to figure it out. I'm going to make Tate or Jonny do it with me until I get the hang of it, then I can hopefully have something to talk to Toby about.

He also likes Legos, which were never my thing, but I can figure it out.

There seems to be a way you can build a rock concert set with Lego's, so I've started researching how to buy the pieces and the tutorial.

It's probably way above my skill level, but I know Sam is into that kind of thing, so I'm sure he'll help me.

There are a lot of logistics to work out, like where we'll live and how to see each other if she's a full-time mom, but my hope is that she can live with her mom this fall while I'm on tour.

That will give us both time to work and save money so that we can either buy or rent something.

At the very least, she needs to be able to hire an attorney so she can get custody.

I'm probably jumping the gun, but I already let her go once before. I can't do that again. I knew she was it when I was twenty-two but was too stupid to act on it. I've had close to five years to regret that decision, so I won't make it again.

Of course, everything is contingent upon getting her away from Callum first.

And I don't know how I'm going to watch over her once we leave the tour.

She says she's working on getting the money to break away sooner, but I don't know how she'll pull it off. Payments are slow, and both her agent and the government take a cut off the top, so we don't know exactly what will be left.

Sasha doesn't take any kind of agent fee from us—she's paid by the record company—but we may have to discuss something additional if she continues to coordinate these modeling jobs that keep coming up.

If she doesn't want to handle it, I can always sign on with Taryn's agent, but I think it would be easier for Sasha to do it since she knows my music and the band comes first.

"You okay, bro?" Sam sinks down next to me as we ride over to the arena for soundcheck.

"Yeah. Just trying to figure out if it's possible to have it all."

He cocks his head. "In what way?"

"Even when Taryn leaves Callum, she still has to work. And technically, she lives in L.A. I don't know how we'll manage the long-distance thing."

"Kirsten and I do it. She's in college in New York, I'm here, and we've made it work. She's about to finish her freshman year and we're still going strong."

"Yeah, but you guys—at least her—have money. Right now, Taryn and I don't. Kirsten can afford to fly out whenever she wants. Once we pay taxes and, in Taryn's case, her agent's fifteen percent, we're not left with a lot."

"Yeah, but things are changing and she's getting a lot more work lately, right?"

I nod.

“Why does it feel like there’s more to this story?”

“Because there is,” I mutter. “I just can’t break her confidence.”

He sighs. “Whatever it is she’s hiding, just make sure the two of you are on the same page. There’s no other way for it to work.”

If I ever get Taryn alone again, we are definitely going to talk about everything.

I just don’t know when that will be.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:32 am

Taryn

Callum is in a foul mood when he gets out of jail, and though he isn't mad that I didn't get arrested, he's suspicious.

I thought long and hard about what to tell him but figured it would be too easy to catch me in a lie if I say I'd already gone back to the room.

So I give him a version of the truth—that I was with Ryleigh, and Angus got us out of there because he knew the head of the hotel's security.

I can't tell if he believes me or not because he's just pissed off about everything. The fact that they were raided. The fact that he got arrested. The fact that they had to postpone the Houston show.

He's just mad and has been taking it out on me for two days.

Not physically, thankfully, but verbally. He's just been awful, and though I do my best to tune him out, he seems to sense it when I do and that's when he gets ugly.

"You think I don't know what you're doing," he grumbles as we get ready to leave for the arena. "But I'm not stupid."

"What are you talking about?" I ask warily.

"I know you're going to leave me the second I hit the send on that final payment for Toby."

I can't deny it, but I won't say it outright either.

"Have you given me a single reason to stay?" I ask. "You promised you'd ease up on the constant yelling, but you haven't. Then, if I do the slightest thing wrong in your eyes, you spank me. I used to love you, but now I'm just hurt."

I see the flicker of surprise in his eyes—as if he never expected me to say I loved him since we've never used that word—but it's gone almost as quickly as it appeared.

"You're just like all women," he rumbles. "Using me. For money and status and whatever else. You think it's a coincidence you're getting more work now that you're with me?"

I resist the urge to roll my eyes since we've been together over a year and the work just recently started rolling in. And that's mostly due to Stevie's help. I won't argue that point with him, though.

"I've had most of these contacts a long time," I say instead.

"What the hell are you wearing?" he asks when I come out of the bathroom in short shorts and a tank top.

"It's a thousand degrees," I say. "And an outdoor show. What do you want me to wear?"

"See, this is why we fight." He shakes his head. "Put on a fucking dress. And lose the panties."

"I'm not going to go without panties to a show," I protest.

He growls. "I said, put on a dress and lose the panties. Unless you want me to call the

bank and stop today's payment."

I suck in a breath through my nose, trying not to cry or lose my temper—neither of those things go over well with Callum.

"You just told me I dress too slutty to attend a country club even with you, but now you want me to walk around in a short dress with no panties."

"That's right." He reaches out and roughly grips my chin with two fingers. "You want those final two payments made—you're going to have to work a lot harder for them."

"What does that mean?"

His smile is menacing. "I think you know."

I shake my head. "I'm not fucking the band."

"You will." His eyes blaze with intensity. Or maybe it's insanity. I can't even tell at this point.

"Or little Toby won't get his treatment," he continues. "In fact, we're going to make that happen tonight—because then I can call the bank and stop the payment."

"Do it," I say, though my stomach is churning and my chest is so tight I hope this is panic and not a heart attack. "And I'll be gone tomorrow. I'm never going to fuck the guys in the band for your pleasure."

"This about money?" He pulls out his wallet and starts counting out hundred-dollar bills. "How much, Taryn? How much is that cunt of yours worth?"

“There is no amount of money that will make me have sex with the guys in your band.” I don’t bother to mention that while Dusty is kind of cute, and Joker is okay, Shorty and Miller—Duncan Short and Miles Miller—are gross.

The only reason those two get laid is because they’re rockstars.

On top of that, they’re misogynistic assholes who don’t care about anyone other than themselves.

“Well, you have two choices,” he says. “Gangbang the band, or you suck my cock every night, in front of everyone, just before we go on stage.”

“So, you liked jail?” I counter. “Because that’s what will happen.

You can only get away with so much, and there are decency laws in Texas.

And I’m not going to do anything that might impact my ability to get custody of Toby.

If that’s your line, then I’m out. Don’t make the fucking payment.

” I turn and storm back into the bathroom, locking the door behind me.

My heart is beating so fast I feel like I might throw up, and my hands are shaking.

I might be able to scrounge up enough for two payments but definitely not three.

I’m so fucking close to being free.

I’ll do almost anything for Toby, but letting Callum’s bandmates have sex with me so he can watch—that’s too much.

I'm also not doing threesomes or any other crap he dreams up.

It's bad enough he ties me up, spans me, and does other things I don't particularly enjoy when we're alone.

I'll be damned if I do it with other people and certainly not in front of other people.

I don't know what I'll do if he doesn't make today's payment, but I know as a last resort I can go to Mick. I was serious when I told him I want us to start our relationship with a clean slate, but I still have to think about Toby. We've come too far, and I've put up with too much, to give up now.

My mother can probably put one month on a credit card and then I'll figure out the rest, but this is so damn hard.

"Are you coming out?" Callum yells. "We have to go."

I'm not changing clothes.

Wearing a short dress with no panties isn't the end of the world—I'll do that before I sleep with the guys in his band—but I never know where he'll draw the line of me defying him.

"Why are you still wearing the shorts?" he demands. "Put on the dress, lose the panties, and let's go."

Well, I guess that's that.

It's going to be a long night.

"No panties at all. Ever. You understand me? Your pussy is going to be available to

me whenever and wherever I want it.”

I don’t respond as I pull off my top.

“Lose the bra too.”

I unsnap the back and toss it aside as I pull a short gold lame dress from my suitcase.

“That’s better.” He watches as I change. “Now those shoes.” He points to a pair of gold stilettos that he knows kill my feet.

But I put them on without a word.

“See?” He smiles. “Things are so much easier when you just do what I tell you.”

“I’m not going to have sex with you in public,” I say quietly. “You can’t afford to get arrested again either.”

“You’ll have sex with me when I tell you to,” he grunts, but he doesn’t press the point and I know by the expression on his face he grudgingly accepts that I’m right.

I heard the band’s label reaming them for the drug bust, warning them that this isn’t something they can sweep under the rug.

From what I understand, it’s going to cost them a fortune in legal fees to get out of this, so at least he’s being rational.

Rational for Callum.

“Leaving me would be a mistake,” he says in a gruff voice as we exit the hotel room.

“You’re the one who said I’m leaving,” I say, hoping to deflect. “I never said that.”

“I’m not stupid, Taryn. And you pretty much just admitted it.”

“I said you’re mean and don’t treat me right sometimes. Why can’t you be the way you were when we first started dating?”

He bursts out laughing. “The honeymoon period is a fantasy, baby doll. This is real life. Nobody has time for that romantic bullshit. Life is hard. Nobody gets anything for free. You think my success wasn’t without sacrifice?

This life I lead is fucking hard. You don’t get a pass because you have a pretty face and a tight cunt.

I can get pussy anywhere. You should be honored I chose you. ”

Honored? That’s laughable, though I don’t, of course.

“And frankly, why should anything be easier for you than it was for me?”

I’m not sure how to respond to that since I have no idea what he’s talking about. He’s never talked about his childhood much, and the band did pay their dues in the beginning, but how is that different from most bands?

“You think because you’re a woman you’re going to find some guy to take care of you, and you did. And I have. It just pisses me off that you don’t want to take care of me. That’s why I’m mean to you.”

“I’m sorry I won’t live out all your sexual fantasies,” I say softly. “But if that’s what you consider the most important thing in a relationship, then I’m not sure what to say.”

“You should say thank you.”

I have. Dozens of times. But it doesn't seem prudent to point that out.

“No visits home this month,” he continues. “If you're going to leave anyway, I'm going to get every ounce of pleasure out of you until you do.”

I want to cry but that won't solve anything.

The one good thing about this is that it makes me steel my resolve to get out as soon as possible. I can probably survive one more month, but I don't think I have it in me to stick around for two.

Especially once Crimson Edge leaves the tour.

Callum is getting meaner and more demanding, and as much as I love my son, I'm not sure how much more I have to give.

Mick

I'm waiting in the hallway for Karnal Death to take the stage, but Taryn doesn't appear. I know she's here because I saw her, but she didn't make eye contact and I can tell something is wrong.

Finally, when I can't stand it anymore, I head into the wings.

Taryn is standing on the side of the stage, her body stiff as she gazes in the direction of the stage.

She's not enjoying the show, but she also seems rooted to the spot.

I amble in that direction casually, bobbing my head in time to the music so that it doesn't seem strange that I'm hanging out.

"Hey." I have to yell since it's loud as fuck.

"I can't talk to you," she yells back. "Callum is on a tear."

"What's going on?"

"I'm fine, but he's being extra possessive and wanted me to stand where he can see me for the whole show."

Jesus fucking Christ.

“Go the bathroom and I’ll meet you there.”

She hesitates but finally nods.

I decide not to wait with her and make a show of talking to a couple of the roadies, grabbing a beer one of them offers me and chatting up their tour manager, who’s probably the only decent human being out of the whole bunch of them.

I guzzle the beer, crush it in my hand, and saunter off like I’m just partying.

Then I make a beeline for the bathrooms in the hallway. I’m not sure which one she went to but I’ll find her.

Luckily, she’s in the first one I check, leaning against the sink with an inscrutable look on her face. “What’s wrong, babe?” I ask softly.

“Nothing.”

That’s a lie, but I don’t want to call her on it when she’s nestled in my arms.

“Does he know we were together the other night?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “He’s just such a jerk. He told me he knows I’m going to leave him as soon as he pays the last payment for Toby and he’s going to make me earn every penny.”

My blood runs cold.

What does that even mean?

Is he talking about sex or something more nefarious?

I'm almost afraid to ask.

"Babe, let me fix this."

For the first time, she hesitates.

