

A local dance contest...a twisted scheme...and a long buried secret. Find out if Mataya Black Hawk and Jarek Thanos have got what it takes to become regulars on the hottest teen dance show in Phoenix.

Dance Jam Productions

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DANCE JAM PRODUCTIONS

Celise Downs

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CHAPTER ONE

The Announcement

A phone rang incessantly over the throbbing beat of Michael Jackson's "Smooth Criminal." Head bobbing, hips swaying, fingers snapping, Mataya Black Hawk picked up the receiver on the fourth ring.

"Rhythm Station, how may I help you?"

"I hope you're sitting down," the caller responded.

Mataya rolled her eyes at her best friend's version of hello. More often than not, Renee Hathaway's conversations started with that phrase, and usually amounted to nothing more than dramatic exaggeration.

"Ren, I work at a dance studio. I'm *never* sitting down," Mataya remarked dryly.

"You are *so* right, Mattie. So I take it you haven't heard the news."

Mattie stopped dancing, her fingers stalled in mid-snap. "What news?" she asked warily.

"About DJP," Ren said.

Mattie's heart sped up as all sorts of possibilities raced through her mind. *Dance Jam Productions* was the most popular show for teenagers since *MTV*. Produced right here in Phoenix, it was an hour-long dance party with music videos, movie reviews, and the latest music news. On Friday and Saturday nights, seventeen to twenty-year-olds could head down to Club Avatar, the under twenty-one nightclub, dance till one am, and be filmed the whole time. If you were lucky, you'd see yourself on television some time during the week.

Mattie and her friends had gone every weekend and had danced till their feet hurt. Then Ren's work schedule had

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changed, much to her dismay, so now they only occasionally hit the club. The coveted position of being a regular had been given to the best dancers. And even then, they had to audition for it. The coolest part about her job was that she got to see those dancers every day after school since they practiced at Rhythm Station.

"You there? Anybody home? You better not have zoned out on me, Mattie."

Ren's indignant tone brought her attention back around.

"I'm here, Ren, I'm here. What news are you talking about?" Mattie instinctively steeled herself for the worst. Were they canceling the show? Getting new hosts?

"Dance contest. Tomorrow afternoon," Ren announced.

Mattie backed up to a chair and numbly dropped into it, her mouth sagging in stunned shock. "A-are you saying what I think you're saying?" she whispered.

There was a short pause. "What am I saying?" Ren deadpanned, then ruined the whole effect by laughing. "Isn't it crash, Mattie? *Dance Jam* is looking for more regular dancers. There's gonna be a dance contest tomorrow at Sun Devil Stadium. Twelve finalists are gonna be chosen to participate in a dance-off next Friday at the club. After that, they're gonna narrow it down to six, who will get to dance again on Saturday. And here's the kicker, Mattie. The show's being syndicated. DJP is going *national*, baby. Can you believe it? This is *so* totally crash," she babbled excitedly. "So what's the plan?"

Mattie's head was spinning from the news, so Ren's question went by the wayside for a moment. "How'd you find out about the contest?" she asked.

Ren's exasperated sigh reached through the phone lines and practically blew the hair off Mattie's forehead. "Hel-*lo*, like, they've been talking about it all week on the show. Haven't you been watching?" she questioned.

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"Well, seeing as how I go to school during the day and work here until six—"

"But you tape it, Mattie. Religiously," Ren interjected.

She's got me there, Mattie thought. Instead of taping soap operas, she taped *Dance Jam Productions*.

"Mattie? Mataya, are you there?" Ren yelled into the phone.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here," she answered.

"Mattie, what's going on with you? You're hardly ever home at night anymore. Mici and I call you all the time, but you're never home."

"I've been staying late here at the studio," Mattie told her.

"Oh, I should've known. You get to use the studio after hours, huh? That's cool. Are y'all havin' another dance concert?" she asked.

"Yeah. Some time next month, I think," Mattie returned absently. "I've been working on a few new steps."

"I'm surprised you weren't the one telling *me*. About the contest, I mean. The dancers are still there, aren't they?" Ren wanted to know.

Without thinking, Mattie turned her head towards the huge double doors to her left. One of the doors was slightly ajar and the sounds of clapping hands, stomping feet, and throbbing music could be heard.

"Yeah, they're still here," she confirmed.

"They never mentioned anything to you?"

"By the time I get here, they're already practicing. Besides, they come here to dance, not socialize," Mattie said, her right foot tapping to the beat of the music.

"Well, yeah, but still. They see you every day. Ever since *Dance Jam* came here and they chose your studio to rehearse at, they've seen you. I *know* they don't ignore you when they see you. They haven't said a word to you?" she asked.

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Mattie and rolled her eyes again. "Maybe they aren't allowed to, Ren, did you ever think of that? It's probably against the rules or something," she pointed out.

"Oh. I never thought of that," Ren said in a low tone. "Well, maybe Mici and I can come over later and we can work on something."

"That would be cool. I might stay after for an hour or two, so I'll call you when I get home," Mattie said.

"Ty workin' late again tonight?" Ren inquired.

"Yep." Mattie didn't bother to elaborate.

"He still picks you up from work?"

Mattie leaned back in her chair. "Sometimes," she answered quietly.

"The man sure likes to keep tabs on you. Don't you think he's taking the legal guardian thing a bit too seriously?"

Mattie's breath came out in a blustery sigh as she rubbed her fingers across her forehead. "Ren, there are certain things you don't understand about Ty and his culture. He's very protective," she said.

