

A close-up photograph of a man with dark hair, wearing a white t-shirt, playing an acoustic guitar. He is looking down at the instrument. The guitar has a light-colored top and a dark back. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. The overall mood is calm and focused.

# Reprise

J. Leigh James

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## **Erika**

Zach was coming home. After three years of fame, fortune, and scandal, my first love was returning to Seaside Heights.

Zachariah Rawlings, known to the world as the lead guitarist Zach Rawl for Colliding Comets, had once been my best friend. We'd bonded over music, though his electric guitar and my cello weren't exactly compatible. He loved modern music, and I geeked out over the classics. Even though we preferred different expressions of music, we appreciated it all.

Or at least we had three years ago. Before Zach and his brother Jeremiah had entered a talent search and been selected to join a new boy band. Colliding Comets created buzz through the nation-wide contest, but when the girls saw the five gorgeous boys on stage, their fame skyrocketed.

They'd become so popular so quickly that it practically happened overnight. One day Zach was my best friend, the next day he belonged to the world. One day he wore his shaggy brown hair over his forehead, his curls brushing his eyebrows. The next, his gorgeous hair was nearly gone and styled into a short, spiky silhouette. One day he wore jeans and holey t-shirts, the next he strutted onstage in leather pants and form-fitting shirts that looked poured onto his skin.

So when my mother told me she'd spoken to Zach's mother, I wondered which boy would move into the house next door.

Cliché, I know. I fell for the boy next door. Our bedroom windows faced each other, again like some silly romantic movie or music video. But it had been wonderful. We'd leave our bedroom windows open whenever the weather was nice, and we'd take turns practicing our music, playing to an audience of one.

Those solitary nights had made me a better cellist. I wanted to impress him, and I worked harder when I knew he was listening. I'd told him I'd make first chair in our school's orchestra, and I had. He just hadn't been around when it happened.

"I'm surprised you're not more excited, Erika," Mom said, and I realized I'd gotten lost in my memories. She lifted the bags of chicken from the sous vide and set them on the counter before she paused in her cooking to examine my reaction—or lack thereof.

"It's great news," I pasted a smile on my face and nodded my head. Maybe the nod was too much. Mom frowned like she didn't believe me. And she'd be right. I wasn't excited about Zach's return. Well, that wasn't entirely true. I was excited. I wanted him to throw open his window, tell me he'd missed me and demand I play for him.

I doubted he'd even remember my name. Three years was a long time for a friendship to be on pause. Some might even say it was long enough to kill the best of friendships. I guessed I'd find out.

"When will they be here?" I grabbed a head of lettuce and began separating the leaves, tossing them into a large bowl that would eventually be our family's dinner salad.

"Tomorrow."

I ripped the leaves in half with great enthusiasm. Mom raised her eyebrows at me, but I ignored the question in her expression.

Why wasn't I happy that my best friend was coming home?

I had a perfectly reasonable answer, though I wouldn't share it with her. Because I was mad.

I'd buried three years of disappointment and pain, and it came bubbling to the surface through my anger. All the excuses I'd made for him strummed through my mind in a tune discordant to my nerves. He was busy. He had responsibilities on his time that I didn't understand. That he hadn't understood when he left. But he'd promised we'd stay in touch. That we'd talk on holidays and birthdays and random, average days. I had waved as his family's minivan drove down the street and disappeared over the horizon.

And I'd never heard from him. Not one single time.

"Tomorrow I'm making my famous fettucine alfredo. It will be a nice welcome home supper for our neighbors."

"Sounds good," I said and added cherry tomatoes to the salad. Of course my mother would invite them over the second their car pulled into the driveway. My mother showed her love through food. If she cared about you, she cooked for you.

“I’m surprised they kept the house,” I said more to myself than my mom. It was something I’d wondered over the years but never said out loud.

“It’s a good thing they did. Considering,” her voice trailed off, and I knew what she refused to say. Considering the Rawlings’ rock star dreams had ended as quickly as they’d begun.

