

Prologue

JACKSON MALLORY LIVED to hold people's hearts in his hands. Not literally, of course. Once he discovered it was possible through music, he never looked back. The magic number was 128 BPM: the beats per minute most in sync with a person's heart rate when dancing. Matching that primal pulse was always his primary goal when headlining a dance party.

At a former church turned nightclub called Paradiso in the heart of Amsterdam, Jackson was at the top of his game. A worldwide tour. Several tracks climbing the charts. Artists wanting to collaborate. Asking for anything more seemed like tempting fate to take it all away.

Jackson in the DJ booth wasn't a performance. It was a show. The smoke machines and strobe lights were all timed to his beats. He liked to start slow, with a bass line people moved their

hips to. Then he built on that, like a house—brick by brick. In his case, it was layers of sound until he reached 120 BPM. Approximately the heartbeat of a long-distance runner. Once there, he gradually raised the bar song by song, coaxing the crowd to move with him. Obey his every whim and command.

Every so often he picked up the mic and addressed the crush. Their hoots and shouts of adoration fueled him. It was the life. His life. What he had been working toward since he first started recording all the sounds around him, catching each note like a boy with a butterfly net.

During a gig, he liked focusing on one person. Man or woman, it didn't matter. What he looked for was a sense of rhythm. Something he curated his music around. In his mind, if he changed the way that person moved, his job was done for the night.

On that cool September night, his eyes landed on the most beautiful sight—sunrises on the beach of Ibiza couldn't compare. In the space packed to the brim with liquored-up, drugged-up, gyrating bodies, she stood out. The embodiment of the wonder he'd felt the first time he heard the cuckoo clock his mother brought home from Germany when he was five years old. That clock changed everything. It brought music into his world. And like the music, she brought magic into his life.

Natasha Parker. Dodge Cove princess. In the tightest leather dress and the highest heels Jackson had ever seen. She moved that sexy body to the beat. *His* beat. Her sable hair bounced with each jump. Hands in the air, she swayed. Her bee-stung lips in a perfect pout.

If he were to describe dancing as bands, some people danced like the Rolling Stones, rock stars who shoot from the hip.

Others danced like Daft Punk, all disco-fueled foot movements and jerky arms. Natasha . . . Well, she was Marvin Gaye all the way. All smooth sensuality—moves that flowed with the music as if her body was the lyrics.

The acrid smoke, the bright lasers, the hypersonic beats faded away. His focus went to the melody she created with every grind of her hips. With the pumping of her chest. With the weaving of her fingers above her head as if she plucked the notes he created for herself.

Not taking his eyes off her, Jackson transitioned into a pre-recorded song. He hated doing it, since he liked curating the set while spinning—mixing songs depending on the vibe of the room. But he had to get close to her. Had to prove to himself she was real.

Setting aside his headphones, he jumped down from the booth and snaked his way to her through the whirling mass. The club was dark enough that no one really recognized him. Plus, they were already deep into the night. The molly and whatever else they were taking had long past kicked in.

Like the night he first discovered what being a DJ meant at his brother's party many years ago, Jackson stood and watched. The way Natasha moved should have been considered illegal. The thoughts she inspired in him were certainly bad, naughty, dirty things. He had seen his fair share of women in various stages of undress dancing to his music, but none of them compared to the goddess a yard from him.

He wanted to fall on his knees and worship her.

She had her eyes closed and her lips pursed. It seemed like she was really feeling the music with a graceful sex appeal that called to Jackson. Without having to think twice, he moved

toward her. She turned around, her backside facing him. He placed his hands on her hips and pulled her against his chest.

Natasha gasped. She whirled to face him. Her crystal-blue eyes, lined thickly with black eyeliner, grew wide. A lock of hair clung to the light sweat on her forehead. He reached out to smooth the strands away, but she recoiled like a cat about to strike.

“Are you real?” Jackson asked, in awe. “Because if this is a dream, I don’t ever want to wake up.”

“Oh, I’m real, all right,” she said, stance wide, arms crossed.

“It’s so good to see you.”

“I wish I could say the same.”

He gave her a once-over. Her cheeks were flushed. She was breathing hard. And her eyes . . . there was no describing the heated emotion in them.

Making a snap decision, he grabbed her hand and tugged her off the dance floor, ignoring her protests. The main room was too loud. It was one of the only times when music wasn’t his friend.

On the way to the exit, his phone vibrated in his pocket. He fished it out and glanced at the screen. It was a text from Preston.

Natasha is at the club tonight. Can you make sure she gets home safely?

He pulled Natasha through the first set of doors that led outside, texting with his free hand.

I’ll do that.

They faced each other in the space between two doors, barely bigger than a coat closet. Behind Natasha, the booming bass still pushed through. The harsh fluorescent lighting above them let out a faint buzz, flickering every once in a while.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Natasha asked.

Jackson slid the phone into his back pocket, then ran his fingers through his damp hair. “You won’t believe how happy I am right now. When I saw you in the crowd tonight—”

She jerked back. “Happy?”

“Yeah. I missed you. So much.”

“Miss me? You *miss* me?”

“Yeah.” He reached out for her, but she moved away. “My heart is beating so hard right now I think I’m going to pass out. You should feel it.”

“You’re a sick bastard, do you know that?” She crossed her arms again, her brow furrowed.

Jackson’s brow mimicked Natasha’s. “I don’t understand.”

A laugh escaped her lips as she shook her head. “Well, let me make things clear for you. You left. No word.”

“If you let me explain—”

“What’s there to explain? It looks pretty obvious to me.” She pointed toward the club. “That’s your life now.”

“Can you hear yourself right now?”

“You seriously think I’m being crazy?” She slapped her forehead with the heel of her hand and laughed until she doubled over.

All the blood rushed to the pads of Jackson’s feet as he slowly realized what was happening. “Come on, Tash. Let’s talk about this.”

“Talk?” Natasha sobered. “Now, after all this time, you

want to talk?" She cut her hand through the air between them.
"No. I only came to prove to myself that I'm over you."

"Tash, don't do this. Please."

She sized him up with those eyes he'd once thought could tame any man's wild heart. They absolutely conquered his.

"No second chances," she said, finality in her tone.

The words were a slap in the face. They stunned him into silence.

With all the dignity in the world, she lifted her chin before she turned around and stalked off, leaving the scent of her expensive perfume behind.

For the first time since he was five years old, he heard nothing.

One

SPRAWLED ON THE floor of the backstage area of the Fashion for Fibromyalgia event organized by the Society of Dodge Cove Matrons, Natasha concentrated on pinning the hem of the blue sequined Dolce & Gabbana gown walking the runway in less than—she glanced up at the clock—fifteen minutes. The air smelled faintly of hair spray and expensive perfume. The combination made her nose wrinkle and her eyes water.

“Don’t move,” she muttered over the pins between her teeth.

“I’m in love with this dress,” the cheerleader said, standing on the pedestal in front of a mirror. “I want this for prom.”

“Hmm.”

It was hard enough to focus when time wasn’t on her side without her model twisting around for a better view of the

back. Comments about how her ass looked in it didn't help either. Add to that the army of people moving as if all at once to finish hair and makeup, dress fitting, and countless other tasks aimed at pulling off the event without a hitch.

"Are you sure—"

"Casey, you can't bid on the dress you're wearing," Natasha interrupted.

"Boo!" The girl pouted.

"Just. One. Last." She tucked the needle into place. "There!"

Both Natasha and the cheerleader breathed a sigh of relief, as if a great weight had been lifted off their shoulders.

