

“Do we want to make a life of music? I can say that I, personally, don’t know. You’d have to ask the others what they think.”

“Here’s a question,” Mr. Morgan says, sitting down across from me. “Are you guys interested in finding out?”

Ransom

Start to Finish

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“In ten hours, there’s gonna be twenty thousand people in here...”

Misty Maitland

Lead Vocals

“You are just sooo freakin’ weird, Misty Maitland, I swear...”

Martin Masterson

Keyboards

“It’s like I have no idea who I am anymore... who any of us are.”

Ariel Williams

Rhythm Guitar

“You are as amazing, as you are totally freakin’ insane, Misty Maitland.”

Rhyan Crossman

Drums

“I can’t believe we get to do this twice a week, for the next three months!”

Vanessa Preston

Bass Guitar

“no freakin’ way...”

Joshua Miller

Lead Guitar

Prologue

Riley Mitchell

My name is Riley Mitchell.

Or, if you prefer, Riley Morgan.

And yes... my father is *Audio Distortion's* drummer.

A few years ago, I wrote a series of stories about my father's band, and the amazing journey the five of them embarked on – and are still traveling.

Those of you, who may have read those stories, might remember that, at the end of the last book, I suggested I might write the stories of the other bands that directly influenced my life as I was growing up.

It's taken a while, but you are holding the results.

I struggled for a while with how to tell this story – start at the beginning, or simply pick up where *Audio Distortion's* story ended. It was my sister-in-law, Carla, who helped me make that decision.

Everyone has heard the one about the four people, on four corners of an intersection, who all see the exact same accident, and yet, give four completely different accounts, of what happened. In this case, a lot of *Ransom's* story is contained in the six *Audio Distortion* stories I previously wrote, but the thing is – according to Carla – the parts about *Ransom*, were told by the members of *Audio Distortion*.

That's not really *Ransom's* story, now is it?

So, knowing I had to tell the entire story – start to finish – I kissed my husband, and my kids, and set off to find *Ransom*...

I figured, where better to start, than with the bubbly lead singer?

Kansas, here I come.

1

Really?

Misty Maitland

When Riley shows up at our house, on a sunny spring afternoon, I'm surprised to say the least. She comes in, I close the door, and she follows me to the kitchen.

When she tells me what she wants...

"I want to write *Ransom's* story – start to finish."

...I stand staring at her, speechless, for a good thirty seconds.

"Misty?"

"Huh? Ohhh... sorry. You're serious, aren't you?" I ask.

"Well... yeah," she replies, and as an afterthought adds, "Is that still hot?" and points at the coffee maker.

"Uh-huh, I just made it," I reply, pulling a cup off a hook and handing it to her.

"And why the whole 'shocked' thing anyhow?" she asks, filling her cup.

"Well..."

"It's what I do, remember?" she replies, to my 'less than an answer'.

"But... well... *why us?*" I ask, pulling out a chair and sitting down at the kitchen table.

"You guys were a very intricate part of my parent's lives – and mine – for a really long time. So... why not

Ransom?” she replies, taking a seat next to me. “I believe it’s a story that needs telling...”

I sip my coffee, and, still a bit stunned, again stare at her for moment.

“Thing is... *it has to be told by the six of you.*”

The moment she says it, I get a rush of goose bumps, as I wonder what the others are going to say.

“Besides... it’s been three years since you guys let it go, and went about living your lives, so I’ll bet your fans will be all over this, the moment it is released.”

Although I’m staring at her, my mind has already slipped into memories of a somewhat forgotten past. When I turn and glance into the living room, I see the giant image of the six of us, standing on a stage, the *Begin Again* album cover filling the huge monitor behind us, and it all instantly floods right back into me...

2

Being Discovered

Ariel Williams

I'm walking down the hall, and am just short of the teacher's lounge, headed for a math class, when I see her – and my heart stops. She's following Mrs. Perkins into the lounge.

"No freakin' way!" I mumble out loud, much to the surprise of more than one of my fellow students.

When I reach the door, I slow enough that I can see through the small window, and sure enough, there she is, pouring coffee into a cup. I can't help it – I stop dead in my tracks. 'What' I ask myself, 'would the lead guitarist of one of the biggest pop bands ever, be doing in the teacher's lounge of a high school, in the middle-of-nowhere Kansas?'

Suddenly, someone grabs my arm, and starts pulling me down the hall.

"Come on, Ariel! You are not going to believe this!" Vanessa screams, almost pulling me off my feet.

Before I can respond, we've turned the corner at the end of the hall, and are two-thirds of the way to the music room.

"Nessa! I have a math class now..." I say, trying to break her grip on my arm.

“Too bad. *This* will make being late totally freakin’ worth it!”

We slide to a stop directly outside the music room, and the moment I look inside, my entire world simply stops.

Sitting on Mrs. Perkins’ desk, is none other than Willie Morgan – drummer for *Audio Distortion*. He’s laughing and joking with some freshman, and seems like anything but a superstar.

“No way...” I mumble.

“Why would *he* be in Kansas – of all places?” Vanessa asks.

The moment she says it, I hear heels on the floor behind us, and when I turn around, find Mrs. Perkins and Emily Táo walking toward us.

“Same reason *she* would be, I suppose...” I reply to Vanessa, pointing past her, down the hall.

The moment Mrs. Perkins sees us, she waves and calls to us.

“Ariel! Vanessa!”