But Mom’s words sent my mind into action. I had twenty-four hours to prepare myself. To prepare for seeing a guy I never expected to see again. To hide my feelings and pretend that his abandonment hadn’t ripped at my heart.

The only thing I could do was show him I’d moved on, that I had achieved almost everything I’d told him I would, that I didn’t need him or his fragile friendship anymore.

“Do you mind if I go over Everly’s after supper?” My best friend Everly Janson hadn’t invited me, but I was always welcome at her house. Plus, I needed to do damage control. I didn’t know how long the Rawlings family would stay in town, but in light of the enormous scandal that had broken up the band, my bet was they’d be here for a while.

I’d never shared my history with Zach and Jer Rawls. Not even when Everly claimed to be Colliding Comets’ biggest fan. The band’s break-up had crushed her. She was going to freak when she discovered that two of her idols were moving to our town.

When she heard they would be in the house next to mine.

She might even freak out when I told her that Zach used to be my best friend. But probably not in a good way. Best friends didn’t keep secrets from each other, not huge boy-band-related secrets. I only hoped Everly could forgive me.

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**Zach**

I hoped Erika could forgive me. I dreaded coming face to face with her again. Admitting that I'd killed our friendship through unintentional neglect. As soon as we'd made it to New York, the make-overs and the rehearsals began, and I'd fallen into bed exhausted every night. By the time I became accustomed to the brutal routine, it had been three months since I'd spoken to her, and my shame prevented me from reaching out. Every day, it became easier to move on than admit I'd screwed up and beg for her forgiveness.

I'd been fifteen and stupid. Too afraid to admit when I was wrong, when I'd made a mistake. On my eighteenth birthday, I planned to call her. Admit that I'd been a child and apologize for my broken promises. I hadn't expected her to accept the apology. I just hoped she acknowledged the sincerity in my voice.

All those years when I didn't call her, I guess a part of me had hoped she'd contact me. Rake me over the coals for abandoning her. And then we'd make up and move forward. Make the whole reconciliation process easy for me.

But she never did.

And now I was coming home in disgrace. A failed career. Tainted by actions my bandmates had committed. The only saving grace was Jer had escaped the scrutiny. He had volunteered to visit a sick kid who'd sent him fan mail. He had an alibi. I didn't.

The record label still wanted to work with him. They kicked the rest of us to the curb.

An odd sense of déjà vu hit me as I made the turn onto our street. When I was last here, I had my learner's permit. Now, I could drive without a licensed adult in the car with me. But that was the only difference. The tree-lined street leading to my house remained the same. Same houses, same

yards littered with toys or sports equipment or kids. The same suburban existence I'd left behind three years ago.

I hit the button to activate the automatic garage, and I sat in the driveway watching the small gray house next door, warm lights emanating from the windows on the ground floor. I glanced up to the floor above, to the one window I was most curious about. It remained dark, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe she wasn't home, and I could delay the inevitable. At least for one more night. One night to get my bearings and eradicate the sense of being an intruder in my own home.

I parked the car and lowered the garage door. Grabbing my duffle bag and the fast food I'd bought, I let myself into my house. Nothing had changed.

Of course, it hadn't.

My parents barely spent time here, only coming back occasionally to grab anything we needed or take care of some business. Otherwise, they were in New York, in our cramped apartment near the recording studio. After my family living on top of each other for so long, the roominess in the house almost overwhelmed me. I made my way to my old bedroom and flung open the door. It was just as I'd left it three years ago. Including the manga comics that had fallen off my desk as I'd rushed to pack my suitcase. Even my curtains remained wide open where I'd yelled across the yard at Erika every second I had packed.

I smiled as I remembered her yelling out items I needed to remember, like clean underwear, and I laughed when I remembered I hadn't packed any and had rushed to add some to my bag.

Now my dresser and closet were empty. Mom had either brought our clothes to us or donated what we had outgrown.

I tossed the bag onto the floor and settled on my bed to eat my supper. Mom had long since taken the linens off the mattress, and I'd have to make it before I turned in for the night. It was weird seeing echoes of my old life and reminders that I wasn't the same.

