

**Welcome
to
Groove House**

Jill Meniketti



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Welcome to Groove House
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Welcome to Groove House is a work of fiction. References to real people, events, businesses, organizations, products, places, or incidents are intended only to provide a sense of authenticity, and are used fictitiously. All other characters, events, businesses, organizations, places, incidents, and dialogue are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real.

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“Dave Meniketti has been a dear friend, a great guitarist, and a great vocalist. We have grown up in different bands together. Who else knows the inside scoop better than Jill Meniketti, his longtime wife and manager?”

—**Sammy Hagar**

“*Welcome to Groove House* is a great rock 'n' roll read, clearly written by someone who knows and has lived the genre and its music. With so many rock-based autobiographies out there these days, it was fun to get lost in the fictional world of Mike Mays and company. A must read for any rock fan who loves a great story.”

—**Eddie Trunk** (SiriusXM Radio / VH1 Classic TV host)

“This story rings true to ‘all in the name of rock 'n' roll,’ in a self-inflicted crash and burn lifestyle. It’s never too late to redeem yourself. This is a movie waiting to happen.”

—**Troy Luccketta** (Tesla)

“I’ve always thought if you’re going to write a book about rock 'n' roll, it should be written by someone who has lived the life. Being that Jill Meniketti is the longtime wife of the legendary guitarist and singer of Y&T, Dave Meniketti, the characters in this book seem to come from real life experiences—the good, bad, and sometimes tragic side of rock, as well as a story of redemption. A good read for those who love all things rock 'n' roll.”

—**Don Dokken** (Dokken)

“Jill has written a fictitious but uncanny portrait of the life of a rock star, the carnival of lost souls and innocent bystanders that come with it. I felt like I was looking into a mirror . . . yikes! Not only will you be bashing out the A chords, you’ll be taking a look behind the rock 'n' roll fantasy curtain, wallowing through the blood, sweat, beer, and bullshit backstage, and into a heaping helping of R&R reality. But you’ve gotta love the ride!”

—**Eric Martin** (MR. BIG)

“This book **ROCKS!** I loved it! It’s a totally cool journey through a rocker’s world that most people don’t get to experience until now. It’s a blast!”

—**Stef Burns** (Alice Cooper, Huey Lewis & the News, Vasco Rossi)

*You don't stop laughing when you grow old,
you grow old when you stop laughing.*

—George Bernard Shaw

Chapter 1

Mike Mays glared at Nick, the rhythm guitarist—his twenty-something, hired gun with tar-black hair veiling his dark eyes, and the shitload of hardware hanging off his face. *Poseur*.

“Face it, old man,” Nick growled. “You left your chops in the ’80s.”

“I got jeans older than you, ya little pissant.” Mike felt pressure rising in his chest. His breathing thickened. “Shoulda shipped your ass back to L.A. after the London gig.”

“I’ll be glad when this embarrassment of a tour is over.” Nick scooped up his skull and bones McSwain guitar and began noodling.

Bones, the frizzy-haired guitar tech for the tour, straddled the dressing room doorway in his combat boots, plaid shorts, and a Judas Priest T-shirt. “Okay,” he announced, “time to clear the dressing room.”

Mike turned and ogled the chick’s killer bod as she stood in her sexy red stilettos and her black lace skirt that barely covered her ass. One tug of the tie on her halter top, he thought, and her tits would come spilling out. He licked his lips. She’d be a tasty treat after the show.

She spun her back to him and he grinned as he ran his fingers over the bare skin above her ass. There it was: his own face staring back at him. He glanced down at the tattoo—the kid with pouting lips and long, puffy hair. Not bad, he thought, the jaw line looks pretty good and the eyes look okay. “Damn, they got my nose all wrong . . . too narrow.”

He turned and caught sight of Nick in the mirror. He’s about the same age as me in the tattoo, Mike thought, and then he glanced away from his own withered face and thinning hair. He turned back to the tat.

“I feel sorry for the poor bastard who has to stare at me when he screws her from behind.” Mike grinned as his guitar tech and backing band laughed—all but Nick.

The chick shifted her head back to check Mike’s expression, an auburn curl dropping to her shoulder. She handed him a black Sharpie. “Can you sign it?”

“I’d be delighted.” Mike caressed the colors on her skin and then scribbled his name above the tat. “How ’bout you come back after the show and we’ll see how great *your* ass looks on *my* face?”

The chick giggled and then hugged Mike as he planted a kiss on her cheek.

Then Bones ushered her out and poked his head back inside. "I'm off to the stage now. Need anything before I go?"

"A line of blow?"

Bones did a double-take.

Mike glanced at Dylan, the bleached-blond drummer. "Down boy. . . . No need to get on your AA soapbox." Even though Mike didn't believe in all that sobriety bullshit, he no longer did the hard stuff; it just took too much out of him anymore.

Mike felt a shiver when the roar of the festival crowd swelled into the dressing room. He glanced around the trailer—the same makeshift dressing room every band had that day, lined up side by side like an RV tailgate party at a Raiders game. He'd expected something more comfy, like the backstage at Shoreline Amphitheatre. . . . After all, it was his comeback tour.

He slipped to the back corner for some privacy and reached for the stage clothes hanging on a hook. He strained into his black leather pants and stretched into his charcoal tank top. On the floor next to his Harley-Davidson boots sat a jet-black eyeliner pencil and a plastic cup of Jack and Coke. He groaned as he bent over to get both, took a swig, and then grunted as he pulled on his boots. Guzzling the drink, he leaned in to the full-length mirror and pressed on the bags puffing out under his eyes. "Fuckin' hell." After trickling drops of Visine into each eye, he smudged on more eyeliner. His hair was looking so scraggly, so he fluffed it up and spritzed on another coat of hairspray. Taking a step from the mirror, Mike gave a final once-over.

He turned and then strutted through the dressing room casting a smirk at the three primping, half-naked, twenty-somethings who made up his backing band. He knew he was way better than these hired guns.

Dylan tapped a pair of drumsticks on his thighs. "Ready to rock, Mike?"

"Always. See you dudes up there."

"See ya onstage, man," said Lonnie, the bass player, spiking his blond streaks in the mirror.

Nick said nothing.

Mike flung the dressing room door wide open and paused, gazing at the surrounding mountains. He squinted toward the highest peak, which was crowned with a distant, medieval castle. "Sure ain't got shit like that in America." He looked back at Nick, but he had his head down, noodling on his guitar. *Poseur*, Mike thought, as he let the dressing room door slam.

Walking the backstage path past the artist catering tent, Mike fielded greetings from the other bands. When he felt an arm on his shoulder, he turned to face his manager, Bruce, in a white Panama hat and white button-down shirt, looking so outta place at a rock festival.

"How's the voice today?" Bruce asked, twisting his moustache as he glanced around the backstage area. Then he leaned in to Mike's ear and hissed, "I worked my ass off to get you back on the scene, bud . . . don't fuck it up."

"I got it covered," Mike crowed, as he dipped out from under Bruce's arm. He glanced around and then lowered his voice. "Dude, I, uh, could use another infusion of dough. Landlord's on my ass back home."

"I told you, give me three good songs to send the label. Remember, we only have an *option* for another recording. If they don't like what they hear, the deal's over."

