

Prologue

Heart pounding, Erin raced to the other side of the stage, holding the microphone high, her other hand at her ear to encourage the audience to sing the chorus louder. She stomped her feet to the drumbeat, keeping everyone on tempo while they shouted the words to her number one song back at her. Their energy was infectious, bringing huge smiles to everyone's faces. Sean came to stand next to her, giving her hip a bump and clapping his hands to the beat while his guitar hung unused in front of him. The night was incredible. "That's it!" she encouraged into the mic. "One more time." This time Sean leaned in, singing his part into her microphone before jumping to a lower level of and stage and launching into his guitar solo. Erin retreated, giving him free reign to connect with the crowd while she danced with the backup singers.

They flowed into the next song, and then the next, never missing a beat. Every note, every chord raised the intensity of the crowd, whose energy flowed right back into the band. Without a doubt, this was going down as one of their best show yet.

The crowd roared their appreciation while the last guitar riff hung in the air along with the smoke from the pyrotechnics. "Thank you, Chicago!" Erin heard her voice through the ear piece a fraction of a second after she spoke the words and the crowd reacted by cheering even louder. Her heart was racing, partly from exertion, but mostly from the excitement of the night. The acoustics of the arena somehow supported the instruments rather than creating an unnatural echo like it did so many arenas. The audience was spectacular, their energy made the band burn brighter and hotter than they ever had performed before.

They'd been on fire. The magic that she knew they were capable of finally made its way to the forefront of their set, sparking the elusive *it* she'd been chasing since shifting from television to music.

It was finally happening. They were on the verge of lift off. Her single was at the top of the charts and with this type of buzz there would be no stopping her. Them. "You have been amazing. We love you. Thank you all for coming out and be safe getting home. Good night!"

With a final bow, the lights went down and they exited the stage as quietly and quickly as possible. Not that anyone would be able to hear them with the ringing in their ears, but getting offstage so the crew could start tear down as quickly as possible was just one of the many parts of making the tour work. She'd been offered a last minute slot to play at the Rock-n-Roll Hall of Fame concert the next night. It meant they'd have to drive all night and would barely have time for a soundcheck, but there was no choice. They couldn't—wouldn't—pass this opportunity up for anything.

"That was awesome!" Sean, her lead guitarist and best friend, all but tossed his guitar to the roadie waiting for him, ignoring the offer of a towel to mop the sweat from his body and swooped Erin into his arms swinging her around with a whoop. "You are awesome!"

"I don't think we've ever had a crowd like that," Brett chimed in, still beating her drumsticks against her the leathers of thigh. "They were hot."

"Especially the redhead in the front row," Austin chimed in with an exaggerated eyebrow waggle.

Erin laughed, wrapping her arms around Sean's neck and giving him a squeeze. "You only think so because she threw her bra at you," she told her bassist. His reputation for being a ladies man preceded him and he loved living up to the expectations.

"You say that like it's a bad thing." Austin smiled a grin that set women's hearts fluttering across the country. "It's only gentlemanly of me to return it, right? Lingerie is expensive."

"Can you hear that?" Sean set Erin down, but kept his arm around her shoulder. She knew rumors were swirling about their relationship, but at the moment, she couldn't find it in herself to care. She was the most revved up she'd ever been. Everyone stopped talking and they finally made out what the crowd was shouting.

"Erin! Erin! Erin!"

"They're chanting my name." She looked at her friends, feeling her eyes well up with tears. "This is incredible."

"Well don't cry, we don't have time for that."

"No time for anything." Eli, her manager—all of their manager really, but he'd worked with her for years and steadfastly stuck with her when she told him she wanted to move on from acting, approached, waving off the crew that were nearby, packing up equipment. "Erin, you remember Archie Jensen, right? He *just happened* to catch the show." He gave her a pointed look, dropping his gaze to Sean's arm before looking back at her.

"Of course." Erin stepped out from under Sean's arm to shake the hand of the man who ran one of the hottest labels in the country, specializing in pop country hybrid acts like hers. He was tall with a fake tan that showed off his white hair and bleached teeth, which he currently bared in what she assumed he thought was a smile. She'd always thought he looked more like a caricature than one of the most powerful men in music, but she'd never say so out loud. "I hope you enjoyed the show, Mr. Jensen."

Jensen nodded, keeping her hand in his and giving it a familiar pat. "We've been watching what you're doing, Erin. This is what we've been waiting for," he told her importantly.

