

Already Fallen

by CC Rogers

Iris stirred her tea absently while her best friend chattered at her.

Her thoughts were elsewhere. She was finally coming to terms with the fact that she was going to spend the rest of her life alone. It had been two years since her last relationship had ended and she just couldn't muster the willpower to set out down heartbreak lane again.

She wondered if she should get a cat.

Betty snapped her fingers. "Are you listening to me? Iris, it's been two years. *Two years*. It's not natural for a woman to go that long without. It's not good for you. Look at your skin. Women are supposed to glow. You've got no glow. You've got wrinkles forming on that little crease between your eye and your –"

"Betty," Iris interrupted, finally bringing her attention back to the conversation. "I'm juggling three projects. I don't have time for a relationship, and you know it."

"Who said anything about a relationship?" Betty asked with mock innocence. "I was talking about sex."

"Only in your world do the two have nothing to do with each other."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you! You take sex way too seriously. You think you should only sleep with a guy if you plan to marry him. That's why Bill got to you so much."

Even though her tea was cold, Iris took a sip just to keep herself from saying anything. Bill was ancient history, but the residual feelings were still bitter.

"From your descriptions, he wasn't much of a lover anyway. What you need is a man taking time to pay attention to *you*."

Iris laughed mirthlessly. "Right. So, if I just hook up for meaningless sex, I'll discover a new, liberated world where men are just

equipment on my playground.” She had meant to sound sarcastic, but she saw Betty smile and nod. “My God, you’re serious. No, Betty. No way.”

“Just try it. Come on, Iris. You’re twenty-eight years old and you’ve never had a fling! Do you really want to die without knowing what it feels like? The rush of reckless abandonment... the thrill of being naughty. Can you even imagine what you’re missing?”

Iris was surprised to find herself actually considering Betty’s proposal. *I must be going crazy*, she thought. She was a far cry from a blushing virgin although, as her friend had ruthlessly pointed out, it had been a long time since her last sexual experience.

Maybe she *was* too serious, approaching every first date as an evaluation for marriage compatibility. Maybe, just once, she should scope out a roomful of men just for their... physical potential.

“There’s a band playing at the Yard tomorrow night that I absolutely *love*,” Betty continued. “I know the drummer. I can get us in for free. Come on, Iris, it’s the best spot in town to find a man for a little commitment-free passion.”

Deciding that she had, in fact, lost her mind, Iris nodded. “Fine. I’ll go.” Did rational people make a conscious decision to have a one-night stand? “I don’t have any experience with this hook-up scene, so you’ll have to help me figure out what to wear.”

Betty grinned from ear to ear. “No worries, honey. Just leave everything to me.”

* * *

Jon dropped into a seat across the table from his brother Todd. The rest of the guys in the band clustered near the bar.

The private back room was the best part of performing at the Yard, at least in Jon’s opinion. It meant an opportunity to unwind after the show with a beer in his hand and a select set of people around him... which usually included the band, some of the crew, and a gaggle of hot women that someone managed to pull in from the general population of the bar.

The ladies were always drawn to Todd, who thoroughly enjoyed their attention. One of the perks of being the band's front man was having three or four hotties hanging off him whenever he cocked a finger.

Not that Jon wanted that kind of role. He couldn't imagine going through women the way Todd did. Jon had tried to talk to the gaggles of pretty, twittering women after shows, but always found them... dull.

Jon played guitar and sang backup vocals, but his real value to the band was as its songwriter. The task required a certain poetic nature that Todd lacked. Jon figured it was this difference between himself and his younger brother that allowed Todd to enjoy the flimsy women while Jon required something more.

"Have you written anything new yet?" Todd asked, glancing impatiently at the door. There was no sign of any women. Eddie, the drum player, was probably out rounding some up.

Jon pulled out his notebook and tossed it across the table.

Todd flipped through it, shaking his head. "Crap, crap... and more crap. 'Wah, woe is me' crap. Jon, you've got to get over Tammy! When you first break up with a chick, it's great to have lots of pain-ridden songs, but two years later is just pathetic. The label wants something fresh before they'll get us in the studio for the next album!"

"Todd, do you have any idea how hard it is to compose while we're touring?"

"That's not the problem. The problem is, you need to get laid."

Jon looked up from his beer to see if his brother was serious. "Sex is not going to magically inspire me."

"Dude, you got to start somewhere." He leaned over and whispered, "Are you gay?"

"What?! No. Where the hell did you get that idea from?"

Todd leaned back and waved his hand. "I read something in this magazine on the plane. A long period of 'relationship recovery' is one of the signs of a homosexual in denial."

“That’s ridiculous! If you’d ever had a serious relationship, you’d know that the more in love you were, the longer it takes to be willing to risk that much pain again.” He took a swig of beer.

“But it’s weird the way you never pick up a chick after a show. They are so pumped after hearing us play. You wouldn’t believe what they’re willing to do for me sometimes. This one time, in Cleveland – ”

“Todd, shut up. I really, really don’t want to know.” Jon took another long drink of beer.

“I’m just saying you should try it. If you don’t write some new songs soon, this band is going to be sunk. Okay, so maybe a one-night stand won’t strike up your muse. But maybe it will! How will you know unless you try?”

Maybe he was drinking too much beer, because Todd was starting to sound reasonable. He’d been in a creative rut for so long. What if Todd was right?

Todd looked ready to launch into another persuasive argument. To Jon’s relief, Eddie picked that moment to stroll into the room with a crowd of young lovelies. *That should provide sufficient distraction*, Jon thought.

He almost turned away when he saw her.

She captured his attention immediately. She was a little older than most of the women Eddie brought back, but Jon found that appealing. She had the curves of womanhood in full bloom.

Todd whistled low. “I know which one I’m getting.”

Jon glanced at him and saw that his eyes were locked on the same woman.

A shorter brunette started introducing the woman to the band members at the bar. That one looked familiar... one of Eddie’s regulars. Betty, Jon seemed to recall.

Finally, Betty brought the new woman over to their table. “Guys, this is Iris. Iris, this is Todd and this is Jon.”

Todd stood and took Iris's hand in the smoothest motion Jon had ever seen him make. He kissed her hand, of all things, and murmured, "What a pleasure."

Iris blushed with a slight smile. She had innocence with an overtone of confidence that was so unique. Jon had a sudden desire to plumb the depths of that confidence, and of that innocence.

But Todd led her away toward the bar. "Let me get you a drink."

For a moment, Jon considered following them. He wondered if his brother would back down if he showed an interest in Iris. Or maybe Todd would get into a huff, and be intolerable for weeks. He did that sometimes, getting into fits where he refused to speak to anyone.

Jon settled into his seat, gripping his beer and watching Todd put the moves on Iris. He felt like he was at one of those crossroads in life, where a decision on one thing would change the course of his entire future.

He decided to let Todd have her. He wondered if it wasn't the biggest mistake he'd ever made.

* * *

Iris was certainly exploring new territory in life.

She was up against a wall with the lead singer of the headline band sticking his tongue in her mouth. She was probably the envy of every other woman in a two-mile radius.

There weren't many people left in the room. Betty had left with Eddie some time ago.

Todd rubbed his pelvis against hers, and she felt the strength of his desire. She could scarcely believe she was really going through with this. It felt so unreal.

But Todd was as good a pick as any. He was hot, in a wiry kind of way.

"Come to the men's room with me," Todd whispered breathily in her ear.

