

Taylor Ross needed it to happen tonight.

If she closed her eyes, she could even pretend to feel it, almost taste it, the way she used to. And then the dry spell would end, and things would go back to normal. Tonight. What she needed shimmered around her, in front of her, and if she reached out her fingers, if she touched the gauzy inspiration floating in the air, she might finally be able to write music again.

She drummed her fingers against the table, the red tablecloth absorbing the restless rhythm she tapped out. She blew out a breath and reached for her Jack and Coke, staring at the blinking light on her phone that lay on the table in front of her. She took a sip of her drink and then ran her finger across the screen, frowning at the numerous text messages, e-mails, and Google Alerts all begging for her attention. She took another sip and pushed her phone away, then flipped several pages of the notebook that lay open on the table in front of her, scowling at the scribbled and hastily scratched out chord progressions and lyrics.

She didn't want to think about any of it—breaking up with Zack, getting booted off a plane and the subsequent viral video of her in-air meltdown, or her inability to write. If her life was a sentence, the past few months had been a semicolon. An interruption, a pause. The past and the future linked by a tiny, little wink in time. She was tired of standing still, so for tonight, all she wanted was to catch a buzz so that she could numb the pain, the doubt, and the loneliness that were always simmering just below the surface.

She rested her chin in her hand as she scanned the dim interior of the Rainbow, a favorite LA hangout for rockers, groupies, some locals, and the occasional tourist. Red vinyl booths lined the walls, which were covered with rock paraphernalia. Autographed

pictures, gold records, vinyl albums, all encased in glass and staring down at her. She knew, if she wandered over the garishly carpeted floor to a corner near a window, she'd find a picture of herself and two assholes, all glaring moodily at the camera. She remembered autographing that picture. Hell, she remembered posing for that picture, full of the kind of cocky swagger only a twenty-two-year-old with a hit record can pull off.

How had ten years gone by so damn fast?

She glared up at the plants lining the ceiling, a row of lights shining from underneath them. Frustration rolled through her as her eyes landed once again on her phone. She was gripped by a sudden urge to hurl it across the room, but she forced herself to pick up her drink and drain it instead. She certainly wouldn't be the first musician to throw a tantrum at the Rainbow, but it wouldn't accomplish anything.

She shook her head and forced herself to focus on the blank page. Her brain scrambled for an idea, a melody, a lyric, a hook, *anything*, but the harder she tried to pull a song out of her brain, the more she felt like she was spinning her wheels in mud. Sweating and working and stressing and getting nowhere fast. The album was already six months overdue, and she needed something to show the label within the next week, otherwise they'd dump her, and she'd be out on her ass. And then what? If she wasn't a musician, a performer, then who was she? It was how she'd defined herself for over ten years now, and if she lost that part of herself, she didn't know how she'd stay whole.

It wasn't lost on her that her fame had dwindled to the point where she was able to sit in a bar, alone, without anyone even noticing her presence. But it wasn't the loss of fame that bothered her. It was the loss of the music. The fame was simply a perk that

came with making something that people connected with, of performing on a stage, guitar in hand, feeding on the crowd's energy.

She sifted through the scraps of ideas littered throughout the notebook. She'd hoped maybe coming to the Rainbow where so many greats had hung out would inspire her. As if sitting in a sticky vinyl booth would somehow miraculously move her to finally write a new song. Lips pursed together, she shook her head again. She had nothing. Her brain spun emptily, filled with nothing but frustration and disappointment and fear.

Shoving the notebook aside, she scrolled through a series of texts from Jeremy Nichols, her manager, and then opened her phone's web browser and navigated to a video of her disgrace at thirty thousand feet.

Like pressing on a bruise, she pressed Play. She'd already watched it several times; she couldn't seem to stop watching it, and she couldn't stop herself from cringing every time she did. She'd been trying to make herself numb so that she wouldn't *hurt* so much. And God, she hurt. Several months ago, she'd started casually dating bodyguard Zack De Luca, and much to her surprise, she'd fallen fast and hard for him. For the first time in years, she'd wanted something more than casual. But Zack hadn't, and even though he hadn't meant to, he'd broken her heart.

