

ROCK STAR'S
girl

a novel

J.F. KRISTIN

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Rock Star's Girl

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*For my parents, who taught me that there are no limits
other than the boundaries of my imagination.
I love you both more than anything.*

And for Jordan – thank you.

PROLOGUE

The next sweet-talking musician who tried to buy Emily Watts a drink would find himself wearing a snare drum while getting smacked with a cymbal upside the head. If he called her *darlin'* or *babe*, there was no telling what she'd do with the drumsticks.

Not that Emily was a violent person, by any means. She just couldn't deal with that tonight, or possibly for the rest of this lifetime.

She raised her nearly empty glass of vodka soda to her lips and took a sip, then pressed the cool glass against her cheek. The main room of the Troubadour felt sweaty and cramped to her tonight. Looking across the dimly lit bar to the stage in front of her, she wondered how hot it felt up there, under the bright glow of the red and blue floodlights.

It's usually downright cold in here, she thought, brushing a long

strand of her wavy blond hair out from in front of her eyes. More than a few shivering, drink-filled nights had been spent standing in front of this stage with her best friend, Shelby Marlowe, watching friends' bands perform for the ever-mixed crowd of concert-goers, and shrugging off pickup lines from more than one singer, guitarist, bass player, or drummer who'd declared their band the "next big thing" in the music world.

It was when she didn't shrug them off that the trouble usually began. Trouble, though, was proving to be an understatement for the train wreck she found herself surrounded by tonight.

On stage in front of her was her longtime friend and current migraine, Jesse Cinder, the guitarist for indie rock band Ashes of Brooklyn. Bailey Carson, Jesse's manager and possibly Satan's closest ally, was barely ten feet to her left. And Cory Sampson, the most recent boy to capture her heart, stood a little too close for her liking, just over to her right. In her peripheral vision, she caught sight of Cory glancing over at where she stood. Or whatever he could see through the unruly tangle of sun-streaked hair that covered most of his face.

As she brought her glass back to her lips and finished what was left of her drink, she questioned her choice of making an appearance at this show tonight. She'd dropped herself right back into the drama, and for that decision, Emily knew she had only herself to blame.

And what did I get for this act of sheer brilliance? she thought. *Nothing but ringing ears, prying eyes, and an empty drink in my hand.*

She turned to Shelby, who stood beside her, and started to ask if she wanted to go outside for some air. The question died on her

lips when she saw her best friend glaring at the screen of her phone.

“What’s wrong?” she yelled, trying to be heard over the thrashing guitars and drums that blared from the speakers beside the stage.

Shelby looked up from the screen, but didn’t answer. She lowered her phone to her side.

Emily put out her hand. “Let me see. You know I will anyway.”

Frowning, Shelby handed her the phone. Emily raised it closer to her face, not surprised to see that Shelby had been reading the front page of Wally Hood Goes Hollywood, a celebrity gossip blog.

“What now?” she muttered, scanning the page for her name. She felt her breath catch when she saw the headline she’d somehow known was there.

The Em-Girl is Still Jesse’s Fan Girl

We hear Ms. Emily Watts is lurking around Santa Monica Boulevard tonight, making a guest appearance at the Troubadour for an Ashes of Brooklyn show. If the Em-Girl is showing up for her Flameboy’s cute little headlining performances, we’ll guess this means that she and Mr. Cinder have kissed and made up since she was spotted storming out of his house and looking mighty angry two weekends ago. Not that either of them would admit to any kissing or making up, since both still claim to be “just friends.” (We believe you. Really.)

Let’s hope the two closet lovebirds don’t run into Sampson, who was also spotted out in West Hollywood tonight, looking troubled and gloomy.

While a brooding C-Samp usually means fantastic music from his band, Blistering Twilight, we think the guy has been through enough in the love department over the last while. We can only hope that the Em-Girl will muster the decency from somewhere deep inside of her flirty little soul to feel the same way.

C-Samp, what can we say, except to avoid the Troubadour? That and if we see you around Hollywood, the next beer is on us. Sorry, pal.

Emily handed the phone back to Shelby. “Another drink?” she asked. Without waiting for an answer, she turned away from the stage and headed toward the bar, ignoring the curious glance that Cory tossed her way.