This gave Iris pause. “You... you want to have sex in the bathroom?”

“Have you ever done it in a public place before? It’s amazing.”

Iris suddenly realized she was only willing to go so far. “I’m not an exhibitionist, Todd.”

“Come on, baby. It’s such a rush.”

He ran his hands over her, and a feeling of panic took hold. “No.”

Todd didn’t back off, and Iris realized he was probably accustomed to getting whatever he wanted from a woman. And the people who remained in the back room would probably assume he was entitled to it.

She might no longer have a choice. She tried to form a plan, but fear blocked her thoughts. She tried to push Todd away, but he caught her wrists with surprising strength.

And then suddenly they were not alone. “She said no, Todd.”

Iris looked up and found the speaker was Jon, Todd’s older brother.

“She didn’t mean it,” Todd said.

“Yes, I did,” Iris assured him.

Todd looked up at Jon and glared at him for a moment. Then he released Iris angrily and backed away. He moved across the room and found another woman who greeted his attention enthusiastically.

“I’m sorry about my brother,” Jon said. “He can be kind of a Neanderthal sometimes.”

Iris let herself really see Jon for the first time. Betty had told her she thought Jon was in the closet. It was too bad, really, because he had the hotness of his brother in a more muscular frame. He also had the soulful eyes of a poet, the kind of eyes that made a woman want to drown in them.

“No, it was my fault,” she said. “I’m not a naïve child. I know what I was here for. It’s just... doing it in a public bathroom really doesn’t turn me on.” Iris kicked herself mentally. She had blown it. She had

actually decided to have a one-night stand, found herself a perfect candidate, and been unable to follow through.

There was a moment of silence in which Iris feared she had said too much. Just because Jon rescued her from Todd's attentions didn't mean he wanted to hear –

“So, what does?” Jon asked quietly. “Turn you on, that is?”

She looked up into his eyes and found something completely unexpected: another chance.

“Hotel rooms,” she said breathlessly. “Hotel rooms really do it for me...”

* * *

The band's rented limo defined luxury. Iris had never seen anything like it. She waited while Jon spoke to the driver briefly. Then he slid in next to her and the vehicle started moving.

For a moment, they just sat together. Then Jon smiled nervously.

“I'm Jon, by the way.”

“I know. I'm Iris.”

“I know.”

Iris wasn't sure what to say next. This felt so much different than her encounter with Todd. Todd took charge and she just had to go along. But Jon didn't look like he knew what to do next any more than she did.

She cleared her throat. “I, um, I like your music.”

“Thanks. Been a fan long?”

“No, actually, tonight was the first time I'd ever heard of you.”

Jon stared at her. “You'd never even heard us on the radio?”

“I don't listen to the radio,” she admitted. She squirmed. This was not going well.

Jon looked a little crestfallen. “Do you go out to the Yard often?” he asked.

“No. First time.”

He stared at her again, as if trying to unravel a mystery.

“I know what you’re probably thinking,” she sighed. “But I’m not some kind of crazy sex stalker. I’ve never actually gone out to find a one night stand before.”

He looked curious. “So, why tonight?”

“My best friend talked me into being more... impulsive. Or, at least, giving it a try.”

He grinned. “You might find this hard to believe, given my brother’s behavior, but I don’t usually pick up women this way, either.”

“So, why tonight?”

“Todd convinced me I should give it a try.”

They laughed.

“We’re such push-overs,” she said.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “You know, we don’t have to...” He waved his hand between them.

“Yeah, I know.”

For a moment, they just sat together, and the feeling was quite pleasant. Iris genuinely liked Jon. “Oh, hey, I have an idea!” she said suddenly.

“What?”

“We can hang out in your hotel room for a little bit, then not tell Todd and Betty what happened and they’ll assume we... you know.”

Jon smiled. “Devious.”

“I need to get Betty off my case. When she gets it into her head that she’s helping me, she won’t let it go. Come on, help me out.”

The smile on Jon’s face was really quite attractive.

“Sure, why not?”

* * *

“We’re putting a serious dent in this mini bar,” Iris said.

Jon’s hotel room was not as posh as the limo, but it was pretty upscale, at least by Iris’s standards. The two of them had dug into the

snacks and drinks after Jon had dismissed her objection that the food was ridiculously expensive.

“Ah, that’s what it’s here for. Come on, next round.”

They were lounging on the couch, playing twenty questions.

“Okay,” Iris said, “I’m thinking of something green.”

“A frog.”

“Dammit! How do you do that?”

Jon grinned. “Does it even occur to you to cheat? To change what the thing you’re thinking of is, midway through?”

She shook her head. “Of course not! Wait a minute... do you do that?”

He laughed guiltily. She threw a snack cake package at him.

He threw a candy bar back at her and she retaliated with a bag of cookies. Laughing, they threw things as fast as they could until Jon, breathless, called a cease-fire and they collapsed next to each other on the couch.

“This has to be the cleanest food fight of all time,” Iris said, looking at the packaged food strewn about. She looked up at Jon and found him smiling at her. It was a beautiful smile.

There was something in the twinkle in his eyes... something inviting... wanting.

Her eyes drifted to his mouth. His lips looked so kissable. She wondered what they felt like.

So she kissed him.

During her encounter with Todd, there had been only simple lust, but as Jon kissed her back, there was something more: a need to touch, to be touched... and a hesitation that came from having been hurt in the past. They were feelings that Iris shared.

She slid her hands over the hard muscles of his back. The kiss deepened as Jon ran his hands over her, stoking the fire of her desire.

She hungered for release. Her hands moved to unbuckle his belt.

Jon broke his mouth away from hers. “Are you sure?” he asked.

A part of her couldn’t believe she was doing this, but another part of her had never felt so right.

“Yes.”

* * *

Jon emerged from the bathroom the next morning and was pleased to find Iris still in bed. She looked like she was just waking up.

“Hey,” he greeted, dropping onto the bed next to her.

“Hey,” she replied sleepily. “I just had one of those, ‘Where the heck am I?’ moments.”

“Yeah. I have those a lot.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to fall asleep here and overstay my welcome.”

“You haven’t.” He glanced at the clock. “I don’t have to check out for a couple hours yet. Let me buy you breakfast.”

She stretched luxuriously, which was very pleasant to watch. “No, thanks. I always go Dutch on a first date.”

He grinned, both at the idea of their morning-after breakfast being a first date and at Iris being the kind of woman who insisted on paying her own way. “No, really, this one’s on me.”

For a long moment, she just laid there, staring at him, looking beautiful. Then she shook her head. “I think I’ll just pick up something on my way home.”

“Are you sure?” Jon desperately tried to think of another excuse to spend more time with her.

“Look, Jon, last night was... well, fantastic. But I don’t have any delusions about this going somewhere. I mean, you’ll be heading to Chicago tonight, and after that you’re going to L.A. By the time you’re back on the east coast, I expect you won’t even remember what I look like.”

“I think I will.” He pulled out his cell phone and snapped a picture of her before she could object.

“Hey! If you misuse that, I swear I will track you down and... and...”

“Don’t worry, I’ll only post it on the most reputable of porn sites.” His hands flew up as she whacked him with a pillow. “Joking! It won’t leave my phone. I promise.”

She wrapped the sheet around her and gathered her clothes. “Don’t you need to get ready? You’re playing Fall Fest this afternoon.”

“I have plenty of time. Are you going to be there?”

