

Rockstar Blues

The van bounced-- Jordan thought the shocks must be close to giving out entirely. In the back, Victor, complained about the equipment jostling. Matt, the one driving, only laughed and told everyone to hold on. The roads were slick; it was raining dark and heavy. The windows were streaked with glowing bubbles of water, racing to be the first to freedom. Behind them, distorted, were the faces of buildings. Everything was old and antique here, wrapped up in the snow-globe beads of rain, a backdrop to the sound of Sara humming behind Jordan.

After a sharp turn, the van came to a near stop, jostling Jordan forward in his seat. Outside the window, a line of people dressed in dark jackets and jeans were huddling under scrawny awnings, and they were all waiting impatiently for the same thing. Jordan hoped they were fans, not just bored college students. The building itself wasn't a big place, but it wasn't small, either. It was big enough to have two doors: one for entering, and one for exiting. From the second, there was a stream of people filtering out. They were reluctant, often waiting for their umbrellas to burst open. Then they'd hurry out into the rain and scatter all at once.

The van turned down a narrow alley. On the corner there were two girls—Jordan didn't recognize them. One's hair was bleached blonde, with a solitary red streak running down it. From her cherry-lipstick lips dangled a cigarette; the sight alone was enough to fill Jordan's nostrils with that choking, burning smell. The girl's shirt was red and peeked out from under a thin purple hoodie, and she was in a black miniskirt, wearing boots with heels that easily made her taller than Jordan. The other girl was in faded blue skinny jeans and a black band tee, and her Converse shoes were pristine. She had a cigarette, too, but her lips were much paler than her friend's. Her hair was long, thick, and uncomfortably black.

The girls disappeared behind the van as it crept through the alley, but had still managed to remind Jordan of the long nights he used to spend puffing on cigarettes with Sara, passing out flyers for

their band on the same corner. It would rain back then, too, and he remembered how Sara would make a tent of her fingers to keep the cigarette lit.

"We're here," Matt shouted, happy. He threw the door open and hopped out. His boots splashed in a puddle. The van was parked just beside the back entrance, lit by a flickering light bulb over the door. Beside it, a single other car adorned the lot: a silver Volvo, sparkling in the rain, telling Jordan he'd be suffering Sara's boyfriend--Chris'--company tonight.

The old van's aluminum doors creaked and shook, and a cold breeze rushed in from behind Jordan. Victor was already pulling things out through the back doors and stacking them on the asphalt. Jordan craned his neck and peeked into the back: Victor and Matt grabbed an amp, slung a tarp over it, and heaved it off towards the venue door.

Sara was still sitting in one of the two back seats, rifling through her phone with headphones in. Its light glinted off her eyes and made her seem otherworldly.

"Hey," Jordan shouted. She looked up at him. "Warm-ups?"

"Texting Chris," she said. Jordan frowned and tossed open the passenger door.

"Don't let him distract you," he said, then paused. "I'll carry your share."

"I'll make it up to you," Sara said, then let her eyes fall back to the narrow screen.

The rain pounded puddles like drums, and already Jordan could feel it drowning his hair. He tossed on the emergency black beanie kept in the glove compartment and hurried around back of the van. The white paint shone Halloween orange in the dull light.

Jordan had instruments in each hand: a guitar in his right and a bass in his left, both packed inside neat black cases, thick and heavy. The door to the venue was already propped open with a brick, and he crammed himself inside.

Jordan passed Matt and Victor in the narrow hallway. On his way out, Matt gave a curious stare at Jordan, then gestured toward the van. Jordan shook his head.

"Something came up," Jordan said. Then he fumbled around backstage, the lights dimmed in the interest of ambiance, before dropping off the instruments. He held the door for Matt and Victor when they came back in, carrying an amp, and Matt shook his head and scrunched his nose.

The rain beat down on Jordan's head and he hurried back to the van. He tossed a loudspeaker up onto his shoulder, but waited between the van's pale doors. He watched Sara fumble with her phone, settle on a song, and sing it aloud. There was a softness to it all, but the lyrics were edgy and her lips were quick. Finally, he brought the loudspeaker inside, still drenched in Sara's sweet melody. Or maybe it was rain.

When they were all unloading the drum set, which they always saved for last, Sara was still in her seat making funny noises with her mouth. There were "oohs" and "ahhs" and Jordan always thought it funny how she saved those for last. Her cheeks turned red when she saw the three boys staring at her, and she shooed them away with waving hands. Matt pushed the doors closed. Jordan and Victor had the last of the drum set in their hands, and Matt led them inside.