"All right. Just don't sit down and you'll be fine," Natasha said, picking herself up off the floor.

Scissors, needles, and extra thread all went into the emergency sewing kit by her bare feet. She took a moment to smooth out the bell skirt of the Kate Spade dress she wore and patted her backside to clear it of any dust that clung to the pink silk fabric, hoping nothing had stained back there. Then she slipped on her nude pumps, feeling inches taller once more.

The cheerleader stepped down from the platform and teetered away. Not a thank-you. Not even a look back. Figured. Yet Natasha envied the girl. For that night she was a model walking the runway in a beautiful dress. What was Natasha?

Pushing the unbelievably frightening question aside, Natasha turned around and headed for the exit. On the way, she paused at every dressing station, making sure all the models were ready. She might not be participating in the event like her mother wanted her to, but it didn't mean she couldn't help out a little. No other dresses needed pinning, which was good. There was no time for big fixes, but the one-of-a-kind gowns needed to look

perfect so the bids went up. The higher the better. The biddies, matrons, and debutantes were always more generous when it was for charity.

When she reached the last dressing stall, one of the assistants was in the process of helping the model out of a blush-toned Armani Privé gown. The fabric sparkled as if a million crystals had been hand-sewn on.

“The show is about to start,” Natasha said, pausing in her stride to the exit.

“Tash, one of the matrons reserved this gown,” the assistant replied, looking frazzled as she returned the garment into its bag.

Natasha took a deep, calming breath. “And who reserved this gown?”

“Mrs. Vanderlin,” the model chimed in.

Feeling the blood rush to her head, Natasha pointed at the gown. “No reservations.”

“But—”

“I will take care of Mrs. Vanderlin,” another, more subdued voice than Natasha’s said from behind her. “Dress her quickly. That gown needs to walk the runway. If Mrs. Vanderlin wants it, then she will have to place a bid like everyone else.”

The model quickly hopped into the gown the assistant removed from the dress bag once more.

Natasha bit down on the side of her cheek to keep from wincing. She was supposed to fly under the radar. The last thing she wanted was to be spotted by one of the most important people who helped organize the event. It was wrong of her to think she could escape without notice.

Forcing a smile on her face, Natasha turned around. “Adeline.”

The current president of the Dodge Cove Debutante Society returned her smile. They exchanged air kisses on each cheek. Adeline smelled of lilacs.

“I thought you were sitting this one out,” Adeline said. Radiant. Calm. Her cascade of dark chocolate hair was tamed into an elegant side-braid. The cream dress she wore had a fifties vibe to it that was both understated and eye-catching.

“Just passing by,” Natasha said cordially. “It was on the way. Shouldn’t you be in your seat? The show is about to start.”

“You know me. I can’t sit still for five minutes.” She waved a dismissive hand. “Are you sure you can’t stay?”

A sheepish grin curled Natasha’s lips upward. “Be glad, because I had my eye on that purple Gucci number.”

“The one with the feathers?”

Natasha nodded.

Adeline faked concern and teased, “Then you’d best be on your way.”

“Oh, don’t tempt me,” Natasha threatened. “If it wasn’t for my appointment, I would totally have a paddle in my hand right now.”

The lie flowed out of her lips like honey. There was no appointment that couldn’t be rescheduled.

“How is the gap year coming?”

Natasha had made the decision after returning home from Amsterdam almost seven months ago. It was already mid-April and yet the dreaded question that had followed her around still sent chills down her spine. Couldn’t people move on? Let go? It was tiring clinging to her ready answer: “It’s going really well. Thank you for asking.”

Adeline tilted her head as if unconvinced. “Are you sure

you don't want to replace me for the DoCo Debutante Society presidency? You're my first choice."

"I . . . um . . ." Natasha channeled her inner debutante and relaxed her face. Then she glanced at the clock over her shoulder. "I really have to go, Adeline. You know how appointments are." She slowly started backing away.

"Will I see you at the party?" Adeline called after her.

"With bells on!"

Natasha turned on her heel and grabbed her purse and coat from the closet by the exit. Not bothering with buttoning the coat she shrugged on, she pressed against the bar across the door and exited. Once outside she breathed in deeply—the air was so much fresher. It was like drinking a cool glass of water on a hot day. The relief it brought was sublime.

On the way to the white Tesla SUV she'd parked out back, her phone pinged, signaling a new message. The moment she saw the name of the sender she deleted the text, not bothering to read it. She got into her car, slid her phone into the special attachment on the dash, and with the press of a button, started the engine. After buckling in, she checked all mirrors before driving out of the parking lot onto the open road.

Minutes into the drive, Natasha's phone rang. Her first instinct was to ignore the call. But when she read the name on the display, she pulled the hybrid onto the side of the road.

"Hey, baby bro," she said once her twin's handsome face filled the screen.

Nathan's expression soured almost immediately. "I thought we were done with you calling me that."

"Last I heard, you're still two minutes younger than me," she teased.

“Are you in the car?” he asked. “Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“Just finished with my daughterly duties.”

“Are you telling me you’re not attending the actual event again? Mom’s not going to like that.”

She hated the admonition in his voice, but what she hated more was the fact that she was running away. Bidding on beautiful dresses would have been fine if not for the questions that came with mingling. What are your plans? Are you interested in an internship? What college are you applying to? Natasha had no answers for any of them.

Sighing, she said, “Adeline actually asked me to be president of the debutantes.”

“That’s great!” Nathan beamed. “You’ve wanted that position since you learned what a debutante was.”

“Not anymore,” Natasha said, feeling nauseous.

“Oh, Tash. Don’t be that way.”

“What way?”

“Like things are never going to get better.” Genuine sadness formed on Nathan’s face.

She thumped the back of her head against the seat. “You have your party-planning business. Preston is training to be an Olympian. Caleb, of all people, is in college. And Didi is a brilliant artist. I am nothing.”

“Stop that right now. You are not nothing.”

“Easy for you to say.”

Nathan ran a hand down his face before tapping his chin with a finger. “There’s something you can do for me.”

“Please don’t make me repeat another mantra, because I’ve heard them all. Mostly from you.”

"I am not that bad, am I?" He raised an eyebrow. "And that's not what I meant."

"All right," she said with an exasperated sigh. "Anything for you."

"Will you pick up Didi? She needs a ride to her meeting with Cynthia."

She glanced at her phone. "She should have called me."

"It must have slipped her mind. You know how she gets when she's finishing a painting. And Caleb has class until six."

"I'm on it." Natasha sat up straighter. Despite her ongoing pity party, there was nothing she wouldn't do for her friends and family. Driving Didi to the gallery was easy.

"Good." He smiled. "By the way, I called to let you know our flight is booked."

Natasha bounced in her seat. "You're coming home!"

"Last I heard, we are all invited to the engagement party that will kick off the wedding of the century. So, yes, I'm coming home." Nathan winked. "I wouldn't miss an event planned by Patricia Sinclair."

"You know what they say about meeting your heroes."

"Don't you dare jinx this for me! I'm nervous enough as it is."

"I miss you, little bro."

"Miss you more. And stop calling me that!" Nathan blew her a kiss. "I'll see you soon."

Half an hour later, Natasha parked the Tesla at the curb, got out, and walked up to the door of Didi's house. A fresh coat of paint livened up the once-dull exterior. The yard had yellow spots in places, but the grass was cut and free of litter.

She rang the doorbell and waited. No answer. Natasha shifted to her toes and patted for the Hide-a-Key box on the frame. She slipped the key out of the small rectangular box and let herself in.

Closing the door behind her, she called out, "Didi?"

