

# Without You

By Del James

Although he wanted to share the dance, Mayne could not bring himself to interrupt such beauty. Her well-toned body swayed childlike, peacefully, slowly moving to the rhythm. Her innocence was enchanting, her beauty breathtaking. Mayne knew she'd be angry at him for sneaking about, watching without letting her know, but the teenage voyeur inside his adult body encouraged him and didn't care about the consequences. Besides, this was for his eyes only. Her eyes sparkled, reminding him of the ocean, vast with beauty and mystery. A slight breeze danced through her lion's mane. A full-length see-through dress covered her shapely body and a light glaze of sweat made her glisten. She seemed too beautiful to be real. During this split second of visual euphoria, Mayne conceded that she was the only woman he ever truly loved. Her eyes flickered. She must have heard me, he thought as she turned toward him. He didn't want to ruin the beauty, only to enjoy it. Her thick lips smiled sympathetically. Then the song started growing in volume.

A sharp twinge of panic shot through him when he realized which of his songs it was. Cold sweat seeped out of his pores and dread consumed him. His vision spiraled as reality distorted. Breathing became difficult, complicated. Desperation attacked and twisted every muscle in his thin body. Much worse than the pain was his fear. Unsuppressable anxiety swept through him as he started toward the stereo. Everything lost its natural texture; the walls, the floor, the air became surreal. The louder the music, the more difficult he found it to move. He had to remove the compact disc but his feet felt like large concrete blocks. He couldn't move fast enough. She already had the pistol's barrel against her temple.

BLAMM!

Mayne awoke covered in sweat, a mute shriek still lodged in his throat. The past six hours had been spent in a drug-and-alcohol-induced coma that he put over as sleep. Sleep was a rare commodity and was impossible to achieve without some assistance. It didn't matter whether he slept six hours or six minutes, the nightmare always managed to creep in. No sleeping pill or antidepressant could spare him. He had written the song and was forever damned by it. With unsteady hands, he wiped sweat from his brow and rubbed his fingers against the satin sheets. His silver and gold bracelets clinked together. Rolling onto his side, he stared at the digital alarm clock on top of the black night table that had a built-in refrigerator as its base. On top of the clock was a half-empty pack of Marlboros. He stared at the green digital numbers but they made no sense. It really didn't matter what time it was anyway, his time was other people's money. Next to the clock was something more important than cash or time. Slowly he sat up. Tortured eyes scanned the black marble tabletop, searching for any leftover precious brown powder. There were burned matches, bent cigarettes, and empty bindles, but no dope. It didn't matter. He could always have more delivered. Sitting on the edge of the bed, Mayne reached down and opened the night table's refrigerator door. Inside were several Budweiser's, baking soda, and a chilled bottle of Dom Perignon. He grabbed a cold can, killing half of it in one sip. He did this every morning. Instantly, his aching head began to feel better. Although he didn't want to admit it, the time had arrived to rejoin the living. He knew he had to be at the studio soon but didn't feel up to it. Besides, the recording of his latest album, *Alone*, had been finished over a month ago. The album was now in the final mixing stages. If Mayne liked what he heard, he'd approve it and the record would be released on schedule. If not, it would have to be remixed until he did approve. So then, what the @!#\$ did they need him for? He procrastinated for as long as he possibly could before finally standing up.

Much like his bedroom, the bathroom was a disaster area. Discarded clothes, creams, trash, cassettes, and towels dominated the view. Using radar to locate the bowl, he found the porcelain, fought off the urge to puke, and relieved himself. He reentered the bedroom, not really feeling human, more like a robot dressed in rented flesh. There was a dull pain in his abdomen that he'd grown accustomed to. It, like many other flaws in his health, could be attributed to his excessive life-style. Besides his jewelry, Mayne only wore Jockey briefs. He stumbled over to his dresser, removed a pair of custom-tailored black leather

pants, and changed. He found a dark purple silk kimono hanging in a walk in closet and put it on. In a dresser drawer was a gram vial of cocaine. Scooping with the long fingernail on his right pinkie, the tattered musician snorted eight blasts of rock 'n' roll aspirin. The kimono felt cool against his warm flesh. He wondered if he was feverish and concluded he probably was. He was always run down, as if with a perpetual fever. That is, of course, until he got his chip. He finished his beer, tossing the empty can in the general direction of a wastebasket that was already crammed with empties. Staring into a full-length mirror, the run-down recluse didn't recognize the reflection. Sure, the long blond hair and tattoos gave him away, but he looked so frail. Mayne looked like someone who was ready for hospital pajamas. His once attractive face was blue, taut, and expressionless. A scraggly beard covered his chin and his emerald eyes were no longer authentic gems, but rather costume jewelry. He needed a drink.