"Another good show tonight?" the owner asked from across the room. There was an inexperienced punk band hammering it out on stage, so he had to shout. Matt threw up his hands.

"You know it!" Matt said, flashing his ivory teeth in a smirk. His hair was messy and loose tonight, like he usually kept it for the shows. Jordan felt up towards his own hair, straight, thin, then the beanie. He sighed, not sure he liked his new haircut.

"Yo, Jord, you good to go?" Victor asked. His drums were as set up as could be without actually being on stage, and he was fumbling with a cymbal.

"Just let me tune real quick," Jordan replied.

The other band finished, notes ringing out in triumph, but their amps wavered and buzzed. Victor hopped onto the stage and a few girls in the crowd cheered his name. Victor took a little bow and

hoisted up part of his set. Jordan noticed Victor's jeans only had fake pockets on the back: they were the pair Victor had taken from his ex-girlfriend.

"You're still stealing your girls' pants?" Jordan laughed. Victor crossed his arms and raised his chin.

"It's all part of the package," Victor said. "I'm cute, that's why they love me!" He smirked and his lip ring tilted and caught the light. "Besides, she didn't want 'em when she left."

Sara came in with a mic stand tossed over her shoulders, flicking up two fingers as greeting to Jordan. He smiled at her.

"Everything better?" he asked. Sara stuck out her tongue.

"Yep! Ready to sing my heart out." She had a cocky smirk, like all rock musicians tended to, but hers was different. Jordan liked the way her lips curled up in the corners, like a cat.

Now Jordan hopped across the stage from the side, guitar slung over his shoulder. It was a deep red, crimson and polished, with a long rosewood neck and gleaming silver strings. He plugged in the wound black cord and made sure everything worked. Just a couple clean riffs, then checked the pedals, and finally another familiar riff to get the crowd excited. Matt was leaning on his amp, bass ready to go, his head buried in the clouds. Victor beat out a quick pattern, and the crowd got silent. Then they cheered, and Jordan heard a girl scream above the rest. Sara leapt onto the stage and shouted her hellos, and the boys in the front of the crowd whistled. She slammed the feet of her mic stand onto the stage and leaned into it, and the show began.

Jordan felt Victor's drumming shake the floor. He felt the vibration of each string under his fingertips, too, and the cord of his guitar rapping the ground each time he jumped around the stage. Jordan noticed his amp was a little louder than usual, or that maybe Sara was quieter, because between his riffs and the pounding drums he couldn't hear her at all. But the crowd was good that night. Jordan watched the heads bob under the changing lights, and the familiar faces up front were grinning and

screaming. Up against the wall, the two girls from the street corner were sipping drinks and chatting. Sometimes the blonde stopped to watch the stage, but rarely. Her eyes seemed fixed on the ceiling, on the lights and the colors.

Jordan's ears rang as his last riff died out into the wet air. His bangs were clinging to his forehead, messy and everywhere. The beanie was part of him now, and the back of his shirt was like a second layer of skin. Sweat gathered around the rose tattoo on his right hand, and dripped onto the strings. Across the stage, Matt pointed at a girl in the front row and winked, then combed his hair through sweaty fingers.

"I'm so happy you all made it," Sara screamed into the mic, and for the first time since the show started, Jordan could actually hear her. Then she laughed, like sugar and honey early in the morning. She put the mic back in its cradle and waved to her boyfriend in the front row. He waved back at Sara and ducked out of the crowd.

Everyone met up in the cramped hallways backstage after taking turns packing the gear into the neat black boxes with sharp metal corners, and after everything was already back in the van. Sara hugged her boyfriend, who Jordan felt might have gotten taller since last time. The man was handsome enough: good jaw, good hair, but always a little too clean cut for these venues. His eyes, too, were always elsewhere, never on Sara.

"You were cute up there," her boyfriend said, holding Sara around the shoulder. His right thumb was on her collarbone and she was leaning into him. Her hair was drenched in sweat, stuck in a loose zigzag-like wave, and had left streaks on her boyfriend's shirt where it clung. In the dim lighting, Jordan thought it could've been black.

"Please, I'm always cute," Sara said, laughing. Her boyfriend shrugged and chuckled along. Then he shifted his weight and stuffed his left hand into the pocket of his baggy jeans.

