

Heartbreak Alley

His favorite guitar pick. Six years, four albums, two headlining world tours; I'd loved him through it all. But the only thing he'd loved was the music, and the pick he used to make it. So when I left, I took it. I figured it was owed to me. A small part of me hoped that the theft would lead him to call. But what would that conversation even contain? I mean, what else was there to say? The rhythmic clack-clack noise of the train as it rumbled down the tracks was the soundtrack to my thoughts. There were faster trains now—sleek, silver bullet-like tubes that sped down these tracks at 100+ miles an hour; newer models that shaved hours off of travel time. But I liked the traditional trains. I didn't see the need for speed; I'd never needed to get anywhere that fast... except maybe out of our—I mean, his house. I'd definitely packed with the speed of that slick, silver bullet of a train; I had to get out the door to have any chance of staying away. I knew from experience that it was much easier to convince me not to go than it was to beg me to come back. And I knew this time I'd have to find a way to make him leave me alone... for good. I'd have to find a way to make him not want me anymore, because as long as he wanted me, there was a chance. I wasn't counting on me not wanting him, because I knew that would never happen. He was all I wanted; all I'd ever wanted. That wasn't going to change, even if he was everything I didn't need.

Six Years Earlier

I watched him for two months before I finally spoke to him. Two months of sitting in a corner booth, pretending not to listen to him, giving half-hearted applause as he and his guitar left the stage. He played for the women who fawned over him; he played for the attention they

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gave. He left with a different woman every night of that two months. I left alone, and dreamt of him. As sure as I was that no one could love him the way I could, I was just as sure that I didn't want to be one of the women he left with at the end of the night. I didn't want to be one... because those women never returned. They never came back to the club to watch him, which they certainly would do if he belonged to them. This led me to the conclusion that he belonged to no one. That made me even more determined not to be one of the misguided women who gave him attention, who fawned over his angelic voice and strong fingers strumming over guitar strings.

The night we finally spoke, I was running late, and trying desperately not to lose my perfect, inconspicuous seat. I burst through the door of the club, waved at the bouncer and headed toward my corner. Our crash was the result of neither of us looking straight ahead. The force threw us away from each other and I dropped my handbag. He picked it up and handed it back, staring at me intently.

"Hello." He spoke. I licked my lips and smiled hesitantly.

"Hello." I spoke back.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, thanks. Don't worry about it,"

"Too late, I'm worried. What's your name?" he asked, smiling back.

"Cassandra. I'm Cassandra... or Cassie,"

"Nice to meet you, Cassie. I'm--"

"I know. You're Aaron Mathis." I interrupted. His smile got bigger. My knees got weak.

“Well that answers my question about whether you've been here before. Where were you headed to so fast?”

“To that corner booth in the back. It seems like a quiet spot.” I replied to his question. I didn't want to let on that I sat there nearly every night, watched and fantasized about him. Suddenly he grabbed my arm gently and started steering me toward the stage.

“But if you came here to hear some good music, you should sit up front. So it can really touch you,” He insisted. I walked with him, too thrilled by the idea of him touching me to protest. He stopped at a table near the stage, smack in the center of the room. He smiled at me.

“If you're sitting here, I can sing right to you. Enjoy the show, Cassie.” He finished and disappeared into the crowd. I sat down at the table, both confused and mesmerized. When the show started, I tried to affect my same air of nonchalance, but it was hard with him right in front of me, and sometimes looking into my eyes.

I watched his entire set, completely mesmerized. I was so afraid to look into his eyes, but so afraid to look away. I had no idea what my next move was going to be, or how I was going to avoid being the woman he left with that night. I had a sliver of hope that maybe he wouldn't want me, that maybe one of the others fawning over him had caught his attention. But when he came to sit with me between sets, I knew that hope was lost. We didn't even talk during the break. We just sat next to each other, drinking, and occasionally letting our eyes speak the heat our bodies felt. It was both exhilarating and scary that a part of me felt a complete loss of control.

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When his second set was done, he took a bow, and left the stage, guitar in tow. He came right to the table and held out his hand. I placed mine in his and was pulled from my seat. I grabbed my handbag and started to leave with him, just as I had seen other women do, just as I had always wished I could. When we got outside, he turned to me.

"Did you drive here, Cassie?" I nodded. He smiled.