She went straight toward the kitchen and turned left to Didi's studio. As Nathan had suspected, the artist was seated on a stool in her paint-splattered overalls, chewing on the end of a paintbrush. Two other paintbrushes kept her brown hair in a knot behind her head.

"You're not ready." Natasha stepped forward.

Didi's studio was a small room that perpetually smelled of paint and turpentine, with a wall made entirely of glass that let in natural light. Canvases rested three deep against the other walls, and prints from famous artists Didi loved hung above them.

Seemingly in her own world, Caleb's girlfriend dipped the business end of the brush into a blob of black paint on the palette balanced on her left hand and with expert strokes added shadow to the corner of the canvas before her. From the looks of it, the painting was of an elderly couple holding hands while sitting on a park bench. The image reminded Natasha of something. A memory, maybe. It caused an ache in her chest.

Clearing her throat to ease the growing tightness there, she called Didi's name again. Only louder.

"Natasha!" Didi cried out. She set her painting tools aside and hopped out of her seat, heading straight for Natasha and giving her a big hug. Natasha hoped none of the paint on Didi's overalls was still wet. "You came."

"Of course I came! When Nathan said you needed help, I drove right over. Why didn't you just ask me for help yourself?"

"You've already done so much," Didi said, looking embarrassed. "I never could have gotten that appointment without you. Let me show you what I've done so far."

Didi lifted the still-wet painting off the easel gingerly and placed it against the glass wall. Then she picked up the one Natasha had posed for and rested it on the vacant easel.

Natasha bent forward as close as she could get without pressing her nose against the canvas. The painting featured her in the flapper dress she'd worn for Caleb's Roaring Twenties birthday party. She clutched a strand of pearls in one hand while resting her elbow on her other hand. There was a pensive look on her face. Her hair was gathered to one side and pinned down by a collection of peacock feathers.

The brushstrokes were so fine. And the colors were vibrant. It was as if Natasha was looking at a photo of herself instead of a portrait done in oil. The most amazing part was the backdrop. Instead of being at the party, Natasha found herself in the middle of a crowded street, the only one in period costume.

"Didi, it's gorgeous," Natasha said in awe.

"I'm happy I finished it in time," Didi said, stuffing her hands into the pockets of her overalls. "It's the centerpiece of the collection. I call it *Timeless Princess*."

"I don't know what to say." Natasha's cheeks flamed.

"You don't like it."

"No!" She waved her hands. "It's beautiful. I don't think I ever thought of myself like this."

"Are you kidding me?" Didi gestured at the painting. "You're the perfect muse. Well . . . not as perfect as Caleb, but close."

“That’s certainly an ego boost if I ever heard one.” She pulled Didi into another tight hug. “Thank you for letting me be a part of this.”

“Enough with the mush.” Didi stepped back. “Let’s head to the gallery before I miss that meeting.”

“Maybe we can consider an outfit change first?” Natasha smiled. She strode out of Didi’s studio and straight into her room.

“Can’t I just go as I am? I mean, my clothes already scream artist,” Didi said, following after her.

Natasha narrowed her eyes at Didi.

“I know that look.” Didi’s eyebrow twitched. “Fine.”

“I knew you’d see it my way.” Natasha flung open the closet doors and began pushing hangers along the metal bar, one after another.

“It’s like Nathan’s in the room, except in a dress.”

“Ha!” Natasha’s lips quirked. “He’s an amateur compared to me.”

As she pulled out one dress after another, discarding each as soon as she put it against Didi, an unexpected pang of longing hit Natasha so hard it surprised her that she was still standing instead of crumpling into a sobbing ball on the floor.

“What’s wrong?” Didi asked.

“It’s nothing.” Natasha turned back to the closet, embarrassed by the sting in the corner of her eyes.

“Come on. I know it’s not.”

“It’s just . . .” She paused, biting her lower lip. “I remember the days when picking out what to wear was exciting. That feeling of finding the perfect outfit for a date.”

“Oh.” Didi shifted her weight from one flip-flop to the other. “You mean Jackson.”

“I’m being silly.”

“No. No, you’re not. I’d be a total basket case if Caleb did to me what that jerk did to you.”

Drawing on the anger that Didi’s words triggered, Natasha inhaled sharply. “I hate his guts and nothing will ever change that. I choose what I wear for myself now and no one else.”

“That’s the spirit!”

Pressing her lips together to keep them from wobbling, Natasha nodded. “Now, let’s get you dressed for that meeting.”

Natasha took a deep breath as she sat in her car outside the Cove Gallery, located in downtown Dodge Cove. Many artists who debuted at the Cove—as the locals called it—went on to show in all the top galleries in the world. Its owner and curator possessed one of the best eyes in the business for spotting undiscovered talent.

“Are you sure about this?” Didi asked from the passenger seat as she gazed at the window display. It was the third time she’d asked in the last five minutes. “I mean, it’s *the Cove*. I used to stand outside, thinking I was never good enough to go inside.”

“Well, now you are going inside, and not only will you wow Cynthia, you will secure your first showing,” Natasha said.

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

Didi unsnapped her seat belt. Natasha reached over to unsnap her own, but her hand paused at the clasp.

“What’s wrong?” Didi asked.

Natasha worried her lower lip again. It had become a habit she didn’t like. Yet it always happened when she found herself

unsure of what to do. Cynthia was inside the gallery. The gallery owner and Natasha's mother walked in the same circles.

There was no such thing as a secret in Dodge Cove, especially when the talk involved a high-profile debutante. Natasha still hadn't recovered fully from the barrage of questions Adeline had hurled her way. She hated lying. But it was worse to have to admit to the world and to herself that she had no idea what she was doing next.

"Is it okay if I stay here?" Natasha blurted out the question. She twisted around to face Didi. "I mean . . . if you really need me in there, I'll be out of this car in three seconds flat."

Natasha wanted to close her eyes against the hurt she was sure would form on Didi's pretty face. But before she could give in to the urge, Didi took both of Natasha's hands in hers and squeezed them.

"Tash, I can do this." Didi's smile was so bright, it was blinding. "Thank you for driving me here."

"Are you sure?"

Determination hardened her features. "If I can't do this on my own, then I don't have a right to show in that gallery."

A mix of relief and disappointment at herself warred for top position in Natasha's chest. A part of her was happy she could hide away. The other part of her was frustrated that she couldn't even find it in herself to be there for her friend because the urge to avoid questions flung at her was paralyzing.

"I'll be right back," Didi said, pulling Natasha away from her thoughts. She got out of the car and strode confidently into the gallery in the dark jeans, ballet flats, and blazer over a graphic tee that they'd settled on. She looked the part of chic artist ready to conquer the world.

Almost immediately, a powerful sense of abandonment came over Natasha. Everyone was doing their thing. Even the guy she hated the most was living his dream. A year ago, she'd thought she had it all planned. College. The Debutante Society presidency. A solid place in Dodge Cove society. Who knew she would be the one taking the gap year to "find herself"?

Natasha laughed at the imaginary air quotes that popped into her mind.

Not twenty minutes later, Didi was running out of the gallery. She hopped into the passenger seat like a bank robber after a heist and Natasha was her getaway car driver. Didi was breathing hard, a wild look in her eyes. At first, Natasha worried that Didi might be slipping into one of her manic states again. But then she remembered that her friend made sure to take her medication regularly.

"So?" Natasha asked cautiously.

Like she had done earlier, Didi held on to Natasha's hands and squeezed. "I got it!"

It took a second for the words to sink in. Then Natasha said, "You got it!"

They bounced in their seats, squealing like excited girls who'd just been asked by their crushes to attend winter formal. Natasha threw her arms around Didi.

