

PROLOGUE

Overwhelming exhaustion wrapped around Indigo Nash like a heavy cloak. What she'd give to be able to close her eyes and sleep for days, but just like every other day, she couldn't afford to be weary. No rest for the wicked, her actually wicked father would say, if they were on speaking terms. All work and no play is bad for the soul, her late mother would have said if Indigo's prayers were answered, and she got to hear her sweet voice once more.

Feeling way older than her twenty-seven years, she popped the last two NoDoz capsules from the blister pack and tossed the tablets into her mouth with a swig of coconut water. Her vivid green eyes glued to the glamorous woman in mirror, she stared at her reflection as if really seeing herself for the very first time since being discovered by the Capitol Records talent scout at a Nashville honky-tonk five years ago. Although she was the spitting image of her mother, it was as if she were eyeing a stranger. Just as the effervescent young woman she'd once been had disappeared, the freckles that normally dusted her cheeks were nowhere to

be seen. But thankfully, neither were the dark circles that had become a permanent part of her gruelling reality.

Two hours before every one of her sellout shows was spent grooming herself into a picture of flawlessness – her fans and record label expected her to shine bright and she painstakingly strived to meet their expectations. And she liked to do this herself; the thought of other people plucking and preening her was very uninviting. Touching was for people she was close to, and they were few and far between. At first, it had been exciting to get all dolled up to maintain the Country Music's Sweetheart title she'd attained very early on in America, but now, it was downright exhausting.

With her make-up finally done, and her usually wild auburn locks styled to within an inch of their life, she placed her blusher down and stared in the mirror with a sigh. Her throat tightened – where had the wild-haired tomboy of her youth gone, the one who lived to ride a horse like she stole it, who ended each day covered in dirt with leaves and god only knew what tangled up in her knotty hair? Somewhere between her mother's untimely death, her older brother's disappearance, and this long, steep road to fame, she'd gone and lost herself. Completely. Something she always swore she'd never do.

She blinked past the unexpected surge of emotion – tears would ruin her mascara and she didn't have the time to fix it. She'd been so desperate to prove herself, to make a mark in this cutthroat world so she never had to return to the life, and man, she loathed. She could still hear her father's drunken voice loud and clear, on the morning she'd finally had enough of his cruelty: 'You are your father's daughter, Indigo Nash. You're never going to amount to nothing.'

Well, she'd gone and showed him, hadn't she? Not that he cared. But a Grammy would fix that.

Desperate for air, she shot to her feet, grabbed her coat and dashed out of her dressing room. Her bodyguard, and childhood friend, had lectured her again and again to never go anywhere alone, but she just needed a few minutes to gather her wits before going on stage. The back door of the tavern was almost as stubborn as she was, and she had to give it a firm shove before slipping out of the noisy bustle and into the snowflake-dusted night. Her breath escaping her in little white puffs, she tugged her sheepskin-lined R.M. Williams jacket in tighter as darkness engulfed her.

Closing her eyes, she drew in a slow, deep breath and, counting to six, blew it away. The sharp blow to her head came out of nowhere. With no time to react or call for help, she was pinned between a mammoth man and the wall of the alleyway. His hand, pressing painfully hard against her mouth, tasted like sweat and filth. His other hand gripped her wrists and twisted them painfully up behind her. He snarled into her ear, ordering her not to cry, and she bit back sobs. His chin dug into her shoulder, and his laboured breath was rife with the putrid stench of alcohol. Then, to her horror, she heard his zipper going down. Her blood froze solid in her veins. Even though this sick bastard was almost twice her size, she had to do something, anything. Now.

Gritting her teeth, she lifted her left leg, hard and fast. Her knee hit the mark and with a cry, he buckled. It gave her a moment to retaliate, to fight for her life.

'Harley! Help me!' Her scream echoed.

Her attacker swore viciously as she used every bit of strength to try to break free from his hold – kicking, punching, scratching – but

he quickly overpowered her and wrapped his hands around her throat, terrifyingly tight. She gasped for breath, clawing at his fingers, but his grip constricted even more. Her boots lifting from the ground, her vision blurred ... until, from the shadows, a fist connected with the side of her attacker's jaw with a bone-shattering crunch.

