

Betrayal of the Band

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Dedication

To my parents, my husband, and my children for their
support and encouragement.

1

Where it All Begins

The never-gonna-be-a-chart-topper on stage stopped wailing, and a group in the back corner of the coffeehouse cheered.

Zoey swallowed back the feeling of psychotic moths swarming from her stomach into her throat and squeezed the paper cup of unsipped tea. One more karaoke performer down. Soon...soon...

She couldn't even finish the terrifying thought. The cup's sides started to cave, and she loosened her grip.

"Next..." The man at the mic checked a clipboard. "Zoey Harris."

Zoey stood on jittery legs and wove between mismatched tables fingering the beads at her neck. She should've bailed on her older sister, Livvy, the moment the off-key strains of the previous song had insulted her ears. She should've run out of the Downstairs Coffeehouse after seeing "Karaoke Night" on the black dry erase board. She should've stopped her sister from adding her name to the list of performers.

She stepped onto the black plywood stage and faced the latte- and tea-drinking audience. Her heart pounded so loud the microphone would probably pick

up its beats. She wished Justin sat out there grinning and believing in her. But “no boyfriends” was rule number one on sisters’ night. Of course, this was more like force-Zoey-to-face-her-fears night. Or, depending on what happened in the next five minutes, Zoey-kills-Livvy night.

Then the opening notes of a '90s classic blasted through the speakers. With the first word, the song swelled from deep inside sparking every nerve. She forgot her anger toward Livvy. Forgot her dread of the stage. Forgot everything except this moment.

By the time she hit the first chorus, conversations ceased. Every person stared. She owned the crowd. She danced with the mic, expressed the music with her entire body.

Mama’s dream for her come true.

The music ended, and the last notes faded, replaced by the crowd’s cheers. Zoey floated off the stage savoring the high that helped her forget she was motherless. But the euphoria evaporated.

Livvy was no longer alone. A college-age guy straddled the back of a chair. Lean and narrow-chested, his dark hair hung to his shoulders smooth and straight.

What happened to sisters’ night out? Rule number two was no picking up guys. Zoey was already taken, and Livvy attracted losers.

Zoey dropped into her seat.

“What did I tell you?” Livvy held out a peach tea peace offering. She had on her falling-in-love face—cheeks flushed and eyes sparkling. “If this was one of those TV talent competitions, you’d totally be going on national television.”

“Uh-huh.” Zoey tipped her head at the strange

dude.

"This is Vance." Livvy gave him a head-over-heels smile. He winked in return.

That confirmed it. Only a loser would flirt with clichés.

"He wanted to meet you," Livvy said.

"Me?" Zoey sputtered tea onto the scarred wood table.

"You totally rocked that stage." Vance turned his green-eyed charm on Zoey. "You shouldn't be performing karaoke."

"Thanks." Zoey heard the caution in her voice. It wasn't as if she hadn't been complimented before, but not by some random guy who was hitting on her sister.

"How would you like to join a band?"

The on-stage adrenaline jolted through Zoey's veins. Was this for real, a total stranger inviting her to join his band? But the excitement passed. "I'm already in a band."

"What's your group's name?"

"We don't have one." Zoey caught his indulgent smile and looked away. A no-name band. She could barely take herself seriously, let alone expect him to.

"I'm in this progressive metal band called Aurora Fire." Vance's voice swelled with pride. "I write the songs, play lead guitar, and sing backup. Our singer's gone until fall, so we need a voice to fill in over the summer."

"Oh." She rolled a necklace bead between her fingers. He wasn't just using her as an excuse to flirt with Livvy. He hadn't even looked at Livvy since Zoey sat down. She felt her rapid pulse in her neck. Her heart had never beaten this wildly before. Not even while on stage.

No one had ever asked her to join a band. Well, no one besides Justin, but that was back in eighth grade, and they were already a couple then, so that hardly counted. "I'm sorry. I can't just abandon my friends."

"Yeah, I get that." Vance's voice fell like a kid reluctantly accepting a no. But he couldn't have wanted her to join that badly. He'd only heard her sing once. "You got a lot of concerts planned?"