"It was amazing," Didi said. "I strode up to Cynthia and extended my hand."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I should have told you that Cynthia doesn't do handshakes."

"I got that right away." Didi's beaming smile never lost its luster. "So I launched into talking about how I admired the gallery and about my art. You should have seen her face."

"I'm sure she was impressed."

Didi shook her head. "Actually, she was horrified."

"What?"

"When I told her that I wanted to have a nontraditional show, where the servers dressed like the subjects in the portraits as they mingled with the crowd with trays of drinks and hors d'oeuvres, I thought she was going to faint. All the blood drained from her already-pale face. It was glorious."

"Okay." Natasha inclined her head. "I don't get it. How did she agree to your show?"

"Then I told her about my subjects being prominent residents of Dodge Cove."

"My portrait." Natasha was slowly understanding. Cynthia had never exhibited a show that involved the DoCo elite before. And since Didi had attended so many parties last summer, she'd met enough of them to paint an entire showcase of characters.

"Yes! She said she was intrigued. The show's in three weeks."

"That is fantastic!"

Didi's enthusiasm was catching. It made Natasha feel like she could also do anything if only she put her mind to it.

The question was, what did she want to do?

Two

THE NEXT DAY, in another part of the country, the abrasive metallic *chink* of curtains ripped aside startled Jackson out of a dead sleep. Bright light pierced through the black comfort of his closed eyelids. He snorted, then groaned, pressing the heel of his hand against his temple as he pushed up and away from the blinding sun.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” came the all-too-familiar bellow of his manager.

Jackson moved his tongue. The dryness of his mouth left a rancid taste. Bile climbed up his throat. He paused in the act of sitting up, waiting. To vomit or not to vomit? That was the question.

“I forgot to take two aspirin with water before I died last night?” Jackson said in response to the question hurled at him.

He finally managed a seated position. One eye opened a slit, allowing him to track the whirlwind of movement that was his manager, who was picking up discarded bottles scattered on the floor and shoving them into a black trash bag. Partying the night before didn't seem like such a good idea in the bright light of day.

After he exhaled long and hard, Jackson said, "Can you call room service and have them bring up some pancakes and lots of bacon? I need to soak up the rest of this booze, man."

Back in Dodge Cove, Jackson and his friends used to party, but never hard enough to pass out afterward. A pang of overwhelming loneliness hit him. He'd thought inviting people over after his gig was the perfect cure. He just didn't want to wind up alone in his too-large suite, faced with the saddest lyrics in the world floating around in his head. He wrote party music for a living, for crying out loud. Unfortunately, the party was over and it left him feeling like roadkill. It was depressing to think that the only person in his life was the man currently tidying up the place.

In the beginning Jackson had felt strong. Independent. Hell, he was going to take over the world. He came close to it too, with a highly successful world tour. Then he saw Natasha again in Amsterdam. Watching her walk away and missing her every day since came crashing into him like a wrecking ball. The party beats were gone and he was afraid he might never get them back.

"I knew you'd forget." Stomping and clomping around like an elephant stampeding followed the hysterical words. "I knew it!"

“Hutch,” Jackson barked. “Calm down. It’s too early for a tantrum.”

The rotund man froze in the act of picking up one of Jackson’s discarded shirts and glared at him. “It’s already noon, you ungrateful bastard. The rep for Maroon 5 keeps asking for the track you promised for their next album. This new pop star, Crysta Lyn, wants to collab with you after hearing you play last night. And you have the studio booked all afternoon.”

Jackson scratched his jaw. The pounding in his head, which he wished he could record because it made one hell of a bass-line beat, continued. He still needed hangover food. Badly. And a shower.

Rubbing the last of sleep from his face, forcing his brain to focus, he said, “Tell Adam the track isn’t ready yet. Who’s this Crysta Lyn again? And cancel studio time. I don’t feel like making music today.”

Hutch’s usually ruddy face turned beet red. His second chin jiggled and his lips quivered. Jackson imagined steam coming out of the man’s ears.

“No, we are not canceling studio time,” his manager said in a surprisingly even tone. He breathed in, eyes closing for a second. “You haven’t had a hit in six months. No one is buying sad, sappy songs. You make dance music, damn it!”

Jackson scowled. “That vein on your neck is about to pop. You should really watch your blood pressure.”

In response, Hutch grabbed the leather pants hanging from the back of a chair. Along with the shirt in his hand, he threw both garments at Jackson’s face. Then he pointed a pudgy finger Jackson’s way.

“I want you at the studio in ten minutes,” he said, the threat clear in his voice. “Ten minutes, Jackson!” He waddled to the door. “Do you hear me?”

The door slammed shut before Jackson formed a response.

With both eyes open, he took in the full extent of the events from the night before. His hotel suite was in shambles. A bra hung from the back of the couch. Someone had left a shoe. And several empty bags of chips littered the floor. Hutch must have cleared the room of lingering partygoers, because he was the only one left.

One thing was for sure: housekeeping had their hands full that morning.

This wasn't the life he'd imagined for himself when he left Dodge Cove to pursue a career as a DJ. He was sick and tired of moving from one hotel room to another—the same overpriced minibar, the same generic desk, even the same Bible on the nightstand.

With tired and creaking joints unfit for someone who'd just turned nineteen, Jackson swung his legs over the side of the bed. The second his feet touched the carpet, he stretched. Joints popped back into place. Then he looked down. Still in the jeans and underwear he'd worn the day before.

Scratching his bare chest, he ambled to the bathroom. The phrase “tired to the bone” had meant nothing to Jackson until that morning. Hutch worked him like a mule. The gigs never stopped. It seemed like a high-class problem to have. He should be happy that people wanted him headlining their clubs and playing their parties. But he wasn't. Not anymore. His feet dragged. His shoulders drooped. Every muscle in his body seemed to have turned to lead overnight.

The wince that came when he stared at his reflection in the mirror was unstoppable. His dyed black hair hung limply to one side. He picked up the electric razor and began shaving the sides and back of his head. The top he kept long and usually slicked back with gel. Then he moved the razor along his chin and jaw.

The purple splotches beneath his eyes were unmistakable. His shoulders and collarbones protruded. Where once he'd had definition and muscle, six months later he was little more than skin and bones. Sleeping all day and working all night did that. He couldn't remember the last time he had hit the gym. If he wasn't in a club or party DJ'ing, he was on a plane or in the studio. The cycle was just too much.

Once he was done shaving, he put down the razor and lifted the tap.

Twenty minutes later, in the shirt and leather pants Hutch had thrown at him, Jackson sat in the studio across the street from his hotel and stared at his phone. A name and a number stared back. His thumb hovered over the Call button.

The producer, who sat beside him in front of a massive soundboard filled with faders, knobs, and buttons, gave him the side eye. Jackson returned the glance with a scowl before he stood up and hit Call.

The number rang a couple of times before it went to voice mail.

Jackson waited for the beep, then said, "Hey, Tash, it's me . . . again. Um, okay, I know I messed up." He ran a hand over the top of his head, smoothing back the gelled strands. "I know I'm the last person you want to talk to, but if you can please return my messages . . ." Then he bowed his head and sighed. "I miss you. I really—"

Another beep cut him off. He ended the call and stared at the screen again. A snort came from behind him.

“Pathetic, man,” the producer said. “You can have any girl you want any night of the week and you’re begging some girl from home to call you back?”

Turning around, Jackson narrowed his eyes at the guy. “Instead of pissing me off, why don’t we just get back to work?”

“Yeah, that’s what you said the last hundred times.”