Flying backwards, her assailant landed with an almighty thud, sending bins tumbling and rolling, his body limp, motionless.

Her knight in shining armour turned to her. 'Indy?'

Heaving a breath and shaking like a leaf, Indigo fell into the safe haven of Harley Knight's arms.

CHAPTER

1

Two months later

Pulling on her favourite Old Gringo turquoise ankle boots, Indigo was relieved to be almost at the end of her tour. She could hear the six thousand-strong mob of country music lovers sardined into Billy Bob's Texas, chanting her name. The noise vibrated through her chest, giving rise to that awful numbing panic she'd become accustomed to these past few months. The assault had left her with way more than bruises and a heightened sense of caution. Crippling panic attacks had become more and more frequent. Just like the deranged man who'd attacked her, the bouts of anxiety crept up on her, quickening her breaths, clamping her hands, shaking her to her very core, and usually at the most inconvenient of times. It was becoming harder and harder to get through the flight-or-fight sensation, especially when out on stage, under the attentive eyes of her fans. She dreaded news of

her condition getting into the hands of the media – they'd twist it, ruin her career in a heartbeat for headline, and foil her ultimate goal of winning a Grammy for the Best Female Country Artist. She'd worked way too hard to lose that now. With a handful of trendy up-and-comers hot on her tail, the slippery slope of a burnt-out artist lingered menacingly. She didn't need to give the tabloids any ammunition, even if she wasn't sure how much longer she could teeter on the edge.

Surely she could find light at the end of this horribly dark tunnel? She prayed for it every single day. For now, the anxiety medication eased the severity of a full-blown attack, and the Valium was helping her frayed nerves.

She couldn't be throwing away a musical career others would kill for because of her damn anxiety, especially before she could plant a Grammy on her shelf. Once she had that Grammy, she might allow herself a reprieve, some time to rest and recoup, to decide her next step.

You are your father's daughter, Indigo Nash ...

Blinking back hot tears, she paced her dressing room. She hated how her father's nasty words still haunted her. As a seventeen-year-old, she'd run away from home, and him, with nothing but her mum's guitar, a few hundred dollars in her back pocket and a big dream. She'd never looked back.

And look at her now. Having grown up dirt poor, she now had more money than she knew what to do with. If only she had that someone special to share it all with – not an easy feat when she didn't have time for a relationship. Spending years living on the road, with no place to put her boots up and call her own, was starting to wear extremely thin. Moreover, she wanted to one day have children and her biological clock was ticking, but she

needed the precious time to find a man to settle down with. She craved to put down roots, to build a house and call it her forever home, but where, she hadn't a damn clue. She did know, though, without a shadow of a doubt, that it would never be back in her hometown of Kuranda – being anywhere near her father was a very bad thing.

Then there was the matter of dragging her brother's best mate from pillar to post. A former boxing pro, Harley Knight was no ordinary guy. Six-foot four, chiselled from head to toe, chocolate-brown hair and striking blue eyes, he could melt a girl's heart at first sight. The women of Kuranda had been drooling over him since teenage hormones had kicked in, and now even more so – he was one hell of a man, and a total horseman at heart. Surely this showbiz existence wasn't the life he wanted to lead? Not that he'd ever let on as much. She'd become so close to him over the years, especially the past five on the road, that the very thought of doing all this without him by her side terrified her. Even the idea that he was heading home in between this tour and the next to visit his sister, Amy, made her heart ache.

Neighbours growing up, she and Harley had gone from riding their horses bareback, jumping out of trees into red claw-packed dams, to rubbing shoulders with the high and mighty of the country music scene in Nashville in what felt like the blink of an eye. Back then, she'd been the daredevil tomboy, and he'd been a willing participant on their many adventures, always nearby to make her laugh, or to save her from many a bad decision. And here he was, still doing exactly that, if on a much grander scale. Biggest difference was that now it was for a substantial pay cheque, well-earned by his constant hard work.

If she'd thought she'd had a crush on him way back when, the flames of the fire he'd lit inside her heart as a lanky teenage boy now burnt like wildfire – not that she'd ever tell him so. He'd always seen her like a little sister, and even told her as much, and his little sister was her best mate – a friendship she would never risk by stepping over the line.