I savored my triple cheeseburger. It was a silent protest to the executives who had ruled my life. With the skin-tight clothes they'd forced me to wear, fatty foods like cheeseburgers and fries were strictly off-limits, and our personal trainer ensured we burned off the few calories they allowed us to ingest.

Not that I totally minded. I'd left Seaside Heights as an average-sized teen boy with a few pudgy places, and now I returned as a fit man with muscles and impressively low body fat count.

I gazed at Erika's empty bedroom. Would she approve of the changes, or would she prefer the average-looking boy I'd been all those years ago?

The bedroom light came on, and my breath caught in my throat as a form passed by the window. Erika was now blond? I peered closer. No, it wasn't Erika. Another girl plopped onto the bed and opened a book.

A weight grew in the pit of my stomach. This wasn't her room anymore? As much as I dreaded the groveling I'd have to do to receive her forgiveness, I never imagined she wouldn't be right where I'd left her.

My parents hadn't mentioned the Arnolds moving. To be honest, they never shared any updates about the Arnolds. But I'd assumed that meant nothing had changed. I stood and walked toward the window.

Everything had changed. I had changed, and she had, too. She'd left.

It was stupid to feel abandoned. Wasn't that what I had done? Yet, the ridiculous emotion filled me. Abandonment because she'd moved away without bothering to tell me. That'd I'd come back ready to grovel for forgiveness and couldn't. Because she left me.

Another girl entered the room, and my body relaxed in relief. Even without seeing her face, I recognized that raven hair, that purposeful walk. I stepped away from the window before she saw me. And even though it was a little creepy, I couldn't help but watch her and the other girl interact.

She hadn't changed. At least not from my distant vantage point. Her smile still lit up her face. Her hair seemed so soft you wanted to touch it and make sure it was real. She was still beautiful. A longing filled me. I'd missed her so much. I hadn't realized how much until I saw her standing there with only a few feet of air and a couple glass panes between us.

I wanted to rush over there immediately, but my mind flashed back to the fifteen-year-old kid who had left. As much as I craved to reconnect with her, I wasn't ready. And I didn't want an audience. I'd wait for tomorrow. And hoped by then I'd have the right words to say.

I prayed she'd listen.

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### **Erika**

Mom didn't let me spend last night at Everly's. I'm sure she sensed that I'd be tempted to miss the big welcome home meal she'd planned for the Rawlings family. And she'd be right.

My bedroom was on the second story of our house. The corner of the building where I could see our neighbor's driveway as well as their son's room. I tensed at every car that approached their house and relaxed when it passed. I had to get this meeting over, and the longer I waited, the more my nerves frayed.

Everly had suggested I make a huge welcome home banner for them, but I'd die a million deaths if Zach looked at a handmade sign and lumped me with his adoring fans. I wasn't a fan or a groupie or any other category of girl he may have encountered on tour. So, in the end, I closed my

curtains and shut out all sight of the Rawlings homestead and their possible arrival.

Everly had been pretty cool when I'd told her about my history with the boys. She'd held back her urge to ask for their autographs, and as a reward, I promised to introduce her to them at some point in the future. When that would be, I didn't know. I guess it depended on if Zach and I spoke to each other after today. If nothing else, I'd introduce her to Jeremiah. One Colliding Comets member was better than none.

With an hour before their expected arrival, I got dressed. Not super dressy. I wasn't trying to impress them. Just a little more than my usual joggers and t-shirt. I wanted to feel pretty and confident. For myself. Not for them.

I went downstairs to help Mom, and as I descended the stairs, the doorbell rang. It was way too early to be our dinner guests, so I opened the door, only mildly curious who would be waiting on the other side.

I couldn't breathe as I came eye-level to a very solid, very masculine chest. My gaze traveled upwards until I was staring into Zach's warm brown eyes. Which short-circuited my brain, and my mouth blurted out the first thought in my head, "You grew."

He smiled, and I was happy to see his slightly crooked incisor on the right side of his mouth. Not everything about him had changed. There might be a chance that the old Zach was still in there somewhere.