"Then I need you to show me your car, love," he continued in an amused voice. I smiled sheepishly.

"Oh right. I'm sorry. It's the little red Honda about halfway up the block on this side," I replied. He nodded and started up the block, tugging me along with him. When we reached my car, I unlocked the doors and threw my handbag in the back seat. He took the keys from my hand.

"I'm driving to my place. Is that okay?" he asked. I nodded and got into the passenger seat. He jogged around to the driver's side, threw his guitar into the backseat with my handbag, and got into the car. He put the key into the ignition and turned to me. I faced him also, staring into those dark brown eyes. He leaned forward, and our lips connected. I opened my mouth, his tongue slipped inside and I sighed with pleasure. I could feel my body heating up and I reached for him, wanting to be closer. He pulled back, rubbing my arms.

"I'll hurry." he whispered, the lust evident in his voice. I nodded and sat back in the seat. I had a sad thought that I had become one of them, which would probably make this my last night at the club. But then he placed his hand on my thigh... and I pushed that thought away.

Present Day

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The train pulled into a station, the metal on metal making a screeching noise and the rolling countryside coming to a halt. I remained in my seat, still reminiscing. This wasn't my stop, because it wasn't the last stop. I was going all the way to the end, in an effort to put as many miles between us as possible. I watched through the window as a girl hopped down from the train and ran into a man's arms. He wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her hair. He looked so relieved, as though he'd been afraid she wasn't coming, as if he were afraid to lose her. Aaron's never been afraid to lose me. He's always had complete confidence that I wasn't going anywhere. In his defense, I was pretty easy to read. My love for him, my obsession with him, was glistening on my skin, shining in my eyes. Why would anyone think I'd ever leave him? I had a hard time believing I was doing it myself.

Six Years Earlier

After our night together, I never expected to see Aaron again. I woke up in his bed, deliciously sore and sated, but completely uncertain. I looked over at his sleeping face and felt a wave of sadness, because I knew I'd never go to the club again, I'd never hear his guitar again. There was no way I could watch him leave with another woman night after night. I'd become the girls I'd watched for those two months... and I had no one to blame but myself. I woke him as I tried to sneak out of bed.

"Cassie... where you going?" he rumbled, his voice full of sleep. I turned around, looking sheepish.

"I was going to leave. I thought... you might want your privacy," I answered, my voice soft and scared. To my surprise, he smiled. His hand reached out and grabbed my arm, pulling

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me back into bed. I tumbled into his arms, our faces inches apart. Aaron leaned in and kissed me. I clung to him.

“What I want... is *more*, Cassie. You hear me? I want more...” he whispered and started making love to me again. After that, he made me breakfast, and let me watch while he prepared his set for the club that night. I had no idea why he was clinging to me, but it made me nervous. I mean, I was expecting the let-down, the prepared speech, the “I’ll call you,” where he never actually calls. I was expecting... disappointment. But it didn’t happen. Every time I even mentioned leaving, he invaded my space with his body and smile, and my clothing disappeared. We spent the entire day together. When it was time for him to go to the club, he insisted on going with me to my house and waiting while I changed. When I finished, I came out to show him my outfit. He made love to me urgently, in my living room, as though he couldn’t help himself. He was 45 minutes late that night. And I was in front, center table, two nights in a row.

Present Day

The train started moving again, the slow chug and creak graduating to full speed. I watched the scenery as I remembered the beginning of our relationship. We were inseparable after that night—and I hadn’t a clue how it happened. I went to work during the day, I was at the club listening to Aaron sing to me every night, and then he took me to his apartment, where we laughed and made love until we were tired. I was there two months later, when the talent scout introduced himself after Aaron’s set and offered to make him famous. Aaron signed up for the ride with no hesitation, and took me with him.

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I had no idea how to be a musician's girlfriend. But I didn't want anything as badly as I wanted Aaron, so I learned. I learned how to soothe his ego, how to make him comfortable, what environments fostered his creativity. I learned when to speak up for him, and when to let him speak up for himself. I learned when it was okay to be jealous and when I looked like a "nag." And I learned that my complete obsession with him, my desire to be branded by him, mind and body... wasn't exclusive. I learned that I was one of so, so many. And during the first year, I was reminded over and over again how lucky I was to be chosen, and how easily I could be replaced. All I wanted was to make myself indispensable, irreplaceable. And because back then, Aaron loved me too... he gave me a way.