For the past fourteen of his twenty-eight years, he'd spent the majority of his time inside a bottle. Teenage beer and wine parties turned to vodka and rum at nightclubs, which in turn evolved into straight whiskey. Exiting the bedroom, he said a silent prayer to his patron saint, Jim Beam, asking that there be some in the liquor cabinet. An illuminating golden glow surrounded the thick blackout curtains. A small war had gone down in the living room the previous evening. Full ashtrays, assorted liquor bottles, empty and half-empty packs of cigarettes, and beer cans were strewn everywhere. Several CD covers were caked in cocaine residue. Mayne tried remembering who had been partying there and couldn't. An empty pack of Kool cigarettes meant that one of his many dealers, Jamie Jazz had delivered something. It didn't take very long before he made the connection between the empty bindles in the bedroom and Jamie. Jamie (pronounced Jay-mee) was typical Hollywood trash who hand delivered coke, toke, crack, or smack to troubled celebrities, exploiting their vulnerabilities. Mayne searched for more clues as to who else had been over partying but came up blank. He slid behind the bar that was adjacent to the kitchen and opened a cabinet. There were several unopened bottles of assorted white liquors. A nervous surge shot through his small stomach. What if there was no whiskey? He shuffled the bottles around until he found the proper one. A sigh of relief escaped him as he twisted the cap off and made a mental note that he needed to restock. The whiskey's aroma was his equivalent of fresh brewed coffee. "Here's looking at you, love," Mayne said aloud, raising the bottle to his lips.

Like every day, one sip led to another. After several sips, he started feeling right. He put the bottle on the counter and made it to the refrigerator. If he was lucky, he'd be drunk before the day started. He removed another Budweiser and went back into the messy living room. There was a dull hum inside his cranium. He couldn't differentiate whether it was cocaine-induced or the central air-conditioning. If only he could remember what day today was, then he'd know if a maid was scheduled to come by. She could bring booze. The musician sat on the couch, picked up the phone, and dialed 411.

"Operator. What city, please?"

"L.A."

"Yes?"

"What day is it? Mayne asked sincerely, lighting a Marlboro.

"What?"

"What day is it?"

"Sir, I'm an operator."

"Ma'am, you're Information and I asked you a question," Mayne corrected her. A snide laugh escaped him. After a silent moment, she answered his question.

"It's Wednesday, sir."

"Thanks," he said, and hung up. There would be no maid service today. This was not the way he wanted to start the day. He polished off the beer, finished his cigarette, and snorted more cocaine. After several confusing seconds, he remembered where he kept the large green garbage bags and began straightening up the mess. Moving around the large one-bedroom condominium, he picked up anything that wasn't bolted down and threw it out. Bottles and empty food containers stretched the garbage bag to a point where it threatened to rip open. After ten minutes of straightening up, the apartment began taking shape. Besides this condominium, he also owned one in Manhattan and another in Houston. He rarely frequented his Hollywood Hills mansion, or for that matter, his house in Maui. Both brought back too many memories of her. It was in the Hollywood Hills house where he and Elizabeth Aston had spent most

of their quality time. As his thoughts began betraying him, thinking more about her, Mayne instinctively went to the bar and retrieved the whiskey bottle. He could think of her as long as he had a safety net. With all the money, fame, and success he had attained, it was the simple things like friendship and love that were the hardest to keep. He never meant to hurt anyone, especially those closest to him, but for some reason that's who he usually hurt the worst. He never set out to be malicious, but by living under a microscope with the world scrutinizing him, any wrongdoing, public or private, tended to blow up in his face and often wound up as Nightly News. Personal flaws and @!#\$-ups are not allowed of the elite. He often suffered silently, trapped by his own fame, until he needed out of his cage. But the cage was as wide as his eyes could perceive. All Mayne had ever tried to be, right or wrong, was himself. With all the doctors, specialists, therapists, fans, and everyone in his organization trying to help him, he just sank further into his cocoon, alienating himself even more. He often wondered who he really was. Was he another regenerated social security number automatically inherited at birth or a genuine reflection of society? Was he a phenomenon or just a facade? Was he a product of his own imagination or just another brick? Would he ever understand his own destiny?