Jackson put on his headphones and played the track he had been working on for months. Instantly he was transported to an afternoon by the lake. The sunset colored the placid water bright orange and gold. He was lying on a picnic blanket, his head pillowed by his crossed arms. A yard away, in the water, stood Natasha. She wore a pretty sundress that showed off her shoulders, and she had her hair down.

Nothing else in his life was as beautiful as her.

“Come here,” she said, waving him over. “The water is nice.”

He shook his head, smiling. “I’m fine here. Thanks.”

Who wanted to move when gazing at a view like her was better?

She pouted. “You’re no fun.”

Powerless against her, he pushed up from the blanket, toed off his boots, and removed his socks. Then he folded up his pant legs and ran toward her. Once his feet were submerged, he bent down and splashed her with water. She shrieked and danced away, laughing even more.

“Bet you regret calling me now, huh?” Jackson challenged.

“Is that the best you can do?”

Never one to walk away from a dare, he charged Natasha. Once she was in his arms, he dove into the water backward,

taking her with him. They were soaked and laughing in seconds, tangled in each other's arms. Kissing wasn't too far behind.

"Do you love me?" she whispered when they were back on the blanket, drying off.

"You don't know by now?"

There was that pout again.

Jackson took her hand and placed it at the center of his chest. "Do you feel that?"

She nodded, watching him with clear blue eyes.

"You are every beat of my heart," he said.

Hours later, Jackson threw the headphones against the soundboard and covered his face with his hands. It wasn't working. No matter how hard he tried, the song just wasn't coming together the way he liked. The notes still sounded too depressing. No one wanted to dance to a sad song.

"Fuck," he said into his hands.

"Maybe we should take a break," the producer said.

Jackson knew a break wouldn't help. Not when six months of nothing but crap was coming out of him. The beats used to come easily. He knew how each song would sound way before he laid down tracks. The producer swiveled his chair to face Jackson.

"What if we—"

"We already tried that," Jackson cut off the producer way before the guy finished his thought.

"We can always return to—"

"That version was crap too."

"Okay, looks like you're going to interrupt me any chance you get." The sound of a chair being pushed back followed his

words. "I'm going to grab a coffee. Hutch said a song needs to come out of this session or we're not leaving the studio."

Jackson didn't lift his head from his hands until the door of the studio closed. The hourly rate for a studio was astronomical. If he didn't come up with something, they were just wasting money. It wasn't the pressure that bothered him. He had produced something under more stressful conditions. It was that every time he tried to write something new, Natasha's face popped into his mind, influencing the sound of the track. Now all his songs were about missing her. Or not having her in his life. Or wanting her back. These would be all well and good if he were a country artist. But as a dance-party DJ? Not so much.

Unable to stand himself anymore, he picked up his phone and quickly typed a message to the one friend he had left.

JACKSON: Have you heard from Tash lately?

The reply came seconds later.

PRESTON: Hello to you too.

JACKSON: She's not answering any of my calls.

PRESTON: Can you blame her?

JACKSON: I thought when she came to Amsterdam that everything was going to be okay.

PRESTON: It's never that easy. You know that.

JACKSON: I messed up, man.

He leaned forward until his elbows rested on his knees and cradled his forehead in his free hand. There was a long pause before the next reply came.

PRESTON: Suck it up.

JACKSON: What?

PRESTON: Stop moping and do something about it.

JACKSON: Do you honestly think she'll want to see me when she doesn't even return my calls?

PRESTON: Then make her see you.

JACKSON: Easy for you to say.

PRESTON: Grow a spine. BTW, your brother got engaged.

Jackson almost dropped his phone after reading the text. How come it was the first time he was hearing about it? His thumbs flew over the keypad.

JACKSON: Baxter's engaged? To who?

PRESTON: That's not the point. There's an engagement party. Natasha will be there. Do I have to explain the rest to you or are you smart enough to figure shit out on your own?

JACKSON: When?

PRESTON: Tomorrow.

Jackson pushed to his feet and tucked his phone into his pocket. Quickly, he stuffed all his gear into his pack and left the studio. He had to see her. Had to talk to her in person. Preston was right. There was a quote in his head about a mountain and a guy named Muhammad.

This time, he wasn't allowing her to walk away.

"Where are you going?" the producer asked when they passed each other in the hallway.

“Back to the hotel,” Jackson said over his shoulder, not once stopping.

After jogging across the street, he slipped into the lobby of his hotel, ignoring the cheerful greeting of the night manager. He pressed the triangle pointing up and seconds later the elevator doors parted, letting him in. Finding his floor number, he punched the button.

His phone vibrated.

Thinking it was another text from Preston, Jackson slipped the device out of his back pocket only to realize it was a call. From Hutch.

“Where the hell did you go?” bellowed his manager. “You have a gig at Velvet tonight.”

“Have someone fill in for me,” Jackson said as he slid the keycard into the slot and pushed into his hotel room.

All signs of the party from the previous night were gone. He ended the call before Hutch could yell at him some more. Dumping his pack onto the bed, he opened the airline app on his phone and quickly typed in the destination. There was a red-eye leaving in two hours.

With a tap of his finger, he booked the ticket. His phone rang again. He checked and ignored Hutch’s call. He pulled his duffel out of the closet and quickly stuffed clothes into it, not bothering to fold them. Then he called the front desk for a cab.

He had a plane to catch.

Jackson Mallory was going home.

Three

THE ENGAGEMENT PARTY for Baxter and Adeline was kicked off by cocktails at the lesser ballroom of Mallory Manor before dinner on Friday. Natasha greeted the happily engaged couple at the door and handed over the flowers she'd brought for Adeline. Even if guests had been asked to make charitable donations instead of bringing gifts, she couldn't come empty-handed.

Natasha had always loved the lesser ballroom. Its floor area opened out onto the expansive patio overlooking the grounds. Something that the grand ballroom didn't have, since it was on the second floor of the property. People were already outside, enjoying the mild early evening weather. She admired the standing tables added to the room for those who wanted to have a place to set their drinks down. The floral centerpieces were beautiful,

made up of white peonies, the future bride's favorite flower. Natasha sighed. Everything was too beautiful for words.

Supporting an elbow with one hand and holding a glass of ginger ale with the other, Natasha pretended to ignore the fact that she was standing in a room where she and Jackson used to make out.

A lot.

In fact, in her periphery, she spotted the heavy curtains he'd loved to pull her behind.

Every time there was a party at a manor, she and Jackson always found a way to sneak off. Her chest felt tight at the memory of his smile and the way he ran his thumb over her lips before he kissed her. It was a bad idea to come here. She knew the Ghosts of Relationship Past would come back and haunt her the second she stepped into his house. But she had promised to attend. And Natasha liked Baxter. She couldn't let her heartbreak get in the way of showing her support for his engagement to Adeline. She was happy for them. She really was. They had what she'd once had. Now, if she could only survive the night without breaking down, she'd call it a win.

Plus, her periwinkle silk charmeuse Valentino with beading made her feel pretty, confident—like a girl who wasn't lost and heartbroken. She loved how the fabric moved when she did—lighter than air. The hem of the full skirt fell a few inches above her knee and the bodice was cinched in at the waist. Her one regret was the new Jimmy Choos on her feet. Breaking them in at a party where lots of standing around was involved was a rookie move on her part. In her defense, they'd looked so sexy in the store that she just had to have them.

"Isn't this just marvelous?" Nathan bumped his shoulder

against hers. He held a pretty green mocktail while grinning like a kid in a candy store.