“Yes ma’am,” we say at the same time.

The two of them stop in front of us, and the disbelieving looks on our faces, give us away.

“Well... it’s apparent you already know who she,” she points at Ms. Táo, “is, so I’ll just tell you what’s up. They are giving a talk for the music students during fourth period this afternoon, here in the music room. Most of the teachers know about it, so if you need to get out of a class, they will let you. I’m keeping a list, so don’t even think about...”

“Yeah, right,” I mumble. “I’d pretty much miss graduation for this...”

Ms. Táo laughs, and Mrs. Perkins says, “I know there’s a class you are supposed to be in, so...”

“Yes ma’am” we say, again simultaneously, and then turn and head off in different directions.

For the next two and a half hours, my heart is racing...

3

Opportunities

Joshua Miller

I thought Martin was full of crap – to be honest with you. But when I walk into the music room and find Ariel, Vanessa, and Rhyan all sitting in the front row, I begin to wonder.

“Martin says that the lead guitarist and drummer of...” is as far as I get, before Ariel points at the door. When I turn and look, in walks Willie Morgan and Emily Táó, followed closely by Mrs. Perkins.

“So...” Mr. Morgan says, grinning like he’s nuts, “any musicians in here?”

They spend the next hour telling us about themselves, their music, and finally, their studio. They explain that Discovery Studios is in search of the next *Audio Distortion*, but as yet, haven’t found them. Finally, when the hour is up, they tell the twenty-two of us in the room that, if anyone is interested, they’ll hang around after school, and jam with us.

Yeah... right... *‘interested’*...

An hour and a half later, the four of us are standing around, goofing off with some freshman, waiting for Martin to show up – hard to be a ‘band’ without all your members. Anyhow, because we’re all totally into music, we always jump at the chance to help other kids who share

our passion. Rhyan is diligently trying to show Noah parts of a *Next Page* song, and Ariel is talking frets with a different girl.

The second the door opens, all eighteen heads in the room turn to look.

“Okay guys and girls, shall we make some music?”
Ms. Táó yells.

Watching the two of them interacting with all of us for close to two hours is totally amazing. It’s not kids and pop stars – it’s just a bunch of musicians. Eventually, they ask if any of us actually play together. Seconds after Mr. Morgan asks the question, a huffing and puffing Martin comes busting into the room, which makes everyone laugh. I turn to look at Vanessa and see that she is whispering to Noah. When I start to say something, she puts her finger to her lips telling me to be quiet.

Once everyone quits laughing, Martin sits down, and Ms. Táó takes over.

“So... not a single ‘band’ in the room, huh?”

Noah slowly raises his hand, and Chip – sitting on the other side of him – looks like he’s gonna faint when he does.

“We sorta are. But we’re still just learning...”

“Got a song you can play?” Mr. Morgan asks.

“Well...” Noah starts to say, and is interrupted by James, their bass player.

“We do,” James says, “but it will suck. We just aren’t that good yet.”

“‘Suck’ is what we did for almost three months when we started playing together,” Ms. Táó says, following it with a laugh. “You feel like entertaining us?”

Chip, Noah, James and Conner set up with the school equipment, and tear through a metal song (that’s what they are into) and although it’s just loud noise to most of us, Ms. Táó seems interested.

“Well guys, I didn’t hear any bad notes, and it did seem to flow, but you aren’t playing *together*.”

“Yeah,” Mr. Morgan adds, “you and you,” he points at Noah and James, “are at least a couple of beats ahead of the them,” he finishes by pointing at Conner and Chip.

“Sync up and you guys will have something,” Ms. Táo says, smiling.

“Practice, practice...”

“*PRACTICE!*” everyone in the room yells at the same time.

“Exactly. So, I need a restroom,” Ms. Táo says, holding up her hands.

“There’s one in the teacher’s lounge,” Vanessa says.

“Closer?”

“End of the hall on the left,” Carolyn, a freshman, offers.

“Cool. Back in a bit,” Ms. Táo says, and disappears out the door.

“I need a soda machine,” Mr. Morgan says.

“Teacher’s lounge is the closest one,” Martin says.

“Cool... and maybe I can find your teacher as well. Back in a flash...”

The moment they are both gone, the five of us get into a circle...

Hesitance

Jean Perkins

The moment they walk in, I get excited.

“Well?”

“Kinda weird, actually,” Emily offers. “None of them said anything.”

“Yeah,” Willie adds, feeding coins into the soda machine, “they didn’t even admit to playing together.”

“*What?*”

“It happens, Jean. Lots of kids don’t handle the spotlight very well...” Emily says.

When I laugh, so does Willie.

“Heard about Emma, have you?” he asks.

“Anyone who loves music knows your story, guys. Every kid, in every one of my classes, can recite it almost word for word.”

“So...” Emily says, taking Willie’s Pepsi, and guzzling it.

“I’m really sorry guys. I wouldn’t have told Janet about them unless I thought they were interested. Looks like I’ve wasted your time...”

“Oh... I don’t know about that,” Emily says, grinning.

“Huh?”

“She’s been watching out the window...” Willie offers, getting another soda from the machine.

“So far, about half the kids have filtered out and headed home. The five of them are still in there...”

“What we need from you, Jean, is a means to sneak up on them...”

Even as the shock of what is happening sweeps over me, I find myself wondering if all the members of *Audio Distortion* are as in tune to each other as these two are...