"Yeah," he said back to me. "And you didn't."

I blinked for a moment and realized he'd teased me. Like old times. But this wasn't old times. This was new and different and awkward. I glanced around my front porch. "Where's your family?"

"They're almost here," he said and scuffed one foot on our welcome mat. "Can I come in?" He smiled again at my hesitation. "Or am I only

invited when they arrive?”

My face heated. “Of course not,” I said and stood back. “Come in.”

Before I could yell to Mom that we had company, she rushed from the kitchen and enveloped Zach into a huge hug.

“Oh my boy, it’s been way too long,” she said and hooked her arm through his. She dragged him into the kitchen and motioned to where she’d set a plate with cookies next to a glass of milk.

Zach laughed. “You shouldn’t have,” he said, “My trainer will kill me if I eat all of these.”

My jaw clenched. His trainer? The old Zach—my Zach—would have scarfed down the cookies before I’d had a chance to take a bite of one. Now he was turning down treats because his trainer didn’t let him have them?

Zach winked at my mom, “So this has to be our secret.”

Mom beamed at him. “You eat, and I’ll hide the evidence.”

He munched on two cookies and slid his plate toward me, offering me the final one. The old Zach never shared his sweets. “No thanks,” I said to him. “You can have it.”

“I can’t,” he patted his incredibly flat stomach. “I have to save room for whatever Ms. A. is whipping up over there.”

“Sure,” I said and backed away from the kitchen island. “I’ll be back.” Then I rushed up the stairs to my room, where I sat on my bed and stared at the wall. I didn’t know what to say to this stranger. The one that almost looked like my friend, almost sounded like him, but definitely wasn’t him.

A knock sounded on my door, and I assumed it was my mother ready to admonish me for my rudeness to our guest. I called come in, and Zach stepped into my room.

“You’re not allowed in here,” I said.

He didn't listen. Instead, he took a slow tour of the room, examining every picture I had on the wall, every book on my bedside table, the instruments I had displayed in the corner near my bed.

"Cello, violin, acoustic guitar," he said as he ran his fingers over the instruments.

"I like strings," I said and immediately wanted to face palm myself. It was something I'd say to my friend, not to a world-renowned rock star.

"I know," he said under his breath, but I heard him.

"You really do need to leave my room," I said, unnerved that he remembered anything about me.

He nodded and yet didn't move. "I wanted to talk to you in private," he said and faced me. "I need to apologize."

I cut him off. "No, you don't," I said. I was so confused. I'd wanted him to apologize, but now that he was here doing it, all I wanted was for him to go away. This wasn't my best friend. He was a stranger with flat abs and a personal trainer. A man who had traveled all over the world and experienced things I'd never understand. The Zach I'd known and loved didn't exist anymore, and it would be foolish to pretend otherwise. "You don't owe me anything."

"I disagree," he said, "But even if I don't owe this to you, I owe it to myself. I need to hold myself accountable for the cowardly way I handled everything. For the way I treated you. I don't expect you to forgive me, but I need you to know why it happened."

"I don't want excuses," I said.

He sat on the bed next to me. "And I don't want to be a coward. Not anymore."

Coward? It was hard to imagine this muscle-bound guy afraid of anything. Curiosity had me waiting in silence instead of insisting he get out

immediately.

Zach rested his elbows on his knees and tilted his face to the floor. He huffed a single breath of air and shook his head before he started his story. Then it all came pouring from his lips. The demands on his time, the changes to his looks, his habits, his life. How exhausted and insecure the whole process made him feel. And the fear that I wouldn't approve. That I'd think he'd sold out his music for a shot at fame.

"No," I quietly interrupted him. "You didn't sell out your music. You always loved that sound, and you had your chance to be a part of it. Instead, you sold out our friendship."

He sat up straighter and looked me in the eyes. "You're right," he said. "I didn't trust you or myself enough. I put us in this position. I'm so sorry I did that to us. I wished I'd been strong enough to reach out, to keep us together."