Just breathe, she thought, trying to force air into her lungs. While more vodka probably wasn’t the answer, she had hopes that for a few fuzzy hours at least, it could make her forget about the article she’d just read and all of the other ones Wally Hood had written about her in recent weeks.

Staring at the bar lights, she felt a familiar pang for how simple life had been just three months ago, before she’d met Cory. Back then she’d been Emily Watts, the sarcastic 26-year-old whose biggest problem had been managing Zeeked, the fashion commentary web site that she’d made her livelihood. If she’d known then what life was about to bring, she would have been a lot more grateful for a personal life that had all but flatlined, back in the time when most of the world hadn’t known her name.

CHAPTER ONE

Three months earlier

“All dressed up and drinking alone?”

Emily took a slow sip from her glass of sauvignon blanc before setting it down on the dark wooden countertop in front of her. She gave the bartender a small smile in response and tried to ignore his sympathetic glance.

A hint of evening breeze made its way through the open door at the entrance to Koi, where she stood at the bar waiting for Jesse. As usual, he was running a few minutes behind schedule, or so his last text message to her had said. Considering he often claimed it took him ten minutes to get dressed, groomed, and ready for any occasion, his chronic habit of being fashionably late was a little mystifying.

Knowing Jesse as well as she did, she had made their dinner reservation for fifteen minutes later than she'd told him it was for, in hopes that he would get there before they were bumped from their table. Her own habit of arriving a few minutes early was something she really needed to work on. Especially when her plans involved meeting up with him.

She picked up her glass again and stepped away from the bar. Taking another sip of her wine, she looked out into the closest dining room. The last time she'd been here, the star of her favorite TV show had been sitting only a few tables away from her, although it was doubtful that she would have noticed if Jesse hadn't pointed him out.

"Are you looking for another date?" Jesse's voice came from behind her.

Brushing aside a lock of her hair, she turned around to look at him. "Nah, I was going to give you about thirty more seconds. After that, you might have been history."

This is going to be trouble, she thought, taking him in, and she had little doubt that he knew it too. Dressed in a black button-down shirt, casually distressed jeans, and black leather boots, his dark hair perfectly in place, he exuded confidence and charm.

"I would have been crushed if someone had stolen you away." He flashed her the easy grin that always made her smile and reached for her hand. Together, they walked the few steps over to where the hostess stood, near the restaurant's entrance.

They were seated at a quiet corner table, given a cozy feel by the glow of white tea lights. Emily always looked forward to having dinner here with Jesse during the few times a year he made it out to

L.A. She knew she was silly to think of it as their place, but sitting across from him at the table, studying his face in the flickering candlelight, she liked the idea that any outside observer might think they were a couple enjoying a romantic dinner for two.

“So what do you think?” he asked her, scanning the dinner menu he held in his hands.

“Hmm?” She blinked, and tried to pull her thoughts into the present moment. “About what?”

“Dinner.” He looked up at her and grinned. “Or you could just keep staring at me like that. It’s kind of hot.”

She flushed. “I wasn’t staring at you. I was just...” she paused for a moment, searching for a word. “Thinking,” she finished.

He raised his eyebrows. “I’d do a lot of things to hear those thoughts.”

Same old Jesse, she thought. He probably practiced being seductive even while talking in his sleep.

“Hey now,” she protested. “I’m a girl, if you’ve forgotten. I’m sure my thoughts are pretty much never what you think they are.”

“Well, that’s a shame,” he said, the slightest hint of a smirk appearing on his lips. “So what were they, then?”

She ignored his question and picked up her menu. “Are you up for sushi rolls tonight?” she asked, positioning the menu to conceal her face.

“Absolutely,” he said. “Which ones do you feel like?”

“Definitely the salmon roll. I’ve been craving it since the last time I was here.”

“Isn’t salmon an aphrodisiac?” he asked. She lowered her menu to look at him, and he raised his eyebrows again.

I was definitely right about tonight being trouble, she thought, suspecting she would have to phrase her answer carefully. “Since when do you even know what that word means?” she teased, hoping to steer the conversation in another direction before it got out of hand, as conversations with Jesse often did.