Inside his mind, he analyzed why his relationship with Elizabeth had failed more times than were countable. Like the scholar he wasn't, he dissected situations, pondered things he should've said and shouldn't have been caught doing. When it came to sex, why couldn't Elizabeth understand that just because he occasionally strayed from their bedroom didn't mean he didn't love her? Sex was like role-playing. He never forced her to be monogamous but deep down he knew that if he found out she was fucking someone else it would have hurt. A lot! Even with that knowledge, he couldn't confine himself to only one woman. He wanted to have his cake and eat it too. He tried being open with her but concluded that certain things should've remained secret. Sex was an ego addiction similar to the one felt onstage. Different audiences, like different partners, were more challenging and made him work harder for the applause. Like drugs, he was addicted to the rush. Even with an empire at his disposal, money couldn't buy him love, nor happiness, nor peace of mind. Nor Elizabeth. Looking around the large living room, a very disenchanted artist absorbed the modern decor. None of these possessions except a few token items had ever meant anything to Mayne. None of this @!#\$ was real. He was surrounded by trophies of a game that had no meaning. And he was tired of playing games.

A sharp pain in his left ear sent him back to the dark corridor that led from stage to dressing room. Inside his ringing head, speakers feeding back ignited and exploded. He was experiencing another rock 'n' roll side effect, ear damage. The dull hum lasted only seconds but the memories of his final show with his former band, Suicide Shift, would never fade. For reasons he couldn't remember, Elizabeth had been unable to attend the tour's final show. The band had been on the road for the better part of fourteen months, over 285 concerts. Every few weeks Mayne had flown her to whatever city he was performing in and she'd stay for a few nights. The final concert of any tour is an important night. It was Suicide Shift's first headlining tour and Mayne wanted to share the experience with her. It was the culmination of many miles traveled, many hours worked, and the celebration that went on afterward was well deserved. He called her several times to offer her plane tickets, trying to persuade her, but she couldn't make it.

The gig was well over two hours of electric ferocity. Of course Mayne consumed plenty of drugs and alcohol before and during the show (he did every gig), but it was the Florida crowd's enthusiasm and knowing that he'd be able to sleep for a month that gave him extra spark. Every time he took a solo, he tried to best any previous soloing effort. Every time he approached his microphone to sing backups, his voice surged with whiskey vigor. For him, this was rock 'n' roll at its best. The 4,000-plus crowd acknowledged this with deafening applause.

After the final encore, it was time to celebrate. Mayne wound up with two eager females in his hotel room. In the privacy of his bathroom he injected a little heroin. Not enough to make him nod out but enough to get him good and high. The two nubile females would only make him feel better. After struggling to get his wet brown suede pants off, he joined the nude women, and thus the revelry began. The dope clouded his not-so-good memory but Mayne remembered a very drunk Peter Terrance walking into the room. The band's drummer had mistaken Mayne's room for his own. In the spirit of celebration, Mayne offered him a girl. Terrance declined saying he'd find his own and left. The menage-a-trois continued. Shortly afterward there was a knock on the door. Thinking it was Terrance taking up the offer, Mayne called out, telling

whoever was at the door to enter. Standing at the door with an overnight bag was Elizabeth. On the spur of the moment she'd flown from L.A. to Miami to be with him. A very bad scene played itself out. Elizabeth left broken and hysterical. That was the beginning of the end for their relationship.

Mayne snapped out of the past. His left knee popped loudly as he straightened his legs and headed for the phone. He pushed a button. Elizabeth's number was still programmed and every now and then he pushed it just to hear her phone ring. Also in the phone's memory was his record label, his manager, the three members of his current band, the Mayne Mann Group, and several drug dealers. After receiving no answer at Elizabeth's, he pushed another button. His many bracelets clinked together and a few seconds later there was a reply.

"Yeah?" spat an unenthusiastic voice from a car phone.

"It's me," Mayne said, swallowing, cocaine dripping down his throat.

"My main man," Jamie's voice declared like a cash register ringing. "What can I do ya for?"

"Uptown and downtown." Cocaine and heroin.

"No problem. You remember what I did for ya last night, right?"

"Yeah." He didn't.

"You owe me three bills from that @!#\$, brother man," the dealer explained just in case memory failed. I'm sure I got some change floatin' around. If I can't find some I'll five ya my Versateller card and you can get what I owe."

"Bet. I'll be right up," Jamie said as if he was doing Mayne a favor and hung up.

"@!#\$' prick," Mayne mumbled to himself.