Five Years Earlier

"That's it Cass. I've had it with Frankie and his fucking attitude. I made that man a shit load of money. He can't treat me like this!"

"Calm down, baby. I'm sure Frankie will call you soon. You two always work it out," I soothed my man and rubbed the tightness from his neck. Aaron was home from a small tour, and I'd get three whole weeks with him (between studio recordings) before he left again. I was used to the venting sessions by this time. He always needed a drink and a gripe session before sex. He told me that he liked to talk out all of his angst about the road, and the music before we reconnected physically. He'd always said that when we got physical he wanted "nothing but our love between us," and that I deserved better than "sex filled with frustration and anxiety." So this was our routine.

“Nah, fuck him baby. I’m done letting him lead me around by the nose. He completely dropped the ball with the last three venues and my money was held up. If he wasn’t so busy trying to bone background singers he’d be able to concentrate on his job,” Aaron said. I nodded in support and rubbed his shoulders harder.

“Okay baby. So what do you want to do? Fire Frankie?”

“Yes. That’s what I want to do,” he replied. I leaned down and kissed his neck.

“Then that’s what we’ll do. We’ll get you someone better. We can look over your contract with him tomorrow and figure out what you have to do to get rid of him,” I said. I started rubbing his shoulders again. Suddenly, Aaron reached up and stilled my hands with his own. He turned to face me, his eyes shining with love. I smiled at him patiently.

“You can do it, Cass. You can be my manager,” he said. My smile faded fast and I shook my head.

“Oh no. NO. Aaron, I don’t know the first thing about-“

“So you can learn, Cassie. I mean, who better to look out for my interests than you? Nobody loves me like you, Cass. Come on, baby. And this way, you can come be with me. Sleep with me at night. I can make you omelets every morning. Please?”

“Oh baby. You know being with you is all I want. And I do love you. But this is your career. I don’t want to mess it up,” I explained. Aaron stood up and came around the chair to take me in his arms. He kissed me passionately, urgently, making me cling to him. When he lifted his head, we were both equally breathless.

“You won’t mess it up. You’re smart, and capable. And you already have the business background. You just need to learn the music industry stuff. Quit that job you hate, be my manager, and come away with me, Cassandra. This is meant to be.” Aaron finished and started kissing me again. The next morning, Frankie was fired, and I was introducing myself to the engineer at the studio as Aaron Mathis’ manager. I’d wanted to be indispensable. And my love had found a way.

Present Day

The conductor opened the door and began walking through the car, checking tickets. They did this every couple of stops to make sure they captured all the paying customers. I held up my ticket, the conductor nodded and moved on, and I was alone with my thoughts once again. Learning the music business had been exciting and wonderful for me. I’d done it to make Aaron happy, but found that I had a knack for it. So much so, that after six months of managing Aaron, I was getting offers from other up-and-comers to manage them. Aaron wanted me to focus on him so I turned them all down, but a part of me was flattered that my hard work was being noticed. I was taken from my thoughts as a girl sat in the seat across from me. She was beautiful, with her dark chocolate skin, full lips, and almond shaped eyes. Her hair was cut short and colored a wonderful shade of red. She smiled in greeting and I smiled in return, but I couldn’t stop staring. She reminded me of one of Aaron’s early backup singers. She’d been one of the most talented... and one of many that he’d slept with behind my back.

Four Years Earlier

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In all honesty, Aaron had probably been cheating from the beginning, but it wasn't until I had a full year in of being his manager/ girlfriend that I really became aware of it. I think it was because by that time, I had taken over most of the hiring and firing for the band that traveled with us, and the backup singers and dancers. Plus, I was backstage at every show. I was able to see how women threw themselves at him indiscriminately, and with no regard for me whatsoever. I was also able to see how Aaron never did anything to stop their advances. He couldn't even hold my hand at a party without some woman coming over to smile in his face and touch him; women who were dying to prove they were capable of taking his attention away from me. And he never did anything about it. Rehearsals were filled with flirting and innuendo and I couldn't react without everyone looking at me like some evil shrew who wanted to ruin the party. At night, our bedroom turned into a den of arguing and sex, as his actions incited my jealousy, which incited my anger, and my anger incited his passion. He made me forgive him with his hands and mouth, promised me it meant nothing, and begged me to ignore it. I tried, told myself it didn't mean anything, but the more it happened without any intervention from Aaron, the more I was convinced that he welcomed it, that he encouraged it. But I didn't have any proof, and I didn't know what to do.