“I can see you’re impressed,” he said. She detected a note of mischief in his voice. “Do you know what other word I know?”

“Can’t even begin to guess, but go ahead, *Webster’s*.” She did her best to sound disinterested, but inwardly, she steeled herself for what was coming.

“Pheromones.”

“Sure you do. Use it in a sentence.” She set her menu down on the table and looked at him.

“Your hair smells amazing. The scent is almost as powerful as pheromones.” A look of triumph spread across his face.

She felt her mouth twitch and coughed to cover up a laugh. “I’d bet my dinner that Cole taught you that one to help you pick up girls.”

Cole Brooklyn was the lead singer of Ashes of Brooklyn and Jesse’s best friend. He was also Jesse’s wingman when it came to hitting on women, as Emily had witnessed on a few occasions.

“Why? I can’t be pretty *and* smart?” Jesse countered, a little too loudly. A middle-aged woman seated at the table next to them looked over and giggled.

“You said it, not me,” she replied, ignoring their audience.

“What?”

She shook her head, but she was smiling. “Have you ever heard the term ‘guitarded’?”

He put a hand over his heart, his face contorted into a pained expression as if she'd wounded him. "You have so much animosity toward musicians, Em. Or is that being directed to all guys in general?"

"Would it make you feel better if it was?" she asked, and raised her wine glass to her lips.

He studied her for a moment, and a look of realization settled across his face. "You're not getting any, are you?"

She was thankful that she hadn't yet begun swallowing her sip of wine, so she had time to compose her thoughts and let the drops of liquid slide down her throat without choking on them.

"Getting any what?" *Leave it to Jesse to bring this up*, she thought.

"As if you're twelve." His expression reminded Emily of a tiger, waiting to pounce. From experience she knew he probably was, since his favorite pastime seemed to be interrogating her about her love life. For some reason, she was never prepared with witty answers.

"No really, that's quite the question there, Mr. Cinder. Getting any what?" Her hazel eyes shone with a defiant look that dared him to put what he was thinking into words.

"Affection." He kept his eyes fixed on her.

"Define affection," she challenged, feeling the heat rising in her cheeks.

"Hmm. You're blushing quite madly, Miss Em."

"I'm not blushing!" she said. "I'm just warm. The candles are throwing heat over here."

This time, he didn't even try to conceal his smirk. "Uh-huh.

Tea lights are definitely a raging inferno. Let's see if I can take a guess here."

"Jesse." Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that the woman at the next table was watching them again.

"Touchy subject, I can see," he said. "Three months, then?"

"I'm not answering this." She folded her arms across her chest and pressed her lips together in a hard line.

He opened his mouth to respond, just as their server appeared beside their table. *Impeccable timing*, she thought. *Buddy, you just earned yourself a generous tip.*

"Welcome to Koi," he greeted them. "My name is David. Is this your first time?"

"No, we're a little more experienced at this table," Jesse replied in a dry tone, keeping his eyes on Emily. It took everything she had in her to keep from kicking him under the table.

She quickly piped up. "Ignore this one," she said, with an apologetic glance at David. "He's cute and all, but I'm pretty sure he was raised in a barn."

David gave them a bewildered smile. "Welcome back to Koi, then, or at least that's what I think you meant. Can I start you off with something to drink while you look over the menu?"

"Could I get another glass of sauvignon blanc, please?" she asked. The way things had been going so far, she suspected that she was going to need it.

"Absolutely. And anything for you, sir?" David turned to Jesse, who looked incredibly entertained.

"I'll have the Kaori sake," he answered. "And you might want to bring her the whole bottle of wine."

“One glass is fine, thanks.” She shot Jesse a dark look, and he laughed.

“So that’s one glass of sauvignon blanc, and one Kaori sake.” David repeated, sounding uncertain. “I’ll be back with your drinks and to take your order in a few minutes.”

“Will you behave, please?” she hissed, when their server was out of earshot. Jesse grinned and turned his attention back to the menu.

“Aside from the salmon roll, what else should we get?” he asked.

“Yellowtail and scallion roll,” she answered. “You choose the rest.”