He lit up a cigarette and got himself another beer. The lid popped loudly and foam rose to the mouth hole. He watched, amused, then walked over to the black-out curtains and pulled the lever, letting bright sunlight invade his living room. "@!#\$ you very much," he loudly announced, squinting, and raising his middle finger to the sky. The view from his balcony was vast, displaying the City of Angels below, yet more often than not Mayne kept the curtains shut, preferring not to be a part of the world outside. It was safe inside his apartment. Against a far wall, tucked in the corner so that the ivory keys faced out toward the living room, was a vintage Steinway. He spent many pleasure-filled hours on the instrument, and even when he wasn't playing, the piano gave him visual stimulation. It was an instrument of precision and grace. Next to the piano, resting comfortably on stands were half a dozen vintage guitars: Les Pauls, Stratocasters, and Telecasters. The guitars he kept in the apartment were the ones that meant the most to him.

The buzzer sounded, waking Mayne from his drifting thoughts. He went to the intercom and pressed the button that unlocked the front door. A few minutes later, Jamie Jazz was inside his apartment. Dozens of platinum and gold records adorned the walls. Hours upon years of planning, writing, recording, and struggling had reaped these round rewards. His songwriting stemmed from inner pains and his slower, more blues-influenced songs often dealt with personal hardships. Those were the songs he was most proud of and believed might stand the test of time. The faster, more hard-rock-oriented songs often had little significance or wore their meanings on their sleeve. Unfortunately, the awards were no longer awards without Elizabeth. Mayne excused himself and went into the bedroom. Hidden behind yet another platinum disc was a safe. He removed the disc from the wall, twisted the combination, and opened the safe. Inside were jewelry, documents, over four thousand dollars cash, a freebase pipe, and a loaded .357 Magnum. He grabbed a few Gnotes and went back into the living room, leaving the safe shut but unlocked. Jamie was seated on the black leather couch, feet up on the marble coffee table, looking casual in Suicide Shift sweatpants (that he'd gotten from Mayne) and a matching sweatshirt. He'd helped himself to a beer.

"What's the total?"

"Including last night? Six," Jamie replied, fidgeting with the beeper on his waist.

Mayne handed him six bills and put the rest in his pants pocket. Judging by the look on his face, the dealer understood he wanted to be alone and took the hint.

"Call me if you need anything else," Jamie offered, exiting the apartment.

The moment the front door clicked shut, Mayne's mind rushed into overdrive but his body refused to move. He had drugs in hand, but instead of finding a syringe, he went back into the bedroom. Something in the wall safe more powerful than his addiction had caught his eye. He walked to the safe and pulled the door open. Inside was a photo album containing precious Kodachrome memories. Placing the drugs on top of the messy night table, he fell on the bed, and began flipping through the leather-bound book. Captured in photos were images and feelings so intense that it made him warm as well as suicidal. Elizabeth had challenged him intellectually while stimulating him sexually. She'd mothered him when he was sick, which was quite often. She'd set free inner feelings that he'd often tried avoiding. Her beauty, both inner and physical, was something he wanted; yet when she was his, he did everything conceivable to lose her.

He turned to the second page. He had no idea how many times he'd masturbated to this photo. Every other day perhaps. It was just a snapshot he'd taken of her while on vacation in Las Vegas. In photo form, the wind blew her long hair away from her face and she was smiling. Behind her was the Caesar's Palace hotel where they'd spent the better part of two weeks in the penthouse suite. It was a typical tourist photo but it was her smile that turned him on. It was so free from pain. Mayne would do anything to have her smile for him like she had in the photograph. He'd do anything to have her lips, her body again.

He unbuttoned his leather pants. Before beginning his self-stimulation, he pulled himself over to the night-table refrigerator and removed an unopened bottle of Dom Perignon champagne. The bottle opened with a loud pop and smoke billowed from the top, but no liquid spilled.

Sipping deeply from the bottle, he flipped through the photo album that was all too short, carefully avoiding the final page. He rarely looked at the last page. As always, he wound up back on page two. With the bottle two-thirds empty, he pulled his pants and briefs down to his knees and poured the remaining champagne onto his palms. This was part of the ritual. Fine champagne was something he and Elizabeth enjoyed sharing. He could still share it with her. As he took hold of his wet erection, his thoughts began to slip. It was during one of their final dinner dates that she had said something that inspired him to write the most beautiful song of his career. "I can't live with you and I can't live without you," he could hear her saying as if it were just yesterday. Words flowed from pen to paper faster than he could write. Mayne concluded that this was his private way of explaining all that had happened between them. The song "Without You," was not an apology, it was his side of the story. It was rock 'n' roll sincerity that sold over three million copies in the U.S., topping the record sales charts and putting the Mayne Mann Group on top of the rock world. He offered Elizabeth half of the royalties from the song because without her there would be no song. She politely declined. A sold-out Mayne Mann Group tour ensued. When the tour arrived in Los Angeles, Mayne desperately wanted to see her. No matter how many women he had, no matter how over her he told everyone he was, he'd do anything for her except let her permanently slip out of his life.