I stood and paced toward my bedroom door. I'd heard enough. "I am, too," I said and nodded toward the entrance, indicating he should leave.

He didn't move. "For what?"

I blinked. "What do you mean?"

"What are you sorry for? That I messed up?" He raised his eyebrows at me. "Or that you did?"

My mouth dropped open. "Excuse me?"

He spread his arms wide. "I laid it all on the table," he said. "Everything I did to wreck our friendship. What about you?"

"You're the one who left," I said.

"And you're the one who never called," he countered.

I couldn't believe he was throwing this on me. "I wasn't supposed to. We'd agreed you'd call me after you got settled."

“And when you didn’t hear from me, you let it slide. You didn’t confront me or tell me what a jerk I’d been. What happened? Didn’t you miss me?”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Apparently more than you missed me. You couldn’t send one text good night or good morning? I woke up every day hoping for one of those and devastated when I didn’t have one. After a month, I gave up hope that you ever cared for me the way I did for you.”

Zach winced. “I didn’t know. When I never heard from you, I didn’t think you cared anymore.”

“Same,” I challenged him.

He slowly nodded. “Can we start over?”

I wanted to. So badly. But I was afraid of trusting him again. What if the record label called him back? Would he abandon me again for his dreams?

I had to be completely honest with him. “We can try,” I said. “But I can’t make any promises.”

“Fair enough,” he said. Then he stood, walked over to me and held out his hand. “Hi, I’m Zach. I’m a big geek who loves music and was stupid enough to lose my best friend while pursuing my dream job.”

I shook his hand. “Hi Zach,” I kept the smile from my face. “I’m Erika. I’m an orchestra nerd who let my best friend slip away because I thought he loved fame and fortune more than me.”

He sighed. “That’s not possible. If you’re serious about giving me a chance, then after supper, I’d like to show you something.”

“Why not now?”

Zach smiled, and my heart skipped a beat. “Because it’s not here yet. Let’s go downstairs and grab more of your mom’s cookies while we wait for my family.”

I smiled at this guy who was a stranger and who wasn't. Raiding my mom's kitchen for cookies? That was totally my Zach.

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### **Zach**

Sitting at the Arnolds' dining room table felt like old times. Ms. A. sat at one end with my parents while I sat next to Erika and Jer sat across from us. We dove into the amazing home-cooked food and focused on stuffing our faces more than polite conversation. It wasn't uncomfortable, though. Erika's warm smile told me she was trying to rekindle our friendship, and she was relaxed and welcoming to my younger brother.

Our parents stuck to neutral topics while we ate. It wasn't until we cleared away the dinner dishes, and Ms. A. brought out a hot pear cobbler that the conversation ventured into our careers.

"What are your plans now?" Ms. A. said. "Are you home for good?"

"The label wants Jeremiah to start a solo career," Dad said and smiled at Jer while deftly avoiding eye contact with me.

"But," Mom added, "we think it's best for both boys if Jer takes some time off. Maybe a year of school, and then we can launch his new career once everything has died down."

She also avoided looking at me.

Ms. A., however, wasn't as worried about hurting my feelings. "What happened, Zach? I don't believe for a second you were involved in all that nonsense."

I sighed. It would have been nice if my parents showed that blind trust in me, but they hadn't. They wanted witness testimony to corroborate my story before they fully believed me.

I avoided gazing at my parents. If I made eye contact with them, they were sure to give our neighbor a vague answer and change the subject. I

thought back to that stupid night. I'd been depressed and sorry for myself. I'd turned eighteen the week before and couldn't shake the overwhelming dissatisfaction with my life. Which was stupid. I was living my dream and didn't have any reason to be so down. But I wouldn't share that with my neighbors. I didn't want to sound like a spoiled brat rock star.

"The guys in the band wanted to party," I started and shrugged like it wasn't a big deal. They partied often, but usually it was a tame affair. "Jer had a fan in a children's hospital that he planned to visit, and he invited me to come along. But, I just wanted a quiet night. So I opted to stay in the hotel's penthouse." We'd been on tour and had a brief stop in between gigs. So, we'd opted to stay at a hotel instead of remaining cramped on the tour bus.