Yeah, yeah. Mike couldn't look at Bruce. When he spotted a break in the chain-link fence where he could peer out at the festival crowd, he turned and changed course. "Worked his ass off," Mike muttered as he glanced back with a smirk to see Bruce herding his wife and two teenage sons toward the stage. He missed that hungry young Bruce who used to score hookers

and blow, and could always squeeze an extra grand outta any promoter or record exec. Nowadays, he was pure business . . . that was, when Mike could even get him on the phone.

A crooked smile crossed Mike's face as he glanced out at the massive festival stage. Always a rush to play the big stages, he thought. Beneath the colossal lighting rig, a red and black banner rippled in the warm evening breeze: GERMANY ROCKS. Thirty-four thousand energetic rock fans were jam-packed on the field. From the crowd's center, thousands of rowdy fans—young and old—pushed forward, vying for closer range at the stage. Poor fuckers, Mike thought, meltin' in the sun all day. Sweaty bodies near the front shoved and swayed and pressed from every direction; the diehard fans stood their ground, pushing back to maintain their small parcel of dirt among the herd. So glad, he thought, I ain't out there with the masses.

At the chug of his guitar being checked through the sound system, Mike headed toward the stage, scoping out the untilled farmland and the mixing tower in its center. Onstage, the frantic changeover continued. Stagehands darted about, running cables, and swapping out amplifiers while a tech on the drum kit pounded out a line check for the sound man.

"Mike Mays!" a voice called out.

About to climb the tall stairs to the stage, Mike turned to see some dude with a buzz cut wearing faded jeans and a denim jacket covered with patches.

"Can you sign this?" The dude held out a silver Sharpie and a magazine featuring Mike, and then watched as he scrawled his signature.

Mike leafed through the magazine and paused at the festival advertisement. "Fuckin' hell." He was thrilled to get second billing, a position Bruce had miraculously finagled based on Mike's legacy alone. "They been beggin' me to come outta retirement for years. Got a killer band. . . . These cats kick ass, old school style. Ya won't see nothin' like *this* today."

He flipped a few more pages, scrutinizing the album ads, mainly newer bands. He didn't recognize the majority. Turning back to the feature, Mike winced at the photos. "Fuckin' hell. Don't nobody weed out the shitty shots no more?" He glanced at the German gobbledygook in the article and figured it was probably a rave, unlike the mixed European press reviews so far.

Mike's backing band breezed by him, kicking up dust before they headed up the stairs. His eyes focused on Nick, that ungrateful little prick in ripped jeans and a T-shirt.

"These fuckin' teenyboppers don't know how to dress for stage," Mike bitched as he readjusted his snugly tucked balls in his black leather pants. His gaze landed on the fan's patch-covered denim jacket. Iron Maiden. Mötley Crüe. AC/DC. KISS. Whitesnake. MM—Mike Mays. "Fuckin' hell." Mike traced a finger over the silver and red embroidery. "Haven't seen that patch since the '80s."

"You're an icon," the eager fan said in slight accent. "The best . . . lead guitar *and* lead vocals."

Mike nodded. After all, the little ass-wipes who called themselves musicians these days had cut their teeth on his chops, as did most of the '80s hair bands. Yeah, he knew his shit, alright.

The dude stood nervously wringing his hands. "Can't wait to see you play again."

Mike tossed him a nod. "Every interviewer on tour the last two weeks complained I been away too long." He grinned. "It's good to be back." Between drumming up an occasional gig and noodling every day in his San Francisco apartment, he'd kept up his chops . . . always.

Mike returned the pen and magazine. "Don't go sellin' this on eBay now." He leaned in to the window of a minibus parked nearby for a final glance. He fluffed his hair, tugging it forward to conceal the receding hairline. He angled closer, widened his eyes, and wiped a smudge of eyeliner. In the reflection he noticed the fan still standing behind him. He groaned. *How do these*

fuckers always get backstage?

“It’s been fifteen years. Too long, yeah?”

Mike squinted toward the setting sun. Even after countless interviews the past two weeks, he still felt unsure how to answer that one. He’d never intended to stay away so long.

“Mike!” Atop the stairs, Bones lifted a guitar and motioned for him.

“Have a good show!” the fan said, raising the two-finger metal salute, as Mike climbed the stairs to the stage.

Mike stopped on the platform to catch his breath from the long climb. He veered away from the stagehands darting about, moving road cases, until he found his spot stage right and out of view of the rowdy audience. Like a runner warming up for a marathon, he shook out his arms and legs and stretched his neck. Mike tried to ignore the house music blaring through the crowd; he didn’t recognize the tunes.

The skinny tech held up Mike’s prized 1960 Gibson Les Paul Custom “Black Beauty” guitar.

“Not yet, Bones.”

Bones held the guitar, patiently waiting.

Mike belted out a few shrill vocal warm-ups, then calmed down, mentally preparing for the moment. Smoothing his hands over his tank top, he glanced down and sucked in his stomach. He inhaled deeply and slowly expelled the air. Yep, he was ready. . . . Ready to prove to Germany that he could still rock. Like a king commanding his court, he reached out for his guitar. “Okay. Now, Bones.”

Bones lifted the flashlight hanging from his lanyard and aimed it out through the crowd to the mixing tower in the field. Flicking the light on and off, he signaled “show time” to the soundman. Then, for the final pre-show ritual, he adorned Mike with the guitar.

At Bones’s signal, the subterranean low-end quaked through the sound system and into the audience. Mike grinned. His pre-recorded intro triggered the crowd every time.

As Mike inched closer to entering the stage, he spotted two hot chicks in ass-hugging shorts standing in his path. He wiped droplets of sweat from his unruly brows and gave them a cocky smile.

With one arm cradling the neck of his guitar, Mike sauntered toward the women. He reached out his right hand and grabbed the fine ass of the blonde as he passed. The women giggled.

As the thunderous fanfare faded, Mike watched his hired guns seize the festival stage and strike the opening chords to “Lucky Night,” one of his hits from the ’80s. A crooked smile spanned his face when the crowd roared. A chill streaked up his spine as the chanting mounted: “Mike, Mike, Mike!”

The crowd volume swelled when Mike chunked out the opening guitar lick from offstage, and the cheers amplified once he swaggered onstage.

He sauntered to the microphone, center stage, screeched, and then purred out the lyrics. Pummeling the audience with song, Mike pointed at three chicks near the front, each perched on shoulders, teetering above the festival crowd. His fingers moved subconsciously across the frets as he watched one of the girls remove her bikini top and fling it onto the stage. When he ducked, grinning, the crowd whooped. *Hell, yeah.*

After striking the last chord of the song, Mike leaned on the mic stand, absorbing the love. When the applause dissolved, he rested both hands on the mic and yelled, “Hell, yeah!” He cackled when the audience repeated his cry. Then he glanced at Nick, but he was fiddling with his pedal board, ignoring Mike. *Pansy ass.*

Giving in to the spontaneity of a live show, Mike raised a clenched fist and repeated, “Hell, yeah!” and the audience again echoed it back. Goddamn, he still had it.

As darkness fell on the field, lights bathed the stage in yellow and blue. Alone in the follow spot, Mike clutched the microphone. “The San Francisco Chronicle once called me the ‘godfather of ’80s hard rock.’” He waited as cheers rang out. “But ya know . . . I was around before all those ’80s hair bands. . . . Here’s one some of you old fuckers might remember from 1979.”

The crowd howled.

Midway through the fifth song, Mike suppressed a powerful urge to cough. He pinched out a few lines and turned from the mic. But when he resumed singing, his voice cracked. *Fuck!* It cracked again. Between lines, Mike twisted from the mic and coughed up a glob of phlegm. As he spit, he spotted the two hot chicks mock-gagging on the side of the stage. Turning back to the mic, he continued singing, but the nagging urge to cough was hellbent on upstaging him.