“I wasn’t planning to.”

“I can get you in for free.”

She finished dressing and turned to face him. “You’re not trying to repay me, are you?”

“What? No.”

“Good. Because I think you may have a mistaken impression of who was taking advantage of whom last night.”

“I didn’t really think either of us was doing that.”

She smiled. “A meeting of equal needs?”

“That’s more like how it seemed to me.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know what to make of you, Mr. Rock-and-Roll star.” She picked up her purse. “I think I’ll just leave it at ‘thank you and goodbye.’”

“Wait... can I have your number? Or your e-mail? I don’t even know your last name!”

For a moment, she just looked at him, and Jon had the rising fear that she was going to walk out of his life forever.

“I must be crazy.” She pulled a business card out of her purse and wrote something on the back. “Here.”

He reached out to take it, but she snatched it back. “Wait. You’re not going to sell my info to marketing lists, are you?”

“No. Scout’s honor.”

She handed him the card. “Okay. I really should go now.”

“Iris, wait.” Taking a chance, he gathered her in his arms and kissed her. She responded in a very satisfying way, arching into him and kissing him back. He released her reluctantly. “Something to remember me by,” he said.

Shaking her head, she murmured, “I already have a lot to remember you by.” And with that, she slipped out the door.

He looked at the card in his hands, his only tenuous connection to a woman he desperately wanted to see again. She had given him her e-mail address. He flipped the card over and was more than a little surprised to see the name of the biggest tech company in town and a small picture of her face. It wasn’t just any business card. It was hers.

She had given him her name. And, despite her apparent reticence, had indicated that she trusted him with her contact information.

He glanced at her job title. “Systems analyst? I wonder what that means...”

* * *

On the tour bus, Jon laid open his magazine and admired a glossy picture of a black Corvette. “That is one sexy car.”

“Why don’t you buy one?” Todd asked from his seat across the aisle.

Jon shook his head. “You are going to be one of those idiots who ends up playing bar mitzvahs in his old age to make ends meet. Me, I’m saving up. Only after I’m sure I won’t be playing kid birthday parties will I indulge in expensive cars.” He ran his finger over the picture of the ‘vette, wondering if Iris would like it. For all he knew, she might already have one.

He pulled out her business card and turned it over in his hands.

“You stole her from me, you know,” Todd grumbled. “I did all the work of getting her revved up, and you swooped in and stole her.”

“You’re the one who told me I needed to get laid.”

“Oh. Yeah, I did. And you did it! Damn, I’m good.” Todd settled back in his seat with closed eyes and a self-satisfied smile.

Shaking his head, Jon pulled out his laptop and brought up the Internet. He wanted to find out what Iris did.

Even after researching it awhile, he wasn’t sure he really understood. Something about computers and designing stuff.

Then he switched over to searching for her name. He found slides for presentations she had done. He found references to scholarships she had won. She had even been president of several clubs in college.

As the evidence of her accomplishments grew and grew, he had the sinking feeling that this woman was out of his league.

* * *

With a cup of hot tea in hand, Iris settled into her desk for her habitual Sunday night web surfing.

Jon was probably in Chicago by now. She wondered how rock stars spent their spare evenings.

Shaking her head, she forced him out of her mind. Why was she even thinking about him? Wasn’t the whole point of a one-night stand to enjoy it and forget about it?

She brought up her e-mail to avoid the temptation of googling his name again. There were a surprising number of fan sites for the band, with lots of pictures and stories about Jon and the other guys. Not that she had read them. Well, not that she had read *all* of them.

One of the messages in her inbox caught her eye. She didn’t recognize the address, but the subject line simply said, “It’s Jon.”

Hesitantly, she opened the message. It said, “Hey Iris. Now you can add me to your address book. What’s a systems analyst, by the way?”

She hit reply. “It’s difficult to explain,” she wrote, and hit send.

What was she doing? Was she actually keeping in touch with him? She thought about calling Betty. It wasn't supposed to work this way, was it?

Her e-mail beeped. He had replied already. She opened up the message and it said, "Are you online now? Do you want to chat?" And it had his IM name.

Even with her dearth of experience in the area, she was pretty sure online chatting was not supposed to be a follow-up to a one-night stand. But, it would be easier to answer his question about her job via chat than via e-mail. She brought up her chat program and entered his name...

And was surprised to see the video availability icon when he appeared on her buddy list. Not many of her friends had video chat capability, so she rarely used hers. It meant she could see him again, unless he chose not to turn his camera on. He might not be in shape for being seen.

She snatched up a mirror, checking her reflection, suddenly realizing she hadn't been expecting to be seen tonight. But she had gone out earlier, and she still looked okay. Hesitantly, she initiated the chat.

"It's Iris," she typed.

The video request came up. She couldn't breathe. She hit "Accept."

And there he was. Grinning at her from a little box on her screen.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," she managed to reply. "I didn't expect to see you again so soon."

"You didn't tell me you were some kind of high-power computer genius designer."

"Well, you didn't tell me you were a track star in high school. Some things just didn't seem relevant at the time."

He paused. "Have you been Internet stalking me?" His slight smile told her he wasn't really accusing her of wrongdoing.

Still, she felt a blush heat her cheeks. “It’s not like you’re hard to find on the web. Have you counted your fan sites?”

“Actually, I visit them from time to time, just to make sure they’re not making things up about me. Well, not bad things anyway.” He paused. “You’re not exactly web-anonymous yourself.”

“You googled me? Why would you do that?”

“Why’d you do it to me?” he countered.

She waved her hand and struggled to answer. “You’re a celebrity. It’s normal for people to obsess a little about... I mean, our society idolizes famous... ah, crap. The truth is, I wanted to know if you were the kind of sailor who had a girl in every port.”

“That’s Eddie.”

“Or one who finds a new girl every weekend.”

“Like Todd.”

She paused nervously. “But I couldn’t find anything conclusive,” she admitted.

“You could try asking me.”

“I... I don’t think I would feel comfortable doing that.”

“How about we make a deal? I’ll tell you my relationship history for the past two years and you tell me yours.”

She couldn’t suppress a little smile. “I’m not sure that would be fair.”

“Why?”

“My relationship history over the past two years has been pretty simple. I haven’t had any.”

He smiled back. “Neither have I.”

“Oh, come on. That can’t be true.”

“You think I’m lying to you? Why would I do that?”

Try though she might, she couldn’t come up with a plausible reason. “But you’re so... so hot.”

He threw back his head and laughed. Iris blushed furiously. “Thank you,” he said. “So are you.”

She cleared her throat, desperate to change the subject. “You asked about my job...”

She launched into a description of what she did for a living. That discussion branched out into other topics: travel, movies, current events, and more.

The conversation flow was so natural, so easy, that she was surprised when she looked at the clock and saw that it was two in the morning.

“Oh my gosh. I have to go to work tomorrow!”

“I’m sorry,” Jon said. “Late hours are normal for me. I didn’t even notice the time.”

“Me, either.” She yawned. “But I really have to go now.”

“It was great talking to you, Iris. Goodnight.”

As Iris shut down her computer, she tapped her finger on her desk pensively. Jon was a dangerous combination: incredibly sexy, fun to talk to, and completely out of reach. Long-distance relationships never worked.

And why was she even thinking about a relationship? She didn’t have time for a relationship!