"He just made the month's payment. I haven't had a moment to myself to sit down and figure out finances. If I can pull off the last two months, then I'm out of there. But..." She hesitates again.

"But what?"

"If I leave him now, that means I won't have a dime. I'll be completely dependent on you." She looks embarrassed, and I quickly shake my head.

"I don't have a lot, but you can stay with me and I can afford to feed you. A big check is coming—high five figures—mid-June, and once that comes, we'll be good."

"I have to work," she whispers, tears filling her eyes. "And I really, really don't want to go from one situation where I'm reliant on a man to another. I know you're not him, but I still don't want to force you into this position."

"No one forces me to do anything, Taryn. Especially not when it comes to you." I bend my head and kiss her firmly on the lips. "Whatever you decide, I'm here for you. Okay?"

"Okay." She pulls away and fluffs her hair. "Stay in here for a few minutes after I leave, please."

"I will. And I'm in room 554. If you're ready to make the break, just knock on the door. You don't need to ask or call or anything else. Show up and I'll be waiting."

She manages a watery smile. “Thank you.”

She blows me a kiss and then slips out, disappearing down the hall.

I don’t know why, but I have a bad feeling about this.

* * *

I’ve just gotten back to my room when Sasha calls. It’s late so I’m surprised she’s still up.

“Hey,” I say in surprise. “Shouldn’t you be asleep?”

“I never sleep,” she says with a laugh. “Between work and the kids, I’m lucky if I get four hours a night. Anyway, for some reason, you’re in high demand lately.”

“Oh?” That’s surprising.

“Well, Barely Rockin’ wants to fly you out to New York to do a test shoot, all expenses paid. I had legal look it over and the contract they sent is great, so the only thing now is the test shoot to make sure you fit the bill.”

“Okay. When is this all supposed to happen?”

“That’s why I’m calling so late. They want you on a flight at six tomorrow morning. You’ll get into New York around eleven. You’ll do the shoot, and they’ll have you on the first flight out the day after tomorrow so you can meet the band in Baton Rouge.”

“Oh.”

This is exciting, but the timing couldn’t suck more.

I have to do it, though.

My future—and the one I want to build with Taryn—could be partially dependent on it. If we're going to move forward and make sure Toby has everything he needs, I need all the work I can get.

“Is there a problem?” she asks.

“No. I'm just thinking of the logistics.”

“It's a lot of travel for you but the contract could be lucrative if they sign you. I'm not really a talent agent, but our attorney works with a lot of contracts within the industry and he said it's extremely generous for an unknown like you.”

“Book it,” I say firmly. “I need the money.”

“All right.”

“And Sasha, if you want to take a cut, since you're acting as my agent in this regard, I don't mind?—”

“Don't be ridiculous.” She chuckles. “Anton and I have more money than we'll ever need or spend.

I'm happy to do it. The more success you find individually, the better it is for the band, which means the label makes money too.

And while I personally don't need money, we have employees and a corporation I need to keep running in the black. ”

“You're a good manager,” I say quietly. “And a good friend. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I disconnect and then call Tate. “Hey, I need a favor.”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“I know it’s hard because of the circumstances, but do you think you could keep an eye on Taryn while I’m out of town?” I explain where I’m going and what I’m doing.

“Look, you know I’ll always have your back, but Callum doesn’t let anyone get anywhere near her. I don’t know how much I can do.”

“Just keep an eye on things and let me know if something seems off, like if she doesn’t show up for a gig or whatever.”

He hesitates. “Is something going on?”

“I just have a bad feeling in my gut. Also, can you tell Ryleigh what’s going on and have her tell Taryn where I am?”

“Sure.” He clears his throat. “You sure you know what you’re doing? I’m really trying to stay out of your personal life, but I feel like you’re playing with fire. Not just for yourself but for her and for us.”

“It’s almost over,” I promise. “We’re working on a plan so we can be together.”

“Why do you need a plan? Why can’t you just tell me what’s going on? I call bullshit on a family member with cancer.”

Is it time to bring the band in on Taryn’s situation?

I feel like it is, even though she won't like it.

I need her to be safe. I need her to get the hell away from Callum.

I need to be able to help her even when she thinks she can handle everything herself—because I know damn well she can't. Not when it comes to Callum.

“She does have a family member with cancer,” I say slowly. “Her nine-year-old son, Toby, has leukemia. And Callum is making the payments for his treatment.”

“Oh, shit . She has a kid?” He looks shocked.

“Her mom and agent kind of brainwashed her into thinking it would hurt her career and her future, so she's never told anyone.

Her mom has custody, but when the leukemia came back, they recommended some experimental treatment.

The problem is that the funding fell through.

I don't understand the details, but they gave them a deal because Toby was already approved, but even together they couldn't afford it. It's like ten grand a month.”

“And Callum is paying for it.”

I huff out a breath. “And she's earning every damn penny of that payment.”

There's a beat of silence before he breathes, “Damn.”

“Exactly. There were three payments left, and he just made the first of the three, and we're trying to see if we can come up with the money together for her to leave him

now.

Except she really doesn't want me to help.

She doesn't want us to start our relationship with a debt like that, even though I told her I'd give her the money even if she didn't want to be with me—no strings attached. ”

“But you don't have it,” he says knowingly.

“I'd take a loan from Sasha,” I reply. “Her family are billionaires and it's a little kid with fucking cancer! I can't believe, even if Taryn breaks my heart, there isn't some good karma in that!”

“For sure,” he says quietly. “I mean, I'd give it to you if I had it. What about?—”

I know he's going to ask about Angus, and I cut him off. “She's so embarrassed about all of this. She doesn't want to ask me, much less the boyfriend of one of her best friends. Look, I'm only telling you so you can keep an eye on her while I'm gone. Around thirty-six hours all told.”

“It's not about the amount of time. I got you, brother, but if something goes down, I don't know what I can do.”

“You reach out to me. Or tell Ryleigh. You know she's like a feral cat if you hurt someone she cares about.”

We chuckle because Ryleigh is fiercely protective of Angus and the rest of us.

“Go to New York, man. The only thing is—if something goes south, I have to tell the rest of the band.”

“I know. And if that happens, I’ll deal with the repercussions.”

Taryn

I wake to a hand on my breast, rubbing, kneading, hard enough to make me squirm.

“Stop,” I mutter.

“Come on, baby.” Callum’s voice is rough with sleep, but his intentions are clear.

Dread fills me.

He’s been insatiable the last few days, and I’m exhausted.

Both mentally and physically. I just want to get the hell out, but between the payment for my phone, my credit card payment, and the health insurance premium my agent insisted upon, my account is at least a thousand dollars lighter than I’d hoped.

Even with the money I know is coming in, I can only truly pay for one month of Toby’s treatment, which means I’m stuck here for at least that long.

I roll away from his touch. “I have to pee.”

Sometimes this is a good tactic because he’ll fall asleep while I’m gone.

I slide out of bed and hurry into the bathroom, closing the door behind me.

I lean against it and pull in a few shaky breaths.

I don't know if I can do this another month.

He's so hard to deal with. If he was even a little bit nicer, I wouldn't have a problem with it.

Before I started hating him, the sex was decent.

Not the best but not horrible. He's hung like a horse, so it didn't take much to get me off.

Intellectually, I know I'm doing this for Toby, but I feel like a failure. Like the only way I can take care of my child is by prostituting myself. I'm not good enough of a model, or a mother, to get the money any other way.

And I've never been so ashamed.

"Hurry up!" Callum yells. "I'm hard."

Tears fill my eyes and I quickly use the bathroom, wash my hands and face, and stare into the mirror. I look like hell, with dark circles under my eyes, bruises on my chest from the way he manhandles me, and I've never been quite this pale.

But Toby needs me, and since it appears there's no stopping this, I pad back into the bedroom.

Callum is lying on top of the covers, naked, proudly stroking his erection.

I grudgingly get on the bed and have just reached him when his phone rings. He reaches for it, frowns, and then answers.

"It's fucking ten in the morning—what?! That's your job. Figure it out—wait, what

do you mean it's gone? How can it just be gone?" He listens again, his face getting red. Then he sits up and grabs his jeans from the floor next to the bed. "I'm coming down. Don't fucking leave without me."

"What happened?" I ask politely.

"They lost my fucking guitar," he snaps. Then he turns and points to me. "You stay right fucking there, in that bed, naked. I'll be right back." He grabs his room key and wallet, shoves his feet into his boots without even lacing them up, and stomps out.

I throw myself down with a mixture of relief and dread.

I got a short reprieve but now, instead of getting it over with, I have to lie here and wait.

I'd shower but I'm tired.

A nap might be the best thing since I'm so exhausted.

I also need to call Toby, but I'm so tired.

I must have drifted off because when I open my eyes again it's after noon—and I'm still alone.

I get in the shower and take the time to shave my legs since Callum is often rushing me to get ready.

Today's a day off so I'm not going to wash my hair—I'll just put it up in a ponytail—or worry about any of my conditioning masks.

That annoys Callum too, the plethora of toiletries I use to look the way I do.

He says he understands but then uses it against me any time we fight.

Of course, he uses everything against me when we fight, and we fight a lot.

The door slams just as I'm putting moisturizer on my face and I quickly drop my towel—since he likes me naked—before padding into the main room.

“Did you find it?” I ask.

“Where did I tell you to wait for me?”

“I took a shower for you,” I say in what I hope is a sexy voice.

“Why can't you ever do what I tell you to do when I tell you to do it?” he growls, his face darkening.

Ugh.

He's mad.

“I'm sorry,” I whisper. “I thought freshening up would be nice.”

“When I tell you to wait for me in bed, I don't expect you to do anything but that.”
He strides over to me, grabbing me by the arms.

“Ow!” I yelp. “Stop it.”

“I'll stop when I feel like stopping.”

Now that he's up close, I can tell he's high.

That's probably why he was gone so long.

Which is a problem in more ways than one. Not only is he ugly when he's high, if he's on coke, he can have sex without getting off for hours. And he's not a fan of lube so I'm in for a pounding.

"Don't tell me what to do." He shoves me, sending me sprawling onto the bed. "You know how much you've cost me in the last nine months?"

I don't respond because there's no point.

"All you do is complain about how mean I am, but I know what you're doing. I know you plan to leave the second I make that last payment. And I know you've been fucking Mick Lips."

I shake my head. "I haven't! Yes, we saw each other in New York and hung out between takes during the shoot, but I'm not sleeping with him!"

Not exactly.

I am in love with him, though.

Not that I'll say any of that out loud.

"Don't fucking lie to me!" He advances on me angrily, fists clenched at his sides.

"I'm not." My voice breaks a little and I flinch as he yanks off his belt.

"I told you not to lie to me!" He wraps part of the belt around his fist and then swings the loose part, smacking my thighs.

“Callum, knock it off!” I scramble off the bed.

“I fucking told you to get on the bed.”

“Not if you’re going to hurt me like that.”

“Like this?” He holds up the belt. “You have a lot more to worry about than my belt. Get over here.”

I shake my head, suddenly terrified. He’s always scary when he’s high, but there’s something in his eyes I’ve never seen before today, and my gut tells me this is going to be bad.

“You’re nothing but a greedy little slut,” he says, walking toward me menacingly. “You want the money but you don’t want to be a real partner.”

“What more do you want?” I cry. “We have sex every single day, usually multiple times. I’m with you twenty-four-seven unless I’m traveling, but you’re not going to make me feel bad about wanting to see my son or work so I can bring some money in.”

“The only reason you want to work is so that you can leave. I’m not fucking stupid!” he yells.

“I wouldn’t leave if you’d stop attacking me all the time!” I whisper, tears spoiling down my cheeks. “If you didn’t hit me with a belt. If you didn’t leave bruises on my ass.”

“Oh, boo fucking hoo!” He rolls his eyes. “If you cared about my needs, you’d be all in for that stuff. When we first started dating you used to give as good as you got—and then you got all mousey and timid. Or is it that you started screwing Mick

so now you don't like it when I fuck you?"

