

almost magical with the sounds they could conjure from his ancient guitar.

Jess felt the hairs on her arm tingle, wanting to hold onto all the feelings of this life-changing moment. The band's journey here had been so sudden, so unexpected, and now, so *intense*.

But Unlost, was — at least to Jess — always more than just a band.

It was her *family*. A family of artists.

And, as for herself and Ryan, well, *that* relationship went even closer.

Life now seemed more like a fantasy — and one she didn't want to end.

She moved close to Ryan. Despite his serious, intense manner, she guessed he, too, would be feeling *blown away*.

“Something, isn't it, Ryan? Cherringfest, this stage?”

He turned and looked at her.

She wondered — how much of their success had come about because she and Ryan were now linked? Not just as performers, but as a couple?

*That, too, she hoped would never end.*

He smiled, nodded. But then — *Ryan being Ryan* — he looked back at the stage.

“Big. That’s for sure. But all the stacks of gear here? Looks like a bloody garage sale. We’ve got a lot to organise before tomorrow. Set the playlist. Work on the new tracks. Grab some rehearsal time ...”

Jess smiled. Ryan, despite the songs he wrote, was always the practical one. She looked back at Alfie — lean, serious. His parents had wanted him to become a doctor, but all Alfie had ever wanted to do was summon amazing moments from his Fender Strat.

So far, her relationship with Ryan hadn’t interfered with the band. *Three amigos*. Three artists. And now this Cherringfest booking, and

the amazing success of their first album quickly reaching new heights.

Cherringfest: not the biggest of the summer festivals by any means, but everyone knew it was *important*.

This was a gig that could propel bands out of the tiny clubs into the big tours. Had done already: she could almost recite the list of award winners who had made their breakthrough playing the famous Valley Stage.

She could see that Ryan had his eyes locked on a large drum set, off to one side of the stage on a portable riser — the big bass drum emblazoned with a name anyone coming here would know very well: *Lizard*. The infamous metal band — led by lead singer Alex King — had dominated the '90s charts. Jess even knew the drummer's name — Will Dumford — who was now studiously fiddling with the tuning screws of the drum set, leaning

forward as he touched the skin of the snare, then the toms ... *as if checking for a pulse.*

Will was a local guy — also Cherringham born and bred — whose skills had propelled the Lizard anthems that had driven stadium audiences all around the world totally *wild.*

Now, though, *that* era was over, Jess knew.

Lizard surely knew it as well. In fact, the only reason, besides nostalgia, that they were still a “name” was because of the murder of their lead singer five years ago. Since that time, they had been on a world tour.

*The Alex King Memorial Tour.*

A tour that would never end, not as long, she guessed, as the money kept coming.

They were still a big enough draw to close the festival, playing the big Sunday-night slot.

She thought of the contrast with her band, *Unlost.* Their creative life, she hoped, really just beginning. Lizard though ...? Like

watching a mammoth star in the sky slowly fade away.

“Yeah. Our sound check’s first thing in the morning,” Ryan said, digging out a tattered piece of paper that contained the key information they needed for their Friday-evening performance. “Hope the production manager gets all of Lizard’s damn stuff off of here ...”

That was when Jess noticed someone standing stage left, hidden in the shadows of the backstage area, talking to a small group of crew.

A lanky man with a mane of hair, and leather trousers. Bottle of beer clutched in one hand. A jagged face with deep ridges and folds showing too many late nights, too much booze and drugs ... too much of *everything*.

Jess recognised him straight away — Lizard’s lead guitarist, Nick Taylor.