She was probably reading too much into things. Just because Jon spent a few hours talking to her didn’t mean he was trying to start something. Probably just satisfying his curiosity. As she climbed into bed, she convinced herself that she would probably never hear from him again.

* * *

Jon knew he was in love.

After talking to Iris, he spent the whole night writing songs. He hadn’t felt this way in... well, ever. He felt too alive to sleep.

The next day, the band met in their practice studio. Jon tuned his guitar nervously while the others set up.

“You got anything new for us today?” Todd asked.

“I, um... I wrote something last night,” Jon said. “It’s a little different than our previous stuff, but I think it still fits us.”

“Well, let’s hear it.”

The guys settled in, finding places to sit. They didn’t look optimistic. They hadn’t liked anything Jon had brought to them in over a year.

The song wasn’t exactly about Iris. It was more about life, but it was a life with purpose, a life with hope. A life without self-pity. It was more melodic than most of their repertoire, too.

As the sound of the guitar strings died away, Jon looked at their faces anxiously.

For a moment, their faces were unreadable. Then Eddie nodded. “It’s good. It’s very good.”

The others murmured in agreement, except for Todd, who jumped up and whooped. “It worked! The plan worked! I am a freakin’ genius!”

“Let’s get to work,” Eddie said with a smile. Jon could feel the general excitement as the group settled in for a seriously fun session.

* * *

The Café was Iris’s favorite lunch spot. She sat at a sidewalk table with Betty and sipped her tea.

“Sorry I haven’t gotten a chance to talk to you all week,” Betty apologized. “So, how’d it go Friday after I left with Eddie? Did you and Todd...?”

Iris shook her head. “Things didn’t quite work out as planned.”

“What? But he was so into you! What happened?”

“I ended up with Jon instead.”

“Oh! Oh, well, that’s... Wait, Jon isn’t gay?”

“I can personally vouch for the fact that Jon is not gay.”

“Oh, ho ho!” Betty chuckled. “Was it good?”

“It was,” Iris said with a smile, “mind-blowing.”

“Alright! You go, girl.”

“It was also not exactly a one-night stand.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I’ve been chatting with him online every night since Sunday.”

“No. Really?”

“And he’s making a special trip out to see me next week.”

Betty leaned back in her chair. “Whoa.”

“I know. I don’t know what to do.”

“Do you want him to visit?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“What’s the problem? He spends his life traveling all across the country! He’s a famous rock star! I’m nobody! I’m a computer geek. What on earth do we have in common?”

“Physical attraction, apparently.”

Iris sighed. “I don’t know if I want to be a rock star’s sex toy, Betty.”

“Why not? It’s not a bad gig. Eddie gets me all kind of stuff that I couldn’t get without him.”

She shook her head slightly. “I don’t know. It just doesn’t... I just don’t think it’s what I want.”

“Iris, honey, do you really know what you want?”

Did she? Iris thought about it. She’d always wanted to be successful. She *was* successful. But what else did she want? Did she want to get married? She’d always thought so, but that might just be a quiet acceptance of society’s expectations for women. Maybe she could be happy with no-commitment passionate interludes. Maybe, for once, she should just go with the flow and see where it took her.

* * *

He should be here any minute, Iris thought. She slid a dusting cloth over the already-spotless tables in her condo.

She couldn't decide what to say to Jon first. Should she offer him tea or take him out to dinner?

Her doorbell rang. For a moment, she just stared at her door like a deer caught in the headlights. Then, to compensate for the delay, she bolted – which caused her to be slightly breathless by the time she yanked open the door.

And there he was. In the flesh. With those eyes she could drown in. Holding a pink rose.

“Hey,” he said.

He handed her the rose as she stepped aside to let him in. “Thank you,” she said. She wondered if she should greet him with a kiss. There was an awkward moment before she decided against it and escaped to the kitchen to put the flower in a vase.

She could see Jon, in the living room, turning around in a slow circle. “Your place is amazing,” he called. “Like those pictures in magazines.”

“I have a minor obsession with decorating. I blame Martha Stewart.”

“And it's so... clean!”

“I'm also a bit compulsive. Cleaning is a nervous habit sometimes.” She finished repositioning the vase on the kitchen counter for the tenth time, then headed to the living room.

As she returned to his side, Jon smiled. “Did my visit make you nervous?”

“A little,” she confessed.

She couldn't get over how gorgeous his eyes were. One of the disadvantages of video chat was that the camera was positioned above the other person's image, so you never had the feeling that you were making eye contact with the person you were talking to.

Before she knew it, she had moved very close to him. He lowered his head slightly, but was clearly waiting for her move.

So she kissed him.

He kissed her back, wrapping his arms around her. The kiss went on and on, expressing all the emotions they had built up in the days since they had last parted, days in which they had spent so much time together while being hundreds of miles apart.

As their lips finally parted, Iris realized tea or dinner were not top on her list. “Do you want to see the bedroom?” she asked coyly.

He laughed. She took his hand and pulled him after her as she ran back to her room, downright giddy. For once in her life, she knew exactly what she wanted.

* * *

The next morning, Jon woke up knowing where he was, which was unusual for him. Despite the fact that he had never woken up there before, lying in Iris’s bed next to her felt like the most natural place in the world to be.

It was torture to know he had to catch a plane in just a few hours. The gap in his schedule wasn’t really big enough to justify this trip, but he had done it anyway. He had needed to see Iris again more than anything.

She awoke and smiled at him. He kissed her. Her smile changed to a mischievous look, and her hands went to work on him, making it clear how she wanted to spend their remaining time together.

He complied enthusiastically. Making love to her was rapidly moving to the top of his list of favorite activities.

Afterward, he cradled her in his arms, trying to etch the moment in his memory forever.

“You have to catch your plane,” she said regretfully.

“I know. I have a few more minutes.”

She raised herself up on her arms to look into his eyes. “Jon, what are we doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“This,” she said, waving her hand between them. “During the past two weeks, you’ve become one of the best friends I’ve ever had. But when we’re together, I can’t keep my hands off you.”

He smiled. “So, what’s the problem?”

“The problem is, I don’t know what we’re doing. We’re never going to be able to see each other for more than a few days at a time. I come from a world of cubicles, project deadlines, and stock options. You come from a world of tour dates and studio appointments.”

His smile disappeared. “I know.”

“So, what are we doing here? A friendship with benefits?”

He stroked her hair. “I thought... we might be falling in love.”

She turned away with a furrowed brow. He thought his heart might break. He had just assumed that she felt the same way he did.

She glanced at the clock and looked back at him in exasperation. “You have to go, or you’ll miss your plane.”

For a moment, he considered simply missing it. But he couldn’t let the guys down like that, especially his brother.

So he rapidly gathered his things. Iris met him by the door. “Goodbye, Jon.” That sounded too final.

He put his bag down and hugged her. “I don’t want to leave things this way.”

She smiled sadly and kissed him. “Jon... I can’t let myself fall in love with you. I can’t really have you, not the way I would want. I’m sorry.”

“But – ”

“You have to go.”

He checked his watch and realized she was right. He had no more time. He grabbed his bag and left, racing for his rental car to keep from missing his flight.

His mind was racing as well. He couldn’t lose Iris. He needed to figure out how to offer her a future... one that included him.

* * *

When Iris got to work the next day, she could tell something was up. The admin grinned at her and ducked away. Other people smiled at her, too, and whispered to each other after she passed.

It was only when she got to her desk that she found out what was causing the stir.