"No. Only one—next Saturday." Flaming heat engulfed her head. She sounded like a silly middle-schooler playing a band-style video game.

"We've got concerts lined up over the summer here in Fairbanks, and in Anchorage, and at the state fair. We need a voice like yours."

Images danced through her mind, quickened her breath. Standing on stage under hot lights, backed by a live band, facing a crowd of cheering strangers. What a way to spend the summer before senior year.

"You wouldn't be abandoning your other band." Vance leaned even closer, his coffee-scented breath laced with something bitter, his gaze both begging and sincere. "And this would be good for them too. Trust me; that would benefit you a lot. You'd get exposure for yourself and your other band. You'd meet the people who book shows. You'd get experience."

There it was. The one thing she lacked. She had the talent. She had the determination. But she didn't have the experience.

She glanced across the table at Livvy, who nodded encouragement. But of course Livvy would be encouraging. She'd dragged Zoey here for experience, and she was still giving dreamy looks at Vance as if she'd become his number-one groupie.

"I don't know." His argument sounded

convincing, and he offered what she needed—connections, exposure, experience. The possibilities fluttered her heart and prickled her nerves.

“D’you want to meet the rest of the band? They’re over there.” Vance gestured at the tables behind Zoey and then stood. “C’mon. Let me introduce ya.”

“OK.”

Livvy started to stand, but Zoey shook her head. She didn’t need to hold her big sister’s hand. “I’m good.”

She stayed on Vance’s heels through the tight stream of back-to-back chairs until he stopped at his table.

Three guys and a bubble-gum-pink-haired girl clustered around a table littered with half-empty paper cups. They looked older than Zoey, probably in their early twenties like Livvy. And judging from their tats and piercings, they wanted to star in a reality spin-off: Fairbanks Ink.

“This is Zoey. She just finished singing.” Vance pointed around the table. “That’s Devin, Travis, Myles, Bailee.”

The names buzzed inside Zoey’s head like speaker feedback.

“As good as Gwen Stefani herself,” black-bearded Myles said.

“Thanks.” Zoey tried to sound confident, but off stage, she was as timid as a nun at a shock-rocker concert.

“Best all night.” The three silver studs under Devin’s lip flashed.

“Really?” Bailee’s voice jumped an octave. She’d performed right before Zoey, a performance only the tone-deaf could’ve called not horrible.

"Yeah. You can't sing. She can."

"And she can fill-in for Halleigh until September." Vance's sharp-edged tone reminded Zoey of Dad cutting off her and Livvy's arguments.

"I don't know." Bailee leaned against Myles, her hand resting high on his inner thigh. "Karaoke is nothing. Who knows if she can sing worth anything with an actual band?"

"Shut up, Bailee." Devin leaned across the tiny table. "Only band members have a say."

"Bailee's right." Myles shoved Devin against his chair.

Zoey held her breath and inched one foot back. If a fight started, she was gone.

"But Zoey's worth a try." The guy with hoops in his lip like oddly-shaped fangs—Travis?—rubbed a hand over his bald head. "Else we gotta cancel next week."

Bailee shrugged a shoulder and studied her neon orange nails.

The guys eyed Zoey as if assessing a new instrument's specs. Not what she'd expected after Vance's pleading. He'd acted as if she'd be the band's savior.

"We gotta hear her with us first." Myles stuck with his girlfriend. Bailee might not have a say, but Myles gave her a voice.

"No problem." Zoey lifted her chin. She'd prove capable of singing anything they played. "When's your next practice?"

"Tomorrow. Six o'clock," Vance said. "You free?"

"Yes." She'd cancel on anything or anyone else. No way was she letting a bubble-gum-haired girl who couldn't carry a tune win.

“OK. We practice in the basement of our house.” Vance asked for Zoey’s number. “I’ll text you the address.”

“This place is getting dull.” Bailee pulled away from her boyfriend and stood. “Let’s go to Deadhorse.”

“You wanna come?” Vance asked Zoey.

“I’m hanging out with my sister tonight.” She waved toward the table where Livvy waited. She wasn’t about to admit that at seventeen she couldn’t get into the popular bar. Not that she’d go anyway.