So, to numb the pain of walking away from Zack, she'd joined the mile-high club with a cute guy she'd met earlier in the airport lounge. They'd flirted, had coffee, and gone their separate ways. When she'd boarded the plane and found her first-class seat, she'd been pleasantly surprised to discover that cute coffee guy was right across the aisle from her. The flirting had resumed, and she'd moved over to the empty seat beside him. One thing had led to another, and after about forty-five minutes, they'd wound up in the bathroom together. As soon as they'd emerged, they'd been confronted by the flight

attendant, who knew exactly what they'd done, and threatened to have them arrested when the plane landed. When Taylor had started to apologize, the woman had turned on her, calling her a dirty slut. Livid and with no patience for bullshit double standards, Taylor had had a few choice words for the woman. The air marshal had come over to see what the commotion was about, and the flight attendant had called Taylor a white trash whore. So she'd slapped the flight attendant across the face, and the confrontation had devolved into flailing limbs and hair pulling. The air marshal had had to separate them, and she'd accidentally caught him in the throat with her elbow.

Not her finest moment.

She'd been escorted off the plane, and the video of the whole thing had gone viral almost immediately.

She shook her head and closed the video. Her pulse throbbed ominously in her temples, warning her of an oncoming headache. Everything was falling apart, and hell if she knew how to fix it.

A gawky guy with a slim build approached her table, and as his eyes met Taylor's through his thick horn-rimmed glasses, a chill crept over her skin. His dark brown hair was long on top and shaved close on the sides, his plain white T-shirt and jeans boring but clean. A surge of something weird, something cold, pushed up through her chest, and she forced herself to take a breath. He was probably just a fan looking for a picture. She should be grateful she still had fans. And yet something about this guy set her on edge.

"Hi, um, Taylor? Taylor Ross?" His voice was higher than she'd expected.

"Yeah, hi," she said, wanting to get this interaction over with.

“Can I, um, get a picture?” His eyes darted around the bar, oddly bright, and the hairs on the back of her neck prickled. He pushed his glasses back up his nose and made an awkward, fluttering gesture with his hand before shoving it in his pocket. She glanced around, trying to figure out what he was looking at.

She plastered a smile on her face that she hoped didn't look as fake as it felt. “Sure.” Pressing her palms against the table, she stood from her booth.

He slipped his arm around her, and another chill shivered down her spine, making her shrink away from him a little. Raising his phone in front of them, he took the picture. Relieved, she started to move away from him, but his arm tightened around her. He smiled shyly.

“One more.” She held still for the picture and didn't smile this time. As soon as he'd clicked the button, she pulled away. He let her this time, his fingers trailing over her waist and leaving her feeling as though she'd been slimed. “You shouldn't be here by yourself. I can keep you company.”

“No thanks.” She turned away and moved to slip back into the booth when he tapped her on her shoulder. She spun, ready to tell him to fuck off, but froze at the look on his face, his eyes blazing, his lips curled into a thin sneer.

When he spoke, his voice was quiet and determined. “But I want to. You have to let me.”

Anger melted her fear, and she scoffed out an impatient laugh. “I don't have to let you do sh—” But the rest of her words died as he grabbed her, curling a surprisingly strong hand around her arm, and her heart leaped into her throat. There was a time when she hadn't gone anywhere without security, but that level of fame was long behind her.

“Get off me,” she growled through clenched teeth, jerking away from him. His fingers dug in harder, and she raised her knee, ready to hit him in his tiny balls.

“What’s going on here?” At the sound of the deep voice, the creep released her.