She looked at her band and saw they were just as clueless as she was. Returning her gaze to his she tried to keep her excitement up, but he was a serious wet rag on the high she'd been riding. "What is?"

Sean moved so he was behind Eli and Mr. Jensen, but still in her line of sight and crossed his eyes, making her grin. Brett had found a couple straws and stuck them in her mouth like fangs while she jumped onto Austin's back, doing their best to make her laugh. Erin would much rather celebrate with her friends, but no one said no to Archie Jensen. She wasn't ready to commit career suicide just to get the man to go away.

"The song, the set. All of it." She wondered if he realized how pompous he sounded but figured he probably wouldn't care. He *was* pompous and everything he did and said reflected what he thought was important. It would be annoying if he wasn't such a magician in launching careers. "We're ready for the next step."

Erin shook her head again and extracted her hand from his grip. "I'm sorry, I'm not following. The next step of what?"

Waving away her question, Mr. Jensen ignored the bustle of the crew around them and continued spouting his plan. "We'll get you on air during the morning show, then fly you out for your show tomorrow night."

He finally had everyone's attention. "What morning show?" Brett asked, the straw fangs gone while she moved in and laid a hand on Erin's shoulder, her voice tinged with excitement.

"New York, of course," Eli answered, his eyes dancing with dollar signs.

Erin's mind started racing. A morning radio show in New York meant millions of people who hadn't heard her sing would be exposed to her music. It was the launching point for everything they'd been working toward. "We've got to be in Cleveland for the Rock n Roll Hall of Fame sound check tomorrow." Everyone in the band was living out their childhood dream of playing at the Hall. The success of tonight's show had them riding high. New York would only enhance that.

"Erin." Eli frowned again, this time at Brett's hand on her shoulder until the other woman dropped it so he could grip Erin's elbow and pull her away from the rest of the band for a private word. "I understand that the show in Cleveland is a dream come true for the guys," He always referred to her band as *the guys*, which set her teeth on edge, but she let it go. That was a battle for another time. "But, you have to think about yourself here. You're on the verge of something next level here. Something life changing. And if you go big, so do they. Don't tank your career only to make some hangers on happy."

She reared back at his words, unable to believe what he'd just said. "They aren't hangers on. They are my band. I couldn't do what I do without them."

"You've got that backwards," Eli said in a harsh whisper. "There are thousands of talented, good looking people in LA. It's you they can't do without. You're the star of this show. Don't forget that. Without you, they wouldn't have the careers they have."

As much as she hated what Eli was saying, she couldn't ignore the fact that it was—at least in part—true. "Give me a few minutes to talk to them."

Eli gave her a measured look and stepped back. "Two minutes," he clipped out. "Mr. Jensen can't be expected to wait." Turning on his heel, he moved to tell the other man who knew what while her friends moved in, forming a tight circle around her.

"You're going?" Austin asked before she even opened her mouth.

Erin blew a breath out her nose. "Yeah. It's an opportunity we can't pass up. I need more than just a couple minutes to change clothes and clean up, even if I am going." She held her arms out to her sides. The sequined top was still damp from her sweat and the rhinestone bangles that wove their way up her arm clanged together. She did not want to fly in her show clothes.

Sean grinned and handed her a duffel bag. "I had Emma run and grab you a couple changes of clothes from the bus when I heard the offer."

Erin stared at him, a slow grin spreading over her face. "Why would you do that?"

"You're going to rock this," Brett told her, her normally cheery face serious. "And even though I hate how that troll said it, he's not wrong. Without you, we don't have the band. You're the glue that holds us all together. We need you to do this for all of us."

"He's wrong," Erin started to object, but was cut off when Sean pulled her into his body for a hug.

"He's not," he murmured into her hair. "Yeah, we'd still be playing, but we wouldn't be here. With you. You are the reason all of this is happening, so you need to do this."

Erin pulled back to look at everyone. Everything, all their hopes and dreams, rested on her. "Okay. You guys can drive through the night and get there to do the soundcheck without me."

After the shows, I'll fly in and make it in time to hit the stage. I wouldn't want to be here without all of you. This—all of this—is possible only because each of you are here with me."

"Oh for God's sake, don't get all mushy on us." Austin had a well-known aversion to real feelings and Erin grinned, realizing she was hitting a little close to home for him. "Go. Be amazing. And then we'll kick ass on the Hall of Fame stage."

"Meanwhile, there is a beautiful redhead waiting for me to return her intimates to her."