"Some local fans found out what hotel we were staying in, and they hung out in the hotel lobby until Rick, Paul and Danny happened to walk through." My bandmates were older than me. They were single, and it wasn't unusual for them to seek female company whenever we stayed overnight anywhere. "They brought the girls to the room and ordered a ton of hard liquor. I walked through the penthouse living room and saw the girls, but I didn't think anything about it. They were laughing and having fun and taking selfies. Everything seemed normal, so I waved to the group as I went to my room, and I went to sleep."

Dad jumped in to finish the story, which was fine, since I didn't have firsthand experience with what happened next. "The girls posted pictures of themselves on social media, and their parents found out. Apparently all three girls were high school sophomores, and the guys were charged with a laundry-list of violations. If they're found guilty, they could serve prison time."

Ms. A. shook her head in disgust. “What were they thinking? How stupid could they be?”

I glanced at Erika. She didn’t seem shocked, so I assumed she’d heard about the charges that broke up my band.

“They charged Zachariah with accessory to those violations,” Mom said, and I squirmed a little. “They claimed he should have known what was going on and stopped them.”

I sighed. I’d been beating myself up over the same thing. Maybe if I hadn’t been so depressed, I would have realized something wasn’t right.

“I saw the pictures on the gossip vlogs,” Erika said to the table and placed her hand on my arm. “Those girls looked older than me.”

“Well, fortunately,” Dad frowned, a look I’d seen on his face constantly over the past few weeks, “the girls testified that they barely saw him, and he wasn’t in any of their pictures. Their parents wanted to throw the book at him, but the District Attorney said they wouldn’t have a strong case against Zach without more proof.”

“I was lucky.” I’d been saying this over and over, and I could barely believe how fortunate I really was.

“You avoided jail,” he said. We all knew what he didn’t say. But not lucky enough to save my career. Fans had turned on the band, and they were torn over their support of me. Only Jeremiah escaped the incident completely untarnished. Which was ironic because at sixteen years old, he was the only one young enough to actually date the girls in question.

“I guess your hermit life saved you,” Jer teased.

“Hermit life?” Erika asked. “A rock star on tour?”

My brother laughed as I scowled at him. He got the message to keep his mouth shut and said, “I’ll let him explain.”

I shrugged, letting the table know I didn’t plan on explaining anything.

Fortunately, Ms. A. rescued me by sharing her latest adventures as a kindergarten teacher, and the spotlight moved from me to her.

I wasn't ready to share with Erika and her mother how isolated and lonely I'd been while on tour. How I kept to myself while the others enjoyed exploring each new town and hanging out. How much I missed playing the music I wanted to play when I wanted to play it.

One day I hoped I could share all of that with Erika. But there was something more important I needed to say first. And then we'd see if she still wanted to be my friend.

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### **Erika**

I'd read all the reports of Colliding Comets' downfall. I'd scoured every news and entertainment site looking for the truth. Some blamed Zach for the incident; some claimed he was innocent; some were torn. It was a relief to finally understand Zach's point of view. Of course I believed him. While being a rock star had changed him, I refused to believe it had changed the foundation of his personality. Zach never lied. He always faced the truth straight-on, even if it meant negative consequences.

He'd told the truth, though not everything.

After we'd eaten, Zach helped me clear the dishes while our families moved to the living room to catch up. Neither of us said a word as we put up the left-over meal and placed the dishes in the dishwasher.

I grabbed a rag to wipe down the kitchen counters, and Zach wrapped his fingers around my wrist. "I need to show you something," he said and released me.

I nodded and followed him out our kitchen door and onto the lawn between our homes. He purposefully strode into his house, and I slowly walked behind him. It gave me a chance to openly examine the differences I

hadn't noticed before. How his long frame held more grace and strength now than it had when I'd seen him last. This was the body of a confident man, not an insecure boy. Even though his shoulders slumped slightly as led the way through his home, his confidence was undeniable.