Aaron's first album had gone gold, and we were nearly done with the second. Aaron was writing like crazy, his energy and creativity so high I swore he was on something. But he just kept saying that I was the best muse he could ever ask for and that he was only high on life. The performance schedule took us back home for the last two nights, and I thought it was the perfect opportunity to see my parents. I stopped by with lots of goodies, including tickets for

the show that night and then headed back to the theater, to help Aaron get ready. I walked into his dressing room just in time to see Mira, the most flagrant and flirty of our three backup singers, rising from where she kneeled in front of my man and wiping her mouth. Aaron was sitting on the sofa with his eyes closed, pants open, a smile of satisfaction on his face.

“I guess I know why you didn’t want to go to my mother’s with me,” I said, startling them. Mira spun around and looked at me, her mouth open in shock. Aaron sat straight up and opened his eyes, grappling with his pants.

“Cass, baby listen. It’s not what-“ Aaron started but I interrupted.

“Mira, you need to get dressed. The show starts in 20,” I addressed her without looking at her and she scampered out of the room without looking at me. I took a deep breath and clenched my fists. I wanted to scream, and strangle them both, but I put my mind in manager mode. This was an important show, and the venue owners would not appreciate us making a scene.

“How long has this been going on? How long has she been giggling behind my back? How could you do this, Aaron?”

“Cassie, it didn’t mean anything. I just—I got caught up in the moment—look, I’m sorry. But I love you. She doesn’t mean anything to me,” he insisted.

“I don’t believe that. I mean, I always suspected... but to see it, to know that you’ve been lying to me... there’s been a lot of them, hasn’t it? The whole time, right? Two years of making me feel like I won some prize, like I was special. They’ve been there, all that time.” By

this time, I was crying and Aaron stared at me, looking miserable. He started towards me and I held up my hand.

“Don’t touch me. I don’t want you near me right now. Just... get dressed. The show starts in 15 minutes.” I told him and left the room. I spent the next ten minutes outside in the limo, crying. I wiped my face and went back in, joined the band in prayer and posted up backstage in my regular spot. Aaron was great, as usual, but I was barely paying attention. After the show, Aaron and I got into our limo and headed home. We didn’t speak, and I moved every time he got close until he finally got the hint and stopped trying to touch me. Since it was our hometown, I insisted we keep a place there, a home base so to speak. When we got there, I went into our bedroom and started to pack. Aaron saw me and came running in.

“Cass, you can’t leave me. Please. I can’t be without you. Baby, I’m sorry,” he said.

“I can still be your manager, Aaron. I can still make you money, and help you create. But I can’t be your lover, your woman. Not anymore. You’re not who I thought you were and I need to take my heart back now while I still can,” I said back.

“I’m not going to let you leave me, Cass. I’m not. I’ll die without you. I need you as my lover, as the woman in my life. I can’t have you just being my manager.”

“Aaron, what do you want from me? Am I supposed to just accept this? Am I supposed to forgive and forget? How are we supposed to go on?” I was screaming at him, tears running down my face. Aaron dropped to his knees, his hands raised in supplication.

“Cassie, I never meant to hurt you. And I’ll never do it again. Please baby, please give me another chance,” he begged. I sat on the bed, still crying, exhausted.

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“I’ve been telling you for months how flirty she is, and how uncomfortable it makes me. You brushed off my concern, you defended her, you SWORE I didn’t have anything to worry about! And she’s been... you’ve been...” I couldn’t go on because I was sobbing. Now that the show was over and we’d played nice for the cameras, I was free to let my heart break. Aaron got up and sat on the bed next to me. He reached for me tentatively, and when I didn’t back away, took me in his arms. He apologized over and over, and rocked me gently. I cried for an hour. Then he made love to me all night.

After the following night’s performance, Aaron spent the next week holed up in the studio finishing the album. He wanted me there every day, which made Mira angry and petulant. After the album was mixed to perfection, he announced that we needed a break. He dismissed the band for a month, rented a secluded villa in St. Croix, and we took off. It was a perfect month. But that’s all it was.