"You don't even wait for me to come anymore!" I say in frustration. I wouldn't stay with him regardless, but he doesn't get to put this on me. I was ready to leave before this started.

"You think you deserve orgasms?" He throws back his head and laughs. Then he slaps me so hard I stumble back, losing my footing and landing hard on one ankle.

"Callum!" I cover my face as he kicks me, hard, in the ribs.

"Get up!" he yells.

I try but my ankle buckles and I wind up on the floor again.

"Stupid whore." He grabs me by the ponytail, pulling me across the floor toward the bed.

A sharp pain in my chest tells me he probably just broke one—or more—of my ribs.

"Callum, please." I try to grab my head, but he yanks me even harder and lifts me onto the bed.

"Remember when I said you'd pay dearly for the last three payments? That starts now." He slaps me across the face again. "Because you're never going to forget the man who helped your kid get better." He crawls on top of me and puts his knee in the middle of my chest.

Pain explodes out of me but all I can manage is a whimper because I can barely breathe with his weight on me.

“Or who supported your skanky ass when you had nowhere to go.” He slaps me twice more, once on each side.

I want to cry, plead, beg him to stop, but as horrible as this is, I realize he’s going to regret it when he comes down from his high. That’s his M.O. whenever he gets physical with me.

And this will give me leverage.

He’s already out on bail so getting arrested again could land him back in jail until a trial.

So I just have to survive whatever he’s going to do and then wait for him to sober up.

“Are you listening to me?” He grabs me by the throat, squeezing hard enough to cut off my airway.

“Stop...” I rasp.

“Cunt.” He lets go of my neck and backhands me.

I taste blood this time and close my eyes as he smacks me a few more times.

“You think you’re just going to walk away from Callum Yates? Think again. You’re not going anywhere.”

He slides off the bed and grabs my phone off the table, putting it in his pocket. Then he digs my wallet out of my purse, puts that in his pocket as well, and walks out of the room without looking back.

I don’t know whether I’m relieved it’s over and I’m still alive or terrified about what

to do next. It hurts every time I take a breath, which means I have to get help.

I don't know what time Mick is supposed to get back, but I'll try his room first. If he's not there, I'll go down to the front desk. That way, I'll have witnesses.

Then, if Callum won't pay the final two payments, I'll threaten to go to the cops.

This isn't how I envisioned getting out from under Callum's thumb, but I feel like there's finally a light at the end of the tunnel.

And I'm heading full-speed in that direction.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:32 am

Mick

My phone lights up with messages as soon as I get off the plane. The Wi-Fi on the plane was broken so I couldn't check in with anyone until now, and my blood immediately goes cold.

TATE: I need you to call me.

TATE: There's been an incident with Taryn and Callum. She's in the hospital.

TATE: Can you come to the hospital?

There's an address and I practically run through the airport to the car service that's waiting for me.

"We need to detour." I give him the address and then respond to Tate.

MICK: What the fuck happened? Is she okay?

TATE: She's in rough shape and she won't tell the doctors the truth about what happened.

MICK: I'm on my way!

The blood thrums through my veins, my body tense as I try to contain my fury.

If I see that motherfucker, I'm going to end him.

It's not a game to me; he's hurt the woman I love.

I don't care what it costs, or even if it upsets Taryn, but she's done with him. Unless she tells me she doesn't love me, doesn't want to be with me, I'm ending this now. He might be physically larger than I am, but I've always been scrappy.

And the guys will have my back.

We get to the hospital and the driver offers to wait. Since I'm not paying for it, I tell him I'll let him know if I'm going to be more than an hour or so.

Then I stalk into the emergency room area like a man on a mission.

"Mick!" Tate calls to me, and I hurry in that direction.

"Where is she?"

"Still in the E.R. The cops just showed up and she's insisting it was an accident."

"I'm done with this fucker. Take me to her."

"Dude, for whatever reason, she doesn't want to tell the cops."

"Why the fuck not?"

"I don't know." He shakes his head. "I found her in the hallway, knocking on your door. She could barely stand up. There was blood on her face..." His voice trails. "The X-rays showed three broken ribs."

I'm starting to see red and he can probably tell because he grabs my arm. "Easy. Don't let her see how upset you are. She's in rough shape and scared. I don't know if

it's of him or something else, but you need to chill before you see her."

I nod, trying to calm the fury racing through my veins.

The need to hurt him the way he hurt her.

That asshole put his hands on what's mine.

I've done a shit job protecting her so far but that ends now.

"I'm good," I say in a steely voice.

He points to where she is and I walk in that direction, trying to compose myself because I don't want to scare her and I also don't want the cops to mistake me for the guy who did this.

"Taryn." My heart squeezes painfully when I see her.

There's a black and blue mark forming around one eye and her lips are swollen, with a deep cut on one side, but it's the bruises on her neck that almost make me lose control.

"I came straight here from the airport—what happened?"

"Detectives Ortiz and O'Shaunessy." One of the two detectives standing outside the room approaches me. "Who are you?"

"Michael Lipson." I turn to him accusingly. "Did you get the guy who did this? Callum Yates?"

The guy starts writing something on his pad.

“Who is Callum Yates?” he asks.

“Mick!” Taryn’s voice is hoarse but undeniably angry. “Mick, stop!”

“He’s not going to get away with this, Taryn. Over my dead body.”

“It’s fine! I’m fine.”

“Callum Yates, from Karnal Death?” The other detective narrows her eyes.

“That’s him.”

“Mick!” Taryn calls to me again, but I ignore her.

“This has been going on for a while, escalating. Her son is sick, and Callum is paying for the treatment, so she doesn’t want to get him in trouble. But this has to stop. He’s never gotten this physical before.”

“And what’s your relationship to Ms. Blakely?”

“I’m her...friend.”

Detective O’Shaunessy gives me a curious look. “Do you have any idea why Mr. Yates would attack her like this?”

“No, but he gets mean when he’s drunk or high. We’ve seen him get physical with her before, but it’s always been grabbing her arm, stuff like that. There was a bruise in the shape of a hand on her thigh a month or so ago.”

“Ms. Blakely, we understand you’re afraid,” Detective Ortiz is a woman, and her voice is gentle as she speaks to Taryn. “But we can protect you.”

Taryn gives me a death glare. “I said I was fine. I’m not pressing charges.”

“Taryn!” Callum’s voice echoes through the hallway and Taryn visibly finches.

“That’s him,” I say gruffly.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Callum snarls at me. His eyes are bloodshot, hair sticking up on one side of his head. He seems sweaty, the armpits of his T-shirt stained, and he stomps in my direction.

“Mr. Yates.” Detective O’Shaunessy cuts him off. “We’d like to talk to you.”

“Taryn!” he yells at her, but the detectives are blocking his way.

“What’s your relationship to Ms. Blakely?”

“She’s my girl—unlike this guy!” He flicks a thumb in my direction. “He has no business here. I want him gone.”

“Mr. Yates, this is about you and Ms. Blakely. Do you know how your girlfriend got three broken ribs, a twisted ankle, and multiple cuts and contusions on her face?”

“What did she say?” he demands. Then he whirls on Taryn. “You stupid cunt! What did you tell them, you fucking coke whore?!”

He lunges in her direction, but Detective O’Shaunessy stops him.

“Mr. Yates. You need to calm down or we’ll restrain you.”

“She fucking deserved it, cheating little cunt!” He’s yelling, trying to break free from the police officer, spittle flying from his mouth.

“She’s a goddamn whore and a drug addict!

You hear me, Taryn? Your kid can burn in hell for all I care!

Stupid bitch!” He lunges again, and Detective Ortiz pulls out her taser.

Security has arrived, and suddenly there’s chaos.

Callum breaks free from the officers, heading toward Taryn.

She cries out, and I throw myself in that direction, taking Callum down before he can get to her.

We land on the floor hard, but I’m too pissed off to let him get in a punch.

I bring my fist up under his jaw, hitting him hard enough to stun him, and then the detectives are there, pulling us apart and putting Callum in handcuffs.

“Stupid little cunt,” he growls at Taryn. “Do you know what you’ve done? Do you? I’ll kill you, your kid, and everyone you’ve ever met! You hear me? No one fucking turns on Callum Yates!”

The place is crawling with hospital employees, more cops, hospital security, and Tate, Angus, and Ryleigh.

“Are you all right, Mr. Lipson?” Detective Ortiz asks me.

I nod, rubbing my hand. “Yeah. All good.”

“We’d like to get a statement from you.”

“Uh, sure.” I glance at Taryn, but she’s crying and Ryleigh’s next to her now, trying to comfort her.

The worst part is Taryn won’t even look at me.

There’s a nurse with her and I hear something about a sedative.

“Do I need to call an attorney?” Angus demands when the detectives take me into the hallway.

“Has Mr. Lipson done anything illegal?” Detective Ortiz asks.

“No, I have not,” I reply in a grumpy voice. “But you tell me.”

“You aren’t a person of interest at this time,” Detective Ortiz says. “Mr. Yates essentially just confessed so we don’t need to keep searching for the person responsible for Ms. Blakely’s injuries.”

“I was in New York,” I say. “I literally got off the plane an hour ago and came straight here when I saw the text that Taryn was in the hospital.”

“If you’ll give us your contact information, in case we have any follow-up questions, you’re free to go.”

I give them my phone number and then go into Taryn’s room.

“They just gave her something to sleep,” Ryleigh says softly. “She was really upset. I’m not sure what’s going on, something about leverage...I don’t know what she’s talking about, but the doctor thought she’s been through enough today. She needs to rest.”

“I’m going to sit with her,” I say stubbornly. “At least until we have to leave for the arena.”

“There may not be a show if they don’t let Callum out. Getting arrested again is a violation of his original bail, so I don’t know what’s going to happen,” Angus says.

We look at each other.

“I’m going to call Sasha,” Tate says, pulling out his phone.

“Let me know what’s going on,” I say, “but I’m not going anywhere until I know she’s going to be okay. Or I have to head to the arena. Whichever comes first.”

“This is a clusterfuck,” Ryleigh whispers. “A ton of people took video of the altercation and everything Callum said. You can bet your ass this is going to be big news.”

“Fuck.”

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:32 am

Taryn

My head is pounding and it's so noisy.

I can't imagine why Callum is making so much noise this early in the morning.

Is it morning?

I pry open my lids and everything is blurry.

What the fuck?

Did we get drunk last night? Why do I feel like I got run over by a truck? I really have to pee but it feels like so much effort.

"Taryn?" A soft voice.

Definitely not Callum's.

"It's Ryleigh. Are you awake?"

"Ry...leigh?" My voice sounds weird and I attempt to clear my throat.

"Shh. Don't try to talk. They gave you a sedative last night so you could rest. Do you need me to get a nurse?"

"I have to pee," I whisper.

“You have an IV. Hang on.” She disappears and I reach up to rub my eyes.

I’m in a hospital.

And as soon as I move I remember what happened—and why I’m here.

It all comes rushing back and an inadvertent groan leaves me that has nothing to do with physical pain.

“Here we are, darling.” A nurse with a faint British accent and a cheerful tone comes bustling in. “I’ll bet you want to freshen up. Those ribs will be a bit sore but you should be able to navigate the restroom.” She moves some IVs around and lowers the railing on the bed.

“Thanks.” I get to my feet slowly because it’s like every inch of me hurts, but the idea of peeing my pants is worse.

Somehow, I shuffle to the bathroom and sink onto the toilet and close my eyes.

Memories of yesterday come rushing back.

Callum’s hands around my throat.

Backhanding me.

Leaving me without my phone or ID.

Tate finding me in the hallway banging on Mick’s door.

Tate and Ryleigh taking me to the hospital.

Mick showing up and talking to the police.

Callum showing up and...I groan again.

I don't even know what happened to him.

I do my business and then stare into the mirror.

Yikes. This isn't good. I won't be modeling for a while, that's for sure.