He'd called her a dozen times over the course of two days, leaving message after message on her answering machine. Even though she never responded, he'd left her ten All-Access passes at Will Call. She never showed.

After the show, Mayne vowed he wouldn't make the same mistake twice. He quickly showered, changed into dry clothing, and left, avoiding all the backstage hoopla. He and his driver headed for Elizabeth's apartment. Using the phone in the limousine, he dialed her from the street below her apartment. Again he was greeted by a recorded message.

"Elizabeth, I know—I hope you're there. I'm downstairs and even if I have to break down the door to see you, I'm willing. If you're gonna call the cops, well, call 'em now. . . I don't expect anything from you. I don't deserve anything . . . @!#\$, I don't even know what I'm trying to say other than I still care about you. Words can't heal what I've done but, @!#\$, the past is done . . . I really need to see your face again," Mayne softly explained after the beep. The words still echoed in his mind as he wondered if he could've possibly phrased things differently. It was too late now, he thought, already inside the building. This was one of the rare occasions after a gig that Mayne was sober. As he arrived by way of elevator at her floor,

he heard familiar music. The closer he got to her door the louder the volume grew. Then his world began to spin uncontrollably as a loud gunshot echoed through the hallway. He ran toward her apartment, lowered his shoulder, and with reckless abandon crashed through the wooden door. He'd found Elizabeth on the couch, bleeding profusely, most of her head splattered on the wall behind her. On the blood-sprayed coffee table in front of her was the answering

machine, a ballpoint pen, and several crumpled balls of writing paper. He stood destroyed before her corpse. How could this have happened? All he had ever done was love her. Devastated, he slowly walked over to the blaring stereo. A CD single of "Without You" was programmed to repeat. He wondered how many times she'd listened to the same song and shut the power off. Then he noticed that next to the answering machine was a note.

Number one with a bullet, the red-speckled note read.

Shaking and convulsing, his tears falling freely, Mayne began screaming at the top of his lungs. It sounded like someone had unleashed a wild animal. His shrieks threatened to break the windows. A migraine pierced his throbbing temples and his entire head was overloaded with pressure. Did she kill herself because they had failed or because he wouldn't leave her be? Was it the song, one of the few things he'd ever done autonomously, that had driven her to this? Was this really happening? Then another thought came out mind. He removed the pistol from her hand and put it against his temple.

He was going to join her.

CLICK.

It was empty. Elizabeth had known she would only need one bullet.

Mayne snapped out of that nightmare and was thrust into another memory. He recognized the familiar room as the honeymoon suite in Las Vegas and almost felt at ease. The bed was in disarray and Elizabeth was smiling mischievously.

"What do you want to do?"

"Wha'?" Mayne responded, confused.

They'd already drunk several bottles of champagne and made love twice.

"What do you want to do?" she replied softly, daring Mayne to answer.

Mayne caught wind of her game and decided to play along. If she was giving him an option as to what they'd do next, he was definitely going to take advantage of her generosity.

"You can either come up here and tell me that you love me or go down on me."

Elizabeth's face registered joy. Words like love were the hardest to get out of Mayne's mouth. Once again she smiled as she began her descent toward his waistline. It didn't take her very long to bring him back to life. Several minutes later, when she sensed that he was as excited as he was going to get, Elizabeth looked up at her man and with the sexiest expression she would conjure, softly said, "I love you."

Mayne came with a slight grunt. The powerful surge had given him something to work at but there was no pleasure in the orgasm. There never was anymore. He tossed the photo album aside and lay on the bed feeling dead, staring at the ceiling. For a split second, he thought he heard musical strands of "Without You" but it was only his imagination. His tired body lay there for what felt like a year before he sat up. At least the drugs on the night table were real. Everything he needed was on the table. Hidden beneath the clock radio was a syringe and a blackened spoon. There was a half-empty glass of water and a lighter next to it. In the spoon he mixed the proper amounts of heroin and water, and then, using the lighter,

heated the bottom of the spoon until the mixture cleared up before placing a tiny piece of cotton into the spoon. With unsteady hands, he added some cocaine and his speedball was complete. Being a high-profile celebrity, he couldn't afford to have his withered arms tracked up too badly. He usually shot into the back of his forearms or his feet. He also injected into his neck but the way he felt right now, he had no time to dillydally. Like an expert acupuncturist, he fixed into a bulging vein in his forearm.