With a deep inhalation, Indigo did her best to quieten her racing mind, heart and thoughts. She was tougher than all of this – or so she liked to tell herself. Rising from the ashes had been her life's motto, which was why she'd called her latest hit album the same. She focused on the lemon myrtle candles flickering dancing shadows over the plush dressing room – Amy had sent them, and the scent made her homesick for Australia, but she wasn't about to run with it.

With her nerves threatening to get the better of her, she popped two Valium out of the crumpled blister pack with trembling hands, tossed them into her mouth and washed them down with a glug from her water bottle. Nobody needed to know it was filled with vodka – it helped to take the edge off before a show.

A firm rap at the door had her turning to see her bodyguard – slash manager, slash best friend's older brother, slash girlhood crush, slash ex-band member when they were teenagers – glide into the room. He looked as handsome as ever in his new Akubra, with chiselled jaw and kissable lips – that one time when she was fifteen and a little drunk from the beers they'd stolen from her father's fridge still lingered, as did his shocked response reminding her she was like a little sister to him and that kissing each other was off-limits.

'You good to go, Indy?' Harley thumbed over his incredibly broad shoulders. 'The crowd is pumping out there.'

‘Yeah, I can hear that.’ She hoped to god he wouldn’t smell the alcohol on her breath. ‘Just a few minutes and I’ll be ready to rock it.’

Closing the distance, he regarded her with expressive blue eyes. ‘You don’t look so good.’ He felt her forehead, the tenderness palpable in his touch. ‘You feel a little hot, are you coming down with something?’

Vodka always heated her up. ‘No, I don’t think so.’ Staring at the place she ached to rest her cheek, where his strapping chest poked out of his button-up black shirt, she blinked back another onslaught of tears, her breath seizing. ‘It’s my anxiety rearing its ugly head again. I don’t think I can do it tonight, Harley.’ Her thoughts scattered like a tumbleweed in the wind. She sucked in a desperate, wheezing breath, followed by another.

Harley’s deep gaze filled with compassion. ‘Yes, you can, Indigo Nash, and you will, just like all the other nights. You thought your nerves would get the better of you, but then you pushed through the fear and blew the socks off your fans.’ He rubbed her back, soothingly, reassuringly. ‘Not much longer, and you can put your boots up for a few weeks and take some much-needed time to rest.’

Remaining bent at the hips, her hands resting on her denim-clad knees, she nodded as she tried to slow her breathing. She had decided to not tell Harley she’d be in the recording studio by mid-next week. Idle time would lead to idle thoughts – she was afraid to stay still for too long.

‘That’s it, take long, slow breaths.’ Harley’s comforting voice helped to soothe the panic. ‘You got this, Indy. You’re way stronger than you give yourself credit for.’

After a few lengthy moments, she straightened but, woozy from the amount of liquor she'd thrown back, now coupled with the Valium, she found it hard to look him in the eyes. She hated herself for resorting to alcohol, just like her father had when her mother had died. *Like father, like daughter.* Surely she was better than this?

Harley framed her face with his hands, forcing her to look at him. 'Nothing bad is going to happen to you. I won't let it.' His eyes searched hers. 'You believe me, right?'

'Uh-huh.' And she did, wholeheartedly.

Biting her quivering lip, she gave in to her desperate need to be close to him, resting her forehead against his chest. 'Thank you for looking after me like you do,' she whispered. 'I honestly don't know what I'd do without you.'

'No need to thank me, you crazy, beautiful woman.' His deep chuckles lightened the sombre mood of the dressing room. 'Now, come on, Miss Nash, let's get this show on the road before your fans barge their way into your dressing room.' He grimaced. 'Because that could get real messy.'

'Ha ha. In that case, I suppose I'm as ready as I'll ever be.' She took one last look in the mirror, deciding to powder her cheeks to counteract the cold sweat that had broken out. Closing the lid on the concealer, she leant in closer, sighing at the hint of the dark rings beneath her eyes. Then, tossing the long locks of auburn hair over her shoulder, she squared them as she spun to face the only man she'd ever been able to trust with all of her heart. 'Thank god for make-up, otherwise I'd look like absolute crap.'