“So has it been four months then?” There was a devilish gleam in his eyes. *Here we go*, she thought. She’d been foolish to think he’d just lay the subject to rest. “Wait, don’t tell me it’s been any longer than th—”

She cut him off before he could finish his sentence. “Seriously, that’s enough.” Her voice was close to a growl.

“Why?” he asked, looking curious. “It’s me.”

“Exactly,” she answered.

“I’m your friend, babe. You can tell me anything.”

“Well that’s going to be pretty one-sided, then, since I won’t be asking about your latest conquests.” It wasn’t that she didn’t want to dish out what she was taking in. She just really didn’t want to know about Jesse and his girls.

“Ah, no conquests this trip,” he admitted, shifting in his chair.

“Wow, and you’ve been here for almost three days. You’re slipping.” She feigned a look of surprise.

He laughed. "I'm recovering from a broken heart, actually. My Santa Monica girl left me for the singer in an emo band. I'm feeling a little wounded."

She shot him a knowing glance. "Uh-huh. Right until you can hook up with your Hollywood girl."

"Aren't you my Hollywood girl?" he asked, trying to look innocent.

"You only have one?"

"The only one who counts is sitting across from me right this second. And pretty much calling me a male whore."

"If the shoe fits," she said, shrugging her shoulders. She leaned forward to look at the menu again.

"Ouch. If the shoe fits, apparently you're going to pummel me with it. Why are you so curious about my love life?" He also leaned forward, but was looking at her. Setting an elbow down on the table, he propped his head up with his hand and waited for her answer.

"You started it," she pointed out. "If you can't take the heat, hun, stop fanning the flames."

"What if I like the fire?" His voice was playful.

She bit off her reply when she saw David returning to their table. He placed a filled wine glass in front of her, which she immediately picked up and took a drink from.

"Are you sure you don't want the bottle?" Jesse asked. "This could get fun."

"Yeah, hangovers are a blast. If you get the bottle, you're drinking it."

David set Jesse's sake down and took a step back from the ta-

ble. “How are you doing?” he asked. “Do you need a couple more minutes to look over the menu?”

“No, I think we’re ready,” Emily said, and nodded to Jesse. “He’ll order for both of us. Just ignore anything he orders that isn’t food.”

She’d expected Jesse to pick up their conversation from where it had left off once David had left their table, but he reached for his BlackBerry instead. His eyes focused on its screen, he used his thumb to move the track ball every few seconds while he read.

She tried to move closer to him, to see what was on the screen. “Looking for texts from your Santa Monica girl?” she asked.

“No,” he said, his eyes still fixed on his BlackBerry. “I’m reading your Facebook page.”

“Have we gone that far with social media that you’re going to have a conversation with me on my Facebook wall, rather than just talking to me from across the table?”

He moved his thumb across the track ball again. “When do I ever write on your wall? That would mean keeping it PG-13.”

“You’re going to have to start if you don’t put that away, since I won’t be answering your texts or phone calls,” she threatened.

He paused in his scrolling. “Easy, Em. I was just looking for some dirt, since you won’t give it up.”

“What do you think you need to know?” She leaned across the table to reach for his phone. Before she was close enough to grab it from him, he moved his arm to hold it just outside of her reach.

“Everything.” He looked amused. “If you’re going to be my Hollywood girl, we should really work on open communication.”

She returned to sitting calmly in her chair. “Open communication about what?”

“About why you’re denying yourself affection. Drop the walls.” He put his phone back down on the table.

She could feel her face burning. “I see we’re back to your misguided assumption that I’m lacking something in my life. That conversation is closed for the rest of dinner, my dear.”

He contemplated her answer. “So we can talk about it again over dessert?”

“Jesse, for the love of—” She cut herself off when she saw that he was laughing. “Just promise me you’ll behave for at least the main course, okay?”

He put his hands up in mock-surrender. “You’re right. I’ll probably get more out of you after you have another glass of wine, anyway.”

“Don’t count it,” she said, wrapping her fingers around the stem of her glass.

“We’ll see.” He raised his glass to her, then took a sip of his drink. She watched the Adam’s apple of his throat bob while he swallowed. “So if we can’t talk about your boys, I guess that leaves your career. How’s my working girl?”