"Yes, well-" her boyfriend began, but stopped.

"But not as cute as me," Victor said. "Everyone knows I'm the star of the show." Then he winked at Sara; she patted him on the head and messed up his gelled hair.

"Yes, yes, Victor the lady-killer," she replied.

Matt chuckled behind his hand, "For real though, you get all the chicks." Victor smirked and stared out at the girls just past the stage.

"Speaking of girls," Victor said. Jordan eyed the crowd: a few familiar girls gathered just past the stage, eyelids heavy with makeup, lips puckered.

"Your people need you," Matt said. Victor continued to smirk.

"They always come back for more," Victor laughed, and trotted out towards his girls. On the way out he nudged Jordan on the shoulder.

"You know, you've gotta make a move sometime," Victor said in a whisper with raised eyebrows. His breath smelled like pot. Jordan rolled his eyes and pushed Victor out towards his adoring fans.

"You guys should try adding in some electronic stuff," Sara's boyfriend said, after a gap in the conversation. Jordan gave a sarcastic glance at Matt, who scratched the back of his head with worn nails and looked over his shoulder.

"I'm gettin' out of here, I think," Matt said.

"I'll help. I'll drive," Jordan said.

"I got it." Matt said. "Besides, you've got things to do here, right?" He cast an intimidating look at Jordan and rested his hands at his hips.

"It can wait, come on," Jordan pleaded. Matt shook his head and turned for the door.

"Text me later," Matt said, casually, before slipping out the back. Jordan opened his mouth to shout, or scream, but restrained himself. Now wasn't the time. It wasn't right.

Sara whispered something to her boyfriend. He stooped down toward her ear and mouthed something back. Then she walked over to Jordan. Her boyfriend's eyes caught Jordan's briefly, but he brushed the gaze off and faced Sara, instead. She was the same height as him, and when she talked they were perfectly eye-to-eye.

"Things to do," she sang through thin pink lips. "How suspicious. Oh, wait! Did the girl from your class show up? You should go talk to-"

"Nah," Jordan said. "Not that." Sara pouted and wandered back to her boyfriend's side. Her left foot curved inward when she walked, and her fraying shoelaces dragged on the concrete. Jordan stepped after her, carefully placing each foot in front of the other, and wound up just in front of Sara and her boyfriend.

"Look," Jordan said. Sara fell back against her boyfriend's side. Her eyes were widened, lashes short but jutting straight out. The two of them smelled like cigarettes. "Wait. I thought you quit?" Sara looked away, down towards her boyfriend's Nikes, or the thin strip of black carpet running down the hallway like a freeway divider.

"No way," her boyfriend said. "she doesn't need to, anyway."

"Chris-"

"Sara, you were supposed to quit. Remember, for your voice?" Jordan took a step towards her, glaring into her eyes. He could see the beads of sweat caught in her eyebrows, and the ones yet to drip down from the edge of her hairline.

"What are you, her mom? Relax, dude," her boyfriend said. Jordan pivoted on his heels to face the man, and looked up at Chris' dark eyes and sharp jaw.

"Shut up," Jordan said. "And don't call me dude. This isn't your business."

"Jordan, stop-"

"She's my girlfriend, it is my damn business. You need to back off, *dude*." Jordan bit the inside of his lip and stepped back from them. Her boyfriend had since moved his arm around Sara's waist and held her tight against his side.

"I know I should have quit," Sara said, "but it's hard."

"I did it," Jordan said.

"I know--"

"We were supposed to quit together, remember? That was the deal." Jordan yanked the beanie off his head, which was damp and limp in his hand. He dug his fingers into its wool--it was soft and didn't resist.

"Jordan, come on," Sara said.

"Let's go, Sara," her boyfriend cut in. Jordan's nostrils flared and he cut into the beanie even further, feeling each small hole between the knitted strands.

"Go," Jordan said. "I'm leaving, anyway." He took a handful of steps towards the crowd, and their smiling faces and waving hands scratched at the inside of his eyes. Then he stopped. "The band wanted me to talk to you," he said. "They don't think you're committed."

Then Jordan walked further toward the crowd, and though the next act was already booming on stage with high-energy electronic ballads, all he heard was silence. He imagined Sara, leaning concave against her boyfriend, her eyes downcast and smile faded. After every step his toes dug in, and he wanted to turn and look, to make sure she was all right, to see life in her eyes, but he knew he'd see her sad face and he'd take it all back, and he'd go back, and nothing would change.