“Nothing.” The creep stuffed his phone back into his pocket and stalked away toward the exit, disappearing quickly into the crowd. Taylor let out the breath she’d been holding, her shoulders slumping slightly. Her skin itched, a physical remnant of the anxiety.

“Are you okay?” The man’s voice was deliciously warm and rumbly, washing over her and chasing away the chill the creep had left behind.

“Yeah, I...thanks.” Taking another deep breath, she ran her hands through her hair and turned to face her rescuer. For the second time in as many minutes, her heart was in her throat, but for an entirely different reason now.

Taken individually, the man’s features were all so pretty. The intensely green eyes with the long lashes. The perfectly formed nose. The high, sculpted cheekbones. The lush, tempting mouth. The thick, short, light brown hair. And yet together, all prettiness disappeared, coalescing into the most handsome male face she’d ever seen. Her eyes scraped down his body, and she took in the way his black Led Zeppelin T-shirt was stretched tight over strong, broad shoulders and hugged his thick, muscular biceps. His right arm was covered in a sleeve tattoo, consisting entirely of intricate, detailed feathers overlapping each other, muscles rippling beneath the ink. The T-shirt fell straight down over his flat stomach and narrow waist, leading to well-built legs clad in denim.

He looked...sturdy. Like he’d been made to lean on.

She couldn’t remember ever having that initial impression of a guy before. Hot, yes. Sexy, sure. But sturdy? That was a new one.

“I...need another drink.” Taking a deep breath and trying to get her heart to slow down, she grabbed her purse and jacket out of the booth and made her way toward the bar at the back of the room. Her rescuer followed a few feet behind.

“Jack and Coke, please.” She tipped her head at the bartender and could feel the gorgeous guy’s eyes on her, leaving her skin tingling with excitement.

“You sure you’re all right?” He turned sideways to face her, leaning one arm on the bar. Never had a man looked so good in an old T-shirt and jeans. Never. And never had a man been so immediately appealing. It was the model-worthy face paired with that deep, rumbling voice; the strong, muscular body with the relaxed, confident posture; the alertness in his gaze with his slow, easy smile.

“I’m fine. Really, he should be thanking you. It’s because of you that his balls are still intact.”

He chuckled, the sound low and warm. “Trust me, there isn’t a doubt in my mind that you can take care of yourself.”

She arched an eyebrow, twirling a finger around the rim of her fresh Jack and Coke. “So why’d you come over?”

“I was worried about the guy’s balls.” He winked, and she found herself smiling as her heart flickered in her chest.

The man scrubbed a hand over his hair and smiled, flashing a row of straight, white teeth, and the skin around his light emerald eyes crinkled in a way that had her stomach doing a slow turn. The bartender pointed at him, and he nodded.

She sat down on the barstool, crossed her legs, and ran her hands through her hair again. “I’m Taylor.”

He nodded and picked up the bottle of beer the bartender had set down in front of him. "I know." He took a swig of the beer, and she watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. A faint layer of stubble covered his jaw, and she found herself wondering what that stubble would feel like beneath her fingertips or against her neck, rasping over her skin. "I'm Colt."

Her heart gave a little kick against her ribs. "Thanks again for stepping in." She signaled to the bartender and pointed at Colt's beer. "You can go ahead and put that on my tab."

He smiled at her again, a cocky half grin that sent heat chasing over her skin. "You don't have to do that. That asshole crossed a line with you, and I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

She shook her head, returning the smile. "I'm trying to say thank you."

"Well, in that case, you're welcome." He leaned in closer. Jesus, he smelled good. Like warm leather and something else both mouthwatering and masculine. She bit her lip and looked down into her drink.

"Anyway. Thank you for the drink. I should let you get back to whatever you were working on," he said, tipping his head at her notebook.

It was her turn to lean in, and she smiled sweetly, looking up at him through her lashes. "Nah. You vanquished a creepy nerd for me. Have a seat."

He touched his thumb to his lips as his eyes traveled up and down her body and a slow smile turned up the corners of his mouth, his eyes crinkling once again. "Yeah. Okay."