It was the biggest arrangement of red roses that she had ever seen.

Denise, one of her coworkers, came over to admire them. “Is that four dozen?” she asked. “Someone must really want to get your attention.”

Iris hunted for the card among the abundant foliage. But there was really only one person it could be from.

Finally, she found the note. It simply said: “I’ve already fallen.”

And Iris knew, despite what she had said to Jon, that she had, too. She was doomed. Heartbreak was inevitable. But, for the moment, she was in love.

* * *

“Our agent and the label rep heard the new stuff,” Todd reported. “They’re negotiating a gap in our show schedule so we can spend time in the studio!”

Jon barely heard as the rest of the band cheered. All he could think about was Iris.

Todd dropped into the seat next to him. “What is it, bro? What’s wrong?”

“I think she’s breaking up with me,” Jon said miserably.

“What?! No. Oh, no. No, no, no!” Todd said. “We’re not going back to whiny, self-pitying songs! Jimmy said he wanted this album to be upbeat!”

Jon didn’t respond. He couldn’t bring himself to care.

Todd gripped his arm angrily. “Jon, listen to me. I need you to be happy and creative until this album is done. We need this album!”

Jon looked around the room at the anxious faces of the band. They really did need a new album. They were all counting on him.

But he knew if he lost Iris, he couldn't do it.

His cell phone rang, startling him. He glanced at the display. "It's her," he said in surprise.

"Talk to her!" Todd shouted, grabbing the guys and pushing them towards the door. "Come on, let's give him a little privacy."

Jon flipped open his phone hesitantly. "Hello?"

"Thanks for the flowers."

He leaned against a wall. "Did you like them? Were they too much?"

She chuckled. "Well, they certainly got my attention."

He could barely breathe. Confessing love for someone who had essentially told you she didn't love you was not generally a smart move. But it was the only thing he could think to do.

"Iris, I need you."

"I know."

"I don't want to make light of your concerns, but I can't agree with giving up on something just because you don't know where it's going."

"You're right."

"I mean, love isn't predictable. It doesn't follow a plan. It... wait, are you agreeing with me?"

She laughed. "Jon, I love you."

His jaw dropped.

"I know I basically said I didn't the other day, but I wasn't being honest with myself."

"Iris..." He couldn't seem to form completely thoughts. *She...*

"So, let's just see where this road takes us, okay? No pressure."

"Okay." ...*loves...*

"I've got to get back to work. I'll see you later."

"Yeah." ...*me!*

As he hung up the phone, he felt like he was floating. He felt like... like he needed to write a song.

* * *

Two weeks later, Jon paced nervously at the airport. Things were not going as planned.

Iris was coming to visit, but nothing was ready. His place was a mess, there were no romantic dinner reservations, and it felt like everything was falling apart.

He had intended to prepare the previous week, but a series of emergencies with the band had taken up all his time. He had almost had to leave a message for Iris to take a taxi from the airport, but he had freed up just in time.

Finally, he saw her, waving and smiling with a bag slung over her shoulder. She ran up and gave him a hug and a kiss.

It felt so good to have her in his arms. He wished she were staying for more than a couple of days.

As they drove to his apartment, he told her all the things that had been happening that week. He hadn't even had time to send her an e-mail about them.

"Oh, Jon," she said sympathetically. "You should have told me. We could have rescheduled this visit."

"Are you kidding? Looking forward to this weekend has been the only thing keeping me going. But I have to warn you, my place is a disaster. I didn't get a chance to clean at all, and I know you're kind of... uh..."

"A clean freak?"

"I just don't want you to have to endure the squalor. We can get a hotel room."

Iris laughed. "Let me see your place first. It can't be that bad."

* * *

“Is it that bad?” Jon asked as Iris swept her eyes over his living room. He dreaded the verdict. After seeing her place, he was sure she couldn’t stand to spend the night in such a mess.

“No festering piles of food. No mounds of dirty clothes. No visible cockroaches. It’s not that bad.”

“Are you sure?”

Iris smiled broadly at him. “I clean compulsively, but I don’t demand spotless environments. Your place is cluttered, not filthy. It’s fine.”

Jon sighed in relief.

“Although... maybe I should see the bathroom before I make a final decision,” she teased.

He led her there, but she didn’t really inspect it. She just started unpacking some of her toiletries.

“Do I have time to shower before this thing at Todd’s?”

“Of course.”

She glanced at her watch dubiously. “Aren’t we going to be late?”

“No, Todd’s parties don’t really get started until after midnight.”

“Hmm, I think you underestimate how long it takes me to shower.”

“How long can it take to shower?”

“It’s not just the time in the water. It’s a whole process. Moisturizing. Hair. Makeup.”

“Right. Well, as long as we leave by midnight, I don’t think anyone will miss us.”

“I can do that.”

She started stripping off clothes, and Jon considered leaving, but hesitated because she hadn’t asked him to go. He had seen her naked before, after all.

“Are these parties fun?” she asked as she turned on the water.

“No. At least, not for me. I have to work the room. Lots of hands to shake, promises to make. It’s excruciating.”

“Why do you go?”

“It has to be done. For the band. Can’t get anywhere if the right people aren’t working for you.”

“I see. Is that why Todd throws these?”

“Yes. He’s a lot smarter than people realize. He has a reputation for throwing great parties, and so all the right people come. And, of course, that reinforces his reputation for throwing the best parties.”

“Clever.”

Iris finished showering and Jon fetched her a towel. Looking at her wet body was affecting him. He nuzzled her neck, and she giggled.

“Surely, it won’t matter if we’re a little late to the party,” he suggested.

“You’re going to make me need to shower again, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I hope so.”

* * *

Iris stepped out of the car and brushed her hands down her miniskirt. She gazed up at the apartment building in awe. “Todd lives here?” she asked in amazement. The place looked like it belonged in a movie.

Jon handed the keys to an attendant, who drove off to park the car. “Yes. The fool spends way too much on this place, but it is useful for these soirees.”

She looked him up and down. “You have good taste in clothes.”

He smiled and blushed slightly. “I have good taste in a lot of things.” His eyes swept over her.

Then it was her turn to blush. She ran her fingers through his hair, brushing it off his face. “You look like you just got laid, though.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a reason for that.” He wrapped his arm around her and they headed inside.

* * *

Iris had never seen a party like the one she and Jon stepped into.

It was loud. Music and voices filled the air. Todd's place was spacious, but it was packed.

Several people yelled greetings to Jon. He waved to those farther away, and shook hands with those nearby.

There were introductions, too, but Iris couldn't learn names fast enough. She was terrible with names, and she met twenty people in the first five minutes.

There were some really beautiful women at the party. In fact, as Iris looked around, it seemed that there were only beautiful women at the party. Skinny, young women, wearing stylish clothes and sporting perfect manicures.

She felt completely out of place. Fashion was not a skill she excelled at. She wished she had gotten Betty to pick out her clothes for this event. She was not dressed anything like the other women.

Jon got her attention with a hand on her shoulder. "Hey, I'm going to make the rounds. Do you want to come with me?"

"It'll go faster if you don't have to make introductions, so why don't we meet up at the bar when you're done?" she suggested.

Jon nodded and headed off, visiting with one group after another. He was smooth, like he'd done this a thousand times before.

She became painfully aware of eyes on her. Groups of gorgeous women swept cool, appraising gazes over her, then twittered at each other. As she worked her way past them towards the bar, she overheard snippets like, "Guess he likes 'em on the chubby side," and "Can you believe those shoes?"