This was a guy who'd seen so much, experienced more than I could imagine. A sadness washed over me as I realized how much we'd grown apart. The distance between us physical and emotional.

Not even the familiarity of his boyhood home broke into the sense of separateness between us.

Zach stepped into his brother's room, and I watched from the hallway as he grabbed a backpack and a guitar case from the room. Then he wordlessly stepped across the hallway to his bedroom. It was a room I'd been in countless times as we grew up. Zach looked out of place in the room that had once been his haven.

Zach motioned to his bed, and I gingerly sat on the edge. My heart thumped in my chest, and a nervous energy filled my limbs, my foot tapping of its own accord.

He pulled a drive from the backpack and placed it into the USB port. With a few clicks, Jeremiah's voice filled the air. He sang a haunting tune about a guy who'd lost his true love. The pain in the words touched me, and I held back the tears that threatened to form in my eyes. When the song ended, Zach and I sat in silence, experiencing the lingering emotion from the song.

Zach was the first to break the silence. "That's a demo," he said. "When the label is ready to launch his solo career, this will be on his album. Maybe even his first release."

"It's beautiful."

I expected Zach to agree. Instead, he said, "Thanks. I wrote that."

My heart pounded harder. “Seriously?”

A small smile lifted the corner of his lips. “I started it before we left,” he said and moved to the bedside table. He opened the drawer and pulled out a few sheets of notebook paper. “But I forgot to pack it,” he smiled, “I didn’t tell you about it. Otherwise, you would have reminded me to take it.”

He handed the pages to me and shrugged one shoulder. “I needed to rewrite everything, and when I did, some words didn’t fit anymore.”

I read the pages in my hand. It was the same concept. Only instead of losing someone he loved, Zach had written about his fear of losing someone before he could tell her how much she meant to him.

He pulled out his guitar and began strumming the chords. “Before it’s too late,” he sang.

It was the last line of the song in my hands, one that repeated over and over and faded to end.

“When I wrote the song,” he said, “that line echoed in my head. I changed it to *it’s too late*. That became the first line of the revised song.”

He strummed the chords and sang, “It’s too late. I never took the chance I had to take. It’s my own fault this heartbreak. It’s too late.”

He slowly strummed the chords on the last word, and the notes from the acoustic guitar echoed in the air around us.

The sad, somber sound made my fingers itch to grab my cello and add its haunting notes to the melody. As if Zach read my mind, he said, “There’s only one thing missing from the demo. A cello. That would take the song to the next level.”

I nodded. “If it didn’t break my heart before, it would with a cello harmony.”

“My thoughts exactly.” He smiled at me. A sad, weary expression that added to the ache already settling in my heart.

He placed his guitar on his dresser and sat next to me. “I never wanted us to end like this.”

I sighed. “I didn’t, either.”

“I sat in my hotel room on my eighteenth birthday and played this over and over until I got it right. I needed to finish it. Even if the band never played it. I needed it to be real. I needed closure.”

“Closure?” I asked. “From what?”

He raised his dark eyebrows at me. Then he stood and paced the room. “From what I’d done.”

Hope tugged at my heart. Was it possible he meant what I thought? All I’d wanted was an apology. Maybe a chance that one day we would be friends again. Never like it was before, of course. But at least he’d be a part of my life. Maybe I’d get the closure I’d wanted. For the past three years I had tried to kill my crush on my best friend, but even resenting him and telling myself I hated him hadn’t worked.

Seeing him in person only reminded me of what we’d shared before. Of the fear I’d had that he didn’t love me as much as I had loved him. That he’d be fine without me. “I thought you replaced me,” I said to myself.

He stopped pacing and lowered his brows. “Replaced you?”

“I didn’t contact you because I was afraid. Afraid that you wouldn’t need your small-town, orchestra-nerd best friend when you were surrounded by rock stars and groupies and hot girls. When you didn’t call or text, I assumed I no longer held a place in your life. It just happened quicker than I’d expected.”