From what he could see beyond the photo pit and the barricade that separated the audience from the stage, the first several rows of adoring fans cheered wildly, disregarding the few coughs and the wheezing that had started to plague his performance. The crowd sang along, pumping their fists in the air. As Mike screeched out the lyrics, he noticed several chicks in front clasping their hands, as though pulling for his voice to behave. But onstage to his left, the sentiment proved different as Nick glared, obviously bitter.

When the set entered the halfway point, though the cracking persisted, his voice full-out failing in spots, Mike’s drive remained steadfast. At the end of “Slave Driver,” he paused and muttered to the audience, “I must be allergic to Germany. I know . . . I need some of that kick-ass cough medicine you guys make—Jägermeister.” He turned toward his tech and commanded into the mic, “Bones, get me a shotta Jäger.”

Bones scrambled off.

“Hit it, dudes!” Mike barked to his band as they launched into the next tune.

He eked out the lyrics, focusing his eyes on his anchor point—the tits, still flopping to the beat in front. The hacking persisted. After coughing his way through a blistering guitar solo, Mike turned his back to the crowd and stepped toward Dylan. “Dr-u-u-u-um solo-o-o-o!”

“Now?” Dylan exchanged puzzled looks with the rest of the band.

“Do it!” Mike rasped.

Chunking away at rhythm guitar on the other side of the stage, Nick narrowed his stance before he bowed out of playing and yielded to the drummer.

Guitar dangling from his torso, Mike bolted to Bones’s guitar tech station and out of view from most of the audience. He kicked a road case and bent forward, resting his hands on his thighs.

Bones rushed to Mike with a shot of Jäger.

“I don’t want that shit!” Mike pushed it away. “I need a boost. Get me Gatorade.”

“Gatorade?” Bones shrugged, set the cup of Jägermeister on a road case, and scrambled off again.

Mike’s head reeled for a dizzy second. The chick with the tat hurtled into his thoughts. That fuckin’ tattoo. He rubbed his temples as the cartoonish image haunted him.

Bones returned with a bottle. “All they got’s Powerade.”

Mike motioned for it. He slammed back the blue liquid and shook his head. He couldn’t believe he was resorting to sports drinks. What a pussy.

Mike blotted his face with a towel. “After all these years,” he said to Bones, “I’d better not

be gettin' nodes." He lifted his hair and swiped the towel across the back of his neck. "More brew," he ordered.

Bones dashed to the thermos near his tech station, filled a plastic cup with the brownish-green liquid, and rushed the cup to Mike.

While Dylan battered the skins, Nick stormed across the stage and glared at Mike. "What the fuck?"

"Just gimme a minute." Mike lifted the concoction to his lips.

"That nasty potion ain't doin' shit."

"I been drinkin' this herbal brew since you were in diapers, shithead," Mike snapped. "A hot fuckin' groupie in Poughkeepsie turned me on to it. Done it every show since."

"It's bullshit. It reeks, dude, and it don't work. It's superstition."

Mike sipped the hideous elixir, but he suspected Nick was right—it didn't do shit for his voice. Maybe it never had.

Nick glanced at Dylan pounding out a solo, and Lonnie holding his bass, waiting on the other side of the stage. "Dude." He turned back to Mike and shook his head. "This is like the fifth time in two weeks. It's fucking embarrassing."

Mike looked around at the bystanders onstage.

"Drink up." Nick snatched the cup of Jäger from the road case and shoved it at Mike. "You need a miracle to get through this tour."

Mike batted the cup from Nick's hand. The nearby festival staff, other bands, and guests dodged the splashing booze, but watched the confrontation.

Nick leaned in close. "Butch up and get out there."

Mike watched Nick storm back across the stage. Disrespectful little prick. "This is bullshit," he yelled to Bones. "See if there's a festival medic who can shoot me with cortisone or somethin'."

Bones scrambled off again.

While the drum solo continued, Mike spotted a pack of smokes by the guitar rack. That'd knock that shit right out, he figured. Grabbing the lighter next to the pack, he lit up, planted his ass on a nearby road case, and hurriedly puffed smoke. He coughed again, spit up a hunk of phlegm, and wiped his mouth with the towel. *What the hell?* He stared at the blood dotting the white terrycloth. Then he glanced around.

Dylan locked eyes with him. Mike nodded, flicked the cigarette from his fingertips, and regained his composure. He stood up and sashayed back to center stage, damned determined to finish the song . . . and the show.

Mike soaked up the applause. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he glanced down at the set list. Three-quarters through. They were in the home stretch.

As the band rolled directly into the opening chords of the power ballad, fog flooded the stage, dancing in the colorful lights, swirling around the musicians.

Mike wailed through the first lines of "Love Gone Wrong" but his voice cracked again. The stage smoke choked off his vocal cords. He turned to cough and focused again on the chick's tits—his brass ring. Mike's fingers glided across the frets on the breakdown. Grateful for the vocal break, he sauntered toward Bones.

"No cortisone," Bones hollered.

Mike shook his head. "Cut the damn fog!"

Then he turned to the crowd and shredded a mournful guitar solo, as the band built to a climax. Adrenaline raced through his body. He dashed to the edge of the stage and lingered

there, dancing his fingers across the fretboard, feeding the fans in front. He rocked his body to the beat, shaking the sweat from his hair. He spun in a circle and paused to headbang. He skipped toward the fans on stage left. Smack dab in the heart of his gut-wrenching guitar solo, Mike dropped unsteadily to his knees. The crowd cheered. Mike winced. He was gasping for air, and it spooked him. His fingers flailed across the frets until, mid-note, he drooped and teetered. As the weight of the guitar pulled him to the side, his vision blurred. He looked at the crowd. The tits were gone. He crumpled onto the stage, his guitar ringing out a melodic thud and landing with the neck pointing straight up. He thought he heard a groan from the audience.

The backing musicians stopped playing, abruptly ending the song. Mike could hear the distorted clang as Nick threw down his guitar. He lay on the dusty stage, conscious but weak, breathing uneasily. He could almost hear thirty-four thousand people catching their breath. In the front row he could make out a woman—about his daughter’s age, he supposed—wearing his current tour shirt. Next to her, a man and his preteen son lowered their clenched fists. Behind them, three biker-looking dudes with long grey hair looked on, mouths open. Then Bones appeared, lunged for the strap locks, and removed the guitar.

Four stagehands rushed onstage. A security guard from the pit below handed up a bottle of water to them. Mike tried to roll away from the audience. He looked up at Bones.

“Can you stand up?” Bones wiped the sweat from Mike’s face, and with it some of the bronzer smeared onto the towel. “Shit,” Bones said, wide-eyed. “Medic!”

While Dylan and Lonnie encircled Mike, Nick lingered on the fringe.

“You gonna be alright, man?” Dylan asked, moving aside as Bruce stepped in.

Bruce stood there frowning at Mike. As he rubbed the back of his neck, an event medic pushed past him. In a thick German accent he asked slowly and loudly, “Sir, do you know where you are?”

“Yeah. Germany.”

“Who’s the president?”

“How the fuck would I know who the President of Germany is?”

The medic continued, slower and louder. “Do you know your name?”

“I ain’t deaf.”

“Okay, sir, where’s your tour manager?”

Mike’s eyes pointed to Bones.