I do the best I can with the toiletries available and then slowly make my way back to bed. The nurse tucks me in and checks my vital signs, saying something about breakfast, and then disappears.

Finally, I look at Ryleigh.

"What happened?" My voice almost sounds normal again.

"I don't know what went on between you and Callum, but Tate found you banging on Mick's door.

He wasn't back from New York yet, but Tate heard the banging and came to see what was going on.

He knew right away you were in rough shape, so he called me.

Me, him, and Angus brought you to the ER. " She pauses. "What do you remember?"

I frown. "Mick showed up and told the police it was Callum." I shake my head. "Dammit, why did he get involved?"

“What do you mean?” Ryleigh sounds incredulous. “You can’t let Callum get away with this.”

“I had leverage!” I whisper harshly, blinking away tears. “This was my chance for him to not only pay for Toby’s treatment but also get away from him.”

“Toby.” Her face is neutral. “That’s your son.”

I realize my slip, but then it sinks in that she knows who Toby is.

“Mick told you,” I say glumly.

“What I don’t understand is why you didn’t. He would’ve been a toddler when we were in college...why didn’t you say anything?”

“I wanted...” I sigh.

That part of the story is hard to explain.

“My parents wanted me to go to college. My dad made me promise before he died. And since my mom had custody, I was embarrassed. Embarrassed that I got knocked up at fifteen. Embarrassed that the dad wasn’t in my life—he died in a car accident before Toby was born, by the way.

And embarrassed that I have a child I can’t take care of.

Not then and not now.” I swipe at the tears puddling in my eyes.

“You were a teenager. How could you take care of a child without help? Come on, don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“And then my agent told me it would be better if we kept Toby a secret. An up-and-coming model with a kid might be a turn-off to clients, assuming I wouldn’t be available to go to castings or shoots at the drop of a hat. So I kind of took that on.”

“That’s bullshit. Tons of models have kids.”

“Models with partners and money,” I whisper.

“No one cares about that. Your agent is an idiot.” She shakes her head.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.” I take the tissue she hands me and dab at my eyes.

“What happened yesterday?”

“Callum figured out that I’m in love with Mick. He was cruder in his accusations, but it amounts to the same thing. He told me he wasn’t stupid, that he knew I was leaving him once he made the final payment for Toby and?—”

“Toby is sick,” she interjects. “We only got part of the story from Tate. He didn’t seem to know much and what little he knew, he felt bad betraying you and Mick.”

I sigh and tell her about Toby’s illness.

“Oh my God, Taryn!” She stares at me. “Angus has more money than fucking God. He’s literally going to be a billionaire before he’s forty. Ten or twenty thousand dollars is nothing for us... I mean, it’s his money but he would do this for me. For you. For Toby!”

“You and I haven’t been close in years. Yeah, it’s mostly because of Callum, but I didn’t feel right asking for money.

I didn't want everyone to see me as this pathetic loser who can't take care of her kid.

Not even when he's sick. Here I am, partying with my rock star boyfriend, on tour, living my best life, while my kid is sick. ”

Ryleigh frowns. “That's not what we'd see.”

“It's what my mom sees. It's what the attorney I talked to about custody said the judge would see.”

“You're trying to get custody?”

“Not actively. I didn't have the money to retain the lawyer, but I was saving up.

And being on tour with Callum was perfect.

He was fun at first, and the sex was good.

I didn't need to rent an apartment, I sold my car, and I was getting work.

And Callum didn't start to change right away.

In the beginning, I could manage him. I'd laugh off his misogynistic remarks, put him in his place when he went too far, and sex was a great way to distract him.

“Somewhere along the way...” My voice trails.

“I was leaving him. I literally packed up my shit and told him I was done. I was in the lobby waiting for a cab to take me to the airport when my mom called and said the funding for this experimental treatment fell through. And he swooped right in, offering to pay, saying he'd be better, if I just gave him another chance. ”

“Classic words from an abuser.”

I nod miserably. “And as time went on, things got worse. He got meaner and rougher and more demanding.”

“And then you started falling for Mick.”

“I was always crazy about Mick. We spent three days together four years ago and it was magical. But I was moving back to L.A. and he was busy with his music. There didn’t seem to be a way for us to be together so it seemed easier to just let it go.

Then, when I saw him again, I tried so hard not to think about everything, but it was hard.

And when I found out he felt the same... it got impossible.

But I didn’t want to run from Callum to Mick, the perpetual damsel in distress.

On top of that, I basically sold my body to Callum like a fucking prostitute. Gross.” I shudder slightly.

“It’s not gross. Your kid has cancer . I would beg, borrow, steal, or fuck whoever was necessary if it was my kid.

And shout it from the rooftops. I don’t care what anyone thinks.

People rob banks and commit murder to pay medical bills—and you were already dating Callum. No one will think anything like that.”

“Is Callum in jail?” I ask after a moment.

“You’re damn straight he is.” Both of us jump at the sound of Mick’s voice.

“Good morning.” Ryleigh gets up. “I’ll leave you two to talk. I’m going to go get some breakfast. I’ll be back.” She reaches over to squeeze my hand and then disappears down the hall.

Mick is standing in the doorway with a bouquet of flowers and a weird combination of ferocity and contrition on his face.

“Thank you.” I take the flowers as he leans over to kiss my forehead.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m sore,” I say.

“Liar. Three broken ribs have to hurt like a bitch.” He brushes warm fingers along my cheek. “I can’t believe he did this to you.”

“What did you tell the police?” I ask quietly.

“The truth as I know it, which is things he’s done in the past. Obviously, I wasn’t there when this happened.”

“I told you not to get involved,” I whisper.

“There was no way in hell I was going to let him get away with this,” he says, scowling. “And anyway, no matter what I said, he gave himself away when he got here.”

“But you gave the cops his name. Why would you do that when I specifically asked you not to get involved?”

He cocks his head. “Seriously?”

“I had a plan! I was ready to get out and now I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“You had a plan?” He stares at me. “Did your plan include getting your ribs broken and your face busted up? Was that the plan?!”

“Don’t yell at me.” I’m on the verge of tears and panic again.

Callum getting arrested again is bad.

For him and for me.

“Sorry.” He takes a breath. “But Taryn, what are you talking about?”

“It wasn’t intentional, I didn’t know what was going to happen yesterday, but because of what he did to me, I finally had leverage. It was my way out! And now...” She shakes her head. “Where is he? Is he still in jail? Was he at the show last night?”

“No. Tate filled in for him, and we don’t know what’s going to happen after this. I don’t know what happened after they arrested him.”

“Can you find out?”

Mick

I have a feeling this isn't going to end well for me. I'm not sure why she's so upset, or what she's talking about, but I obligingly pull out my phone and open the internet. I search for Callum's name and— whoa .

Oh, hell. This isn't good at all.

Death Metal Rockstar and Girlfriend have drug-laced Hospital Altercation.

Drugs and Alcohol Fuel Argument Between Rock Guitarist Callum Yates and Model Girlfriend Taryn Blakely.

“What?” she asks.

She's going to be pissed.

“Looks like the judge denied bail,” I murmur.

“Fuck.” She holds out her hand. “Let me see.”

“You don't need to get upset again,” I say quietly.

“Mick. Give me the damn phone.”

Well, it's not like I can say no, so I slowly hand it over.

Her eyes widen and she starts combing through the articles.

“What the—” Her face gets even paler. “Oh my God. What are they saying about me? I don’t do drugs! Fuck fuck fuck!”

“Honey, you were the victim,” I say gently.

She wiggles the phone angrily. “That’s not what it says here!

This is all about our drug and alcohol use leading to a physical altercation that put me in the hospital.

And every single article mentions drugs...

someone has video of him calling me a coke whore!

” She closes her eyes. “Mick, what did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything,” I protest.

“You told the cops! And now look at me—I’m everywhere as some drug-addled idiot who lets her boyfriend hit her. How the hell am I going to get custody with this shit everywhere?”

“You didn’t do anything wrong and—” I try again but she’s not having it, shaking her head at me.

“This was the leverage I needed! Don’t you understand?

I finally had him where I wanted him. I wouldn’t have chosen for it to happen because he beat me up, but once he did it—he was high.

When he came down and saw the results of what he did, he would be sorry.

I could use that to keep him on his best behavior.

Two more payments, Mick, and I would've been free.

Now you ruined everything. Not only can he not make those payments if he's in jail, I can't make those last two payments! ”

“I can help! I told you?—”

“Stop it.” She looks furious, her pretty face marred by both bruises and tears. “And I told you a million times—I don't want money from you! I can't be with you unless I come to you free of debt and outside obligations. Why can't you understand and respect my boundaries?”

“Because they're stupid!” I snap. “This is about your son, not some misplaced sense of pride or whatever it is you've got going on.”

“It's not misplaced,” she hisses. “I'm trying not to bring baggage to our relationship and you're just shitting all over how I feel.”

Christ.

This isn't the conversation I thought we'd be having.

“Look, I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings. I don't mean to. I'm just thinking about what Toby needs. Short-term, I want to get through this. We can sort out everything later. Once he's okay and you're?—”

“You don't understand,” she whispers. “There can't be a later if we start everything

on the wrong foot now.”

I’m trying to be patient, but I truly don’t understand.

“So it’s okay to take money for your kid from your abusive boyfriend, whom you hate, but not from the guy who loves you? Please make that make sense.”

“I always make bad decisions!” she snaps.

“ Always . Getting pregnant at fifteen. Leaving Toby behind and letting my parents have custody while I went to college. Dating guys who don’t appreciate me.

My spending habits. Turning down work I thought was beneath me.

Even walking away from a great guy like you because I was going to be a supermodel and I didn’t have time for a long-distance relationship.

“My entire life has been built on a series of bad decisions, and I refuse to do that with you. Not this time. I refuse to come to you with the baggage of my past. And if you can’t respect that, then we can’t have a future.”

I don’t usually think I’m dense, but I feel like it right now.

I’m not sure what to say because she’s completely focused on the idea that I can’t help her with Toby’s situation.

“If we were a couple, and we already are, despite the circumstances... wouldn’t I be a part of Toby’s life?”

“I don’t know,” she says.

“You don’t know?”

“I’m barely in his life! How can you be?”

“You’ve been sleeping with a mean, abusive man for the last year so you can pay for his treatment—that tells me just how involved you are in his life.”

A knock on the door interrupts us.

“Ms. Blakely? The doctor said you were awake.” Detectives O’Shaunessy and Ortiz are standing in the doorway. “Would it be all right if we talked to you?”

“I guess I don’t have a choice,” she mumbles.

“Honey—” I reach for her, but she shakes her head.

“You should go. You’ve done enough.”

Ouch .

That not only hurts my feelings, it also pisses me off a little too.

I’ve bent over backwards to be there for her.

I’ve not only offered her my heart, but every dime to my name, the help of my friends, and anything else I could possibly give her.

And what do I get in return?

She blames me for getting Callum arrested even though that was his own fault. He showed up at the hospital high and admitted everything, so how is this my fault? I

know the news reports don't look good, but I can talk to Sasha and our PR people could fix that.

But apparently, she doesn't want my help.

"Would you mind giving us some privacy?" Detective Ortiz asks me.

"Do you want me to leave?" I ask Taryn.

She nods. "I think it's for the best, Mick. We've said all there is to say."

No, we definitely have not.

But this isn't the time or place to finish this conversation.

Because I'm not walking away without a fight.

I just have to regroup and figure out what my next move is.

"All right," I say quietly. "I'll talk to you soon."

Then I turn and walk out of the room without looking back.

* * *

"How's Taryn?" Ryleigh accosts me as I'm leaving the hospital.

"She's talking to the detectives."

"What's wrong?" She watches my face intently.

“She’s mad at me ,” I say in frustration. “Like it’s somehow my fault that she’s all over the news as some druggie whore whose rocker boyfriend beat her up.”

“Why is she blaming you?”

“Because she heard me mention Callum’s name to the cops yesterday. She seems to have conveniently forgotten that he showed up and made a fool of himself without any help from me.”