Distracted from her aching toes, Natasha hugged him for the hundredth time since he'd arrived with Preston the day before. It was so nice to have her twin back.

"Have I told you how much I've missed you?"

He counted off with his fingers as he spoke. "Um . . . when I was packing for this trip. When I was on my way to the airport. While I was settling in on the plane. Shortly after onboard Wi-Fi was activated. When we landed—"

Her laughter cut him off. "I get it. But I really did miss you. Why did you have to move all the way to Colorado?"

In unison, their eyes landed on the tall, built-like-a-Greek-god guy who was laughing at something Caleb had said. Or he might have been laughing at Didi, who stood beside him in the pale pink dress Natasha had helped her pick out for the party.

"I still can't believe he shaved his head. It's so sexy," she said with a sigh.

"Stop drooling over my boyfriend, please. Or hair extensions will come off," he snapped back. "But I also completely understand where the worship is coming from. He *does* fill that sports jacket with deliciousness."

"How does it feel?"

Nathan's eyebrows knitted together. "What?"

"Finally getting to call him your boyfriend."

"Oh, stop it!"

"Come on. Tell me."

He rolled his eyes and smiled. "Some days I wake up and think it's all a dream. Then he smiles at me, and I know it's all real."

As if sensing that Natasha and Nathan were both staring at him, Preston glanced their way. Almost immediately his expression changed from passive to adoring. Those green eyes focused on Nathan like he was the only person there. Like Nathan belonged to no one else. He smiled and turned his attention back to Caleb and Didi. For a moment, Natasha saw someone other than Preston staring back. That was exactly the way Jackson used to look at her. Like she was his whole world. Her feet seemed unsteady all of a sudden, like she'd broken a heel and was about to topple over.

Blinking the image of Jackson away, she steadied herself and focused on what was really important: teasing Nathan.

She poked her twin in the arm repeatedly. "How are you still standing right now?"

"I'm hiding it well, but my knees are Jell-O." Nathan inhaled sharply. "Isn't this party just perfect? Everything is within the blue, green, and ivory color scheme that I'm already suspecting are the colors of the wedding. White peonies everywhere. And the food and drinks are impeccable. I didn't expect any less."

Her brother's fledgling party-planning business was gaining a reputation for excellence, especially with Eleanor Grant's recommendation after he had put together the Society of Dodge Cove Matrons luncheon back in October. Natasha was so proud of him. She envied his ability to know what he wanted and go after it with single-minded determination.

She needed a new dream. Something she could call her own. But as soon as the thought entered her mind and she wanted to tell Nathan about it, her brother spotted the party planner and left Natasha to fend for herself. The biddies descended upon her like sharks scenting blood in the water.

Needing a break from all the mingling and the heavy-handed questions about her future, Natasha left the lesser ballroom for the powder room nearby. A minute to herself was all she needed. She pushed open the door and entered. The sounds of sniffing reached her immediately.

"Is everything okay?" Natasha asked as she neared the young woman she recognized as one of the new debutantes sitting on a divan at the center of the small room with her face in her hands.

"He's such a jerk," the girl said, her voice quivering.

Natasha pulled a couple of tissues from the holder by the porcelain sink and handed them over. The debutante took them gratefully and began dabbing at her tearstained face. For a second, Natasha worried for her makeup, but it seemed everything stayed in place, even the mascara on her lashes.

"You're Stacy, right? Stacy Richmond," she said. "You just moved here last year?"

Stacy's eyes grew wide. "You're *the* Natasha Parker."

"I don't know about 'the.'" Natasha's smile wobbled. "Just Natasha is fine. I hope you don't mind my asking." She gestured at Stacy's slightly splotchy complexion. "What happened?"

A new wave of tears gushed from Stacy's eyes, accompanied by the crumpling of her pretty face. Natasha eased closer and rubbed soothing circles down the other girl's back.

It took a couple of minutes, but the keening cries ebbed and Stacy was able to speak again. More tissues were involved. Natasha waited patiently.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Stacy said, "He's cheating on me."

The moment the word "cheating" left Stacy's mouth, Natasha

went on the defensive. She understood Stacy's heartbreak. Sisters had to stick together.

"Who?" Natasha racked her brain, but she couldn't come up with the name of the guy Stacy was with. Her debutante gossip wasn't up to date since she'd decided to lie low.

"Peyton."

"McMasters?"

Stacy nodded, seeming like another crying jag was on the way. Finally, a name. Natasha's mind immediately thought of the many ways to make the jerk pay for making such a sweet girl cry. At a party, no less.

"I went to high school with him," Natasha said through tight lips. "He used to be on the lacrosse team. How did you find out that he was cheating on you?"

"Someone sent me a picture, and when I confronted him about it, he broke up with me."

Natasha stood and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Stacy asked, still sniffing.

But Natasha didn't reply. Instead she went back into the lesser ballroom and snagged a champagne glass from a passing tray. She gathered as much spit as she could in her mouth, the way Caleb taught her when they were kids, and dropped everything into the glass. Then she lifted her head and scanned the crowd for her target.

Jackson checked his reflection in the mirror one more time, adjusting the tie around his neck. It felt too tight. He loosened the knot and started over. About halfway through, he pulled the tie off and flung it over the back of a nearby chair. Wearing it felt like having a noose around his neck. He unbuttoned the

top of his shirt and tugged the cuffs out from the ends of the sleeves of his dinner jacket.

It had been a while since he'd had to dress in something other than jeans and a T-shirt. The starch the household staff used when ironing his clothes made his skin itch. Coming home to Natasha had fueled him on the plane ride over, but the second he stepped over the town line he began questioning himself. Was he doing the right thing by coming back? He knew he needed Natasha in his life. But what if she never took him back? What if she moved on?

The last question practically crippled him. He had to see her. But seeing her also meant seeing his family. Sneaking into the house was easy enough because of its size. Yet the second he attended the party, they would all know he was back.

He turned his head left, then right. The sides were starting to grow out. His hair always started darker, then lightened as the strands grew longer. He considered shaving off the top after his shower but decided against it. Might be too severe a look for his first party in town. So he worked a glob of gel into the strands and combed everything back.

He sighed and then gave himself a stern look in the mirror. "You can do this."

Then he walked out of his room and into the hall. Unfortunately, his confidence wavered the closer he got to the lesser ballroom. And it was a long trip. He had to traverse the grand staircase to the foyer, take a right into the music room, move across the sunroom, and then take a left past the center atrium with its glass dome and hothouse flowers.

The guests he passed stopped and stared. He nodded and smiled, keeping his pace even. The whispering started as soon

as he passed. No one even bothered waiting for him to be out of earshot.

“Here we go,” he said under his breath.

Just at the entrance stood Baxter and Adeline, looking like the handsome power couple they were.

Baxter froze in the middle of greeting the Feldsteins. He even had Dr. Feldstein’s hand in his. Adeline noticed the sudden change in Baxter and followed his gaze. Like a pro, she thanked the Feldsteins and gestured for them to enter the ballroom. Then she wrapped her arm around Baxter’s and gave him a squeeze.

Jackson cleared his throat and forced himself to move the five steps it took to be standing in front of the couple. The tips of his fingers tingled. And sweat drenched his pits. *Thank God for jackets*, he thought. No one had to know how nervous he was.

“Hey, Bax,” he said, not quite making eye contact with his brother, who was twelve years his senior.

“You’re here,” Baxter said, surprise and shock crossing his face one after the other. “When did you get back?”

“Couple hours ago.”

“Welcome home,” Adeline said, warmth in her voice. “We’re so glad you came to the party.”