The floor was packed, each person a flailing roadblock keeping Jordan from the front entrance. He shoved a few skinny boys aside, brushing their bare arms, and weaved past huddles of girls. Everything smelled like sweat, smoke, and alcohol.

Jordan stomped up towards the bar, and leaned his elbows on its polished wood.

"Whiskey," Jordan said. The bartender raised his eyebrows.

"You're drinking?" The bartender asked.

"What of it?" The bartender flicked a bottle off the shelf, cranked off the top, and poured a bit of golden liquid into a sparkling glass. Jordan took it up in his palm, and the chill felt good against his stiff hands.

"Don't overdo it," the bartender said. Jordan walked away.

The crowd roared, and from over everyone's heads Jordan could barely make out a pair of men on stage, with their signature snapback hats and their turntables. He took a seat at a table off to the side of the venue, not far from where the two girls had been during his show, and sipped at the whiskey. Sharp and stiff, like the wooden chair he was sitting on. He forced the liquid down his throat.

Then he saw Victor bob through the crowd, chasing a fiery blonde with long legs out towards the entrance. She had that hard-to-get grin plastered across her face, and her hair bounced with each step. Victor put his hand on the small of her back and led her to the door--she was nearly a full head taller than him, even considering his mohawk. Jordan took another drink.

The overhead lights turned to reds and yellows, shooting fire over the crowd, and on stage the local dance-duo was blasting away. The crowd erupted into screams each time the bass rattled the poster-clotted walls. Jordan hadn't minded this music before, but now it made him think of Sara's boyfriend, so he choked down the last bit of whiskey.

Jordan thought about what he'd said, and whether he should text Sara to apologize. The phone was already in his hand, lit up, and her name was across the top of the message screen. She'd been the last one to respond in their last conversation. Jordan hadn't known what to say then, either.

Then the phone buzzed, and Matt's picture overlapped Sara's name, with the text "how'd it go?" Jordan hid Matt's smiling face, his message, and shoved the phone down his pocket.

A pair of shadows crept across his face; followed by the scent of flowers and perfume. He looked up. Two girls were standing in front of him: the two from before, from outside, from everywhere. The blonde was still sipping a local beer, leaving lip prints on the head of the bottle, while her friend texted with black fingernails.

"I saw you on stage. You're pretty good," the blonde said. "My name's Summer."

"Jordan," he said. "And thanks." Her friend put the phone away and cast a sharp glance towards the two on stage. Jordan noticed her piercings: a nose ring and matching silver studs planted under the corners of her bottom lip. She elbowed Summer, who nudged her back before turning a blinding smile to Jordan.

"That's all you have to say?" Summer asked.

"Nah. But I'm curious, what's her name?" Jordan nodded his head at the black-haired girl, who scoffed.

"It's Liz," she said.

"Enjoying the music?" He asked, hoping.

"How about we get out of here," Summer said, not really a question. "Those two losers on stage don't know real music." Then she winked at Jordan. "But you do, of course."

"I hate dubstep," Liz added with a growl. "And they're not very talented." Liz averted her eyes. Jordan felt the razors in her voice as if pressed against his own skin, and cracked a smile. He stood abruptly, empty glass in one hand and sagging beanie in the other, and walked to the front. The girls followed him; Liz had her phone out again, and Summer was playing with her hair. The shine of her bleached hair under the flashing lights was blinding, and Jordan was starting to get a headache.

"Thanks," Jordan said to the bartender, sliding his empty glass across the polished wood. The bartender cocked his head and smiled through cracked lips. His neck was thick, and an eye-of-truth tattoo took up most of its left half. He peered at the girls tagging along behind Jordan.

"I never thought I'd see the day," the bartender said. He raised his eyebrow.

"Yeah, you and everybody else," Jordan added, and he forced his lips into some strange half-happy pose. Then he stepped outside through the glass door, smudged with fingerprints. The rain was hardly noticeable anymore, but had been replaced by a breeze with a nasty bite. Jordan tugged the defeated beanie back over his hair.

"Where to?" He asked. Summer turned to Liz, whose fingers were furiously smashing the tiny phone, eyebrows sharpened to a point, mouth in a snarl.