She had never felt so alone.

Suddenly, a woman blocked her path. She was middle-aged, and had an air of authority. She held out her hand. "I'm Pam, the band's publicist."

Iris shook the offered hand. "I'm Iris."

"You're here with Jon."

“Yes.”

Another appraising look, and Iris felt herself being judged. She could tell Pam found her lacking. “Hmph. Too bad he didn’t pick up some young starlet.”

Iris didn’t know what to say. She felt like she was being insulted, but had the strange impression that it wasn’t personal.

Pam shook her head. “No matter. I have to ask you something. Do you care about Jon?”

“Well, of course.”

“The guys are up for a fairly prestigious award, and the awards ceremony is going to be a great photo op. Jon might ask you to go with him. But, if you really care about him, you won’t go. Do you understand?”

Iris blinked in confusion. “No.”

Pam looked frustrated, as if she was having to deal with a small child, or a moron. “It’s about image. Girlfriends don’t belong in band photos, unless they’re actresses or models.”

“I see.”

Pam nodded in satisfaction and strode off. It was clear she expected to be obeyed. Iris wondered why she wasn’t issuing this directive to Jon instead of her.

She looked around for him, but couldn’t find him. She didn’t really want to stand at the bar by herself, so she set out to find the restroom.

When she found it, she saw things that made her realize just how out of place she was.

Iris had never done drugs. She didn’t know anyone who did. But she knew enough from movies to recognize the activities in the bathroom.

She turned around and left immediately. She couldn’t believe how naïve she was. This was Jon’s world. These were the people in it. These were the kinds of things that Jon probably did.

This thing with Jon had all been a terrible mistake. She kicked herself for letting her feelings take priority over her reason. She had

known from the start that this would never work out. She wanted to go home.

* * *

As the elevator doors closed behind her, Iris stood in the lobby feeling lost. Where was she going to go?

Her cell phone rang, startling her.

She flipped open the phone and recoiled from the loud music in the background.

“Where are you?” came Jon’s voice. “This place is a madhouse.”

“Actually, I’m not there.”

“You want to leave? Okay, where can I meet you?”

“No, you stay and enjoy the party. We’ll meet up later.” Iris was trying to keep her voice steady, but she wasn’t sure she was succeeding. It was a few seconds before Jon spoke again.

“Iris, what happened? Where are you?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll just find that hotel room after all.” Iris abruptly hung up before her voice could betray her.

She fought tears and looked around for a refuge. Luckily, Todd’s building was so posh that it had public restrooms off the lobby.

Jon wouldn’t understand. She didn’t know how she was going to tell him. She didn’t know anything anymore.

* * *

When Iris emerged from the ladies room, she found Jon interrogating the doorman. He looked relieved when he saw her.

“Iris, are you alright?”

“Yes, of course,” she lied. She couldn’t meet his eyes.

“Come on, I’ll take you home.”

“No. You should really go back to the party. It’ll help your career to spend time with those people.”

“Why won’t you look at me?”

She made herself look up at him. His eyes widened.

“Oh my God,” he said. She could tell he knew. He could read her so well. She had hoped to put it off a day or two. She looked at her feet, but now she had no choice.

“Jon, you’re... you’re a really great guy, but – ”

“Are you breaking up with me?”

She stood mutely.

“You *are* breaking up with me! Why?”

She shrugged. “I’m just not the right girl for you.” She wished she could be one of the pretty, glamorous, famous people upstairs. But she couldn’t.

Jon ran his hands through his hair. “Iris, look at me. Look at me!” he snapped. He made a visible effort to control his anger, then took her face in his hands. “Tell me you don’t care about me. Tell me you’ve found someone else. Tell me any reason that makes sense why we should go separate ways.”

She could feel her eyes filling with tears. “Because I love you.”

“That doesn’t make any sense at all!”

“Jon, I don’t belong in your world. I don’t know how to look. I don’t know how to act.”

“Why can’t you just be yourself?”

“Because you’re a rock star! Your girlfriend is not just your girlfriend. She has to... fit your image.”

“Fit my... what? Have you been talking to Pam?”

Iris nodded.

“What did she say?”

“She told me that if I cared about you, about your career, that I wouldn’t go to the awards ceremony.”

“She has no right, she – ”

“She has every right,” Iris interrupted quietly. “She’s your publicist. She has to manage what people think of you.” She steeled herself to say what she had to say. “You should go back to the party, Jon.

There's a lot of beautiful women there, and some famous ones, too, that would look really good on your arm." She silently cursed the tears that she couldn't stop, turning away from Jon so she could wipe them away with the back of her hand.

He pressed against her back and wrapped his arms around her. "No," he said.

"Jon..."

"No." He squeezed her. "Please come home with me. We can talk about this."

Part of her wanted to follow through on what she'd started, call a taxi, and go back to her own world. Another part of her never wanted to leave Jon's embrace.

"You don't really want to break up with me," Jon said. "You're doing this because you think it will help me, but it won't. I need you. I love you." He hugged her tighter. "Iris, please."

And Iris knew it was no use. There was no way she could leave while Jon asked her to stay. "Okay," she said.

Jon sighed with relief as he steered her towards the door. But Iris felt no relief. She felt dread. She knew a day would come when Jon realized what she had come to understand that night.

She didn't belong in his world. And she never would.

* * *

Jon woke up the next morning and was relieved to find Iris in bed next to him. He had half-expected her to pack up and leave in the night.

She had claimed to be too tired to talk the previous night, so they had gone right to bed. But did coming home with him mean she wasn't breaking up with him?

She woke up and looked at him with those big, sad eyes. So he knew the discussion of the previous night wasn't resolved.

"Hey," he said.

She rolled over and pulled the sheets around her tightly. He hated it when she wouldn't face him.

"Iris, am I going to have to have this conversation with your back?"

She sighed and turned back around. "Do we have to do this?"

"Do what? Talk?"

"Can't I just stop returning your calls for a few weeks? Isn't that the way normal people break up?"

"How can you joke about this?" Jon said angrily.

"Because if I can joke about it, maybe I can stop crying over it."

He softened a bit, realizing that she was hurting. "Iris, this doesn't make any sense. What are you not telling me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Something happened at that party that convinced you to break up with me."

"It was the whole experience. Seeing your world."

"That's not my world. That's just a piece of it. A piece that I, honestly, detest."

She looked at him sharply, and he guessed that she was finally going to come out with it.

"When I was sixteen," she said, "I made a promise to myself. That whenever I was in a relationship, there would be three rules. Three offenses for which I would give no second chances. One, no cheating."

"Okay."

"Two, no hitting me."

"Well, of course."

"And three, no drugs."

"Alright." He stared at her, expecting her to continue, but she just stared back at him. "And?"

"At the party, in the bathroom, there were people doing lines."

"Really? Todd would be pissed if he found out."

“I imagine it’s quite common... in your industry.”

Suddenly, it clicked together in his head. “Iris, do you think I do drugs?”

“You certainly have the means. The opportunity. The peer pressure.”

Jon shook his head. “I promise you, I don’t.” She looked skeptical, so he continued. “A long time ago, when Todd and I were first learning to play the guitar, one of our idols died from an overdose. We vowed that it would never happen to us. I admit, there have been times when people have offered stuff to me, and have tried to pressure me into taking it, but I will never break that promise to my brother.”