He sat down on the bar stool next to her, pulling in close, his broad body angled toward her, but instead of feeling crowded, she felt sheltered. Her eyes slammed into his, and heat flared through her.

Oh holy hell, but this man is trouble.

“So you didn’t know that guy?” The way his low voice rumbled over the words sent a warm shiver down her spine and curled her toes.

She shook her head. “No. Just a fan, I guess.”

“Lucky you.”

She chuckled down into her drink and then met his eyes again.

Lucky her, indeed.

Colt Priestley took a long pull on his beer, his eyes once more roving over Taylor’s long, lean body. She was so tall, almost as tall as he, and as he was six-two, that didn’t happen very often. His eyes kept sliding down to her long, slim legs, wrapped in black denim. For now. Soon, they’d be wrapped around him, if he got his way. And when it came to women, Colt almost always got his way.

Huey Lewis began thumping through the bar’s speakers, and Taylor made a face, scrunching her cute little nose. “I thought this was a rock bar.”

“Hey, don’t rag on Huey Lewis. He had some great hits.” Colt smiled and bopped his head with cheesy, put-on enthusiasm in time to the music. She touched her fingers to her mouth and stifled a laugh before her eyes found his, and suddenly, her hand was on his chest. Hopefully she couldn’t feel his heart pounding harder than a damn kick drum.

“I would’ve thought with this”—her fingers traced over the Led Zeppelin logo on his T-shirt—“and this”—the fingers of her opposite hand trailed up his right forearm and over his tattoo—“you’d have better taste than Huey Lewis.”

He tried to think of something sexy, something flirty to say back, but his eyes were glued to her mouth, and goose bumps were trailing up his arm where she touched him. He cleared his throat and flashed her a smile.

She bit her lip and looked up at him, amusement flashing in her huge, blue eyes. “Did you know that Huey Lewis and the News were originally called Huey Lewis and the American Express? They had to change it when the credit card company threatened to sue them.”

“Now who’s hip to be square?” He shot her a teasing smile.

She flung her head back and laughed, a throaty, husky sound that sent blood flowing straight to his already heavy cock.

“Touché,” she said, taking another sip of her drink.

God, he couldn’t take his eyes off of her. The bar could’ve been on fire and he wouldn’t have noticed. He wanted to fist his hands in all that blond hair and pull her close, taste her mouth, feel her skin against his and lose himself in her. But just for tonight.

It was all he could offer. All he had any right to want.

He watched her as she took another sip of her drink, trying to memorize the exact way her hair was falling over her shoulders, the precise shade of blue in her wide, bright eyes, the sound of her laugh.

“So why feathers?” Her fingers still trailed over his arm, sending little sparks of lust shooting through him.

Fuck. Nope. Not talking about that. Not with her, not tonight. He'd come here not to think about all of that shit. He'd come here to find a woman, or get drunk, or to start a fight. Colt knew that as long as he kept the demons fed, he wouldn't have to feel anything he didn't want to feel.

And there was a lot he didn't want to feel.

"You like it?" he asked, dodging the question. If she noticed, she didn't seem to mind.

"Mmm. I do." Her voice was beautiful, rich and sultry with a slight rasp to it, and he couldn't help wondering what she'd sound like moaning out his name. He was already imagining the feel of her fingers digging into his shoulders, her heels pressed into his ass as he sank himself deep inside her.

He forced himself to take a breath and a swallow of beer.

"You have any?" he asked, relieved she hadn't pressed him about the meaning behind his own ink.

She slipped out of her leather jacket, rolled up the sleeve of her denim shirt, and flipped her arm over. A swirled line of black stars decorated the inside of her right wrist. "And," she said and swept her hair up, showing him the Egyptian ankh on the back of her neck, just below her hairline. "I have a couple of others." She let her hair drop back around her shoulders, the blond waves fanning out around her.