Harley looked her up and down in his slow and easy style. 'You look amazing, as always, Indy.' He gestured over his shoulder

with a tip of his head. 'Now come on, your fans want you out yonder.'

With her heart in her throat, Indigo followed Harley out the door and up to the back of the stage. The hustle and bustle of the tech team rattled her a little more, but the protective presence of Harley allowed her to take one step after the other. He had her back. He made her feel safe. If it weren't for him ...

As if reading her mind, he offered her one last meaningful look, giving her the kick she needed to step through the velvet curtains. Her band was right on cue as she drew in a deep breath and strode on stage. Momentarily blinded by the spotlight, she raised her arms to the deafening roar of the crowd, her distinctive showstopping smile something she'd learnt to master in all her years on the stage. The fog machines whirred to life, creating an amazing visual effect along with the colourful strobe lighting. Staring into the sea of eager faces and wide-brimmed hats, she pushed through her fear, grabbed the microphone from the stand and broke into the lyrics of her number-one hit, 'Gotta Give'.

'You gotta give a lot to get a little, in this hard-hitting world, and you've gotta give a lot to get a little from this hard-hitting country girl ... cause she ain't no pushover, and she ain't no saint, but she ain't no sinner until you make her heart break ... yeah, yeah, yeah.' Her backup singers harmonised with her, all four of them perfectly in tune. And the crowd sang along too, way out of tune, but with so much passion and gusto, it gave rise to a flood of goosebumps on her arms.

The adoration of her fans had the power to caress her tortured heart, and combined with the haze of the Valium and alcohol, Indigo forgot about her anxiety and gave song after song her

absolute all. Distraction, after all, was what her doctor had told her worked best to push through the uncomfortable sensations of generalised anxiety. Easier said than done most of the time, but out here on stage, once she got through the initial rush of fear, it was a natural progression to lose herself in her music.

After five fast-paced boot-scooters, she reached the part of her show where she sang her well-known love song, 'My One and Only'. A year ago, she'd woken up before the dawn inspired by her muse, and had penned it by sun-up. It had been written from the depths of her soul to try to ease the heartache that was her everyday companion. The lights dimmed as one of her crew carried her a stool and her vintage Sunburst Gibson. Thanking him, she took hold of her guitar and slid the strap over her head. Getting cosy on the stool, she took a moment to gather herself. Then, with a soft dreamy smile, she slipped into the poignant ballad. Her skilful fingers danced over the strings as she leant closer into her microphone. Eyes closing, she delivered the first line, as did her fans.

'I don't know if you really exist, or if you're just a figment of my imagination, but I'm going to believe in you, in there one day being an us. I don't know how I'm going to find you, or if I ever will, but I'm going to believe in you, and in an us. I just have to. At the very least I'm going to die trying to discover you ... Because I already feel you in my heart, and if I close my eyes long enough, I can even feel the feather of your touch upon my skin, your lips on mine. One day, some day, some way, we will find our way to each other, and into each other's hearts. You'll be my one and only. I will anchor my heart to yours, and together we will storm the weathers of this life. Always, forever, and into eternity.'

Arms were high in the air, swaying side to side. Riding on the waves of the crowd's energy, she glanced to the side of the stage, her eyes catching on the rich depths of Harley's as she sang the next line: 'Or maybe, without even knowing it, without ever showing it, I've already met you ... and in another life, another time, another place, maybe that's when we'll find each other, and then, baby, our search for undying love will be over. We will be each other's one and only ...'

Harley's gaze remained unflinchingly locked onto hers, his knee-buckling smile filled with absolute pride. More goosebumps rose, and her unsettled heart rose with them, hovering, reaching for all that made Harley him – this man gave her the strength to carry on, day after day, year after year. She owed him so much.

She rose as the song ended and bowed to the roar of the crowd. They hollered and sang for the next ninety minutes she was on stage, until she found herself having to bid them all farewell.

'Thank you all for coming to see me tonight, I treasure each and every one of you.' She flashed one last smile before striding off the stage, straight to Harley.

Resting both his hands on her shoulders, he met her gaze. 'See? I told you that you'd rock the socks off them, Indy.'