The look in Iris’s eyes changed from a hopeless acceptance of loss to something more like... admiration.

“You really love your brother, don’t you?”

“Of course. Todd can be an irresponsible lug head sometimes, but he’s always been there for me. I’m sure I wouldn’t be where I am today without him.”

Iris reached out and stroked her fingers down his cheek. “Do you really want to be dating me? A plain, frumpy nobody?”

“I would tell you how beautiful you are, but I don’t believe you seriously have a self-image problem.”

“But the women at that party were so glamorous. I wish I could be more like that, for you.”

“I don’t want you to be like those women. Did you try to hold a conversation with any of them?”

“Well, no. They didn’t look like they wanted to talk to me.”

“Women who spend all their time and energy on their appearance tend to atrophy in other areas. I need someone I can talk to. Someone I can laugh with.”

The smile that spread on Iris’s face warmed his heart. She was his again, he knew.

He hugged her, and she snuggled into his arms.

“I really do love you, Jon.”

“I know.” He sighed. “I wish this weekend wasn’t so short.”

“When can we get together again?”

“There’s some good news on that front. The band’s going to be in the studio starting in two weeks. No more touring for awhile. I’ll be able to see you every weekend. And we can IM each other every day.”

“That’s wonderful!”

“Yup. And maybe we can plan a weekend at Outer Banks, too.”

She hugged him again, and he nuzzled her hair. He didn’t want to ever let her go.

* * *

The next few months were the best in Iris’s life. While the band was in the studio, she saw Jon nearly every weekend. She knew it was too good to last.

As the recording sessions wrapped up, she started hearing from him less and less. A quick phone call here, an e-mail there. For three weekends in a row, one or both of them had things that kept them from visiting each other.

Iris decided that long-distance relationships sucked. And she realized, with a heavy heart, that once the band started touring again, that was all she and Jon were going to have.

* * *

Betty watched Iris stir her cold tea. Her friend’s eyes were vacant, and she knew her thoughts were elsewhere.

Betty had seen this before. Man problems.

“So, how’s Jon?” she asked innocently.

Iris jerked slightly as she came back to the world around her.

“Eh?”

“How are things with you and Jon?” Betty repeated.

“I don’t know,” Iris said miserably.

“Wasn’t he here last weekend?”

“Yes.”

“Did you two break up or something?”

“No.”

Betty resisted the urge to grind her teeth. Iris could be infuriating at times. Getting her to talk was like trying to bleed a stone. She tapped her finger on the table. Iris seemed to realize she was being difficult, and continued.

“He was acting kind of weird while he was here. Secretive. I had to do a business lunch on Saturday, and when I came home, I swear he smelled a little like... perfume.”

“You think he’s cheating on you?” Betty didn’t think Jon was the cheating type.

“No, but... I wouldn’t hold it against him if he found someone else. We hardly ever see each other anymore.”

“I thought you really loved him.”

“I do,” Iris said. “That’s why I just want him to be happy.”

* * *

The next day, Iris pulled the mail out of her box and was surprised to find an envelope from Jon.

She went up to her apartment and called his cell. “What’s this you sent me?” she asked.

“Open it,” he said.

She cut the envelope open and dumped its contents on her desk. It was a pair of tickets and backstage passes.

“They’re for the kick-off concert for the new tour,” Jon said excitedly. “This is going to be the biggest venue we’ve ever played! Look at who’s opening for us!”

Instead, Iris looked at the date. “Oh, Jon. I’m so sorry. I can’t go.”

“What? Why not?”

“I’m traveling to California that night. I have to present at a conference at eight the next morning.”

“Can’t you stop off along the way?”

“And what, sleep on the plane? I don’t think so.”

He sighed. “When can I see you again?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Send me your tour schedule and I’ll look at my work calendar.”

It was happening, she knew. They were drifting apart. This concert was important to him, and yet she couldn’t be there.

She knew she would have to let him go. She just hoped she was strong enough to do it.

* * *

“Todd, I need to talk to you,” Jon said, pulling his brother into an unoccupied room at the record label’s office.

“Sure, bro, what’s up?”

“How would you feel about me... quitting the band? Switching over to songwriting full-time?”

Todd crossed his arms. “I knew this would happen. It’s Iris, isn’t it?”

“I just know I’m going to lose her if I go on this tour.”

“So, what you’re telling me is I have to choose between a happy, productive songwriter or a miserable, mediocre guitar player.”

“I’m not a mediocre guitar player!” Jon snapped defensively.

Todd laughed. “Your guitar is certainly easier to replace than your songwriting. Truth is, I’ve already asked around and there are some guys who are interested. I’ll set up the auditions.”

“You knew I would quit?”

“Yeah. Singing the lyrics for those songs you’re writing is affecting me, I think. I just... I know what you have to lose.”

“Thanks, bro.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“Oh, hey, there’s something else,” Jon said. He pulled a ring box out of his pocket.

Todd stared into the box after Jon opened it. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Do you think she’ll like it? Is the diamond big enough?” Jon looked at the solitaire uncertainly. “I want it to be something she can wear all the time. What if she thinks it’s not big enough?”

His brother smiled and grasped his shoulders reassuringly. “She shouldn’t be saying yes or no based on the size of the rock.”

“True,” Jon chuckled.

“When did you pick that up?”

“Last time I went out to see Iris. She had a business lunch, so I swiped one of her rings and went to the jeweler to find out her ring size. A saleswoman who wears too much perfume talked me into looking over their diamonds, and I really took to this one.”

Todd shook his head. “You’re really serious.”

“Yeah.”

“Well,” Todd said. “Better you than me.”

Jon put the ring back in his pocket. He couldn’t wait to ask Iris. He’d take her out to dinner on the lake and propose to her in the moonlight.

If only he could find a day when he could see her...

* * *

The day of the concert, Iris was at work, finishing her presentation. She wished she hadn’t framed a picture of Jon for her desk. It was distracting. She picked it up and ran a finger over his image.

She wasn’t looking forward to the discussion they needed to have. But surely he would agree. It wasn’t like they were really seeing each other any more anyway. They hadn’t actually seen each other for days.

But she couldn’t picture her life without him.

Suddenly, Denise stepped into her cubicle.

“Hi,” Iris greeted. They were sharing a taxi to the airport. “I’ll be ready to go in a just a minute.”

Denise crossed her arms. “Tell me it isn’t true.”

“What?”

“Betty says you have backstage passes to Jon’s concert, but you’re not going to go.”

“I can’t go! We’ll be on a plane to California.”

“Exactly. We. You and I. On a plane that has a layover in Chicago, where Jon’s concert is.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Iris, don’t be an idiot. I can give the presentation!”

“But you have your own work to do...”

“I can reschedule the plant trip I was going to do. Come on, Iris. You have to get your priorities straight. Some things are more important than work.”

* * *

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” Iris said as she and Betty entered the stadium. “I’m blowing off a work trip! This is not like me.”

“You’re doing the right thing,” Betty reassured her. “You only live once!”

Plans had changed so fast, Iris hadn’t even had a chance to call Jon. She was going to surprise him backstage after the show.

It was a spectacular concert. The bands were hot, the crowd was pumped... it was just perfect.

Afterward, Iris and Betty made their way backstage with their all-access passes. It was so exciting. Iris had never been backstage at a concert before. They finally found the room with the band...

And Iris entered just in time to see Jon leaving out the other side with a beautiful woman: Tammy, his ex-girlfriend.