“Guitar tech, tour manager,” Bones explained. “We’re a skeleton crew.”

Mike grimaced when he heard a siren. The last thing he wanted was publicity that he’d gone down. He tried to push himself up but his muscles wobbled until his elbows finally caved to the stage. Within minutes an emergency medical team, armed with a stretcher, appeared on stage.

Nick tossed his arms up. “We’d better fuckin’ get paid.”

“Dude, have a heart,” said Dylan. “He’s sick.”

Mike groaned as the medics lifted him onto the stretcher. As they strapped him in, he heard someone inform the crowd that Mike Mays would not be finishing his set. He cringed when the audience reacted with a collective “oh.”

As the team hoisted the stretcher, the festival audience applauded. Eh, what the hell, Mike thought. He milked it and raised a weak metal salute to the crowd as the team transported him off the stage and toward the waiting ambulance.

On the ground he ignored the growing flock that had assembled backstage to catch a glimpse of a fallen rock star. Bones pushed through the onlookers and gripped Mike’s arm before the gurney glided into the ambulance. Mike clutched his shirt sleeve and pulled him close.

“We played most of the set,” Mike implored, “be sure ya get *all* of the dough.”

“I’ll take care of it, man.”

As Bones stepped aside, Nick barged through. He placed his hand on Mike’s shoulder and leaned in to his ear, glaring. “Metal Earth Records sure as shit ain’t gonna save your ass if you cancel this tour. You’d *better* fuckin’ pay me . . . or rest assured, I’ll come after you.”

As the ambulance doors closed, Mike overheard several bystanders.

“Dude should’ve stayed in retirement. . . . No way, he still rocks. . . . I hope he’s okay.”

Mike grimaced. Man, he thought . . . I am so fucked.

Chapter 2

“Limey teabag!” Gallo bellowed through the courtyard. “I’ll get you for this.”

Velvet Sabatino swung open the green shutters and flinched when they banged against the yellow stucco walls outside. A scruffy tabby cat darted from the lavatera shrub. Hmm, she thought, that stray is back. She scanned the courtyard and the surrounding complex. She didn’t see anyone, but she recognized that bellowing voice. She closed both window halves and stared at the black 1984 Kramer Baretta guitar on the futon. Then she turned her nostalgic gaze to the eBay screen atop the antique mahogany desk in the corner.

She walked toward the computer, plopped into the black leather swivel chair, and fought back tears. When the office door blasted open, Velvet spun the chair around. “For chrissake, Harley, you scared the shit out of me!”

“Sorry, love.”

Harley’s posh London accent always seemed to tame any remnants of her badass ’70s girl-guitar-pioneer past.

“Close the door,” Velvet whispered with a swish of her hand. As Harley closed the door behind her, Velvet dabbed at a tear and wiped it on her khaki shorts.

Harley moseyed over to the futon and eyed the large plastic box and the guitar next to it. Her piercing, icy blue eyes looked so striking against her weathered, golden skin, and that gorgeous silver-blond hair. For the first time, Velvet felt diminished by Harley’s beauty, for how she still looked so damn cool at her age.

“What was Gallo yelling about?” Velvet asked. “Tank, I suppose.”

“Naturally.” Harley grinned. “He tossed Gallo’s clean laundry into the pool. A bit of Blitz’s, as well.”

Velvet shook her head. “Those guys . . .”

“Perpetually twelve, I’m afraid.” Harley picked up the guitar and started noodling. “Bloody hell, this is a cool guitar—”

“You’re not helping any,” Velvet chided. She could tell Harley was a little jealous that Vin had suddenly been working again—at first just a casual gig here and there around Italy and

slightly beyond, but enough that Harley seemed a bit sullen about it. And now that Vin had returned to the States to temporarily fill the guitar spot for a buddy who had to duck out of his band's tour for knee surgery, Velvet sensed Harley missed being in the game. "Maybe *you*," she tested, "could tour again."

Harley released an edgy laugh. "I'd be lucky to get a hundred people out to a shitty little club in the States anymore. Couldn't even double that in the UK."

Velvet could feel herself pouting. "Vin and I should've just turned this place into a B&B like we'd planned . . . not a friggin' retirement home for rock stars."

"Hey, I resent that remark."

Velvet stared at the Kramer as Harley's fingers whizzed up and down the frets. "I can't do this," she moaned, glancing back at the computer monitor.

"He did say this one's just deadwood," Harley said as she stopped noodling. "Don't really have much choice, do you?"

No, she didn't. Velvet looked up at the wood-beamed ceiling, brushed a blonde wisp from her forehead, and spun the chair back around. With a hesitant move of the mouse, she clicked the button on the eBay window. Done. One of her husband's prized guitars would soon go to the highest bidder.

"If it makes you feel any better, love, I haven't seen him touch this thing in ages. It's so . . . '80s."

Velvet turned back to glance at Harley, who had moved to the window. Still cradling the guitar, she stood there staring out toward the Tuscan hills. Velvet turned back to the computer screen and reviewed her eBay ad.

"V?" Harley said from the window, and Velvet swiveled the chair to face her. "Why don't you sell one of your harps? You never play anymore." She turned and pointed toward the office door. "That gilded monstrosity in the living room would net you a fortune."

She shot Harley an incredulous stare. "My parents bought me that harp when I graduated from conservatory."

Harley slid a strand of hair from her eyes and then turned and peered through the window. "Well, it's no fault of yours. We're just plain broke. It's the fate we all chose long ago when we decided to become musicians." She turned back and looked Velvet in the eye. "If anything, you should blame that husband of yours for sinking so much into that bloody old vineyard."

True, Velvet thought. But Vin loved that vineyard. As a child, he had spent several summers in Italy visiting his grandmother, who taught him how to work the vines. But some fifty years later, Vin's efforts to restore his *nonna's* vineyard had become fruitless, nothing but a waste of money—which nobody at Groove House had any of, anyway. Well, Vin was a rock musician, not a winemaker, and it was too late to change that now.

Velvet pressed her lips. "I'll find a way. . . . I have to," she said, even though she had no idea how she could generate enough money to keep them afloat much longer.

"Wouldn't it be wild if some punter loved Vin so much . . . well, back in the day," Harley said as she rested the guitar on the futon, "that he'd pay twenty grand for this axe today?"

"Dream on."

"Aerosmith," Harley said with a grin. "Uh, 1976—ah, I remember it well. One point for me today."

Velvet tried to smile at their ongoing game, but it turned into more of a pout. "Right, fifteen thousand Euro—just what we need to pay our stupid fucking tax bill."

"Way out of line for what it should be." Harley tilted her head. "Do you think maybe

Carlo?”

Velvet narrowed her eyes toward the hilltop across the way. “That prick had to have somehow convinced them to triple our reassessment—”

“But why would he? To force Vin to sell him that vineyard?”

Velvet cocked her head toward Harley. “Um, yeah.”

“It must be a mistake—”

“I’ve checked like five times.” Velvet stared off toward the hilltop again. “Maybe the guys are right and he really *is* mafia.”

“Taxes did increase, love.” Harley nodded toward the courtyard and the surrounding compound. “The reassessment . . . I mean, you do have loads of land . . . and farm buildings.” She gave a heavy nod. “We are in Tuscany, after all.”

“What good is that when we can’t afford the tax hike?” Velvet sighed. “How am I going to pay that bill?” Velvet felt her lip quiver. “Vin’s out there gigging his ass off, for what?”