"Cool," he mumbled, carefully examining his arm, as he felt the speedball coming on.

He fell back down on the bed. Between the drugs and his emotions, he was exhausted. It was a good thing drugs numbed away most of the pressures. He was rushing out as the drug hit him in powerful waves. It took several moments before he realized his left arm was touching something. He slowly rolled over. The photo album was opened to the last page. The last page contained Elizabeth's obituary and a sympathy card. Tears he'd held in since that day began to flow down his cheeks. His pale face flushed as he felt his strength evaporating. He was drowning in sorrow but didn't believe in self-pity and that made him feel even worse. He sat up hyperventilating with a question echoing inside his head. Why did she have to die? He had no answer and stood up too quickly. Why was everything so fucked? He went back into the living room. He needed whiskey.

Why?

He loved her so much.

Why?

He'd offered her half the royalties. Half. That was a financial empire, but she'd refused.

Why?

He'd tried to make amends. He'd tried being good according to society's standards. He wanted to understand everything that had happened to them. He wanted her to love him but no matter how hard he tried, he fucked it up.

Why?

He wanted to be normal again but that wasn't possible.

Why?

He wanted to feel closer to Elizabeth but she was dead. That tormented his fragile soul but for a split second of insane logic, Mayne concluded that his body should not be spared either.

"Arrrrrrggghh!" he growled, attacking his living room like a pissed-off brawler. Fists and feet attacked defenseless walls and furniture. He cocked his right fist back and a large hole went through plaster. He snatched an Oriental lamp off an end table and hurled it across the room. He violently threw a marble ashtray into a plaque, ruining both. Breathing heavily and drenched in alcoholic sweat, he grabbed a platinum record and smashed it, spraying glass shards everywhere. The shattered glass on the floor twinkled like sun-reflected sand. No matter how many hotel rooms he trashed during his career, Mayne had never harmed a guitar. That was strictly taboo until today. He walked over to the row of guitars, grabbed a '68 Stratocaster by its stringed neck and swung, smashing the mahogany body until it was little more than firewood. With each self-destructive act, he felt slightly better. He walked over to another platinum disc, readied himself and put his right fist through the glass. Blood spurted from the hand that was heavily insured by Lloyds of London.

For the first time that day he smiled.

Mayne grabbed the Jim Beam bottle off the bar and guzzled. The liquid painkiller warmed his heaving chest and eased his bleeding hand, which looked like it needed stitches. He walked over to his Fischer stereo, and, using his good hand, turned on the receiver. The digital readout was locked on a classic rock station. It was the only safe station on the dial, since it never played any of his songs. Mayne Mann was too new, too current. The station only played material from the 60s and 70s. He instantly recognized the song playing; it was Humble Pie's "I Don't Need No Doctor." It was raw rock like this that had inspired him to become a musician. Following the Pie were the Allman Brothers. Mayne could relate to what it felt like being tied to a whipping post.

During the commercials, he went into the kitchen to grab another beer. Out of his stereo speakers a record store chain announced its prices as the lowest in Los Angeles. The background music accompanying the record store commercial was "Without You."

His eyes stung but no tears fell as he realized that no matter where he was, he couldn't hide from himself. Like a man on a mission, he walked over to the stereo, grabbed the receiver, and yanked with both hands. It took several strong tugs before the digital lights went off. With the receiver in hand, he stumbled backward, ripping wires and knocking over one of the large Bose speakers. Distraught and panting, he mad his way to the giant sliding safety glass door that led to the balcony. He casually dropped the high-tech receiver and undid the latch that kept the heavy door locked. Fresh air attacked his senses. The cool breeze felt invigorating as he stepped out onto the balcony and looked over the edge. His jet-black Bentley sat gleaming in the parking lot directly below. He picked the receiver up, held it over the balcony, and aimed it at the car. After several seconds of wondering if his aim was accurate, he let go. Glass spidered wildly when the receiver hit the car's windshield and broke through. He went to fetch the beer he'd been distracted from and ripped the refrigerator door open as hard as he could. It crashed open, spilling several items onto the floor. The door dangled by a hinge. Mayne grabbed a beer, chugged half, and like a strong-armed baseball pitcher threw it at his guitar collection, barely missing his favorite: a vintage '57 Sunburst Les Paul. He grabbed another can from the crippled refrigerator as his eyes returned to the guitars.

The guitars were like adopted children and he loved each one in a different manner.