She froze in shock. The music, the people, the voices... everything faded out of existence for her.

She was startled back into her surroundings when Todd caught her elbow. “Hey there, gorgeous!”

“Todd, hey. Great show.”

“Thanks. I thought Jon said you wouldn’t be here.”

“I can’t stay. Please tell him I had to go.”

“What, you’re leaving already? But he really wants to see you. There’s something he wants to talk to you about.”

Iris’s heart froze. What could Jon want to talk to her about? She knew what it had to be. The same thing she wanted to talk to him about.

They were really over. Her last, fleeting hope that he would somehow talk her out of a break up evaporated.

He had left with Tammy. He was already moving on. Iris suddenly realized her presence made for an awkward situation.

An older gentleman stepped up to Todd and shook his hand. Iris could tell from Todd’s greeting that this was someone important, so she slipped away politely.

She didn’t belong in this world. She should never have come.

* * *

Jon was furious by the time he got back to the party. The nerve that Tammy had! Surprising him backstage and claiming she had something important to talk about.

It didn’t take long for him to realize that she was trying to get back together with him, and why. Her most recent boyfriend had dumped her, and she was looking for a replacement meal ticket.

He had told her, in no uncertain terms, that they were through.

Someone handed him a beer, which he took gratefully. He wasn’t in much of a party mood, now, but at least he could get drunk.

As he took a swig, he saw Todd making his way towards him. Jon could see something was wrong by his expression.

“Jon, she was here,” Todd said urgently.

“What?”

“Iris! I tried to talk to her until you got back, but – ”

“How long ago?” Jon asked. He couldn’t believe Iris had made it to the show!

“About ten minutes.”

“Did she say where she was going?”

Todd shook his head. “She just said she had to go.”

That was strange. Why would she – ?

Jon grabbed him with rising panic. “Did she see me leave with Tammy?”

“I think so.”

Jon scrambled for his phone and hit the speed dial. “Come on, Iris, pick up. Let me explain.” It went right to her voicemail, which meant her phone wasn’t even on. Cursing, he shoved the phone back in his pocket.

“Whoa, bro, calm down,” Todd said. “Just leave her a message.”

“You don’t understand,” Jon said. “Cheating is one of the three rules. Three unbreakable rules!”

“But you didn’t cheat on her.”

“Right now, she probably thinks I did! She’s somewhere out there, thinking we’re through. She’s probably not even going to return my calls.”

Damage control on this would definitely be easier if done sooner rather than later. He had to find her. But how? His eyes darted around the room until they fell on a familiar face... Betty, Iris’s best friend.

* * *

Sitting in the back of a taxi, Iris was so angry with herself. Why was she crying? Hadn’t she always known this thing with Jon wouldn’t last?

But the future felt empty and pointless. She missed him so much already.

The taxi pulled up to her hotel. She paid the driver and went to her room. She wished she had some tea.

Instead, she found her iPod and crawled into bed, with the covers over her head and Jon's songs in her ears.

Between the music and the tears, she almost didn't hear the knock on the door.

There was only one person it could be. Betty was the only one who knew where Iris was staying.

She went to the door and opened it, and was surprised to find Jon standing there.

His eyes went wide. "Iris, oh my God..."

Iris suddenly realized how she must look. She rubbed at her eyes desperately, knowing that she couldn't hide the redness. "Jon, hey, I didn't expect you," she said stupidly as he came in and shut the door. She tried to hide behind her hand.

He pulled it away so he could look her in the eyes. "Tammy just wanted to talk to me. Nothing happened, I swear."

To her horror, Iris started crying too hard to speak. She couldn't seem to make herself stop.

"You don't believe me," Jon said.

She shook her head, forcing herself to breathe, forcing the tears away. "I believe you, Jon." She saw his obvious disbelief, so she said, "I really do. You've never lied to me." Tears threatened to overwhelm her again. "You should go."

"You've got to be kidding."

"I don't want you to see me like this!"

"I'm not leaving."

She retreated from him to sit on the bed. He followed and sat next to her.

"If you believe me, why are you still upset?" he asked.

She looked up at him. She didn't want to say it, but she had to. "We're not working out, Jon. I can't be there for you. Our schedules..."

we're so busy... we hardly ever see each other. I think you should try to find someone more... suitable. Someone from your world."

"Iris, I'm quitting the band."

"What?" Iris was sure she hadn't heard that right.

"I'll still write songs for them, but I'm not going to keep touring with them."

Her eyes searched his. "But you can't... you can't abandon Todd."

"It's already done. I talked to him about it this morning. He can find a new guitarist."

Iris's head spun. Jon was quitting the band. He wasn't going on tour. He wanted... he wanted her.

She threw her arms around him so fiercely that she almost knocked him over. He hugged her back with equal strength.

She laughed and cried at the same time. "You must think I'm so stupid."

"No," he said reassuringly. "But next time you have doubts about us, I really want you to talk to me instead of running away."

She laughed. "Okay. I promise." And she kissed him, feeling for the first time in ages that everything was going to be alright.

* * *

The next morning, Jon was in the shower and Iris was packing.

After she had all her things away, she started cleaning the hotel room compulsively, straightening out pamphlets on the dresser and picking up Jon's clothes from the floor.

Something dropped out of his pocket. She laid his clothes over the back of a chair and bent to retrieve it.

It was a jeweler's ring box. She froze, unable to breathe. Could it be...?

The bathroom door opened and Jon emerged with a towel wrapped around his waist.

Realizing that it looked like she was going through his pockets, she straightened hastily and explained, “It must have fallen out, I was just picking up your clothes and I saw it on the floor and I was going to put it back, honestly.” She held it out to him.

He approached her with a slight smile and took the box. “Did you open it?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Do you want to?” he asked quietly.

What was it he was asking her? If she wanted to open the box, or...

“This wasn’t how I planned to ask,” he said. “But, honestly, I’m not sure I could’ve waited much longer anyway.”

His eyes were so beautiful, so deep. She was drowning in them. “Jon...”

“Iris, will you marry me?”

She didn’t have to consider her answer long. “Yes.” She threw her arms around him, overflowing with joy.

As her hands slid over the bare skin of his back, she noted, “You’re only wearing a towel.”

“True.”

“You should probably get dressed,” she said with an amused smile.

“Here, put the ring on first.” He looked at the box. “I forgot to open it! You haven’t even seen it yet. I hope it doesn’t make you change your answer...”

She laughed. “I don’t care if it’s a twist-tie. I still say yes.”

He opened the box.

She gasped. “It’s beautiful!”

He slipped it on her finger. “It’s not too small?”

She wiggled her finger. “It fits perfectly.”

“I meant the diamond.”

She laughed again. “No, it’s not too small. I’d rather have a solid retirement account than a rock that’s too big to wear.”

He grinned. “I love you.”

“I should probably warn you though, that I made a promise to myself that once I become a millionaire, I’m going to buy a Corvette.”

His jaw dropped. “Oh, I *really* love you.”

He swept her up in his arms and smothered her with kisses. She giggled. “You’re still wearing a towel.”

“Yeah. We should fix that.”

He threw the towel aside and carried her, still giggling, to the bed.

He laid her down and stroked her hair. His expression turned serious. “It’s hard to explain, but... I feel like I’m finally on the right road,” he said.

“Yeah,” she replied. “I know exactly what you mean.”

Already Fallen

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