“You’re the most resourceful person I know,” Harley said with a forced smile. “Meanwhile, your meatless Mondays and candlelight dinners will help keep us all above water.”

Velvet sighed. “Sweet of you to try to cheer me up.” She looked up at Harley. “They all hate me, don’t they?”

“I don’t know why you think they’d hate you in particular. We’re *all* in the same leaky boat.”

Velvet cast her eyes down and fought back tears. She seemed to always be fighting back tears these days. The old farmhouse had begun to fall apart, and with each unexpected expense Velvet could see her husband’s optimism wane. She felt alone, over her head. It wasn’t how she’d envisioned life when they had packed up their belongings, left their home in the San Francisco Bay Area, and moved for the promise of a simpler life in the Italian countryside. *Simpler, my ass*, she thought.

“Sorry to barge in, mates,” Tank said as he flung open the office door.

Velvet squinted at Tank and his stubbly-bald head. The bristles were now a blend of ashen grey and coffee brown, but she remembered when Vin’s former roadie sported a full head of hair back in the ’80s. In fact, she remembered when Vin plucked Tank straight off the UK tour back in 1983; he and Tank had been buddies ever since.

“What is this, Grand fucking Central?” Velvet snuck a nervous glance back toward the computer screen.

“Have you heard the news?” Tank asked, straight-faced for a change.

“There’s good rockin’ tonight?” Harley replied, tossing out the next line to the rock song.

“Montrose,” Velvet blurted, relishing the distraction. “Nineteen—I dunno. Mid-’70s. Whatever, still one point for me.”

“Good one, V,” said Harley. “Love that version.”

“Right. I meant have you heard ’bout Mike Mays?” Tank continued, his Brummie accent thickening with excitement. “Bloody well took a tumble onstage, he did. Went down in front of thirty-thousand people. Just told Gallo and Blitz.”

Velvet smirked. “Was that before or after you threw their clean laundry in the pool?” She stared at Tank, who grinned with delight over his prank. Then she noticed the concern on Harley’s face.

“Mike Mays,” Harley muttered. “Haven’t seen him in ages. . . . Is he alright?” she asked, tucking a silver-blond tuft behind her ear.

“Dunno.” The more excited Tank got, the faster the idioms flowed. “Been tryin’ like a rat up

a drainpipe ta find out waz appen but so far nish.”

Velvet looked to Harley for translation.

“Slow down, Tank,” Harley suggested. “Your Brummie’s taking off.”

Mike Mays. Velvet shuddered. That was so long ago. He was always *on*, she thought, always playing the rock star to the hilt. She remembered all the press he once got for saying he’d pissed into David Lee Roth’s classic red ’51 Mercury custom convertible on Sunset Strip. She always figured it was just a PR stunt. Ugh. She shuddered again and then recalled that whenever Vin was off tour back in the day, Tank would roadie for Mike Mays.

“Got word through the ol’ roadie grapevine. Should know more soon. . . . Shame, innit? Such a talent.”

Velvet rolled her eyes. With her husband away, and the property tax debt due—or else—she couldn’t be bothered thinking about a degenerate like Mike Mays. It was probably just another of Mike’s tricks for attention, anyway. *Media whore.*

“Fuckin’ ’ell! What’s that?” Tank said, pointing to the plastic bin on the futon. He approached the box and leaned in. Rummaging through the photos, laminates, and handbills, he slid out an old tour program. “That’s older than me teeth.”

As Harley laughed, Velvet inched the chair closer to the computer.

Tank studied the front cover and then leafed through the pages. “I remember that tour. You was direct support for Vin on that one, Harl.” He flipped to the end. “Fuckin’ ’ell. Blitz Stryker, Golden Blonde . . . wankers.”

“Bloody no-talent glam band,” Harley growled. “Got lucky, is all.” She turned toward the window. “All you had to do was open a show for *me* in L.A. back then and you’d surely skyrocket to fame. RATT, Poison, Mötley Crüe . . . hell, even Van Halen.” She turned back with a glance at Velvet. “I should’ve opened up for myself, and perhaps *I* could’ve had some of that luck.”

“Ooh,” Tank cooed as he flipped back a page and flinched. “That hot pink jumpsuit looks straight outta the ’80s. . . . Oh, wait, it *were* the ’80s. . . . Harley Yeates, look at that Yamaha in your arms. SG2000. Aw, she were a beauty.” Tank grinned and then looked up from the program, his gaze darting between Harley and Velvet. “You alright? Got a face as long as Livery Street.”

“I just,” Velvet said, “have so much to deal with here . . .”

“Fuckin’ ’ell. Too bad the geezer had to travel so far this time.” Tank arched a bushy eyebrow when he noticed the computer screen behind Velvet. “Is that my guitar . . . on eBay?”

“*Your* guitar?” Harley asked with a harrumph.

“Yes, that’s right, Tom Thumb . . . *my* guitar.”

“Vin told me to sell it,” Velvet said as she stood and pushed the chair to the desk.

Tank stuck out his arm. “Ah, go on then . . . pull the other one, it’s got bells on it.”

Velvet tossed up her arms. “Think what you want but I was asked to sell it.”

“You’re jokin’, right?”

As Velvet shook her head, Harley picked up Vin’s guitar and began noodling.

“But Vin promised me that Kramer. . . . Promised it to me since 1987.”

“Call him and ask him yourself,” Velvet snapped. “He told me to sell it and that’s what I’m doing. . . . You like food on your plate and wine on the table, don’t you? Well, we’re kind of desperate here, in case you hadn’t noticed. I sure as shit don’t see you doing anything about it.”

Tank looked at Harley, as if he thought she might side with him.

“Don’t look at me,” Harley said, her silver jewelry glinting as her fingers danced across the

frets. "I brought my money here same as everyone else."

Tank tapped the tour book on his hand and then tossed it into the box. He gritted his teeth and grabbed for the guitar. Harley turned, dodging Tank's swipe. "She manages our money and now we're fecked."

Velvet glared at him. "That's not fair."

Tank scratched his stubbly head. "Disaster. This was supposed to be paradise, retirement in Italy—"

"Oh for chrissake." Harley paused, cradling the guitar. "We *all* took the risk moving here. I gave all I had left from selling my Jag."

"That jalopy was shite," Tank snarled as he eyed the eBay window.

Velvet held her hand up. "Guys."

"I brought every bit of spondoolie I had," said Tank. "Same with Gallo and Blitz."

"Look, sheep-shagger," Harley retorted with a snide half-grin. "We've *all* got same as you—bugger all."

"Oy, that's a load of crap," said Tank. "You got record royalties. All but me, I'm skint."

Velvet snapped, "We don't *all* have royalties."

"Besides—" Harley scowled at Tank, as she rested the guitar on the futon. "They've dwindled to nothing over decades," she retorted, a vein in her forehead protruding as she broached the perpetually sore subject. "It's the musician's plight—no bloody pension. We're *all* skint now."

"Oy, no need to go mental." Tank fired a daggered glance at her. "Daft cow," he mumbled.

As Harley opened her mouth to fire back, Velvet interrupted. "Guys, stop, please?"

Harley nestled into the futon and began rooting through the box.

Tank paced the room, muttering, "If Vin hadn't poured so much money into that worthless vineyard—"

"My husband," Velvet defended, "never spent one dime of your money trying to restore those vines." She dabbed at the tears with the back of her hand. "It's our *own* money he's blown."

"Greedy feckin' bastid," Tank muttered.