Erin shook her head but couldn't hold back a laugh. "What about you?" she asked Brett. "Do you want to come with me? We could hit up a spa on the label's dime before flying back for the show. Sleep in a real bed, rather than on the bus with the great snoring duo."

Brett laughed and twirled her sticks again. "As great as that sounds, I'm going to pass. Spending any more time with the suits than I have to doesn't sound like a fun time to me," she said with a soft smile. "Besides, someone's got to be the face of the band. It might as well be you. You've had the most practice in front of the camera."

Ignoring the reference to her fame, Erin couldn't help but ask, "And this decision wouldn't have anything to do with the redhead's friend, who was eying you like sex on a stick throughout the set?"

The small shrug didn't fool Erin. She knew Brett struggled with life on the road, probably more than any of them. "We'll see. If nothing else, I'll have a drinking buddy while Austin keeps her friend occupied." Bret finally calmed the sticks and reached for Erin, giving her a solid hug. "You give too much of yourself," she whispered, barely being heard over the noise of everyone else. "Don't sacrifice yourself for us. We need you to be you, otherwise all of this is for nothing."

"I'm not sacrificing myself," Erin objected, but Brett shook her head.

"Go, have fun. Do some shopping, hit the spa, eat some awesome food. Enjoy it. Everything else will work out."

Erin watched her walk away, knowing Sean was waiting for her attention, but he didn't push. He never pushed, which was one of the reasons she was so comfortable with him. She almost wished they were in a relationship like the tabloids assumed. He was so different from everyone else in her world because he understood her in a way no one else seemed to. Plus, he didn't want anything from her. It was a nice switch.

After Brett turned the corner Erin turned to give him her full attention. She pointed to the bag he was still holding. "Should I leave you in charge while I'm gone?"

He barked out a laugh at that. "I'd rather you not. I couldn't handle solving everyone's problems the way you do."

She snorted. "You'd be fine."

"Nope, couldn't do it," he replied evenly. He was always so calm. So certain of everything. Erin envied that more than she could express. "But, it's okay for you to enjoy it. Sleep in that soft hotel bed. Enjoy room service and getting pampered a bit. Plus, it's the right thing to do. For all of us."

"Listen," he continued cutting her off. "You like being in charge. I get that. And you like having things your way. You need to do this. And you need to do it alone."

He leaned in and pressed a light kiss against her temple. "This is just the beginning. Trust me."

Placing her earphones on the stand, Erin turned to the morning show shock jock who had spent the past half hour drilling her on everything from her current relationship status to being a child star. Everything and anything except the music and tour, which were the things she was willing to talk about. She'd easily deflected the tried and true comments and managed to steer most things back to the tour and their hit single. "Thank you," she said, struggling to sound sincere. "This was a great segment."

"Thank you," he replied. "You're a breath of fresh air. Nothing at all like what we were expecting." He offered a smile to try to take the sting out of his words, but the barb struck true. Her reputation was something she'd always have to deal with. It had been naive to assume people would accept this new version of her without questioning the person she'd been. The spoiled star who shined too bright too fast and hadn't known how to handle it.

Bitting back the retort that sprang to her lips, she stood and looked toward the booth, where Eli had been stationed throughout the show smiling encouragingly and using hand gestures to try to convey what he wanted her to talk about. Except now he stood with his phone pressed to his ear, turned away from the window. His shoulders were bowed and if his chin dipped any lower it'd be buried in his chest. She pushed through the door out of the booth, uncertain what was happening, but sure it wasn't good. Had Mr. Jensen changed his mind? Or maybe the show had been canceled—although she couldn't think why that would happen.

"All of them?" Eli asked, his voice strained. He looked her way and turned abruptly away to speak even more softly into his phone.

She leaned against the wall next to the door, realizing how eerily silent everyone was. They were quiet and staring at her with mixed expressions ranging from horror to pity. "What's going on?" she whispered, her voice sounding unnaturally loud as it rippled through the tension. Eli was pale as he turned back around, his tan faded away in the couple of moments since she'd last glanced at him. The look he gave her had the hair standing on the back of her neck. "What is it?" she demanded, only slightly louder.

In all the years she'd known him, she'd never seen him look like this. It was unnerving. Her breath caught in her chest as she waited for him to speak.

Finally, Eli approached her, resting his hands on her shoulders to meet her eyes, his filled with sorrow. "There was an accident. The busses hit some black ice early this morning" His voice broke. "They're all dead."