TAKING OFF

## STOP THE PRESSES

With her role as a newspaper editor in the new film Kill the Messenger, actress Mary Elizabeth Winstead is ready to make headlines

By DAN CRANE Photography by ELIZABETH WEINBERG

BECOMING A horror-film "scream queen" never was part of the plan for Mary Elizabeth Winstead. "It just sort of ... happened," she says, sitting on the grass in the shade of a eucalyptus tree in LA's bucolic Griffith Park. But after appearing in films like the 2011 remake of *The Thing*, *The Ring Two* and *Final Destination 3*, she came to appreciate

horror's dedicated and passionate fan base. "Even though I was an unknown actress, I could feel like I was important to some group of people, which was really cool," she says. Nevertheless, Winstead adds, "At a certain point, it did become a little bit of a boxed-in kind of feeling."

Now, with Kill the Messenger, which hits theaters this month, she's poised to break out of that box. The film is based on the true story of journalist Gary Webb (Jeremy Renner)—who, with a series of articles published in 1996 in the San Jose Mercury News, revealed an alleged link between the CIA, the Nicaraguan Contras and the American crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s. In addition to the sensational plot, the film features cameos by heavyweights including Ray Liotta,

## DOUBLE THREAT

Winstead's musical side gig, Got a Girl, is no vanity project. It all started after legendary music producer Dan "The Automator" Nakamura (of Gorillaz fame) saw an online video of Winstead singing and approached her at the premiere of Scott Pilgrim vs. the World (in which he contributed a few songs and she played Ramona Flowers). At the time, Winstead was listening almost exclusively to 1960s French pop, so when Nakamura told her that he was interested in doing something rooted in that style and era, she said yes (or *oui*, as the case may be). The result is the enchantingly retro I Love You But I Must Drive Off This Cliff Now, which was released this past July.

Andy Garcia and Oliver Platt. But perhaps most significant for Winstead is that the 29-year-old actress didn't have to audition for the role.

Director Michael Cuesta and star Renner both had admired Winstead's performance in the critically acclaimed film *Smashed* (in which she plays an out-of-control alcoholic

opposite Aaron Paul) and decided to reach out. "It's only been happening in the last couple of years that I haven't been auditioning for things as much and just getting offers," she says. "But it's kind of nerve-wracking, because you get on set and you don't already have that audition stamp of approval. I was a little afraid they would fire me after the first day, like, 'This is totally wrong!"

On the contrary, Winstead delivers a stellar performance as Anna Simons, a *Mercury News* editor she describes as "very young and in over her head." (Webb's real-life editor, Dawn Garcia, was not involved in the making of the film.) Judging from the way Winstead has been handling her career, the in-over-her-head part is a stroke of acting genius.