Present Day

The train continued on its journey, hills rolling by as I looked out of the window. But my mind was firmly in the past; I didn’t see any of the scenery. The worse part of finding out about Mira was that I didn’t even get the satisfaction of firing her. Aaron told me I could, but since he’d had sex with her I couldn’t take the chance that she’d sue us for wrongful termination or sexual harassment. I ended up reaching out to one of my contacts who worked with a very successful R&B singer. He owed me a favor and I asked him to offer Mira a job, hoping she’d see the bigger payoff and quit. It worked. We never saw her again after the second album was done. I always had this fear she’d reappear with a paternity suit or something crazy. I did want

to know what Aaron would be like as a father, but not that way. I touched my stomach gently in remembrance. I'd come home from St. Croix pregnant, but lost the baby a couple of months later, when we started the promotional tour for the second album. Aaron promised me we could try again, that we'd have a house full of them if that's what I wanted, but I was still devastated.

"You're Cass Masterson, aren't you?" the dark skinned beauty across from me finally spoke. I looked up, startled. It wasn't often that anyone recognized me. Aaron was the only star in our show, everyone knew that.

"Yes. I am," I answered her. Her face lit up and she unleashed a wonderful smile.

"I'm a big fan of Aaron Mathis. You've been doing an awesome job as his manager."

"Thank you. People don't usually recognize me... or compliment me," I said, smiling back.

"I saw his last press conference. Is it true that *Heartbreak Alley* is his last album? And that you guys are going to settle down after this and start a family?" the girl asked. I sighed. Aaron had told me that three weeks ago, when I told him that I was tired of being his doormat. I said he was full of shit, and only telling me what he thought I wanted to hear, so to prove me wrong, he announced it to the world at his press conference two weeks later. That was when I decided to take the guitar pick. Playing with my emotions in front of the world was a special kind of cruelty and I didn't sign up for that. The irony in his statement is that he'd started a family already. He'd just done it without me.

Three Years Earlier

“A paternity suit? How much of this shit am I supposed to take, Aaron? You know, I thought you’d changed. You *promised*, Aaron! I ignored the late nights, and the drinking, and the women you always deny. I ignored all of that shit. And what did I get for all my fucking ignorance? A dancer, threatening to tell the world that she’s having your baby. I just—I can’t do this anymore,” I yelled at him as we stood in the living room. We’d graduated to a house, since the second album had gone platinum. Aaron had headlined his first tour and we’d thought it be cute to start and end in our hometown. So on the day of the last performance, a clerk had come to serve him papers, papers that said that Fatimah Cross, a dancer we’d employed for a short time at the beginning of the tour, was pregnant and had named Aaron as the father.

“Cassie, baby, I don’t know how this happened. I mean, she’s lying. I don’t know what else to say.”

“I only need you to say one thing, and I know you can’t say it. All I need is for you to tell me this is impossible because you didn’t sleep with her. But you can’t tell me that, can you Aaron? You can’t say that,” I said. Aaron sighed and turned away. I started to cry, though by this time it was a wonder I had any tears left. The previous year had been one big emotional wreck. I’d packed my stuff over and over, threatened to leave over and over, and he’d begged me not to go... over and over. But this? A baby? How in the world were we supposed to work this out?

“I’ll call the lawyers tomorrow; they can schedule a paternity test for you. I’ll meet you at the theater.” I said and left the room. I had to get on the phone with Aaron’s publicist, so we could figure out how to keep this as quiet as possible. I found myself being relieved that the

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news was coming out at the end of the tour. If it had been six months before, this would have been the main story, and no one would have focused on the album.

I left our house, and rented my own. Aaron begged me to come home every day, but I just didn't have it in me anymore. He used his anger and frustration and sadness to his advantage and started working on the third album. He didn't fire me, and I didn't quit, but he started giving me the cold shoulder whenever I came to check on him. In defiance, I took on two new clients and stopped being so available. He was furious, and started coming to my house every night demanding an explanation. It was dangerous, because we would have screaming matches that turned into wild, frenzied, sex. I still loved him. I was still completely in love. But that love definitely wasn't enough.