"Fuck you, Tank. You have no right suggesting how Vin and I should spend our money. He had a dream. It just didn't work. And now that damn tax bill . . ."

"Disaster." Tank pouted toward the eBay window and folded his stubby arms. "I'm just a geezer with me pockets turned out, so what the hell do I know? But I do know one thing for sure." He paused, narrowed his eyes, and looked at the Kramer. "That's *my* bloody guitar. . . . Vin promised it to me since 1987."

Velvet sighed heavily. "I'll just have to get a job somehow."

"A job?" Tank snapped. "Which one of them eye-talian yokels is gonna hire a retired American Goth-pop-rock harpist? Maybe you could roll one of them things down the hill to the village and start buskin' for the tourists, eh?" He shook his head and resumed pacing.

Velvet glared at him.

"Better yet, why don't you sell one of them behemoths?" Tank pointed out the office door in the direction of the gilded symphony harp in the living room outside. "Never play no more, anyway."

Velvet fought back the frustration. "Because—"

"Christ on a bike!" Tank stopped pacing as his eyes widened. "We ain't gonna lose the house?"

“Not if I can help it,” said Velvet.

“But you sayin’ we might?”

Harley glared at Tank. “How ’bout you go get yourself a glassful of shut-the-fuck-up?”

“Disaster.” Tank paced the room. “We’re more fucked than I realized.” He shook his head.

“I ain’t got nowhere to go. You guys is all the family I got.”

“Oh for chrissake,” Harley chided. “Stop acting like a goddamn drama queen.”

“Vin would never sell this place,” Velvet assured him.

Harley stared into the distance. “I’m going to make that record.”

“Good luck, mate,” said Tank. “Nobody’s gonna buy it. Nobody’ll buy nothin’ from anybody here no more.”

Velvet looked at Harley. “You’ve been saying that for months. Have you even written anything new?”

“I’ve been noodling. . . . Just haven’t been able to finish one bloody tune.”

“New songs,” Tank chided. “Oh, those downloads will make us all wealthy, won’t they just?”

Harley cocked her head toward Tank. “And, remind me—what is it that *you’re* doing to contribute?”

Tank folded his arms again. “What about all them bottles of olive oil?” he asked. “Just sittin’ in the barn, growin’ dust.”

Velvet clenched her jaw. “You know damn well I’ve tried everywhere. The locals just won’t buy from foreigners. . . . Even those Brits who own that little shop in Chiantishire stopped buying our oil.” She shifted her glance between Harley and Tank. “It’s a good oil . . . don’t you think?”

“Aw, love, the olive oil is fab. It was a brilliant idea you had. Just the wrong continent, I suppose.” Harley glared at Tank and then turned back to Velvet. “Vin’s a lucky bugger to get some gigs. Should bring back a nice chunk of change this month.”

Velvet rubbed her temples. “You know how much he’s bringing home?” She hated sharing her personal finances. “After a month on tour in the States? . . . twenty-six hundred US.”

“Fuckin’ ’ell,” Tank said.

Harley’s eyes widened. “That’s all?”

Velvet stared at Harley. It seemed her jealousy might have dipped for a moment. “Yep, that’s it. Hardly worth the ass-kicking he’s getting out there.”

Tank counted on his fingers. “I made more than that as a roadie in the ’80s.”

As if in a trance, Harley picked up the guitar again and ran her fingers over the frets.

Tank eyed her and continued pacing. “Can’t believe you’re selling *my* guitar straight out from under me nose . . .”

Velvet stepped to the window and flicked a wave of hair from her shoulder. She sighed and stared out beyond the terracotta courtyard and across the Tuscan landscape. She thought of Harley’s earlier comment: What if some fan *did* pay twenty grand for Vin’s guitar? But she knew they’d be lucky if her husband’s guitar fetched even a few thousand US. If only some ad agency would use one of Vin’s old songs in a car commercial—that’d easily put them in the black. She sighed. Dream on. Aerosmith again—another point for her. She glanced out at the hill beyond. When her eyes landed on Carlo Moretti’s house, she swallowed hard. It might be time for desperate measures.

Chapter 3

Mike Mays sloshed his boot onto the sidewalk and then stood there in the downpour. He glanced at the soggy, crumpled scratch paper he was holding and then up at the tree-lined street. “Los Gatos,” he muttered. “My new fuckin’ home.”

He squinted through the drenching rain at the quaint Craftsman style house, hoping he’d made the right move. Mike sighed heavily and hustled toward the porch. He eyeballed the willow tree in the front yard. It must’ve been fifty feet high—so much taller since the last time he’d stood there. Light from the streetlamp washed an eerie glow over the branches, making them creak in the wind, as though a ghost had blown in to haunt him. He shivered, as if to shake the discomfort, sighed again and then stood tall. He swung his wet duffel bag over his shoulder and stepped onto the porch.

Mike took another deep breath before ringing the doorbell. As he bent over to set his duffel bag down, the door squeaked open. “Trick or fuckin’ treat,” Mike said with a nervous grin, even though it was late April.

When he straightened up, his eyes met the kid standing in the doorway. *Whoa*. Mike flinched. It was *him*. As the kid’s blue eyes stared back from beneath the dark hood of his sweatshirt, Mike’s lips formed a crooked smile. He glanced down at the kid’s Converse Hi-Tops and then up at his face.

The kid looked puzzled.

Mike couldn’t stop staring at him, and he couldn’t stop smiling. He stabbed his hand into his jacket pocket, pulled out his pack of smokes, and bumped out a cig. He struggled to light it, but no matter which way he turned the wind seemed to whip around from every angle, killing the lighter flame. He glanced down at his shaky hands and then back up at the kid. “Damn . . . you’re a helluva lot taller than the last time I saw ya.”

The kid cocked his head and stared, eyes wide.

Mike huddled against the sheets of rain, still fumbling to light the cig. “Your mom home?”

The kid clung to the front door like it was a shield, and then turned to yell into the room behind him. “Mom. . . Someone’s at the door for you.”

Hell, Mike thought, she's home.

"Who is it?" he heard her ask.

"Hell if I know." The kid inspected Mike standing there on the porch. "Just come here."

Mike continued to stare at the kid. Grinning with the cig between his lips, he gave up and shoved the lighter back into his pocket. He caught the kid sneaking glances at his ripped jeans, bullet belt, and black leather jacket, then up at his scraggly hair and the line of studs and hoops clinging to his ear.

The click-clack of her heels drew closer. And then she appeared in the doorway. She stood there, silent, frozen, staring at Mike, her mouth agape—the only loose part on her small, rigid frame.

Mike shifted away from her foreboding presence and chomped down on the soggy cigarette. Then he slid it from his lips and shoved it behind his ear. She looked horrified, as if the grim reaper were standing on her doorstep. Mike shivered as the willow tree creaked again and a chilly wind whipped onto the porch. He glanced down at the rain splatters, then back up at her. There he was, chilled with goosebumps tingling his arms and drenched from the freak storm, yet she just stood there, cold and distant, like she had no intention of letting him past the front door.

"Oh . . . my . . . God." She glared at him as she pulled a loose strand of bobbed, mousy brown hair from her mouth. Then she crossed her arms, damn near speechless.

He'd forgotten how tiny she was. He thought for sure she'd look older, but hell, she looked the same.

"Who is he?" the kid whispered to his mom.

She yanked the hood from the kid's head, gave him a nervous smile, and arranged his mopy brown hair. "Sweetheart—" She swallowed hard.

The kid swerved away from her touch.