“She’s raw right now,” Ryleigh says gently, squeezing my arm. “I’ll talk to her.”

“I don’t understand her perspective. Can you explain it to me?” I give her an abbreviated version of the things Taryn said.

She frowns. “Well, part of it, yes. I do understand. She feels like she’s made a mess of her life and that she makes really bad decisions.

So leaving Callum and going straight to you, with the same issues—money, Toby’s illness, the custody situation, not having money or a steady income—would be following the same pattern.

And with you, she wants to break the pattern. ”

“That part I understand, but the rest of it? I mean, why can’t I help her? I love her.”

“Does she know that?”

“We haven’t had a specific ‘I love you’ and ‘I love you too’ conversation,” I say.

“But I’ve told her that I’m in love with her, and today I referred to her as the woman I’m in love with, but she doesn’t seem to care about any of that.

She keeps talking about how she can't afford the last two payments and she won't take money from me. Or you. Or the band."

"Yeah, we got into a little of that too," she says, shaking her head.

"I think right now she's in a place of trauma, fear, and guilt.

Guilt that she can't take care of her son.

Guilt about what she's been doing the last year or so, with Callum.

She feels cheap, like the only thing she's good for is sex. "

I wince.

I want to tell her we haven't made love yet, not really, but that's private. That's something I don't feel comfortable sharing.

"What do I do?" I ask in frustration.

"I think right now you need to give her space. Let her wrap her head around everything that's happened. Heal both physically and emotionally."

"Without me." I say it flatly.

"Maybe right now that's what she needs. And if you truly love her, you'll give her the space to figure things out. In her own way. Not your way."

I sigh and nod.

Because she's right.

I do love her and if being away from me for now is what she needs, then I'll do it.

No matter how much I don't want to.

"It's going to be okay," Ryleigh whispers. "I promise." She reaches out and gives me a hug.

I really hope she's right.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:32 am

Taryn

The doctor insisted I stay in the hospital one more day for observation. I had to talk to the police multiple times. Callum is still in jail and the media is talking about us non-stop. Even though my bloodwork showed no drugs or alcohol in my system.

Even though I'm the supposed victim.

The court of public opinion is crucifying me, and I've never felt so humiliated.

On top of that, I don't have my phone, my ID, or even the key to the room I was sharing with Callum, so I don't know how I'm going to get my things.

Basically, my life is a nightmare and I don't even have clean underwear.

I'd laugh if it weren't so ludicrous.

And the only person I have to blame is myself.

As usual, I'm the fuck-up, the one who makes bad decisions and screws everything up. My own mother doesn't even believe me when I tell her that the things they're saying about me aren't true.

But what else is new.

She didn't believe me when I told her the condom broke, that Trevor and I weren't careless. It was truly an accident.

She didn't believe that the modeling jobs I was getting were legitimate or a jumping-off point for my career.

She didn't even believe I was capable of taking care of my child.

And she doesn't believe me now.

Of course, in Toby's case, she's probably right.

I have enough money for one of Toby's payments, but not both, so I'm going to swallow my pride and borrow the money from Ryleigh.

I'll pay her back with interest, but I need time to heal enough to get a job waiting tables or whatever is going to bring in the most money in the shortest amount of time.

I just don't know how long it's going to take my ribs to heal. It could be six to eight weeks, maybe more. My ankle isn't broken but it's severely sprained so I'm wearing a boot for a few weeks, and I'm basically a mess. I don't even want to look in the mirror.

"Hey, you ready to blow this popsicle stand?" Ryleigh comes in with...my little rolling carry-on suitcase.

"Hi. Where did you get that?"

"Angus worked his magic and got us a key to Callum's room. We packed up all your stuff and brought it back to our room for now. And I brought you some stuff I thought you'd need. Including..." She pauses dramatically as she pulls something out of her bag. "Your purse and your phone!"

"Oh my God, you're the best!" I say in surprise. "How did you get them?"

“They were in the room. Apparently, Callum went back there and dropped the stuff off before he came to the hospital.”

“Thank fuck. The hospital has been freaking out about payment and all that.”

“We took care of it,” she says gently.

“What?” I gape at her. “No, you can’t?—”

“We can afford it, okay? And you can file with your insurance and give us back the money once you get it. It’s just a loan to make this less stressful.”

Tears sting my eyelids.

Again .

I’ve done a lot of crying the last two days.

“Thank you.”

“Now, how about a shower and then you can put on your own clothes.”

“That sounds amazing.”

She helps me gather my things, and a nurse comes to remove the IV so I can shower. I’m getting released soon anyway, so I don’t need it anymore.

It feels good to be clean and wash away dried blood and as many remnants of that morning as possible.

It’s only been two days but it feels like a year.

Possibly more. I can't even begin to process everything that's happening but all I can focus on right now is making sure Toby finishes the treatment.

His six-month scans looked good, and according to my mother, his energy is coming back.

I told her I'd make the payments, not to worry about it, and we left it at that.

She didn't seem interested in finding out how I'm doing or where I'm getting the money, and that's fine with me.

She and I are going to have a heart-to-heart when I get home to L.A.

, but right now I can't think about getting on a plane.

I can barely walk across the room without help so there's no way I can navigate an airport.

"What's going on with the tour?" I ask Ryleigh once we're settled at the hotel.

"It's done," she says. "Karnal Death has cancelled the remaining dates, and Crimson Edge starts their club tour in just under two weeks."

"Oh, so is everyone already on the way home?"

"They just made the announcement this morning, so we're flying out tomorrow.

Although, I'll stay here with you until you're ready to leave.

I'm not leaving you, so don't start that 'you don't have to' bullshit.

This is what friends do. I don't know what kind of shitty people you've had in your life since college, but I'm not like them. "

I smile. "No. You definitely are not."

"Okay, here's the plan: I'm going to run down to the deli around the corner and get us lunch.

Angus is in a band meeting, so you'll have a little time to relax.

Then we can eat and if you're not too tired, come up with a plan for what you need going forward.

You also need to go through your stuff and make sure we got everything. "

"I'm going to need a favor," I begin.

She stops me with her hand. "Whatever you need. But first, you relax and let me get food. I'm starving. You want turkey and Swiss or a meatball sub?"

Those were my two favorite sandwiches in college, and she remembers.

"Turkey and Swiss," I say. "Lettuce and tomato. No mayo or mustard."

"You got it." A minute later she's gone and for the first time in two days, I'm alone.

And I can finally turn on my phone. It's not charged but she grabbed my charger so I plug it in and give it a minute to power up.

Holy crap.

Two hundred text messages.

A dozen missed calls.

And hundreds of notifications from my social media accounts.

I'm nervous about reading everything, but I might as well start with the ugliest.

There are two from Callum demanding to know where I am—apparently he was so high he forgot he took my phone away from me.

Then there are voicemails from my mother, asking why I haven't answered Toby's video calls or called to check in.

But then there are other messages.

STEVIE: Hey, I saw what happened online. Are you okay? Do you need anything? Please reach out. You know I've been where you are.

HETTIE: You okay, hon? I saw you on the news with that shithead of a boyfriend. If you need anything, call me. And when you're feeling better, let's talk about the next shoot—I'm looking at mid-July if you're healed by then.

CHEY: Hey, if you need a place to stay while you're healing, Ivan and I are right on the beach and have plenty of room. We'll be traveling, so you'll have the place all to yourself. And Stevie has a key. Offer is open-ended if you need it. Callum isn't invited, though.

I cover my mouth with my hand as sobs escape me.

I never expected this type of support. I thought sure my modeling career was over,

but even if it's not, I don't know what I'm going to do.

How can I prove to my mother and to Toby that I'm capable of being his mom?

Of taking care of him, both physically and financially.

L.A. is expensive so I don't know how I can live on my own, not right now anyway, but if we moved somewhere else, I wouldn't have any support.

And now I don't even have Mick.

It's been twenty-four hours since I asked him to leave my hospital room, and I haven't heard from him. Ryleigh and I haven't talked about him in any detail but she did mention that he's hurt and frustrated.

But that's the thing—so am I.

Hurt that I thought I had a plan and then it blew up in my face.

Frustrated that I have to borrow money from Ryleigh even though I don't want to.

Hurt that Mick wouldn't even try to understand how I feel.

Frustrated that he didn't come back later, so we could talk things out.

I'm probably being unreasonable, but I've been through a lot over the last six months or so. If he's truly in love with me, shouldn't he have tried again? Tried harder to understand what I was trying to say or at least appreciate the fact that I don't want to bring baggage to our relationship?

I don't know anymore.

It just feels like my world is crashing down around me, and I don't know where to turn.

“Hey.” Ryleigh walks in with a bag of food that smells wonderful. “They were out of Swiss cheese so instead of guessing what else you'd want, I got you a meatball sub. I know they're fattening but someone who just got out of the hospital should have a treat.”

“Thank you.” I take the sandwich and open the paper wrapping it. There's cheese and sauce all over the place and I take a big bite, unconcerned about the sauce on my nose and cheeks. It hurts my lip a little but I don't care. The taste is worth it. “Oh, fuck, that's almost better than sex.”

Ryleigh laughs. “I don't think so, but okay. You do you.”

“Listen, about that favor.”

“Anything.”

“I need ten thousand dollars. I'll pay you back as soon as?—”

She interrupts me shaking her head. “Done. Don't worry about how long it'll take you to pay it back. Take care of Toby. I meant what I said about that. Your kid has cancer. This isn't like you need a loan because you spent your grocery money on new shoes. Okay? Stop being stubborn.”

“Thank you. You're a good friend.”

“What else?”

That gives me pause because I don't know. Making sure Toby is taken care of is

really all I've had the energy to focus on.

"I don't know," I admit. "I'm tired and everything hurts, to be honest."

"Then rest. You can have the bedroom and we'll sleep on the pull-out couch—and don't say no!

"She gives me an exasperated look. "You just got out of the hospital and can probably use a little privacy. We'll survive one night on a sofa bed.

Geez. You're our friend. If they had availability, we would've gotten you your own room but I guess the place is sold out. "

"Oh." I don't want to argue about anything anymore, so I just nod. "Thank you."

"How about you relax and don't worry about what's next. We'll see what Angus says when he gets back from the meeting and we can make some decisions from there."

The lock whirs on the door and Angus comes in.

"Hey, Taryn. Welcome home. So to speak."

"Thanks."

He picks up the sandwich Ryleigh got for him and takes a bite.

"So?" Ryleigh asks. "What's the plan?"

"We're going home to Minnesota for ten days until we leave on our tour."

"Excellent." She nods.

“Is, uh, Mick around?” I ask quietly. “I need to talk to him.”

Angus makes a weird face. “Actually, no. He left a little while ago. He was headed to the airport. Said he had things to take care of before we hit the road again.”

My heart sinks.

He left without even saying goodbye.

Which is pretty telling.

And my heart shatters into a million pieces.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:32 am

Mick

After Sasha assured me my payout would be more than enough to cover it, I asked for a twenty-five-thousand-dollar advance.

She didn't question me and told me the money would be in my account in a couple of hours.

Then I booked a flight to Los Angeles. It took a little detective work on my part, with some help from Angus and Ryleigh, but I got Taryn's address in L.A.

And that's where I'm headed.

Her mom and I are going to have a talk.

Then I'm going to pay off the rest of Toby's treatment.

If I'm lucky, she'll get to L.A. while I'm still there.

Before I run out of money.

Hotels and rental cars are expensive but I don't care. I'm going to do whatever it takes to show Taryn that I love her. That I'm in this for the long haul. That her "baggage" doesn't scare me.

The news has shifted a bit today, now that the police released a statement saying that while Mr. Yates was found to have alcohol, cocaine, and other stimulants in his

system, Taryn didn't.

That changed the narrative somewhat so I hope she's feeling better, but it bothered me when she said that her mother looks down on her.

That has to stop.

I don't know the specifics of their relationship, but Taryn has always felt that she disappointed her parents by getting pregnant her sophomore year of high school.