His eyebrows rose. "Oh yeah? Where?"

She took one of his hands in hers and pressed it against her rib cage. Instinctively, his fingers flexed into her, and her eyes fluttered closed for a second. "Here." She felt warm and soft through the fabric of her shirt as he moved his hand

down her side toward her hip in gentle strokes, still not quite able to believe that this wasn't a fantasy.

"Where else?" His eyes held hers. She slipped off the stool and stood between his legs, erasing all distance between them. He slid his hand up and around to her shoulder blade.

"Here." Her warm breath tickled his ear, and he clenched his jaw against the need to bury his face in her neck, right here at the bar. "What about you? Any others?"

With his free hand, he took one of hers, placing it over his heart. "Here."

Her long fingers curled into the cotton of his shirt, and heat crackled in the air around them. His stomach flipped, and if he was reading her right—and he would've bet a bottle of fifty-year-old scotch he was—she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

Damn, but he needed this. Needed the release. Needed the temporary oblivion of hot sex with a gorgeous woman. He didn't want to think. Not tonight. Hell, not most nights.

Time to test the waters.

He slid a hand up to her face and grazed his lips against hers, a tease of a kiss. She held stone still, her eyes fixed on his mouth, her lips slightly parted. All of the noise around him seemed to drop away, and in that moment, Taylor was all that existed for him. Well, her and the erection doing its damndest to bust free of his jeans.

He closed his mouth over hers and felt the vibration of her sigh against his lips. He fought back a groan when she slid her tongue against his, and heat exploded over his skin as he tasted her, drinking in the soft warmth of her mouth.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so aroused from just a kiss. His chest tightened, and as he deepened the kiss, he pressed down the cold, hard knot of

fear eating at him. Already, he knew sticking to his one-night rule would suck big-time. She felt so good, so perfect, so fucking **right** kissing him, as her fingernails scraped lightly down his back.

She opened her mouth to him a little more, which he immediately took full advantage of, greedily claiming everything she offered him. He caressed her mouth with his tongue, and she moaned softly, her hips nestling snugly against his. He wove his fingers into her hair and crushed his mouth against hers as arousal and lust and need all sang through his veins. Lips and tongues melded together with increasing urgency, and the kiss seared through him. She rocked against him and bit gently at his lower lip.

Fuck, this was going to be good.

“Get a room, why don’t ya?” The bartender chirped at them, and Taylor broke the kiss, pressing her forehead against his. For a second, he just stood there, trying to breathe.

She was pretty much a total stranger, and yet the intensity of that kiss had been off the charts. Hot, and bruising and so, so promising.

He swallowed, trying to find his voice. “Come home with me.”

She nodded against his forehead, and his dick rejoiced.

From his little table in the corner, Ronnie adjusted his glasses as he watched Taylor walk out of the bar, her fingers laced with those of the brute who’d intruded on them earlier. He finished the rest of his Coke and slammed the empty glass down. Possessive anger coupled with an almost blinding jealousy churned through him. It’d been hard to watch that interaction, and now she was leaving with him? He’d been much happier watching her while she’d been alone, even if she’d looked sad.

He knew he shouldn't have gone over and talked to her, but he couldn't help himself. He'd been warned, but no one knew what they were talking about. They didn't see. They couldn't see. He loved her, and she loved him. Soon, everyone would know, and everyone who'd called him crazy and obsessed and delusional would fucking see.

Ever since he'd first heard her sing, he'd known he was listening to the future mother of his children.

He dropped a five on the table and pushed his way out of the bar, getting in his car just in time to follow Taylor. He had to. He couldn't let her go off alone with that brute, unprotected. And if she was going to betray him, he needed to know. He needed to see.

Because Taylor was his. Every part of her. Her gorgeous blond hair, those huge, blue eyes, the long, lean body. The incredible voice. The skilled hands. Her mind. Her soul. Her body.

She belonged to him.



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