Certain guitars held certain memories but each guitar had the ability to create magic. It was that potential he respected and admired most about these guitars until this afternoon. Now, no matter how much he loved a certain guitar, or how valuable it might be, all he wanted to do was feel pain. Pain brought him closer to reality. It brought him closer to Elizabeth. He gave the world music, very good music, and asked for little in return. A little space to create, some kicks thrown in, and how about peace of mind? Instead, he had more material goods than he could ever use, more money than he could count, and nothing worth fighting for. There was a time not too long ago when he'd fought like hell for all of this. Now that he owned a piece of the rock he wished he could give it back. The view from the top wasn't as picturesque as he'd imagined. What he did as his artistic expression, the record company sold for capital. He'd quickly grown disillusioned with the system but what else could he do? Without the industry he couldn't share his music. No matter how hard anyone tried explaining it to him, musical notes would never equal dollar signs. He made music because since his early childhood, he truly loved rock 'n' roll. It was the people, his people, he wrote music for after he finished writing for himself. So then, why couldn't he sleep at night?

He stared at the answer.

He was going to kill his guitars. If it wasn't for these guitars, he wouldn't have the problems he did. And he's save the goddamn '57 Sunburst for last. He guzzled the beer, raising it away from his greedy mouth. Budweiser rained down the side of his face. When the can was almost empty, he crushed and spiked it like a football. Enraged, he grabbed a Les Paul Black Beauty and dealt it a quick but savage death against a wall. He raised a rare Telecaster over his head and clubbed the coffee table, breaking both. Then he picked up another Les Paul and, swinging it like a baseball bat, clobbered a lamp and several other objects before the guitar's neck snapped off.

"@!#\$' cheap @!#\$," he grumbled.

He heard something that had a bit of rhythm to it. Was there a drummer playing in his head? It took several seconds for him to realize that one of the neighbors was pounding on the wall.

"WHAT, A LITTLE TOO LOUD FOR YA?" Mayne shouted at the direction the noise was coming from. It didn't stop.

"YER PISSING ME OFF, @!#\$!"

Knock-Knock-Knock-Knock-Knock.

"@!#\$, I'm giving ya fair fucking warning," he said.

Knock-Knock-Knock-Knock-Knock.

Mayne walked into the bedroom and over to the night table. He grabbed his cocaine and poured a decent-sized mound on the back of his hand that wasn't bleeding and snorted. Afterward he licked residue off his fist, numbing his teeth and gums. There was a pack of Marlboros on the table. He grabbed one and lit it. He took a deep drag and listened to his surroundings. The neighbor was still pounding. The ashtray was an overflowing mountain of dead butts so Mayne placed the cigarette on the edge of the night table. He had tried to avoid a confrontation, but the shithead next door wouldn't let it lie. He went to his wall safe, grabbed the Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum, and charged out of the bedroom.

"OKAY, HOMEFUCK, WANNA PLAY GAMES?"

Knock-Knock-Knock-Knock-Knock.

KABAMMM, KABAMMM, KABAMMM.

He unloaded three shots toward the already hole-ridden wall. The pounding stopped instantly. Again he smiled. He aimed the pistol at one of his platinum discs on another wall and blasted the shiny sphere. He aimed at his TV and blew it to kingdom come. One bullet left. He held the silver-plated pistol in awe. He could easily join Elizabeth; all it would take was one quick squeeze of the trigger. The idea appealed to him. Maybe he'd get it right in his next life. Slowly, eyes closed, he raised the pistol. The trigger teased his scarlet index finger. The barrel felt good against his temple. Ready himself, he reopened his eyes. In front of him, mocking him, were two more Les Paul guitars. There once was a point in his life when these musical embodiments were holy. The dedication and years of practicing were a labor of love. Guitars were his passion, his expression, and his ticket out of obscurity. But all of that changed with one song. Now these guitars were reminders that Mayne could never regain his innocence.

"Can't I @!#\$' die with some dignity?" he wondered as rage consumed him.

He couldn't even commit suicide without music somehow interfering. His shaking arm lowered and took aim at one of the guitars. There was heavy recoil as wooden fragments flew everywhere. He put a massive hole in the guitar, and then walked over to examine his accuracy. It was definitely dead, but that wasn't enough. He picked up the remains and threw them against the safety-glass door. He walked over to the balcony's edge. Below, a small crowd had gathered around his ruined luxury car.

"Anybody want an autograph?" he asked, tossing out the fragmented guitar.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute. I got another present!" he yelled, and ran into the bedroom.

His heavy footsteps jarred the cigarette he'd forgotten off the night table. It smoldered on the thick rug. Mayne dug inside the wall safe, grabbed a handful of hundred-dollar bills, and ran back to the balcony before his audience could scurry away.