'Yes, you did.' She smiled. 'They were an awesome crowd, though, so they made it easy.'

'Indy.' Resounding clapping echoed. 'Indy.' Boots stomped and hands applauded in rhythmic unison. 'Indy.' Clap clap clap. 'Indy.' Clap, clap clap.

Harley's grin widened. 'Sounds to me like they want you back out there, Miss Nash.'

The floor vibrating beneath her boots, Indigo grinned. 'Whatever makes you think that, Mister Knight?' Then, blinking

the weariness from her eyes, she turned and strode back onto the stage for her encore. ‘Do y’all want one more before I have to say goodbye?’

She was met with roars and cheers.

‘Okay, this one is an oldie, but a goodie. I reckon you’re all going to love it.’ As her drummer, Micky, brought the band in, she waited for the exact moment to break into song, the toe of her boot tapping and her hand slapping her leg in time to the catchy tune. ‘You won’t meet nobody drinking at home, so get your butt out that door, and throw away that phone, tonight’s for drinking, dancing, and midnight romancing, the good old-fashioned way, just like Johnny and June.’

Less than an hour later, Indy and Harley were wandering towards his leased pick-up truck in beautiful, ear-ringing silence. She couldn’t wait to hit the sack – she just hoped she could actually sleep, instead of spending most of the night staring at the ceiling.

‘So, Miss Nash, are you hungry?’ His hands shoved deep in his pockets, his stride slow and easy, Harley offered a sideways glance.

‘Actually ...’ She looked to him, liking the way the moonlight danced in the blue of his eyes. ‘I’m bloody famished.’

‘Me too. What do you feel like?’

Needing something hefty to soak up the alcohol and medication in her otherwise empty belly, she didn’t need long to think about it. ‘A curry meat pie, drowning in tomato sauce, with a side of those hand-cut chips old Mrs Brown used to make at the fish and chip shop.’

‘Ha, talk about knowing exactly what you want.’ Harley’s head tipped back a little as he chuckled. ‘I get it though. Mrs Brown’s

were the best dang chips I've ever sunk my teeth into, hands down.' He sighed, shook his head. 'I really do miss home, Indy.'

Her heart squeezed with the knowledge that she was keeping him from where he wanted to be. 'If I'm being honest, I miss it a little too, but I just can't bring myself to go back there.' A bubble of repressed emotion threatened to rise, but she quickly pushed it back down. 'I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive my father for how he treated me, and Robbie. Alcoholic or not, there's no excuse.'

'I understand completely, Indy. You have every right to feel how you do.' With a heavy sigh, Harley looked at her with knowing in his eyes and, after a silent moment, offered a small smile. 'I'm not sure we'll find a pie van anywhere in the vicinity, or Mrs Brown's doppelganger, but I could possibly get us a stack of pancakes at a little diner on the way back to the cabin, if you like?'

'Yeah, righto.' Reaching the Ford F-150, he opened her door for her, as he always did, and she climbed up and in. 'As long as it's real maple syrup, and not that fake stuff, and we can get a side of crispy bacon and go Canadian-style, I'm in like Flynn.'

'Consider it a done deal, Nash,' Harley replied with a chuckle, right before he closed the door and strode around to the driver's side.

Twenty minutes was all it took for them to be settled at a discreet booth at the back of the virtually empty diner, a mountainous tower of pancakes between them. Enjoying her third mouthful of the carb-fuelled treat, Indigo spotted a familiar paparazzo lurking outside the diner. It was the very man who had done his best to ruin her career with false claims of her sleeping with an illustrious, married music tycoon in a bid to rise to the

top. The tabloids had eaten it up. She'd sued him and won. Hell, she hadn't slept with anyone for almost three years. Her guess, and Harley's, was that he was being paid by her rivals to get as much dirt, true or false, as he could on her.

Before she could alert Harley, the bloke pressed up against the glass, camera aimed to shoot. She raised a hand and turned her head to the click of a camera, cursing beneath her breath.

Harley shot to his feet, his eyes narrowing to slits as he glared at the camera-wielding man. 'Bugger off, you lowlife,' he growled as his hands formed fists at his side.