Then her father died and it's like she never had a chance to prove herself.

She hasn't told me those things in so many words, it's just the vibe I get, but I know her better than she thinks.

"Can I help you?" An attractive but tired-looking woman who's probably in her late forties opens the door.

"Mrs. Blakely?"

"Yes, can I help you?"

"My name is Michael Lipson. I'm a friend of Taryn's. I was hoping I could talk to you."

She sighs. "Is she all right? Has she gotten into more trouble?"

"Not at all. I just, well, if I could come in... maybe we could talk?"

She hesitates and I don't blame her. I'm six-two with visible tattoos and hair that's longer than polite society dictates. And she doesn't know me from Adam.

“You’re her friend Mick,” she says finally. “From Crimson Edge.”

It’s surprising that Taryn told her about me, but I nod. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Come on in. I just got back from the hospital.”

“How’s Toby doing?”

She leads me through a small, modest foyer and living room. “He’s better. The worst of the treatment is over. They’re doing some kind of cell therapy now—the science is way above my pay grade—but this part is to boost his immune system after they shot it to hell with the drugs.”

I nod. “Poor kid. He’s probably been through a lot.”

“He has.” She opens the refrigerator. “I have a meatloaf I was going to reheat. And instant mashed potatoes. If that’s okay with you, you’re welcome to eat with me.”

“Uh, sure. If you’re going to eat, I could eat too. Can I help?”

She shakes her head. “Meatloaf just needs to warm in the oven. Potatoes just require boiling the milk and butter and stirring in the mix.” She bustles around for a few minutes. “So, tell me why you’re here, Michael. Or do you prefer Mick?”

“Mick is what everyone calls me.”

I don’t mention the circumstances surrounding when Taryn calls me Michael.

“Okay, Mick. And you can call me Tracy.”

“Tracy, I’m here because I love Taryn.”

“That doesn’t really have anything to do with me.”

“But it does.” I lean against the counter as she works. “Taryn thinks she’s a disappointment to you.”

Her mother hesitates. “I guess in a way she is. But probably not why she thinks. It has nothing to do with getting pregnant at fifteen. Yes, of course, we were disappointed, but she’s not the first teenager that happened to.

It’s more about her choices after that. The modeling dream...

she talks about wanting to raise Toby but then doesn’t do anything to make that happen. ”

“Her modeling career is important,” I protest. “And she’s starting to see success for all her sacrifices. Rock Vibe wants to make her their spokesperson and there’s been a lot of talk about her since the Alexa Humboldt show.”

“I’ll admit to being surprised about that but with her behavior of late, it wouldn’t surprise me if those avenues are all closed to her now.”

“Taryn didn’t do anything wrong,” I say quietly. “Her bloodwork came back clean—no drugs or alcohol in her system. She drinks a little, but Taryn doesn’t do drugs. At all. Ever.”

Tracy turns, a surprised look in her eyes. “Are you sure?”

“I’m positive.”

She frowns. “Honestly, I don’t know what to believe anymore.”

“Do you have any idea what she endured with Callum?”

Tracy shakes her head. “The fact that she stayed with a man like that. Those are the choices she makes that...disappoint me.”

“Are you kidding me right now? She sold the only commodity she felt she had—herself—to a mean, abusive addict to pay for Toby’s treatment.

Don’t you get the sacrifice she made? Do you have any idea how he treated her?

You think this was the first time he put his hands on her?

Did you miss the bruises on her thighs, her back, all the places most people couldn’t see them? ”

“I don’t...” Her face is a little pale. “I guess I did. I never saw...are you saying he used to hurt her?”

“Yes. Not as bad as this last time but there were marks, things she hid from most people. But I saw them.”

“So... she was with Callum but cheating with you?”

I sigh. “No. I’m in love with her, but we were waiting for this to be over.

For her to be free. And that was all her.

She wanted to wait. She didn’t want to start something with me while she was still tethered to him.

Taryn is as beautiful on the inside as she is on the outside, but the only two people

who don't see that are you and her. ”

Tracy looks sad for a moment and then sinks into the nearest chair.

“I love my daughter, and despite our disappointment, her father and I were excited to become grandparents. It changed when he died. It was hard for me to become a single mom to a toddler at my age. Taryn was off in college, something her father made her promise to finish, so I couldn't ask her to come home.

And then she went and chased her dreams...

again, I didn't want to ask her to come back.

“When Toby got sick, I thought she'd come home. Instead, she worked harder than ever, trying to find her footing in modeling. She's always sent money, and she always comes home to spend time with him...until the last year or so.”

“Because Callum wouldn't let her.”

“He wouldn't...” Now she looks both sad and confused.

“Look, you and your daughter have a lot to talk about, but she's in rough shape.

I'm here because I wanted you to know the truth.

From the perspective of the man who loves her enough to wait for her to be ready.

She's taking some time to figure things out, and I respect that.

I'm here to do what I can for her by getting the information I need so I can pay for the last two months of Toby's treatment. ”

“What?” She stares at me in confusion. “I don’t understand what’s happening here.”

“Like I said, she’s taking some time for herself. To get her head on straight. She’s been through a lot. Callum really hurt her this time.” I pause. “Didn’t you read the news?”

“I try not to. What I saw wasn’t very flattering, and frankly, I don’t have a lot of free time. I work all day, go straight to the hospital to do schoolwork and spend time with Toby, and then come home to grade papers, eat dinner, and go to bed.”

“Well, your daughter needs you right now. Maybe even more than Toby.”

“I don’t...” She falters, rubbing her temples. “I feel like I’ve missed a lot of what’s been happening. Will you go back to the beginning and tell me what you know?”

“Sure.”

“I’m going to get a glass of wine. Would you like one?”

“Thank you, yes.”

She pours two glasses and then sinks into a chair across from me.

And we sit in the kitchen for the next few hours while I fill her in on her daughter’s life.

Taryn’s already mad at me—if I’m overstepping my boundaries, so be it.

She and her mother desperately need to clear the air, and Toby needs his treatment paid for.

If I can accomplish those two things, then my work here is done.

Everything else is up to Taryn.

I'll wait until she's ready, as long as I know she loves me.

And if she doesn't, I'll still have no regrets.

I love her enough to want to do this for her.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:32 am

Taryn

I spend three days in Baton Rouge with Ryleigh.

I feel a little guilty that she's paying for the room and stayed behind when Angus went home to Minnesota, but it's been kind of nice.

Just us girls, hanging out, ordering takeout and watching movies.

It would have been better if I could move around more, but I haven't had girl time like this since college.

And I didn't realize how much I missed it until now.

"What are you doing?" I ask when I wake up on the fourth morning to find her packing.

"My man is waiting for me in our big, empty house. I need to go." She seems happy and carefree, not at all concerned about abandoning me.

"I haven't booked a flight yet or?—"

"Don't worry. Hotel is paid for through Sunday, and your mom landed at the airport a little while ago, so you guys can fly back to L.A. together. Angus used his points to book both of you in first class. Consider it a gift from us."

"Ryleigh!" I want to cry again, but instead I hurry over and hug her as tightly as I can

manage with my sore ribs. “How did... I haven’t spoken to my mom.”

“I know.” She pulls away slightly. “But Mick did.”

“What?” I stare at her in confusion.

“She’ll explain. And stop being stubborn. There are people who love you. No one more than that guy you’ve been too proud to reach out to.”

I frown.

“But don’t worry—he’ll be waiting when you get your head out of your ass.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know. But you will.” She finishes packing, calls for a cab, and then hugs me again. “Your mom is on her way and I have to go. I don’t know when I’m going to see you next, but let me know your plans once you figure them out.”

“Thank you,” I whisper. “For everything.”

“I know you don’t have a lot of experience with this, but this is what besties do. And don’t be too hard on Mick—he’s bent over backwards to be the man you need.”

“What does that mean?”

“Gotta run! Love you!” She grabs her suitcase and a moment later I’m alone.

I don’t even know what to do with this new development.

Why is my mother here? And what did Mick have to do with it?

I should reach out to him but I honestly don't know what to say.

I've taken the last few days to just...be. I've checked in with Toby, of course, but beyond that, I needed to disconnect from almost everything. I stayed away from social media, the news, and even people like Stevie and Chey, though I did tell everyone I was taking a few days to recuperate.

Now it feels like I've missed a lot.

The knock on the door brings me back to the present and I open it slowly.

"Mom."

"Hi, honey." She comes in dragging a small carry-on suitcase with her. She hugs me for a moment, and we just stare at each other for a beat. Maybe longer.

"What are you doing here?"

"Well, your friend Mick and I had some very enlightening conversations, and he suggested I come here to get you since Ryleigh said you weren't strong enough to travel on your own yet."

"You...what?" I squint in confusion. "When did you talk to Mick? How did you talk to Mick?"

"He came to L.A."

"He what?"

"Let's sit down, sweetie." She sinks into a chair and I ease myself into another.

“I need to know everything,” I say finally.

“First, I owe you an apology.” She seems tired and I feel a twinge of guilt about how much our relationship has devolved in the last few months.

“You don’t—” I begin.

“No, I do.” She hesitates. “I guess maybe I didn’t want to think about what was going on with you and Callum.”

“But I told you,” I say in frustration.

“I was stressed about Toby, burning the candle at both ends taking care of him, working, homeschooling...I convinced myself that even though you were breaking up with Callum before this all started, that he was your boyfriend and you’d simply been arguing or whatever.

Normal relationship stuff. I never really listened when you talked about how hard it was, how verbally and emotionally abusive he was.

I figured you were...exaggerating.” She shakes her head. “I’m sorry. I didn’t?—”

“We both had a lot on our plates,” I say magnanimously. It feels good to hear her acknowledge my sacrifice so there’s no need to make her feel any worse. She was under a lot of pressure too, just in a different way.

“I didn’t know he hit you!” She bursts out crying, sobbing into her hands and I reach for her arm.

“Mom, it hurts too much to hug you. Please don’t cry. I did it for Toby. And I’d do it all over again. You have to know that.”

“I didn’t know! I could have taken out a small loan, from my 401K—not for all of it, but you weren’t willing to get a regular job and I didn’t know what to do.

I didn’t even suggest it because at first I was stressed and panicking.

And by the time I realized, you were already back with Callum and the bills were being paid.

I thought...I am so sorry. I didn’t expect you to do— that . ”

“He’s my son. I’d do anything for him. Even though I haven’t been a good mom, I’m trying to be.”

“You were sixteen!” she says through her tears.

“Of course you weren’t a good mom. You were a kid.

Your dad and I were happy to take him, raise him, help you finish growing up without that burden.

If he hadn’t died things would have been different.

But I was grieving, totally unprepared to be a single mom in my forties. ”

“I’m sorry too.” Now I’m crying and the two of us sit there and sob for a while.

Finally, Mom gets up and grabs some tissues and we blow our noses.

Neither of us say anything for a while but then we start to talk.

About everything.

Going back to when I left college.

The struggles of trying to build a modeling career while flying back and forth to L.A. to spend time with my son.

How dating Callum had been nothing but a distraction at first and my eventual realization that he was a horrible person.

The resolution I made when he offered to pay for Toby's new treatment, and the abuse I suffered because of it.

And finally, how through the worst of it, Mick was there. Patient, loving, understanding—ready and willing to do whatever it took for us to be together.

My stubborn refusal to let him help.

The details of what happened five days ago.

Then we cried some more.

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "You should have told me what was happening. You should have made me listen."

"I was ashamed," I admit. "I became a prostitute, and I couldn't bring myself to spell it out for you."

"Don't you ever say that!" she hisses. "Women have been relying on men to support them since the beginning of time. In this case, you did what you had to do for your child. No one will ever think less of you for that—certainly not me. And definitely not that boy waiting for you back in L.A."

“Mick is still in L.A.?” I ask in confusion.

She gives me a strange look. “Well, I wasn’t going to leave Toby on his own without someone to look out for him. And they’re already best buds. Mick is great with him. You should see them together...”