She suppressed a grimace. While she was proud of being the brainchild behind a popular web site that, together with freelance writing work, allowed her to be self-employed, work was the last thing she wanted to think about during a night out on the town. Mainly because she’d spent every night this week trying to find new site advertisers to make up for one of her longest-standing clients going out of business and dropping their campaign, and because

she'd gotten up at 5 o'clock this morning to finish a freelance assignment so she could be at dinner now.

"Everything is great," she lied. "No complaints."

He nodded. "You're taking time out for you though, right?"

Her lips pursed in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Every time I talk to you, you're always working." He reached his hand across the table to gently touch her arm. "Get out there and have some fun."

"Well, I do have deadlines. When you run your own site, readers and advertisers have certain expectations for you to deliver. And when you freelance, editors tend to be kind of big on getting your finished assignments on time." Her lips relaxed into a wry smile.

"I know. I just get concerned." He kept his hand on her arm. She fought to keep her fingers unclenched and her shoulders relaxed.

"About what?" She moved her arm out from under his hand and reached for her glass.

"That you're hiding from your life by getting overly involved with your work." He picked up his own glass and took a sip.

She started to speak, then stopped. Her brow crinkled while she considered what he'd said. It was true that the extra hours she'd had to work lately had been cutting into her energy for going out. Even though she knew Jesse struggled with paying his bills while trying to forge a career in the music industry, she still found it difficult to explain the obligations that came with keeping Zeeked a success and making rent each month.

A rectangular white plate appeared on the table in front of her.

On it were cut pieces of a California roll. A second plate containing a tuna roll followed seconds later. *Saved again*, she thought.

She reached for the white linen napkin on the table in front of her. Across the table, Jesse picked up a black ceramic serving pot, and reached over to fill the small dish in front of her with soy sauce.

With her wooden chopsticks, she picked up a piece of California roll and dipped it in the soy sauce. "So, I want to know more about this Santa Monica girl who broke your heart. Spill."

"Did I say she broke my heart? Hmm." Jesse plucked a piece of tuna roll from its serving dish with his chopsticks, looking thoughtful.

"You can admit that you're human, you know," she said.

He tilted his head, looking puzzled. "What does that mean?"

"I mean, that girls can affect you."

"Of course they can affect me," he replied, sounding matter-of-fact.

"Really." The doubt was evident in her voice.

"Yes, really. What makes you think that they don't?"

"Well, I've known you for four years, and unless there's something you haven't told me, you haven't had a girlfriend in those four years." She held her plate out to him, nodding toward the platter of cut rolls at his end of the table. "Tuna roll, please?"

He shrugged and used his chopsticks to place the roll on her plate. "The band comes first in my life, Em. You know that."

"Now who's hiding?" she teased.

About to take a sip from his glass, he paused and set his glass back down on the table. "When have I ever hidden from a girl?" he asked.

“I can’t speak for others, but I guess that’s true,” she admitted. “There’s more to it than make-out-and-run, though. You know that, right?”

“I really can’t see what’s wrong with that. After all, I do it so well.” He winked at her.

She couldn’t help but laugh. “Yes, you do,” she agreed. “Don’t you ever just wish for something more, though? When you click with someone on a few levels, why run from it?”

While she’d tried to make her question sound like an offhand remark, she knew she’d failed when he stopped with his chopsticks in mid-air and slowly lowered them to rest on his plate. His voice took on a serious tone. “Is that a rhetorical question, or a question about you and me?”

Uh oh. Caught, she thought. “For argument’s sake, let’s say it’s about you and me.”

“Wow, okay.” She noticed that he wasn’t smiling and could feel her pulse begin to race as the seconds passed.

“So, you and me.” He picked up his chopsticks again. “Babe, I adore you, and you know that. You also know that I love hanging out with you.” He stopped for a moment to take a bite of tempura.

She wanted to ask him what the problem was, but instead gripped her wine glass tightly and raised it to her lips. She willed herself to stay relaxed.

He watched her closely while she swallowed her sip of wine. Apparently satisfied with what he saw, he continued. “It just doesn’t make sense. I’m in New York, and you’re here in L.A. We’d hardly ever see each other, and it would never work.”