“I never got the invitation,” Jackson replied. “There must have been some mix-up in the mail since I move a lot. If not RSVP’ing is an issue, I can leave—”

“No!” Baxter said, cutting him off. Then he pulled Jackson into a tight, brotherly embrace. “You’re actually here.”

“Yeah.” Jackson clapped his brother’s back. “Congratulations, dude.”

“Jackie,” his mother said from behind Baxter and Adeline.
“You’re home!”

Words died when Jackson’s gaze landed on his father, who stood at his mother’s side. The white on the man’s temples wasn’t there a year ago. Neither were the harsh lines bracketing his lips. Yet his eyes, golden like Jackson’s, remained as cold as ever. Even if he was in his midfifties, he stood tall and proud. Spine straight. Expression unforgiving.

“I see the prodigal son has returned,” Hayden Mallory said, a glass of scotch in one hand.

“Dad,” Jackson said.

“I take it you being here means you’re done with this DJ business?”

All eyes were on Jackson, but his attempts at a response were choked by the closing walls of his throat.

“Dad, please,” Baxter said. “Let’s not do this here.”

“Hayden, why don’t we let Jackson settle in before we start asking him questions,” his mother said. “This is not the time or place.”

“There is never a good time for this kind of thing, Camilla,” his father said. Then he gestured with his glass toward Jackson. “This is what happens when you coddle your son too much. He goes and gets a ridiculous haircut, and runs off doing God knows what, tarnishing the good name of this family. Baxter is a rising star at Parker and Associates and is on track to make partner. After that I have political plans for him. He may even be president one day. Can’t you see that?”

His mother touched the pearls around her neck. In her distress, she opened her mouth but no words came out.

“It’s okay, Mom.” Jackson gave her a sad smile before

turning his attention to Adeline and Baxter. "I'm sure you have many more guests to greet, so I'll excuse myself. Baxter, we'll catch up later."

"We'll do that." Baxter gave him a subtle nod.

Not making eye contact with anyone for fear of saying something he might regret, Jackson turned on his heel and headed into the ballroom. His father's words were like a physical blow. They hurt and would definitely leave bruises in the morning. He'd never understood Jackson's decision to become a DJ, so some pushback was expected. But his disapproval wasn't welcome, especially when Jackson was struggling with his music. It sucked and it pissed him off. So with his head down, he kept moving, as far away from his father's judgment as possible.

Not paying attention to where he was going, he bumped into someone crossing his path. There was a *splat*. A feminine gasp reached his ears as the glass of champagne in her hand spilled all over the front of her dress. Jackson reached out as if to catch her, an apology already on his lips. Then their eyes met and the clear blue that stared back—despite the annoyance in them—took Jackson's breath away.

Four

HER DRESS. THE beautiful dress she'd been so excited to wear that evening was completely ruined. Her spit-laced champagne dripped all over the front to the floor. Anger rose from the pads of Natasha's feet up her body like a kettle about to blow. The words "Watch it, jerk!" were about to fall out of her mouth when she remembered where she was.

Even in public, she could still hiss and throw death-dagger eyes at whoever had the nerve not to pay attention to where he was going. No one ruined a Valentino and got away with it. Not on her watch. Natasha lifted her narrowed gaze to the person who'd bumped into her, ready to lay down the hurt.

Time stopped.

Her heart punched against the wall of her chest. Hard.

All the blood in her body froze.

Jackson. Was in Dodge Cove. Jackson was in Dodge Cove and he had black hair. He had black hair?

“What are you doing here?” she blurted out.

“Why haven’t you been answering my calls or returning my texts?” he replied.

Her first instinct was to turn around and storm away. It had worked the last time they’d spoken. But they were attracting too much attention already with the spilling-of-the-champagne incident. The last thing Baxter and Adeline needed at their engagement party was to have the night ruined because of a scene she and Jackson caused.

Some reunion it was. Not in her wildest dreams had she expected him to actually come back. Seeing him again brought out a whirl of conflicting emotions. She was mad that he had the gall to show his face in Dodge Cove again. That stupid, handsome-as-sin face. She didn’t know if she wanted to laugh or cry. And damn if the sound of his voice didn’t make her insides pay attention. Even after all the pain he had caused her, she still felt the magnetic pull he always seemed to have on her. Well, not anymore, damn it! Jackson being back changed nothing.

Except that his presence made it seem like all ears were aimed in their direction, waiting for the juiciest piece of gossip. Or, better yet, the next DoCo scandal. Jackson and Natasha together again—what could go wrong? Other than everything.

“We are not doing this here,” she said.

“The terrace, then.”

Attempting to regain some control, she deposited the empty flute on a passing tray. She didn’t bother looking back to see if Jackson followed when she headed outside. The prickle

running along her back told her so. She could actually feel him staring at her like she had a bull's-eye painted somewhere on her backside.

Thankfully, most of the guests had moved inside, so they wouldn't have too many witnesses for whatever came next. Natasha went straight to the farthest corner of the terrace and whirled around. The slight chill in the air made her very aware of the wet condition of her dress and how thin the fabric was. She crossed her arms and scowled.

There were many nights when she'd had dreams of confronting him again after Amsterdam. In those dreams, she felt brave and always had the right thing to say—just like in Amsterdam. Yet no matter how hard she tried, all her confidence ebbed away, leaving a big, gaping, Jackson-shaped hole. Twelve months of patching up that hole left her cold and miserable inside.

How could she ever repair the damage of losing a soul mate? Because that was what he was to her. At least at the time she'd thought so.

Now there he stood in front of her, so tall, so unbelievably, frustratingly good-looking. It pissed her off even more. Natasha hugged herself tighter in the hopes of squeezing the unwanted feelings out of her. Where had the calm and collected Natasha gone?

Jackson shrugged out of his jacket and made a move to drape it over her shoulders. Natasha stepped back. He gave her that exasperated look that never failed to make her weak in the knees.

"How dare you show your face here?"

"Don't be stubborn, Tash," he said. "I'm the reason why

you're soaked. I wasn't paying attention to where I was going. At least let me give you my jacket before you catch a cold."

She shook her head. "I don't want *anything* from you."

His shoulders sagged, but the jacket stayed in his hand. Not in a million years was she asking for it. Freezing to death was preferable, thank you very much. Okay, maybe a tad over-dramatic, but she had a point to make.

"And what made you think that not replying to your messages and calls meant come home, huh?" she hissed, addressing his earlier question. "I never thought you were the type who couldn't take a hint. We're over, Jackson. Face it."

"Tash, come on." He ran his fingers through his hair. "I messed up. I'm willing to admit that. But please let me explain."

"What else is there to say? You left. Plain and simple." Her glare grew ten degrees hotter. "What can you possibly say that will justify what you did?"

"The moment I signed with Hutch, he wanted me in LA as soon as possible. There was no time—"

"I call bullshit," she barked. "I'm your—" She shut her mouth, then corrected herself. "I *was* your girlfriend. Didn't I at least deserve a call? Maybe even a text? Because here I thought a face-to-face might be asking for too much."

"It's not that simple."

"I think I'm smart enough to understand."

"I knew if you asked me not to go that I'd stay," he whispered, bowing his head and squeezing the back of his neck, remorse on his too-thin face. "But that doesn't matter anymore. I'm back and I'm willing to do anything. I love you, Tash."

"Excuse me? You *love* me? Where the hell was that love the

night you decided to pack up and leave? Huh?" Her earlier anger reignited, and the tinder was indignation.

"Tash—"

"Stop! Just stop!" She raised a hand. "I don't have time for your lies. I'm wet. I'm cold. I have to go."