"Well, she wants to go home," Summer pouted. Then she bounced over to Jordan and slipped her hand around his arm, "but we took two cars. I'm free!" Liz looked up and rolled her eyes, then fiddled with the pair of keys she'd produced from her jacket.

"Later," Liz said, and walked off towards the parking lot.

Once her friend was out of earshot, Summer added, "Finally! I swear that girl never wants to have any fun!" Jordan sighed.

"Home sounds good, actually," he told Summer.

"Okay! Where's home?" Summer's shrill voice added to the pounding in Jordan's skull, and he pulled away from her. She relinquished his arm and glared, then pulled out a cigarette with a sharp twist of her wrist.

"Not with you," Jordan said.

"Fine." Summer strut away from him, towards another lot across the street. There wasn't any traffic, so she jumped into the road without hesitation. Then she stopped and jeered at him. She lit the cigarette. "Your music sucks, anyway!" He stood there a moment, watching her leave.

"Because you actually care about music," Jordan said to himself. "Yeah, right."

The sidewalk was dark, but the parking lot nestled behind the nearby buildings was bright and full. Jordan saw Liz still walking to her car, moving slowly, her phone still out. Jordan followed her, jogging through puddles, drowning his hole-ridden canvas shoes with water.

"Wait up!" He shouted. Liz turned, surprised, and gave him a look something like a smile, mixed with enough teenage angst to silence a pep rally.

"I thought you were with Summer," she said. "You know, getting down and dirty." He rubbed the back of his head and laughed a nervous cacophony.

"I'm not into that," Jordan replied. Some of the angst dissolved, and Liz's smile seemed a little more sincere this time.

"That so?" She'd started walking again, but slowly, and her eyes were nowhere at all.

"I'm still getting over someone else," he said.

"Why are you telling me?" Liz asked. Then she paused. "I bet it's your lead singer." Jordan adjusted his beanie, and played with a loose strand of hair. "You're so obvious. You were staring at her like a lost puppy the whole show. Let me guess, now you want pity? She's got a boyfriend?"

Jordan watched Liz's hair twitch when she walked, and the way the water scurried from her feet as she planted her shoes down on the blacktop.

"I know. I'm mean, I'm cold. I'm distant, right?" Liz scoffed and cocked her head back. "I bet you wish you went with Summer now, right?"

Liz stopped at her car, a black Honda. It was the kind of car Jordan had taken to shows with Sara, back before Matt and Victor, back when it was just a guitar, Sara's voice, and lyrics made by sleepless nights. Liz pulled out a cigarette and lit it. Gray swirls surrounded them, and Jordan held his breath for a moment—that smell again. His skin itched. His feet were cold. Bass thumped in the distance the way it did through walls, rude and obnoxious. Then he let the smoke in. He sighed.

"Can I have one?" Jordan asked. Liz smacked the container and pulled out a skinny cigarette, then tossed it to Jordan with her pink lighter. He lit it, cradling it between his lips, and let the smoke dangle above his tongue a moment.

"You know," he started to say, "I don't think you're any of those things." Liz narrowed her eyes and blew smoke at him.

"So why don't you go after her?" Liz asked. "So she has a boyfriend, who cares? She'll cheat, eventually. Why not with you?"

"That's not what I want," Jordan said. Liz gave a shallow, cold laugh.

"God, you are a weird kid," she said.

Liz wrestled with her keys a moment, then the car door clicked unlocked. She swung it open, leaned inside, and started the ignition. The exhaust groaned, steam and gas rising, then fading into the parking lot's artificial light.

Jordan let his cigarette burn down to the tips of his fingers. Liz was poised against the car, knees bent and pointing straight at him, her pale skin exposed through the holes in her jeans. He took a final puff of choking smoke, then tossed the cigarette to the curb. He watched it burn out, watched the life disappear from its used carcass. Liz sighed.

"Want to go for a drive?" she asked. Jordan craned his neck, peeking at the empty lot behind the venue. No van, no silver Volvo, only dumpsters and a bulb newly extinguished over the back door. He turned toward Liz, and their eyes met: her eyes were dark and unyielding, like the eyes of death. She was a silhouette in front of the open door, and the cabin light seeped out past her narrow legs, beckoning him. "If you wait I'll change my mind."

"Yeah," he said. "Where else would I go?"

"Forget about her," Liz said. She frowned, and her eyebrows fell. "It's over."