"Fuckin' hell! The kid's even got my hair." Mike grinned and shifted his weight. "Well . . . mine ain't nothin' like it used to be—" He twirled the big hoop in his earlobe and looked at the kid. "But, hey, better mine than your mom's. . . . She got *her* mom's hair—that'd be your grandma." He shifted his weight to the other side. "Cute as a rat's ass."

The kid stared at Mike.

"Brayden, go to your room," she demanded, nudging him from the doorway.

The kid ignored his mom's command. "You told me to answer the door . . . remember?" He slid behind her and continued to stare at Mike.

She glared at Mike, seething, and then straightened her skirt. "The last time I saw you was at . . . my mother's—" She shook her head. "You showed up . . . disheveled, much like you look tonight, bragging about some new tattoo you got in Seattle—"

"As I recall," Mike said, still twisting the hoop, "you said then you never wanted to see me again." He shoved his hands in his pockets, waiting for her reaction.

"I didn't," she said coldly. "I don't."

In the folds of his pocket, his fingertip grazed the gift—his backstage pass back into her world . . . at least for the night. He curbed a grin. "Yep, I believe those were your exact words."

The kid squinted at Mike as he eavesdropped from behind his mom.

Mike stared at Lydia. "Damn, darlin'." He fingered the cold, tiny charm in his pocket and grinned. "You don't look any older than the day you graduated from high school."

She pressed her thin lips together. "Um . . . you weren't there that day."

"I wasn't?" Mike pondered. "Huh . . . well, on tour that summer I carried your graduation picture in my wallet."

Her expression seemed pained.

“Is he—?” the kid asked.

“He’s nobody,” she interrupted, pursing her lips, looking Mike square in the eye.

Mike jerked his hands from his pockets and held them up. “*Ouch.*”

“I told you to go to your room.”

The kid challenged her with a huff.

Mike sighed through the tension and glanced back at the stormy night behind him. He was fuckin’ soaked and shivering and she didn’t even have the heart to wave him inside. This was gonna be tougher than he imagined. Maybe he should just tell her the truth. . . . Well . . . maybe just some of it.

“Brayden,” she ordered. “Go finish your homework.”

“I’m not going anywhere until you tell me who the fuck he is.” The kid glanced over at his mom. He didn’t seem all that natural spitting out the word “fuck”—not the way Mike was—and he seemed to be checking his mom for her reaction.

She gasped. “Brayden Mays Wilson!”

Mays. Mike grinned. His name was the kid’s middle name. He restrained an urge to laugh. Probably the reason the kid had turned out alright, despite his uptight mom.

“Who’s at the door, Lydia?”

Mike grinned at Andy. He seemed so much taller standing next to Lydia. The kid moved back to make room for his dad.

“Mike?” Drying his hands on a dishtowel, Andy stepped onto the porch to shake Mike’s hand. “What a surprise!” He pushed his wire-rimmed glasses up the bridge of his long, narrow nose. Mike recognized the frames as Berkshire Chase; he remembered when they were all the rage with his rock star comrades. “Well, how are you? Long time no see.” Andy nodded.

“Um—” Mike knew why Andy seemed so nervous at that moment, but Lydia appeared too perturbed to notice.

“What’s it been, ten years?” Andy continued, nodding.

“Right,” Mike nodded, going along with him.

“Fourteen,” Lydia barked, teeth clenched, arms still folded. “. . . actually.”

The kid continued to stare at Mike with big blue suspicious eyes.

“Good to see ya, Andy.”

“It’s *Andrew*,” Lydia corrected as she peered beyond the porch to the headlights shining up the driveway. She looked to her husband, who shrugged.

“Mike!” the chick called out as she hurried toward the porch. It was Diane and she had his wallet. She stepped onto the porch and reached it out to him.

“Uh, thanks.” Mike glanced guiltily at Lydia before cramming the wet wallet into his jacket pocket. “Musta fell out when I got outta the car.”

“Thanks, again.” She smiled at Mike in admiration. “You’re a gracious human being. . . . I truly mean it. Thank you for a wonderful day.”

Mike snorted. He’d been called many things, but never *gracious*. He waved off the gratitude.

“Seriously. It meant the world to Ray.”

He pitched her a wink.

“Thank you. . . . Good night,” she said, waving as she beelined back to her car in the rain.

Lydia rubbernecked out the doorway at the departing car. “Who was that?”

“Oh, her? She gave me a ride here. Part of the deal for gettin’ my Les Paul.” Mike sloughed

it off, but it had killed him to part with his old friend.

“You sold the *Les Paul*?” Andrew moaned as he ran a hand through his sandy blond hair. Then he wised up, and looked to Lydia, flustered. “That’s right, I forgot about that one.”

Lydia glared at Mike, her arms tightly folded.

“Well—” Mike coughed. “I didn’t really sell it. . . . I gave it away.”

“You *gave away* your guitar,” Lydia said sarcastically. “What, in exchange for drugs?”

“The last one . . . my fave . . .” Mike checked the cig behind his ear. “She was a beauty.”

“The *last* one?” Andrew asked.

“Yeah. It was for her ol’ man. . . . *Huge* fan.” Mike blinked at Lydia and thought about sparking the lighter again. “Followed my career for forty years.”

She looked skeptical.

“What?” Mike asked her as he slid his hand back into his pocket and felt for the charm. “For chrissake, the dude’s dyin’ . . . so I spent the day at the hospital with a dyin’ fan—”

“You?” she clarified. “*You* gave away a guitar . . .”

“Yeah. . . . To make him happy.” He focused on Lydia and grinned. “My fans are the fuckin’ greatest.” His finger rubbed the smooth silver of the charm. “Here.” Mike pulled it from his pocket. “I got ya somethin’.”

Lydia’s posture stiffened. Her gaze ping-ponged around the porch and then landed on Andrew.

Mike pressed the charm into her palm and grinned.

She glanced down at the silver horse frozen in a gallop. Then she flinched her head back slightly.

“You always dug horses.”

She blew out a noisy breath. “When I was a *child*—”

“Wait.” Brayden inched forward. “You play guitar?”

“Yeah, kid. . . . Of course.” Mike beamed at the attention. “Hey, you still have that guitar I gave you?”

“What guitar?” Brayden’s glance bounced to his mom, his dad, and then back to Mike.

“He was eleven months old!” Lydia said.

“I don’t understand,” Andrew interjected. “All your guitars are gone?”

Lydia shot her husband a cold glance.

Mike coughed and when he hawked up a hefty loogie and spit it off the porch into the pouring rain, Lydia cringed. He yanked a napkin from his jacket pocket and wiped his mouth. Glancing down at it, he noticed a smattering of blood. He quickly crumpled it up, hiding the bloody side, shoved it into his pocket, and cleared his throat.

“Mom,” Brayden insisted. “What guitar?”

“It was a toy,” Lydia said dismissively.

“I . . . would’ve remembered a toy like that.”

“You were so young—”

“Sonofabitch!” Mike shook his head. “You never gave it to him . . . did ya?”

Brayden glared at his mom. “I’m not stupid, you know.”

“Oh, sweetie.” When Lydia reached out to the kid, he pulled away.

Mike kneaded his shaggy hair. “You never told him about me? . . . Your own fuckin’ father?”

Lydia pursed her lips. She lowered her head and shifted her eyes to Andrew.

Andrew raised his hands. “I knew this would bite you in the ass one day.”

She glanced guiltily at Mike. She looked beaten, he thought. Maybe he had a chance.