“See you tomorrow?” He sounded hopeful.

“Yeah. Of course.”

“You better. We need you.” His tone shifted. Less hope, more demand.

Then he walked away, and it hit her. Tomorrow was Thursday. Thursday night, six o’clock, youth devotional followed by band practice with Justin and Sawyer. The realization wrapped around her lungs and squeezed. Squeezed so hard her vision blurred. How could she ditch her band?

But Justin and Sawyer would understand what this opportunity meant for her—and them. She’d be crazy to turn down concerts and exposure and connections.

They’d be crazy to let her.

2

Rain's a Comin'

Justin Conrad grabbed his cellphone off the amp in his garage and stared at the screen.

No missed calls.

No messages.

No Zoey.

But it was Thursday night. A sacred night. Band practice night. And Zoey hadn't shown up for the youth devo or practice.

"That Zoey? She finally tell you where she's been?" Sawyer Mahon asked from the back of Justin's garage. He sat on a stool behind his drum kit lightly playing a beat. His black-tipped blond spikes and three-quarter-inch gauges fit the drummer image. His skill with sticks earned him the title.

"What?" Justin set down his phone, faking ignorance, and picked up his guitar. No need to admit his missing girlfriend had him distracted. "Just checking the time. We have to quit soon."

"Right." Sawyer snorted. "She really didn't tell you she wasn't coming?"

"Nope. Probably forgot she had to work or her phone died." Justin strummed a few chords. He didn't have to look at Sawyer to know his friend didn't believe him. They fit in practice around Zoey's

schedule at the ice cream shack and Sawyer's schedule at the grocery store, but they had an unspoken pact always to meet on Thursdays.

Why hadn't she answered his texts or called him?

Justin shook away his stupid fears. No reason for her to be mad at him. He hadn't done anything.

Enough about Zoey. This was band practice. An endless stream of notes played inside his head begging to blend. He struck an F chord, followed by a D minor, and a new melody filled the garage.

He repeated the chords, and Sawyer merged with a simple rhythm. By the fifth round, they'd grown bolder, the guitar and drums blending and soaring out the open garage door into Justin's sunlit neighborhood. And he soared with it, lightheaded, feeding off the adrenaline.

Lifting his head, he caught Sawyer's eye. Sawyer gave a tiny nod. Time to finish big.

Justin stood, slamming down on the final chord as Sawyer crashed the cymbals.

Nothing sounded better than a new song. Even a less-than-great new song.

"What do you think?" Justin sat back down cradling his guitar.

"Gold star." Sawyer raised his voice over his new beat. If he was sitting behind his drums, they weren't silent for a second.

Justin started his song again, playing alone, committing the chords to memory as he struggled to catch hold of lyrics that fit.

The sound of a car engine interrupted his thoughts, and a few seconds later, Mom's minivan pulled into the driveway. She stepped out.

Justin's fist tightened around the guitar's neck, the

strings biting into his fingers. It was late. Maybe not late-late, but she was a mom and married, even if her skinny jeans and red top didn't scream married-mother-of-three.

"It's almost ten. You're about finished tonight, right?" It sounded as if she wasn't asking.

"Yes, ma'am," Justin said.

"Thank you." She flashed a smile, but Justin couldn't tell if her smile was too happy for someone who'd been hanging out with a girl friend.

Mom went into the house, and Justin unplugged his guitar from the amp and put it on the stand. His acoustic occupied another slot, but the third was empty. The space echoed the hollow feeling in his chest. Zoey kept her bass there after practice.

He twisted his guitar pick between his fingers. Zoey wasn't his mom, and he wasn't his dad. She had no reason to lie or keep secrets or cheat on him.

He glanced at Sawyer. "Want a ride home?"

"Got my bike." Sawyer jabbed a stick towards the dull red bike in the grass.

"Stick it in the back of my car."

"Gonna check on Zoey, aren't you?" His accusing tone was as flat as an out-of-tune guitar.

"Maybe."

"She shouldn't have missed practice. Not without saying something."

"You want a ride or not?"

"Nothing's more important than practice."