Four months after I left, Fatimah Cross gave birth to a son that she named Aaron Everett Mathis, Jr (AJ). And even though she loved the lifestyle in which Aaron was keeping her, she wanted to go back to dancing. So I encouraged Aaron to hire a nanny and file for custody. He did as I suggested and a month after he was awarded custody, bought me an engagement ring. He came to my house on his knees, told me that the only way AJ would ever have brothers and sisters is if they were mine. He told me fatherhood had changed him. And I loved him, so I believed.

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The train rumbled into another station. The girl got off, after begging me for my email address so she could send me her resume. She'd love to be my intern, she said. I picked up my phone and pressed the button to wake it up. My cover screen was a photo of AJ, smiling and

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handsome. He looked so much like his father I sighed when I looked at him. He was a happy little boy, full of joy and innocence. He was usually with Aaron and me and Skyped his mother every day. He called me his “Mama Cass,” and loved peanut butter sandwiches. He was the one thing I regretted leaving. I’d cried in his room for an hour before I left and made sure to write him a note. I felt cruel leaving him behind, but I needed a break from his father. My love for Aaron was killing me, and I had to figure out a way to stop it.

Needless to say, fatherhood hadn’t really changed Aaron at all. He was still arrogant and uncaring about anyone but himself. There were still lies, and other women. His third album went platinum just like the second and he headlined another tour. But since he wasn’t my only client anymore, I didn’t go to every city with him like I used to. Aaron hated that, hated that I wasn’t at his beck and call. And sometimes I would give in, and catch a red eye to whatever city he was in so that he could sleep with me in his arms. I was tired, but he never noticed, or cared. My engagement ring might as well have been a decoration because he never mentioned the wedding again after he put it on my finger. When I asked him about us having our own baby, he yelled at me about how selfish I was, and told me that AJ was all he could handle. So I stopped bringing it up. We still argued, and had our frenzied sex, but it was pretty evident that Aaron couldn’t bring himself to care about me or my needs unless I was threatening to walk out the door.

When the tour ended and it was time to record the fourth album, Aaron told me he needed time to clear his head. He holed up in a rented house in Boston; he had a close friend there with a studio. He told me not to come and see him, said that I should focus on my other

clients. He'd taken the nanny and AJ with him, so it was just me in our big house, alone. I found out later that he'd had a woman staying there as well. He denied it, of course, but I knew it was true. I didn't have solid proof so I didn't press the issue. I just felt another piece of my heart dying slowly.

On AJ's second birthday, we gave him a party. Aaron held him up in front of everyone and made a speech about how AJ and the music were all that mattered to him in the world. I was livid. All my love and care and he couldn't even acknowledge me? When I confronted him about it, he fed me that bullshit promise about us settling down and starting a family. The press conference was two weeks later. I packed my bags the next day. I'd given him every single thing I had, and all I'd gotten in return was lies and empty promises.

"Last stop, next!" the conductor yelled as he came through the car for the last time. I opened my handbag and removed the guitar pick. His favorite guitar pick. Six years, four albums, two headlining world tours; I'd loved him through it all. But the only thing he'd loved was the music, and the pick he used to make it. I wonder if he'll miss me at all. If I hadn't taken it, I wonder how long it would have taken him to notice I was gone. The train started to slow and I felt myself getting nervous. What if he was there? What if he begged? What if I couldn't resist... again? Or worse yet—what if he wasn't there? What if he let me go? I was prepared to walk away, but I wasn't prepared for him to let me, because he never had before. The train rumbled and screeched to a stop. I gathered my things and headed to the exit. When I got to the platform, he wasn't there. I went inside the station and sat down on a bench. I really wanted to find a hotel, order room service and cry. But I couldn't make myself move. I sat on

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that bench for three hours, watching people and trains come and go, hoping he'd come but hoping he wouldn't. And then I got up, found a hotel, ordered room service, and cried. But I didn't call him. And he didn't call me. That was torture at first. But eventually, it got easier. My heart healed. But a part of me never stopped loving him.

Heartbreak Alley, Aaron Mathis' fourth studio album, went triple platinum. But he never toured for it, or made another one. He and his son AJ left the limelight behind and settled down in a remote location. When asked why he wouldn't record anymore, Aaron would only say he'd lost his muse. I never knew if it was me or the guitar pick. Secretly, I hoped it was me.