“*That’s your dad?*” Brayden looked to his mother. “You said he was dead.”

Lydia turned, as if she couldn’t face her son.

“Ooh, now that’s cold.” Mike leaned back.

Lydia reached out to the kid. “I’m so sorry. . . . Sweetie . . . it’s . . . complicated.”

Brayden ducked and glared at his mother.

Mike stood silently on the porch. So much for barging in.

Brayden took a slight step back. “The man with a guitar standing next to grandma.”

Lydia’s expression softened. “You found the pictures.”

“I can’t believe you lied to me my *whole life*.” Brayden shook his head, turned his back to his mom, and retreated down the hall. The house shook when he slammed a door inside.

Mike shuddered. “I’d say that kid needs a hug.”

Lydia gave Mike what he read as a resigned look, before she turned to follow her son.

Andrew glanced toward the hallway, then back at Mike. “Wow. This is long overdue.”

“Brayden.” Mike heard Lydia in the distance as she knocked on a bedroom door. “Let me explain.”

All Mike wanted was a place to sleep. He clutched his arms and shivered. “Fuckin’ hell, it’s cold out here.”

“Come in,” Andrew gestured.

Mike nabbed his duffel bag from the porch and stepped inside the house. He readjusted his balls as he sized up the place—the clean walls, crown molding, recessed lighting. Neat and orderly, just like his daughter. “Nice pad.” He plopped his duffel bag onto the hardwood floor in the entryway.

“Have a seat.” Andrew directed him down the steps to the living room.

When Mike swaggered into the room, he paused, not sure he should step on the Persian rug.

Andrew gestured toward the sofa. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Jack and Coke?”

Andrew paused. “We don’t have either. How about a glass of Port?”

“Hell, yeah.” Mike settled into the starchy, upright sofa. “Some Port and a nice Cohiba!”

“Sorry, we don’t have cigars in the house,” he said, aiming his head toward the sound of Lydia’s voice pleading down the hallway. He clasped his hands. “Seems like a perfect night for Port.”

Lydia returned, teary-eyed. She gasped when she spotted Mike nestled into the sofa. “This is just great!” She pointed back toward the hallway, toward her son holed up in his room. “See how you just exude chaos?” She looked worn, exhausted, as she folded her arms. “What are you doing here?”

“I just . . . dropped by.”

“Here you go, Mike.” Andrew returned with a glass of Port.

Lydia’s mouth dropped. “My Waterford Crystal *Powerscourt*? . . . Andrew!”

Mike licked his lips, slugged down the shot, and exhaled. “Good shit.”

“Are you hungry, Mike?”

“What?” Lydia glared at her husband.

Mike thought she looked queasy.

“I’ll warm up a plate of leftovers,” Andrew offered.

Mike rubbed his hands together and sniffed the air. “Mmm, yeah, I’m fuckin’ starved!”

“Hold it!” Lydia held up her hands. She stared Mike straight in the eye. “What do you

want?"

Mike focused behind Lydia to the kid creeping into the room.

Lydia followed Mike's glance over her shoulder. "Sweetie." Reaching for her son, she noticed the duffel bag on the floor.

"Just leave me alone," the kid growled, shrugging away her touch. He loitered in the entry hall, eyeing Mike.

Lydia moved cautiously into the living room and propped herself on the edge of a chair. She stared across the room at Mike. "So, what do you want?"

Mike took a deep, exaggerated breath. "Lost the lease on my apartment. . . . Need a place to crash." He held out the Port glass toward Andrew in a plea for more. Then he lifted his feet and rested them on the coffee table.

Lydia's eyed widened. "Take your feet off the table . . . please."

"Just for tonight." He returned his feet to the floor. "I'll leave in the morning."

"You came all the way down here—" Lydia said, crossing her arms. "—from San Francisco . . . just to spend one night?"

"Yeah." Mike nodded.

"You've always had lots of friends—party, party, party." She crossed her legs and looked him squarely in the eye. "Surely, you have a girlfriend . . . or four."

"I'm . . . kinda between chicks right now." Mike coughed. "Certain individuals . . . I need to stay away from, if you catch my drift." He coughed again. "I—" He clenched his teeth and shrugged. "—can't . . . really impose on those people."

Lydia huffed. "And you don't think you're imposing on me?"

He shrugged. "You're family."

"Hardly."

The kid sized up Mike from a distance. "So are there any more grandparents I don't know about?"

Mike stared at Lydia and shook his head. "Can't believe you never told him about me."

Lydia huffed again. "I don't have a father, so he doesn't have a grandfather."

"For chrissake, he's a teenager now—"

Lydia rose, flitted up the steps, and snatched her purse from the entryway table. "How much do you need?"

"I ain't here for dough . . . just for the night." Mike slid the cigarette from behind his ear, flicked the lighter from his pocket, and sucked in the smoke.

"Mike!" Lydia said, darting into the living room. "No smoking in the house." She reached out her hand. "Give."

He took one more hit and then forked over the cig to his daughter.

She handed it to Andrew, who passed it to the kid and said, "Toss this out the front door."

Brayden stood on the threshold facing his parents. Glaring at his mom, he took a drag from the cigarette and choked out smoke.

"Brayden," said Lydia. "Get rid of that right now." She flailed her arms and turned to Mike. "That's just great. . . . You haven't even been here ten minutes and already you're corrupting my son."

"For chrissake." Mike shifted his ass on the stiff sofa. "I guarantee you he sees plenty of shit at high school."

The kid took another drag and coughed as he flung the cig out the door and into the stormy night.

Mike lifted a colorful bottle from the coffee table.

“No, no, no!” Lydia lunged for the object in his hands. “That’s expensive, hand-blown Murano glass.” She carefully returned the art to its precise spot.

He snickered, which made him cough.

“You can’t stay here. You have to go. . . . Andrew will drive you to a hotel. I’ll pay for it.” She looked desperate.

Andrew shifted his stance. “It’s late.” He glanced toward the door. “And nasty weather out.” He looked at Brayden loitering in the entryway. “And . . . it’s a school night.” He turned to Mike. “We’ve got a guest room—”

“What?” Lydia stepped toward her husband. “No . . . no.”

“Why don’t you stay the night?”

Lydia’s jaw dropped. “Andrew.”

“Yeah,” the kid agreed. “Stay.”

“I’ll warm up a plate of food, and we’ll talk more in the morning.” Andrew gave a firm stare to his wife as he moved toward the hall closet. “Right, hon?” Lydia scowled at him. Andrew opened the closet door and pulled the extra blanket from the top shelf. “Right, Lydia?” He placed the blanket into her arms.

Clearly outnumbered, Lydia sullenly carried the blanket toward the hallway.

“C’mon, Mike,” Andrew said. “Let’s get you something to eat.”

Mike struggled out of the uncomfortable sofa and then moseyed back across the Persian rug. Brayden’s blue eyes twinkled as he stared at Mike.

“Brayden,” Andrew proposed. “Why don’t you go help your mother get your grandpa’s room ready?”

The kid looked peeved at the suggestion.

Andrew smiled and patted his son on the shoulder. “Go on.”

The kid slowly scuffed his Hi-Tops down the hall.

Andrew leaned in to Mike and whispered, “And uh—” He winced. “. . . don’t let on to Lydia that we’ve . . . you know . . . had any communication . . . these past years.”

Mike cocked his head. Sure, he dug talkin’ but he wasn’t no snitch. Ah, Mike grasped—now Andrew is fucked.

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