"Let it go, man." Justin laughed despite the tightening of his gut. He didn't share Sawyer's better-be-in-the-hospital-on-life-support attitude toward missing practice. But Zoey almost did. "You coming with me?"

"Fine."

"I'll go tell my parents." Justin pulled his keys from his pocket and tossed them across the garage. They clanged into Sawyer's hand.

"You mean get their permission."

Justin ignored the insult and headed into the house. His friends only needed to tell their parents where they were going; Justin needed approval. But that's how it had always been, so he shrugged it off and trudged up the stairs.

Justin's family was hanging out in the family room, minus three-year-old Tristan. Savannah was reading, curled up in an armchair. Mom was on the couch next to Dad. A good sign, but Justin mentally measured the distance between them. About one ruler-length. Too close? Too far? They were parents, so kind of old, but if they were still in love...

"Time for bed, Savannah," Mom said.

"It's not fair." Justin's ten-year-old sister tumbled off a chair. "It's not dark out. Why can't I stay up like Justin?"

Be quiet, Savannah. Wouldn't be the first time he'd gotten stuck at home because his little sister had scored sympathy points. Forget about him being nine years older than Savannah.

"You don't have to sleep." Mom's voice had a tired, compromising tone that indicated she wanted to sleep. "You can read in bed."

Savannah stomped past Justin.

"Can I give Sawyer a ride home and stop by Zoey's?" Justin asked.

Dad glanced at his watch. "It's a little late."

"I'll be back by midnight."

Dad's mouth twisted to one side in a half-frown.

Why did he have to act like the question was difficult?
“All right. But make sure you’re home on time.”

“I will.” Justin hurried back down the stairs. When had he ever broken curfew? Never.

Maybe it was his choice of friends that made his parents strict. He and Sawyer had been friends since kindergarten, but Sawyer looked like a rule breaker with the silver barbell in his eyebrow and the gauges in his ears. Sawyer’s mom only had three rules: Sawyer had to let her know where he was, he had to graduate from high school, and no getting a tattoo. They argued about the tattoo regularly.

If Justin ever mentioned a tattoo to his parents, he’d be grounded until he graduated from college.

He crossed the yard to his car and slid into the driver’s seat. The car speakers blasted Christian heavy metal from Sawyer’s phone.

“Took you long enough,” Sawyer said.

Without bothering to answer, Justin squinted at Alaska’s midnight sun, slipped on his sunglasses, and drove toward Sawyer’s house.

He dropped off Sawyer, switched the music to his own playlist—a mixture of Christian pop and rock—and drove to Zoey’s house. He parked in the driveway behind Zoey and Livvy’s green car and stared at the split-level, flipping a black guitar pick back and forth through his fingers.

His insides felt like a loose guitar string vibrating wrong. But he had nothing to worry about. She’d have a good explanation for not telling him about missing practice or answering his texts. He’d only sent three, so she’d know he cared but wouldn’t feel smothered. Because all his parents’ books on relationships said that was important.

Be caring, not controlling.

Be interested, not indifferent.

Justin wouldn't make his dad's mistakes. He marched up the front steps and rang the doorbell.

A few seconds later, the door opened.

"Justin, hi." Livvy's voice swung up in a question. Probably because of how late it was. Everyone knew about his curfew.

"Hey. Is Zoey home?"

"Yeah. Come in. I'll tell her you're here."

"Thanks." He crossed the shoe-littered, Arctic entry and took the stairs down to the Harris's family room. Zoey and Livvy's gray-striped cat, Tiger, streaked past him, running the opposite direction—up the stairs.

He settled on the overstuffed couch. The furniture in Zoey's house reminded him of their practice space—worn and comfortable. Next to his garage, this was his favorite hangout. Of course, here it smelled better, like vanilla and cinnamon.

Zoey clattered down the stairs and around the corner, her purple-streaked black hair hanging loose down her back. One look at her brown eyes, dulled with something like worry, and he choked on a smile.

"Hey, you weren't at the devo tonight or practice." He tried not to sound accusing.

"Yeah." She wound her necklace around her finger and unwound it. "Um, I have something to tell you."

"OK." His heart thudded crushing the air from his lungs. Had she been avoiding him? Because right now, she definitely avoided meeting his gaze. Maybe he'd rather not know.