'Come out and make me, Knight,' the cocky bloke retorted with a challenging smirk.

Harley took a step towards the front doors, but Indigo grabbed his wrist, halting him. 'Don't, Harley. He's not worth it.' She was glad for the glass separating the two men. Last time, after she stumbled over the paparazzo's feet and hit the sidewalk face first, Harley had grabbed the camera and smashed it before grabbing the bloke by the collar – being charged with assault and destruction of property was the straw that had broken the camel's back. 'Come on, let's just move to another table.' She could see the flashes of the camera but dared not turn to look. She wanted to keep Harley's focus entirely on her.

With a low growl, Harley began gathering their things. She rose to her feet and he barricaded her from the bloke getting any more shots. They chose the table farthest away, out of the camera's line of sight, and got settled again.

'Why can't they leave you the hell alone?' Harley grumbled through gritted teeth. 'Haven't they caused enough bloody drama?' Before she could reply, his phone chimed 'Ring of Fire'. He snatched it from the table. 'Knight. Yeah, speaking.' His brow line deepened while he listened intently. 'Oh, Christ, when

did it happen?’ His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed and nodded. ‘I see.’

‘Is everything okay?’ Indigo mouthed. ‘What is it?’ she added aloud when he didn’t respond.

Harley held up a hand, gesturing for her to wait. ‘Right, okay, well, thanks for letting me know. I’ll be sure to pass it on to her.’

The call ended and he heaved in a breath. The grave expression on his face made Indigo’s heart race. ‘Well, what is it?’ she asked. ‘Harley, what’s happened?’

He took her hand in his. ‘It’s your father, Indy. He’s had a heart attack.’ His thumb rubbed over hers. ‘They rushed him to hospital, but he didn’t make it.’

Without blinking, Indigo sucked in a sharp breath. Her father? Dead? Surely not. Frederick Nash was as strong as an ox. No man had ever beaten him down. In a strange way, she’d imagined him living forever, or at least long after her.

She stared at Harley, incredulous, itching to say something, anything, but unable to grasp what he’d just told her. She looked down at where both his hands had reached across the table to grip hers, protectively. Her vision momentarily blurred. She shook her head, choking on a sob. She didn’t want to cry over a man who’d been so cruel. But then, she still had so much she’d needed to say to him, to blame him for, to ask him, especially about her brother’s disappearance. And now she would never, ever, get the chance.

‘Indy.’ Harley’s gentle tone was reassuring.

‘Mmm.’ She brought her gaze back to his.

‘Are you okay?’ His eyes were filled with empathy.

‘I think I am, just shocked is all.’ Drawing in a shaky breath, she slowly shook her head, then shrugged. ‘I mean, it’s not like I loved him like a daughter should love her father, hey.’

Harley considered this for a short moment. 'Maybe not in the typical sense, but he was your father, regardless.' He paused for a few seconds, as if considering what to say next. 'It would be strange for you not to feel something, no matter what that something is.'

'Mm-hmm.' She cleared her throat. Harley knew all too well the pain of losing a parent, having lost both of his to a tragic car accident when he was only ten years old. 'I'll never forget the bruises his belt left on me and Robbie. Or the way he used to call us every name under the sun.'

'Of course you won't forget what he did to you, and you don't have to.' Moving around the table, Harley pulled her towards him. He placed a gentle kiss on her cheek, then brushed a lock of hair from her face. 'I'm here for you, just know that, okay?' he said tenderly as he sat back again.

'You're always here for me.' She smiled sadly. 'I'm going to have to go back for the funeral, aren't I?'

He drew in a breath. 'That's a choice only you can make, Indy.'

'If you were in my shoes, would you go back?'

'That's a tough question.' He clasped his hands atop the table. 'I probably would, but that's me. You need to do what feels right for you.'

'Yes, I know.' Indigo didn't know what was right for her, other than the magnificent man sitting opposite her. 'I'm too tired to think about it right now.'

'All good.' He cleared his throat. 'Why don't you sleep on it, and maybe try and make a decision in the morning?'

'Yeah, good idea.' She held his gaze. 'Thank you.'

Harley's shoulders lifted ever so slightly. 'For what?'

'Everything.'