“Mom!” I don’t know what to do with this crazy turn of events.

“If you’re up to it, we’ll fly home tomorrow. You and Mick need to talk.”

We do.

I didn’t realize how much.

“He paid the last two treatments, you know.”

“He what?” I stare at her. “How are you just telling me this now?”

“We’ve had a lot to discuss.”

“I borrowed the money from Ryleigh!”

“We know. She told him, but he asked her not to say anything until the two of you had a chance to talk.”

“Oh my god. I have to call him. I have to?—”

“No. Stop.” She gently takes my hand. “You’ll see him tomorrow. He knows we’re coming. It’ll be better to do it in person, okay?”

I know she’s right, but I can’t help myself.

We order dinner and then I slip into the bathroom and pull up WhatsApp.

It feels like we haven't talked in a long time, and there's so much to say.

But it's only fair that I start.

TARYN: I love you .

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:32 am

Mick

I didn't see the notification that I had a message on WhatsApp right away.

I've been busy with Toby, spending the day with him. We built Legos, did schoolwork, and then he went to a physical therapy thing they have him doing so he doesn't lose all his muscle while he's too weak to be active.

He's a great kid, and he looks just like Taryn.

Even with everything he's gone through with the treatments, he's always smiling, laughing, excited to hear about my band. I played him a few songs that don't have any curse words or overt sex-related lyrics, and he loved them. He's smart and easygoing too.

The best thing in my opinion is that he loves his mom and doesn't resent her at all for leaving him to work.

"Mommy's a model," he tells me proudly.

"I know," I say. "She and I met on a photo shoot for a catalog."

"You're a model and a rockstar?" His eyes round. "That is so cool!"

I chuckle. "I think so too."

He seems to tire out late in the afternoon, so I tell him I'm going to the airport to pick

up his mom and grandma and I take off. The plan is for me to take them home and then Tracy will take her car to go see Toby while Taryn and I have some alone time to talk.

I don't know what's going to happen between us but Tracy told me to be patient, that Taryn wants to talk to me.

And then I saw the message.

I love you.

Short and to the point, but it gives me hope.

Tracy ordered a wheelchair for Taryn, because it's hard for her to walk long distances between her sore ankle and ribs, so I spot them right away.

Taryn looks worse than she did when I last saw her, her face now covered in bruises, but she's still the most beautiful woman alive as far as I'm concerned.

"Hi." I'm talking to both of them but my gaze is on Taryn.

Our eyes lock and for a few seconds it's like there's no one else but us.

Hers are filled with apology and regret, but I can love both of those away. As long as she loves me too.

I love you.

That simple message changed everything.

"Hey." She gets up slowly, resting one hand on my forearm. "I can walk to the car, I

just couldn't make it through the whole airport."

"Let me take the suitcases," I say, since there are two big ones and two carry-ons. "And I'll pull the car around. You guys wait here."

I take three of the suitcases with me and get them stowed in my rental car before driving back around to where Taryn and Tracy are waiting.

No one says anything for a while but I reach across the center console and hold out my hand, waiting for Taryn to take it.

And she does.

Her fingers curl into mine, and I let out an invisible sigh of relief.

Everything is going to be okay.

I don't know how we're going to work things out but we will.

By the time we get to the house, Taryn is visibly dragging, so I let Tracy get her settled in her old room—where I've been sleeping the last two nights—while I get everything out of the car.

"Okay, I'm going to see Toby," Tracy announces.

And with that she's gone, leaving Taryn and me alone.

In the bedroom she grew up in.

"Will you come sit next to me?" she asks when I pause in the doorway. She's propped up against a bunch of pillows, holding out her hand.

“Of course.” I sit beside her and she immediately rests her head on my shoulder.

“I missed you,” she says softly.

“I missed you too.”

“I need to apologize.”

“Nah. Not necessary.”

“But it is.” She lifts her head and stares into my eyes. “I shouldn’t have said those things or blamed you for what happened... I was upset, scared, and worried about Toby. I wasn’t thinking straight but I shouldn’t have lashed out at you.”

“Who else were going to lash out at?” I counter. “The person you trust the most. And I’m glad that’s me.”

“I do trust you,” she whispers. “More than anyone. I’ve loved you almost since the first time I saw you—and that scared me. When you showed me just how wonderful you are all over again, I didn’t want to fall in love with you again because...” She sighs and drops her gaze.

“Because why?” I press gently.

“Because you have to go, and I have to stay here.” Tears spill down her cheeks, and I turn my body so I can face her, using my thumbs to brush them away.

“Emotionally, I’m not going anywhere. Yeah, we’ll probably have to do the long-distance thing for a while but it won’t be forever. I’m going to take care of you, Taryn. You and Toby. Your mom too, if necessary.”

“If I could fucking move, I would throw myself in your arms,” she whispers, crying harder now.

“Shh. No. Don’t cry.” I gently wrap my arms around her, letting her sob into my chest. “I love you. I always have. I just want to take care of you. If you’ll let me.”

“I want us to take care of each other.”

“We will. I’m taking care of you right now because that’s what you need.

Chances are, at some point in our lives, I’m going to need you and that’s when you’ll step up.

And maybe, if we’re lucky, we’ll go a long period of time where no one needs anyone—so we can just love each other and focus on Toby. ”

She lifts her tear-stained face and I can’t resist kissing her, though I keep my touch light because she’s still bruised.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I whisper, pressing my forehead to hers.

“You won’t. I need you to touch me, Mick. For you to touch every bruise, every mark he left, and make them all better.”

“I can do that.”

I stare down at her, the prettiest girl I’ve ever known, and the bruises on her face momentarily piss me off all over again.

But Callum is in jail—it better be for a long time—and the woman I love is here. With me. Hopefully forever.

I run my fingers over her swollen lips and gently skim the cut. It's healing well, mostly closed, with a small scab starting to form. So I press my lips to it.

"I'm going to kiss every one of your boo boo's and make them better."

"Okay." Her eyes are closed but there's a faint smile on her face.

And that's what I do.

From the marks on her face to the deep purple bruise along her ribcage to her swollen ankle.

I kiss and touch and run my fingers over her entire body, as if I'm rubbing some sort of magical potion into her skin.

Something with the kind of magic that can begin to erase the memories of every time Callum hurt her.

By the time I'm done, she's naked, sprawled on the bed, her beautiful body on display for me.

And I'm hard as fucking granite.

I know we can't do anything but?—

"Are you going to sit there drooling or are you going to make love to me?" she asks in a throaty voice.

"Baby, I can't... I mean, you can't..." I shake my head. "How can we possibly do this without your ribs screaming in agony?"

Her eyes flutter open and she meets my gaze. “I lay on my back, you kneel in front of me.”

Obviously, the logistics can work, and we’ve waited so long...

“Are you sure you want to do it now?” I ask softly. “While you’re still hurting?”

“I can’t think of a better time—or better way—to make the hurt go away. I need you inside me, Michael. To remind me what we are together.”

“You’re positive?”

“I’ve never been more positive of anything. Ever.”

I make short work of getting undressed and take a moment to lock the door. Then I stare at the woman on the bed, the one I’ve been waiting for, for so long.

“What?” she asks.

“Just thinking about how long it’s been. How long it took us to find our way back to each other.”

“Are you nervous?”

“A little. Not about the sex but about hurting you.”

“You won’t.” She holds out her hands, and the fact that she trusts me so completely, now that she’s so vulnerable, means everything to me.

I walk over to the bed and lie beside her, careful to keep my weight off of her. This is going to be tricky but I feel like I’m up to the task. There’s no universe where I turn

her down when she asks me to make love to her.

She lifts a hand, cupping the side of my face, then tugs my head down to hers.

“Kiss me,” she whispers against my mouth.

“That’s going to hurt,” I protest.

“I don’t care.” Then she presses her lips to mine, her tongue seeking out mine almost desperately.

I understand her urgency because I feel it too.

We’ve waited so damn long.

But that ends now.

I deepen the kiss, taking deep, erotic pulls of her tongue, hoping to show her everything I feel. Everything I’ve waited so long to give her. But first I have to make sure she feels safe.

“Condom?” I ask.

She shakes her head, pointing to her arm. “I have the implant. And I trust you.” She pauses. “I mean, have you been with...other women... since...”

I cut her off. “No. Not for months. It’s just been you.”

“Then we don’t need condoms.”

Fuck, I love this woman.

I can't remember going bare, it's been that long.

And as I slide between her slick folds, her warm heat enveloping me, my brain goes on the fritz. I can't think, can't breathe, can't do anything but feel.

This woman.

This moment.

Our love.

"I love you," I rasp. "So fucking much."

"I love you too." She gazes up at me, and the love in her eyes nearly sends me over the edge.

"It's been a while, baby—I don't know how long I'm going to last."

"You know how to get me there." There's a tiny glimmer of mischief in her eyes, reminiscent of the Taryn she was before Callum tried to beat her down, and I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure it never dies.

I angle my hips and stroke in, making sure not to move her too much. Resting my hands on her hips, I squeeze a little.

"Anything hurt here?"

She shakes her head.

"Then hold on tight."

I keep a firm grip on her hips—to keep from jostling her ribs—and then start to move with deep, measured strokes. She likes it hard, a little rough, but since she's in no shape for that, I opt for finesse. We haven't done this in a long time, but you don't forget the best sex of your life.

Licking my thumb, I rub it over her clit, watching to see her reaction. A few more times and her hips come up off the mattress.

There it is—the spot that makes her crazy.

So I keep rubbing my thumb over the tight little nub, stroking in time to what I'm doing with my cock.

“Michael.” Her eyes turn a deep sapphire, burning into mine.

“Right here, baby.”

“I love you,” she pants. “Fuck, I love you so much—yes!” She cries out as her tight wet pussy clenches and spasms around me, sending me over the edge right behind her.

I think I told her I loved her too but I'm not sure.

All I can do is ride out this crazy moment of ecstasy, and hope that it never, ever ends.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:32 am

Taryn

The pain in my ribs is hard to ignore, and once the pain meds start to wear off, I can't sleep.

It's still early but I shift restlessly.

My double bed definitely isn't big enough for both Mick and me, but I love sleeping next to him.

I don't know what time we fell asleep, but we talked and kissed and made plans until my eyes just wouldn't stay open any longer.

I turn over carefully and take in his handsome face. He's on his side, hair tousled and falling over his eyes, but he's still gorgeous. And having him here in bed next to me makes everything in my life so much better.

"Why are you watching me sleep?" he rumbles sleepily, reaching out to put a gentle hand on my hip.

"I can't get comfortable, this bed is too small," I admit.

His eyes open and he blinks a few times. "Then we should get a bigger one."

I shake my head. "We don't need to. I'll be okay in another few days. Go back to sleep. I'm just going to?"

“Once I’m up, I’m up.” He smiles. “And one thing you need to know about me—I need coffee in the morning.”

“Then let’s go make some.” I manage to get to my feet, wincing until I’m finally upright.

“Do you need help in the bathroom?” he asks quietly.

I shake my head. “I’ll be okay. You can use the one in the hallway; I’ll go down to my mom’s room.”

“Okay.”

Just as I’m about to open my bedroom door, he reaches for my hand. “Hey. Good morning.” He lightly touches his lips to mine.

“Good morning.”

We smile at each other and then separate.

I find him in the kitchen a few minutes later, and he’s humming to himself.

“Oh, no. Are you a morning person?” I demand with as much seriousness as I can muster up since he makes me so happy.

He grimaces. “Is that...bad? I mean, I’m rarely up at...” He glances at his watch. “Seven oh six. But like I said—once I’m up, I’m up.”

“I don’t know if this thing with us is going to work out,” I murmur.

“I can pretend to be grumpy for you,” he teases, hugging me to his side.

I smile, nestling against his chest as best I can.

Everything fucking hurts and it's pissing me off, but I can't resist any opportunity to touch him.

"I wanted to talk to you about something," he says as we settle at the island with our coffee.

"What's up?"