"Everything okay here?" Caleb asked.

Jackson ran a hand down his face as Natasha looked over his shoulder at the new arrivals. Caleb, Didi, Nathan, and Preston all stood a couple of yards away, wearing different expressions. Her brother seethed and seemed close to cutting someone. Caleb seemed uncertain, stuffing his hands in his pockets. Preston remained stone-faced, making him hard to read. And Didi . . . Well, she was more than mildly curious. In fact, she was the first to break ranks.

"So, you're *the* Jackson everyone loves to hate," Didi said, circling him like a shark and giving him a once-over. Jackson followed her with his gaze. "I thought you were blond. Isn't he supposed to be blond?" She addressed that question to Natasha.

"I dyed my hair," Jackson said.

"Didi, get away from him," Nathan said, as if Jackson were a mangy dog.

Didi stepped back, but instead of returning to Caleb's side, she stood beside Natasha, entwining their arms. Natasha took immense comfort not only in the body heat Didi provided but also in the support. Unfortunately, the comfort sucked out all her previous indignation, leaving her tired and miserable. All feeling from the waist down vanished. She barely understood how she remained upright when curling into a ball was preferable. They said mourning a breakup took twice as long as the

actual relationship. If that were true, then how was Natasha supposed to recover from someone she'd loved since she was six years old?

Seeing Jackson in Dodge Cove felt like seeing a ghost. She wasn't sure if he was real or a figment of her active imagination. Yet the rational part of her brain knew better. There was no such thing as ghosts.

"Let's go home and get you out of that dress," Nathan finally said, barely keeping his cool. His lips quivered and his eyebrow twitched. A vein pulsed in his temple.

Natasha knew what they were all not saying . . . or in their case, not doing. A room away was the entire DoCo elite. Raised voices attracted unwanted attention. But it was becoming increasingly clear that Jackson and Natasha were a powder keg waiting to blow.

Cold and in shock, Natasha tightened her grip on Didi and forced herself to move.

"Tash, please." Jackson moved toward her but Nathan was already there, putting a hand on his chest and hissing into his ear.

"I'd stay where you are if you know what's good for you."

Jackson met Nathan's gaze. Then, face falling, he raised both hands and backed away a step.

"Nathan," Preston said. "Let's go."

"You better not show yourself to me when there's no one around," Nathan said, his parting shot before he followed the rest of them out.

During the plane ride home, Jackson had rehearsed everything he wanted to say. He was confident. Cocky even. Yet the

second he'd seen the hurt in Natasha's eyes, he'd choked. A year ago he would have beaten anyone who made her sad. How fucked up was it that he had been the one to ultimately shatter the girl he loved?

Head in his hands as he sat in one of the chairs in the smaller of the two libraries, Jackson hated himself for hurting her. She deserved better, he knew that now. But he wasn't going to walk away. Not until she and everyone else forgave him for being the shittiest person alive.

He looked up at the cuckoo clock hanging on the wall. It was in the shape of a house with flowers painted on the front paneling. The roof created the perfect letter A.

Above the clock face was a balcony with two doors. What fascinated Jackson most about the clock was the sound it made. When the long hand reached the top, the double doors swung open, revealing a woman holding a bird. It cuckooed to the number where the small hand pointed.

Thus began Jackson's fascination with sound. He heard the music of things. The humming of the fridge. The steady chopping of their cook preparing vegetables for dinner. Bees in the woods buzzing around their hive. The tinkling wind chimes on a branch of the massive oak in the garden. And the best sound of all: Natasha's laughter. Nothing could compare to its brightness. To its clarity. When she laughed, it was as if the world was a perfect place.

"I figured you'd be here," came a masculine voice from his left.

Lips pressed together, Jackson sighed. "Didn't you leave with the rest of them?"

Caleb shrugged. "Forgot my jacket."

“And you’re looking for it here? Because this is not the coatroom.”

“I admire your balls, Mallory,” Caleb said, stuffing his hands in his pockets and leaning against the side of one of the shelves. “You’re really being sarcastic with me right now? After that shit storm at the patio?”

“I should really be saying, ‘Screw you, Parker.’” Jackson paused. “But you’re right.”

“Excuse me?” Caleb cocked his head. “Can you repeat that? I didn’t hear you correctly.”

Jackson snorted. “You’re right. Cut the sarcasm.”

“Maybe there’s hope for you yet.”

What was Jackson supposed to say to that? He was on the wrong side of things. In fact, Caleb had every right to deck him. But it seemed like Caleb was willing to cut him some slack. Jackson took the chance and ran with it.

“Hey, that thing with Tash earlier . . .,” he began, but a sudden lump in his throat prevented him from continuing.

“To be honest, bro, she was hell to be around for the first two months after you left,” Caleb said, a flash of anger in his eyes.

Jackson lifted his head. “What happened?”

“She was a mess.” Caleb rubbed his forehead. “She’d cry all night. Sleep all day. No matter how hard we tried, we just couldn’t get her to leave her room. Forget showering. I never thought someone that pretty could smell that funky. But that was for the first month.”

Jackson hesitated to ask, afraid of the possible answer, but the question fell from his lips anyway. “And the second month?”

Caleb sighed. "That was when the partying started."

"Tash?" His straitlaced, perfect debutante, DoCo princess, a party girl?

"I'm not kidding. If there was a party happening within town limits, she was there. At first, we thought it was a good thing. She was getting out of the house. Interacting with people. Rejoining the world."

"Wait. We're talking about the same girl here, right?"

"You try babysitting her when all she wants is to get drunk. Nathan, Preston, and I had our hands full making sure she stayed out of harm's way. She basically imploded when you left. I'm surprised she managed to pull herself together after that."

"Do you hate me too? For leaving?"

"Jax."

"Because I'm starting to see that there's a pretty long line." Jackson stared at his hands, curling them into tight fists. "I didn't know I hurt so many people, Caleb. I thought I was following my dream and that everyone would be happy for me. I didn't mean to . . ." He swallowed, hard. The corners of his eyes stung. "I'm such a selfish bastard."

A hand rested on his shoulder.

"I'm not going to lie, what you did was a shit move," Caleb said, his tone stern. "But, damn if I don't see where you're coming from. All I ever really wanted was to get out of this town. Even planned an entire gap year around it. But then I met Didi."

The complete adoration in Caleb's face was all too familiar. Jackson looked at Natasha that way. Like his entire world revolved around her.

"I can't say I'm surprised," Jackson said. "But it was just a matter of time. I'm happy you found her, Caleb. I really am."

“More like she found me.” Caleb shook his head. “But we’re not here to talk about my relationship. I’m assuming the reason you’re in Dodge Cove is because you want to make things right with Tash. Because God help you if it’s not. I’d be the first to punch your lights out.”

“I need her in my life, Caleb.” Jackson looked his friend in the eye. “I was wrong to leave without telling her. I was wrong to leave, period.”

“You know what they say: admitting you were wrong is the first step.”

“Isn’t it supposed to be admitting you have a problem?”

“Are you seriously correcting me right now?”

Jackson lifted both his hands. “You’re right.”

Caleb studied him. “So how are you going to fix this?”

Jackson stood, then looked up at the cuckoo clock one more time before he turned to leave.

“Where are you going?” Caleb called after him.

“Making things right,” he said over his shoulder.

“Then I’m glad you’re back.”

For the first time since coming home, Jackson smiled genuinely. “Me too.”

He left the library and went straight for the manor’s front door. Along the way he spotted a large bouquet on a table. It didn’t seem like it belonged to anyone. No card. So he grabbed it. He figured where he was headed, flowers could only help.