"Don't say I never gave you anything," he announced, letting the money fly.

Several wary spectators stepped backward but as soon as it was obvious that the confetti was currency, they rushed forward. Mayne waved to the small crowd and went back inside.

One guitar remained.

He stared at the '57, marveling at the beautiful colors. It was appropriately called a Sunburst. Reds, oranges, and yellows swirled in the wooden body. This one had gold trim as well as golden pickups. The Sunburst was his preference of all guitars. He had another two dozen in storage but this guitar was the first thing he bought after Suicide Shift was signed to a recording contract. It was how he'd rewarded himself for having "made it." This was also the guitar he'd written the music to "Without You" on. He approached it with caution and respect and gently picked it up. He sat down on the floor Indian style. Deep down, he was glad he hadn't destroyed this ax. His picking hand hurt badly, but he wanted to play. Blood dripped off his hand and dripped down the guitar's body. Enthralled, Mayne watched it run. No matter how intoxicated he was, his fingers never betrayed him, and this particular guitar always responded to his call. He began picking something that sounded like Hendrix. He paused abruptly. Something about that last guitar run shook him up and he couldn't continue. In a vague way, it reminded him of a part in "Without You." After taking a deep breath, Mayne partially regained his composure. Multimillionaires like Mayne Mann aren't supposed to cry. They're beyond tears or at least that's what society wants to believe. Mayne Mann was just Stephen Maynard Mandraich, a talented kid who could run his nimble fingers along a piece of stringed wood. He began to strum one of his favorite riffs, Thin Lizzy's "Don't Believe a Word." Even though the guitar wasn't amplified, he could hear it as if it was. He let the last note ring out as he stopped and reflected. He used to love the feel of this instrument in his hands. He used to love making the strings come to life. He used to love just holding this guitar. Then his mind viciously reminded him that he'd also loved the way Elizabeth felt. He quickly rose off the floor and tossed the guitar aside. It landed with a loud DWWWAANNNGGGG.

He stared blankly at the guitar and thought of her. Both had given him so much pleasure, but he'd never been able to properly express his gratitude. He never told her the truth about how she made him feel, about how much he loved her, and when he did, the song reaffirmed that he should've kept his mouth shut. At least she'd still be alive. But the song was pure and he wanted to play it for her. Even if her physical body wasn't present, he could still sing to her in heaven. He wanted to jam but was afraid to touch the guitar.

Then Mayne saw an alternative. He scooped up the almost-dead whiskey bottle and finished what little was left. It slipped silently from his hand. Very drunk, very drugged out, he staggered over to the piano. The smoldering cigarette on the bedroom rug had burned its way over to the goose-down comforter. The cover caught and flames quickly spread throughout the bedroom. Discarded clothing acted as kindling and soon the bedroom was on fire.

Until several hazy hours ago, Mayne's life, no matter how miserable, had been something most people could only dream about. It was all an illusion, and he was one of rock 'n' roll's elite, a hero. Now, he'd been reduced to his basic self and nothing really mattered. He felt the thorns wrapped around his heart and for the first time in far too long, felt human again. He'd smothered his spirituality in drug abuse. He'd stunted his health and personal growth with vice. He'd blinded himself because he was afraid to see that his purpose, his gift in life, was to be true to himself. And the only time he was able to find that inner truth was when he played his music. He softly tapped the ivory keys, making melodies come to life through his fingers. No matter how badly his hand hurt, he persisted in making music. He was determined to play for Elizabeth and all the other angels. With every fluid run, every harmony, every musical accent, his inner pain subsided a little. With each passing musical note, he became one with the music.

Sweating profusely, Mayne felt something stirring behind him. He tried ignoring it for as long as possible. Finally, he turned and saw large flames billowing out of his bedroom. At first he thought it was a hallucination but the fire was scorchingly real and heading his way. His favorite guitar was already engulfed and dying. He wanted to save it but couldn't. He refused to let his jamming be interrupted.

Elizabeth was listening. Every time his fingers pressed the Steinway's keys, crimson stained the ivory and smeared. He ignored the small red spots, sliding his long fingers through them. Scarred-up veins bulged from his forearms a sweat ran down his face. All he'd ever wanted to do with his life was play his music and now he was. For the moment, he felt free from his demons. He built up the courage and began singing "Without You" in his natural gruff voice. The thick carpeting quickly became a wall-to-wall inferno as a giant wave of fire rose up and spread around the piano. He couldn't have cared less. As flames swallowed the apartment, Mayne never screamed and never missed a note.

**The End**