He shook his head and kneeled in front of me. Grabbing my hands, he said, “You were my best friend. The person who knew me better than anyone else. How could you ever doubt what you meant to me?”

I wryly smiled at him.

“Yeah,” he gave me a self-deprecating grin. “I screwed up. But, I thought you knew that I loved you more than any other person in the whole world. When you didn’t contact me I thought you were sending a message.”

“Then I guess we were both a little insecure.”

He squeezed my hands. “Yes, we were. The question is, now that we understand the past, what happens to our future?”

“We start over?” I suggested.

Zach shook his head. “I don’t want to start our friendship over. I want us to move forward, not start back at square one.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible,” I said, “We’re not the same people.”

“In some ways,” he said. “But there’s one thing that remains true. I never stopped loving you.”

I smiled. “I’ll always love your friendship.”

Zach sighed. He stood up and sat by my side. “Did you listen the lyrics of my song? The reprise?”

“Reprise?”

“The part that you play again.”

I laughed. “I’m a musician, too. I know what a reprise is.”

He grabbed the guitar and began playing. “Listen, please,” he said and began singing. “I’d do anything for another chance, I’ll take love or hate, just don’t keep me out of your life, tell me it’s not too late.”

He strummed again and then repeated, “Just don’t keep me out of your life, tell me it’s not too late.”

“Zach,” I whispered, not sure exactly what I wanted to say.

“This is out of line,” he said, “and I don’t expect you to immediately put the last three years behind us. But we both screwed up because we didn’t communicate the truth to each other. I won’t make that mistake again. I still love you. As a friend. And as the first girl I ever crushed on. You still have

my heart. I'll take whatever you give me. But understand that I'm planning to spend the next three years or thirty years, whatever it takes, to convince you to love me back."

My heart stopped its thrumming, and I wasn't sure I was breathing. I inhaled a slow, deep breath and blew it out. "I don't know what to think."

"I'm sorry," he said, "I realize it's a lot. I'm back, I've apologized, I've blindsided you in a ton of ways. It's OK if you don't have an answer, if you want to think about all this. If you don't forgive me right now."

I grabbed his hand. "You're my first crush. I loved you then, and I love you now. I can't promise the future, that we'll be together forever. But I'm willing to try again. Our friendship. Our love."

Zach wrapped his arms around me. "That's all I've ever wanted. Our personal reprise. To be friends again and have a chance to fall in love. Are you sure it's what you want?"

I clasped my hands behind his neck. "Yes, I want our friendship again. I want to love you, again."

Zach grinned and crushed me to him. His lips found mine, and the tune of the song he'd written about me played in my head. Its sadness echoing in my mind and replaced by the joy of knowing the guy I loved felt the same.

We wrote our own personal reprise, with a new, happier ending.

And even though I wasn't ready to promise my whole future to Zach yet, I had a feeling our music would harmonize beautifully for the rest of our lives.

## Blurb

Zach Rawlings is coming home.

After three years of living the rock star life, his career as lead guitarist in a boy band has ended in disgrace. Now he must face the best friend he abandoned when he left.

Erika Arnold isn't ready to forgive.

When Zach left he took her heart with him. She needs answers, and she plans to get them.

It's time to face the music. Will their relationship get a reprise once everything is revealed?

## About the Author

J. Leigh James began writing when a childhood story she enjoyed didn't give the couple their happily ever after. She rewrote the ending to the book and discovered her love of writing. Now she publishes young adult romances with guaranteed happy endings.

JLJ lives in Texas with her wonderful husband, "bad apple" daughter and neurotic cat. She loves communicating with her readers, so email her at [jlj@jleighjames.com](mailto:jlj@jleighjames.com), visit [her website](#) or connect on her [Facebook page](#).

## Author's note

Thank you for reading *Reprise*. I hope you enjoyed Zach and Erika's story. If you'd like to know what happens to Jeremiah, he will be featured as part of my *Faux in Love* series later this year. Sign up for [my newsletter](#) to be notified when his story comes out and a chance to read it for free!