"This isn't as romantic as I would have liked, but after everything we've been through, I don't want to wait—let's get married."

"What?" I gape at him.

"I know it's wild, but let's drive to Vegas and do it."

"But..." It sounds crazy—and soon. "Why would you..."

"Because I love you and we're going to have to be apart a lot. And I don't ever want you to doubt my commitment. To you and to us."

"I..." Surprisingly, I'm suddenly not afraid.

It's crazy but it feels right. "Yes. Absolutely. The only thing, I would want my mom and Toby to be there. We can probably break him out of the clinic for a weekend but I'm not sure how to make that happen because he's still so susceptible to germs while his immune system builds back up. "

"Then we'll figure it out."

“Are you sure? I want to start therapy and stay in L.A. for a while, to be with Toby.”

“Therapy and time with Toby sound like exactly what you need right now.”

“I need those things...but I also need you.”

“You have me. Money is a little bit of an issue short-term, so your engagement ring will be simple but?—”

“I don’t need an engagement ring. Just a wedding ring. We can buy something else later.”

“Then let’s go wedding ring shopping and when we’re done we’ll spend the day with Toby. You think I should ask his permission to marry you?”

“Oh, Mick.” I wrap my arms around his waist, despite the twinge in my ribs, and hold on for dear life. “I don’t know what I was thinking to let you go four years ago.”

“We were both dumb. But now we’ve come to our senses.” He kisses the top of my head.

* * *

I feel a little guilty as we shop for wedding rings but in the end, Mick convinces me it’s the right move.

We opt for non-traditional styles—black tungsten with a brushed center and beveled carbide for him, and black tungsten with a diagonal line of three small diamonds in platinum for me—and all told spend less than a thousand dollars.

“I love my ring,” I whisper as we head toward the clinic to see Toby.

“I love mine too,” Mick says, his fingers twined with mine.

“How would you feel about making L.A. our home base?” I ask him thoughtfully.

“Obviously, you’ll be on the road a lot, but could this be our home when we’re not traveling?”

“Of course. Wherever you want.”

“I know it’s not the most affordable place to live, but it’s where my mom is, and if I’m going to keep modeling, I’ll need her help with Toby no matter what happens with custody.”

“I want what you want,” he says.

“I want to take a month or so to just be with my son,” I admit. “And heal, both physically and mentally. Then I want to get back to work.”

“I’ve got money coming,” he says. “The album is already at a million five, so we’re on our way to double platinum.

Touring with Karnal Death had a lot of challenges but we put up with it because we were making a lot of money.

Our debt to the record label is paid and now we’re in the black.

The club tour will be expensive in its own way, but Sasha sent us the financials the other day and we’re going to make a lot more money, especially with merch.

So what we’re dealing with now is going to be short-term. ”

“You know, if we can live with my mom for a year—even though you’ll barely be

here—we could save up for a little house. Or a condo. Just something of our own, close enough to my mom to be convenient for Toby but a place where we’re going to start our new life.”

“If your mom is amenable, that sounds perfect.”

I hesitate. “I have to talk to her about the custody situation again, which is partly why I need to stay here for a while. Is that okay? Us being apart for an undetermined length of time?”

“I’m not Callum,” he says in a gruff voice, squeezing my hand.

“I love you enough to set you free. I’m not the kind of guy who cheats.

Sure, there have been tons of women over the years, but I was single, sowing my oats and living the rock star life because I could.

Now that I have you, that’s all I need. I’ll never cheat on you.

Things may not work out at some point—we can’t know the future—but if we get to that point, there will be many, many conversations. ”

“I love you so much, Michael Lipson.”

“I love you too, babe.”

“So...should we go ask my son’s permission for my hand in marriage?” I ask, giggling.

“We absolutely should. Well, I should. Maybe let me talk to him alone? I think perception is everything in these situations.”

“Sure. I can drop you off and then run to the drugstore near there. I need a few things.”

“Although... what if he says no?” he asks quietly.

I shake my head. “Absolutely impossible. He’s going to love you as much as I do. Based on the phone conversation we had yesterday, he already does.”

“You, uh, think he’ll be okay with me as his stepdad?”

“You’re not going to be his stepdad.”

“I’m not?” He sounds confused.

“You’re going to be his dad. His sperm donor died before he was born. Toby’s never had a dad. My father died when he was still a toddler, so he doesn’t remember him. You’re going to be the only dad he’s ever known.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“God, yes. I couldn’t ask for a better man to be the role model in my son’s life.”

“Even though I’m going to raise him to be a morning person?”

I burst out laughing. “Toby is already a morning person, so yeah, it’s too late for me in that regard.”

“Good thing—because I’m not going anywhere.”

I gaze over at him. “I know.”

“We took the long road in getting here, but you were worth the wait, Taryn.”

“That might be the most romantic thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:32 am

Mick

My wedding day is nothing like I thought it would be—and nothing like the low-key event Taryn and I tried to plan.

The first roadblock came from Toby. His doctors asked us to wait as long as possible before taking him anywhere public, so we had to delay until the beginning of September since his presence was important to Taryn.

Then Angus got wind of my plans and said there was no way in hell I was getting married without the band. And Taryn wanted Ryleigh to be her maid of honor, so our guest list basically tripled.

Somehow, through the grapevine of her girlfriends, Alexa Humboldt got involved and donated a dress for Taryn to wear, and she made it clear she planned to attend.

Then Hettie heard about it and said she was going to create a leather suit for me, and of course, she also wanted to be there.

Sasha lives in Las Vegas so there's no way to leave her out, and that forced us to pivot.

Our private elopement turned into a small but significant event and we were a little worried at first because we truly didn't want to spend a lot of money.

My debt to Sasha is paid since she took the money I borrowed out of my first payment, but between paying Toby's treatment and some follow-up testing that

required additional out-of-pocket payments, we were stressed about the idea of wedding costs.

Luckily, I have a really rich bandmate who offered to pay for everything as our wedding present. And then Sasha offered to let us have the wedding and a small reception at her house, which is a huge, beautiful mansion.

I'm a little awed and humbled by the outreach of love and support for Taryn and me, considering everything that's happened in the last six months.

Now that everyone knows the truth—and we have Ryleigh to thank for that because she did an expose on Karnal Death, delving into the band's reputation and escalating bad behavior, and then interviewing Taryn to get her perspective.

It just came out two weeks ago and I think it's been cathartic for Taryn, even if there are always haters who say she's lying.

“You ready?” Angus asks me as I put on the pale pink—Taryn said it's called white blush—tie that goes with my all-black suit and dress shirt. Hettie did a great job in my opinion because I look pretty chic, if I do say so myself.

“So ready.”

“I have another wedding present for you guys,” Angus says quietly.

“Oh?”

“My attorney did some digging for us, and it looks like Callum pleaded to a lesser charge, so there isn't going to be a trial.

Between the aggravated assault charge and the drug charges, he's going to do time.

It's not as much as we would have liked—just eighteen months—but Taryn won't have to testify, and you guys can put this behind you. ”

“You're a good friend.”

He grins. “I try.”

“All right. Let's get this party started.”

We walk into the great room that's been completely redecorated for a wedding, with a small pedestal set up by the fireplace where we'll say the vows we wrote, and chairs set up facing the pedestal. There are balloons, flowers, and candles decorating the room, and everything looks amazing.

I just hope this is at least some semblance of the wedding Taryn wanted.

My proposal wasn't all that romantic, but our friends helped make our wedding special without putting us in debt. I hope I can repay them someday, even if it's not monetarily.

The music starts and I turn, my breath practically leaving me when I catch sight of Taryn.

I don't know what color white blush is, beyond the tie she made me wear, but if that's what she's wearing it's my new favorite color. It's the softest, lightest pink imaginable, with enough white to look bride-like but pink enough to be different.

And like the woman wearing it, it takes my breath away.

Taryn

Like most little girls, I've always dreamed of what my wedding day would look like.

This isn't anything like what I imagined, but in some ways it's so much better.

I couldn't have dreamed up a man like Mick.

Having my son walk me down the aisle was emotional.

And being surrounded by the people who made today possible is absolutely magical.

As I dance in my new husband's arms, I feel a lightness I haven't felt in a long time, like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be with the people who mean the most to me.

"Guys, do you have a couple of minutes?" My mother approaches us as the song ends. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Of course." Mick and I follow her to the den, away from the music and laughter of our friends.

"Is everything okay?" Mick asks. As always, he's protective of me, and I've started to love that aspect of our relationship.

"I wanted to talk about Toby."

My heart sinks.

Not today.

Please don't drop any bombshells on me today.

"Can this wait?" Mick asks, frowning.

Mom shakes her head, a faint smile playing on her lips. "No, this isn't anything bad. I promise."

“What’s up?” I ask quietly.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about Toby and the truth of the matter is...

you know the saying that it takes a village to raise a child?

It’s true. And Toby needs all of us. You and Mick are navigating not just a new relationship, but important, busy careers.

In the long run, that’s what’s best for Toby.

We’ve gone back and forth about custody, and if you really want to make the change, I won’t stop you.

“But here’s my thought—what if we leave things as they are for now?

I have a good job with great, inexpensive benefits that include Toby.

I also live in a decent school district, which is important now that he’s not being homeschooled anymore.

So what I’m saying is, why can’t we raise him together?

The two of you can live with me while you save money and focus on your careers.

Maybe in the summertime, when I’m off, you can take Toby on the road or whatever, so I can have some free time.

And then when school starts, I’ll take over again, in whatever capacity works for us. Does this make sense?”

“Mom.” I hug her tightly. “I love you.”

“I love you too. Both of you.” She pulls Mick into our hug.

“I truly want you to be happy and I think with three of us working to make Toby’s life as wonderful as it can possibly be, we can all follow our dreams. The truth of the matter is I wouldn’t know what to do with myself if you moved Toby away.

And you’d both have to sacrifice professionally if you had full custody.

Between travel and him being in school, there’s a lot to consider.

Taryn, you’ve already sacrificed so much.

Frankly, I think this could be win-win for all of us. ”

“Grandma? Did you tell them yet?” Toby stage whispers from the doorway.

I turn and hold out my hand. “Tell us what?” I ask playfully.

“If we can all be a family together!” His eyes twinkle with excitement.

“We already are, big guy,” Mick says, lifting Toby up and drawing him into our group hug.

“Can I call you Dad?” he asks quietly, his little face sobering slightly.

As if there’s a chance Mick might say no.

My heart swells with love as Mick grins.

“I was going to ask you the same question.”

“You want to call me Dad?” Toby deadpans.

We're all quiet for a second before Toby bursts out laughing. "Gotcha."

"You did!" Mick playfully rubs his knuckles on the side of Toby's head.

"We don't have to decide anything tonight," Mom says, smiling. "I just wanted you to know—I don't want either of you to stop following your dreams. Not for me, not even for Toby. He can still be the happiest, healthiest, most loved little boy in Los Angeles with the three of us at the helm."

"I think so too," Mick says.

"Sorry to interrupt," Sasha says from the doorway. "But it's cake time!"

"We're coming." Mick puts Toby down and takes my hand, leading me back to the great room.

"Then I guess I'm going to tell Hettie yes," I whisper in Mick's ear.

I've been reluctant to sign on as her official brand ambassador because I didn't like the optics of being away from Toby for long periods of time, but she'd offered to do some of the photo and video shoots in L.A.

, so I've been on the fence and my mother knows that—and it's probably the reason she mentioned the sacrifices we might have to make to take care of Toby.

"Mom made the decision for you," Mick whispers, verbalizing my thoughts.

We grin at each other.

"I love you, Mr. Lipson."

"I love you, Mrs. Lipson."

I decided to keep my maiden name professionally but take Mick's surname legally.

“We need to go eat some cake,” he says after a moment. “We only have two days for a honeymoon before I have to leave for Europe.”

I smile. “Then let's eat some cake.”

Thanks for reading Mick and Taryn's story. Please consider leaving a review at the retailer of your choice.