“I was kidding, Jesse.” She forced a smile, trying to keep her

tone light. There was something in her voice that was a little too brusque, though. *Damn wine*, she thought.

“Whether you were or you weren’t, you understand what I’m saying, don’t you? I’m not trying to be an ass. I’m just being realistic.”

“I know that. But seriously, I was kidding. I know that we could never work.” He raised an eyebrow. She could tell that he didn’t believe her. “We know each other too well,” she continued. “Besides, you know I’d want to throttle you every five seconds.”

“Only every five?” he asked.

“If you were lucky,” she answered, and laid her chopsticks across her plate. “Excuse me for a sec, okay?”

A look of alarm appeared on his face. “You’re coming back, right?”

“Relax. I’m just using the ladies’ room, not bailing on you. That last piece of tempura had better still be here when I get back.” She put her napkin on the table and pushed back her chair. The clack of her heels against the floor was loud enough to make her feel like everyone in the dining room was watching her.

When she reached the women’s restroom, she was grateful to find herself alone. She walked past the empty stalls, coming to a stop in front of the mirror mounted on the wall above the sinks.

Her reflection revealed very little about how she actually felt. While her eyes had a slightly glassy look to them, she knew she could easily blame the two glasses of wine she’d had if asked. Smoothing a strand of her hair, she took a deep breath and tried to smile. It was ridiculous to feel disappointed, she knew. It was pretty obvious that Jesse liked the freedom of the single life and wasn’t

looking to change that.

She squared her shoulders and turned away from the mirror, then headed back to the dining room. As she made her way back to the table, she could see Jesse reading something on the screen of his BlackBerry again.

He raised his eyes to look at her when she sat down. “Is everything okay?” he asked.

“Of course,” she said, lifting up her chopsticks to reach for the piece of tempura he’d left her. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

He returned to looking at his phone. “No reason. I just thought maybe something I’d said had upset you.”

She chewed her mouthful of food slowly, considering her answer. “I told you I was kidding, Casanova. Do you want dessert?”

“Do you?” he asked.

“Not really,” she admitted. “That was a lot of sushi.”

“All right then,” he nodded. “The check it is.” He signaled to David, who was finishing up with a table a few feet away from where they sat.

She studied her wine glass, finding remarkable interest in the way the candlelight reflected from it. After a few moments of silence, Jesse spoke.

“So, we’re looking at getting a new manager.”

“Yeah?” She looked up, surprised. “What happened to Travis? You’ve been with him since before I met you.”

“We’re still with him, but it’s not working.”

“Not working how?” she asked.

“He’s not helping us get the buzz we need to make a go of this. We’re barely playing enough shows in New York right now, let

alone anywhere else.”

“That’s too bad,” she said, slowly twirling her glass by its stem. “Did Travis come out here with you guys?”

He nodded. “Don’t say anything to him if you see him on Friday.”

“Well thanks, Captain Obvious. I think that goes without saying.” She flinched at her irritated tone the moment the words left her mouth. Before Jesse could respond, David came by their table with the check, saving her the energy of coming up with a believable apology.

She reached into her purse for her wallet. Opening it, she began pulling out her Visa card to pay for her part of dinner. Jesse waved off her action, removing his own credit card from his wallet.

“I’ve got it. What kind of date would I be if I was making you pay?” He put his card inside of the folder and handed it to David.

“A broke musician?” she mumbled, knowing that she wasn’t being fair. He either didn’t hear her, or pretended that he hadn’t.

She closed her wallet, and took her time putting it back inside of her purse. When she looked up, she saw that Jesse’s hands were folded in front of him, and that his head was turned toward the curtained window on the wall beside their table. She could see that he was uncomfortable. *Well, that makes two of us*, she thought.

“Is Friday’s show at the Viper Room a showcase?” she asked, choosing what she hoped to be a safe topic to break the silence.

“It was supposed to be,” he said, sounding subdued. “Travis claims that a few label guys are coming out, but we’ll see. If anyone comes out, I think they’ll be there for the headliners.”

“Why aren’t you guys doing a headlining show this trip?”