"Tonight, I was, um..." She stared at the floor.

Had she been out with someone else? Was she

breaking up with him?

Her head popped up, and she stared him square in the eye. "I was practicing with another band."

His heart stopped as if it had been unplugged. "You've joined another band?"

"Yeah. Aurora Fire. I met them last night at a karaoke thing at the Downstairs Coffeehouse." The words tumbled out of Zoey's mouth like a guitar solo played too fast.

Justin stared at her.

"Their lead singer left for the summer, so they need someone to fill in. They liked my voice and asked me to practice with them tonight." She paused to catch her breath, her eyes wide and unblinking, pleading for him to share her excitement.

What was he supposed to say? He slid his hand into his pocket and dug the edges of his pick into his calloused fingers. She was leaving him for another band.

Not him exactly, but him and Sawyer.

"I'm so sorry." The pleading was now in her voice. "I know I should've told you right away, but I didn't know how. It's only for the summer, though, and this is a really good opportunity for me. They've already got several gigs lined up."

Her words crawled inside him like poison. Death. Killing him. He couldn't lose her. And refusing her the freedom to sing with Aurora Fire would be the quickest way to lose her. So Justin forced down the argument swelling inside him. "Several gigs, huh? That does sound good."

"I know, right?" She almost smiled but held it back as if she didn't quite believe Justin's sincerity.

But he was doing everything right, wasn't he?

Maybe he needed to be more enthusiastic.

"I think it will be good for you, and Sawyer too, after the summer," Zoey continued. "If people like my singing, then they might want to hear us when I'm back with you guys."

"If people like you?" He took Zoey's hand and entwined his fingers with hers.

She didn't pull away, but she didn't tighten her fingers around his either.

"Of course, they'll like you." Was he really giving her a pep talk to encourage her to leave their band? "And just because you're playing with them doesn't mean you can't play with us too."

"I'll be practicing with them a lot to learn their music, and I'll need to rest my voice in between. But I can still play bass with you guys."

Learn their music... rest my voice... She'd be singing someone else's songs.

"And there's one more thing. Their first gig is two weeks from Saturday, and I know we were supposed to play for the youth group that night..." The hesitance returned to her voice.

"Hey, no problem." Justin forced the words past his dry throat. "Sawyer and I will figure something out."

"So you're really OK with this?"

No, don't do it. He stared at their clasped hands and then looked up fighting the urge to squash her hopefulness. "Yeah. It sounds really good for you."

"I should've realized you'd be happy for me." Zoey smiled and took two steps closer.

"Of course I am." He'd act happy about anything if it made her smile as if he was her hero. "Besides, maybe it's part of God's plan for your music career."

“Yeah, maybe.” Her happiness dimmed as if she didn’t believe him. Or in God’s plan.

“Tell me about Aurora Fire.” Justin dropped onto the couch, pulling Zoey down too.

She settled next to him and told him about this other band’s music, the house they shared, the guys.

Justin forced a grin and willed himself to hide his fears.

Please, Lord, make me happy for her.

3

Watching the Bottom Fall

Sawyer stood at the kitchen sink and scrubbed a dirty plate. A drum solo blasted through his earbuds begging him to join in. He lifted his hands out of the sink and played the air drums, soap suds spraying the tiny kitchen. Skills with the sticks was the only thing Sawyer's dad had left behind seventeen years ago.

He only knew three things about his dad: his name was Toby Sawyer, he was a drummer, and he couldn't handle having a kid. But someday, Toby Sawyer would see the name 'Sawyer Mahon' listed as a band's drummer. Then he'd call or email, and Sawyer would tell him off. Sawyer and his mom hadn't needed—would never need—Toby Sawyer in their lives.

The drum solo ended, and Sawyer plunged his hands into the soapy water.

Someone tapped his shoulder.

Sawyer spun around, swearing and ripping the earbuds out of his ears.

"Don't say that." Justin gave his usual response.

"Don't go sneaking up on people."

"I knocked. You didn't answer."

Not much argument for that. Except to remember to lock the door.

Sawyer faced the sink and swiped the dishcloth