“Ask Travis,” he said. He looked away from the window and down at his hands, twisting the silver ring he wore on his right hand.

“Ah. So this is why you’re talking to a new manager?”

“It’s definitely one reason.” Jesse looked up when David returned to the table, and took the folder back from him. He signed the receipt, then put his credit card back into his wallet. “Shall we?” he asked, standing up.

She pushed her chair back from the table and stood up, walking ahead of him to the door and outside to the enclosed front patio. While she usually enjoyed the lush surroundings that separated her from the lights and concrete of La Cienega Boulevard, tonight she hurried past them to the stairs and down to the sidewalk.

“Do you want to see what’s going on at Industry?” he asked, nodding in the direction of a nightclub down the street.

She yawned and shook her head. “I think I’m going to call it a night. The wine is making me pretty sleepy.”

“Are you okay to drive?”

“I took a cab here, in case I’d wanted a little more wine. I’ll take one home.”

“No you won’t,” he said. “I swiped our rental while the guys were at the hotel bar, so I’ll drive you.”

He approached the valet stand and handed his parking stub to an attendant. While she waited for him, she looked down the street at the line forming outside of Industry. About a year ago, she and Jesse had gone there together for a friend’s album release party. She remembered sitting with him on a leather sofa in the corner of the VIP room, secluded away from the rest of the party-goers and sens-

ing he'd been ever so close to kissing her until a friend had found them, interrupting the moment.

She felt Jesse's hand on the small of her back. "You're quiet," he said, moving his hand to lightly touch her forearm and studying her face. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "I'm just tired. You know what happens when I'm tired."

"Yes, you over think everything." He grinned and brushed a strand of her hair out of her eyes. He let his hand rest on her shoulder, where the warmth of his fingertips burned against her bare skin. "Get out of your head, Em. Enjoy life here in the moment."

I'm trying to, she thought, but didn't tell him that he wasn't helping.

A white Toyota RAV4 pulled up in front of them. He opened the passenger door for her and helped her into the truck, then closed the door behind her. He got into the driver's seat a moment later.

She leaned her head back against the leather seat, listening to the sounds of Lady GaGa coming from the speakers. "Nice SUV," she commented.

"Yeah, we got talked into an upgrade at the rental place," he said, turning a dial on the dashboard to lower the volume of the radio.

She twisted around in her seat to look at the amount of space in the back of the truck. "You guys managed to fit all of your suitcases and gear in here?"

"No, not even close," he laughed. "Travis has the full-sized van. We just wanted something a little nicer to ride around in. The Hummer was a little bit out of our price range." He shifted out of

park and began driving down the street.

“I guess you’re staying in New York for a while after this?” She turned her head to look out the passenger-side window so he couldn’t see her face.

“I don’t know. Our soon-to-be new manager thinks he can get a few things lined up out here right away, so we’ll see. If he can’t, our contract with him may be short-lived.”

“How fast would you dump him?” she asked.

“We wouldn’t have to,” he answered. “There just wouldn’t be a band.”

She turned her head away from the window and looked over at him to see if he was kidding. She could see that he wasn’t. “You guys are thinking about breaking up?”

He checked the rearview mirror and moved over into the left turning lane. “The day job life to support doing this for free isn’t as glamorous as it sounds, believe it or not. At some point you have to make a choice.”

They came to a stop at a red light. “I hope the new guy works out,” she said.

“You and me both,” he replied. “Anyway, we’ll see how it goes on Friday night.”

The light changed and he turned onto her tree-lined street, where the part of L.A. known as Miracle Mile met Park La Brea. He brought the truck to a stop at the curb in front of her white stucco building, and a moment of silence passed while he stared straight ahead at the road.

“Thanks for driving me home,” she said, turning her head away from him. She unbuckled her seat belt.

“Doors at 7 on Friday,” he reminded her. “We’re on at 9. I’ll need you to liven the place up if it’s dead.” He leaned across the front seat to kiss the top of her head, but avoided looking her in the eyes.

Great, she thought, reaching for the door handle. She stepped out of the truck and closed the door behind her, not giving Jesse another glance as she walked down the sidewalk to her building’s gate.