Mattie tried to convince herself that it wasn't a complete lie. Her best friends just thought that Tykota had worked for a company that specialized in security systems and personal protection. Of course, those weren't the only services they offered, but her friends didn't need to know *everything*. Being cautious and maintaining her privacy were lessons she had been taught at a young age. *And like the saying goes, old habits die hard. Or they just die.*

"...Don't understand, even after all these years, but still..." Ren was saying.

"Look, I don't stay late all the time. Lately, he just follows me home. You know I drive every chance I get. I feel like I'm your personal freakin' chauffeur sometimes. As if you don't

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have your *own* car," Mattie teased, trying to lighten the mood as well as change the subject.

"I don't need a car. I've got my board," her friend quipped.

Mattie chuckled. Ren was a Louisiana-born skater chick at heart, right down to the baggy pants and wallet chain that dangles halfway down the pant-leg. "Don't worry. Everything's fine. Listen, I know you're not on break over there, and it'll be getting busy here soon, so I'd better go."

"Me, too. I think I see some punk tryin' to make off with some elbow pads. Call me later?"

Mattie shook her head. Ren's job at Thrash Town, a store that sold skate gear to Tony Hawk wannabes, was right up her alley. Mattie definitely wouldn't want to be that guy with the elbow pads.

"Yeah. I'll call you," she assured her friend.

"Don't forget to watch today's episode," Ren reminded her. "They're going to announce it again, I just know it."

"Okay," Mattie replied.

"And tell Chris I said *hi*."

Ren said the word in such a breathy tone that Mattie burst out laughing. Chris Morrow was a regular on *Dance Jam*. He was also the unknowing object of a crush that had begun the minute Ren had seen him on TV almost eight months ago. Getting a chance to meet him, let alone dance with him every day, was incentive enough for her to sign up for the contest.

"I'll tell him," Mattie said.

"I'd better go. That kid looks guilty. Catch ya later, Mattie," she said.

"Bye." Mattie barely got the word out before the dial tone hummed in her ear.

Forty-five minutes and four phone calls later, she got up, stretched, then stood in the doorway, absently tapping her foot to the beat, as she watched the dancers work through a difficult

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step. After a few minutes, she pushed away, closed the door, and strolled back to the desk, her thoughts turning to the dance contest. So *Dance Jam* was looking for more dancers. *Wouldn't it be a hoot if I actually got chosen?* Ren thought that just because Mattie knew the dancers, she would be an automatic shoo-in.

That probably wasn't far from the truth, now that she thought about it. She knew their dance routines, especially the ones they always performed at the beginning and at the end of the show, and she definitely knew their music. Music had been a constant entity in her life ever since Tykota had reappeared ten years ago.

Glancing at one of the two framed pictures on her desk, Mattie reached for it. At six foot four and thirty-two years of age, Tykota Black Hawk was a powerfully built man of Native American descent. His voice was a deep and soothing resonant sound that washed over her like a healing rain and had lulled her to sleep when she was little. The words had not made sense at first, for he sang in his native tongue, but that had never mattered to her. His voice had kept the nightmares at bay. And later, his songs had made her forget the horror she'd not only witnessed but also had been a victim of herself.

Tykota sang to her only on special occasions now, but the music remained a necessity. Her personal tastes leaned towards alternative and New Age. The music selection at Rhythm Station ran the full gamut from Celtic to R and B.

She set the picture of Tykota back and shifted her gaze to the one next to her computer. Dressed in floor-length silk gowns, high heels, and costume jewelry, Mattie and her two best friends had struck poses a la *En Vogue* for Tykota's photographer's eye. Mattie smiled, remembering her sophomore year at Catalina Valley High, sixth period dance class. She had been paired up with Ren and Michelle Fontenot as part of a

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class project. After talking for a few minutes, they realized they had one major thing in common: *Dance Jam Productions*.

Mattie was amazed she'd fit in with them so well. At five foot seven, Ren's close-cropped, burnished gold hair framed a round pixie face. Long brown lashes accented dark green eyes that sparkled with inner mischief, and a light sprinkling of freckles graced a nose that could only be described as "button cute." She carried her skateboard around like an additional limb, but the picture on Mattie's desk was proof that Ren was a female first and a skater second.

Willowy and graceful at five-eight, Mici (pronounced Mickey) had a short cap of fiery red hair, parted deeply on the left side and cut high in the back so the sides angled down. Eyes the color of aged whiskey peered from a freckle-free porcelain-smooth face. Black half glasses that Ren had deemed "beatnik" perched atop a lean nose. Everyone said Mici should be a model, but her response was always "*Cherie*, I'll draw up a star chart for a model, but I'd never want to *be* a model. I'm not really into haute couture." Maybe being born in Paris, France, fashion capitol of the world, tended to desensitize a person from all the glamour. Despite the fact that she'd been living in the States since she was six, Mici liked to keep her roots afloat by using French words on occasion.

Then there was Mattie. At five foot five, she considered herself a duck among swans. Her wavy, dark brown hair stopped short of her waist. A small, tip-tilted nose hovered above a full mouth in a gently rounded olive-toned face. Reaching up, she passed a finger under her right eye. Her almond-shaped eyes had been brown once. A deep, coffee bean brown, if she remembered right. Now, unusually pale blue orbs stared back at her every morning in the mirror; a pallid ice color that seemed unnatural on a person whose skin was so dark. She had nothing to compare them to, for she herself had never seen

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anyone with eyes of so pale a color. If *she* couldn't think of anything nice to say, what made her think any potential male suitors could come up with something?

Yet Ren had found something. "My brother used to have a big marble that same color. His shooter, I think. I'm pretty sure he still carries it around in his pocket. Like a good luck charm, y'know?"

Mici had been pretty encouraging, too. "I *know* I had a crystal that color, *cherie*. Great for channeling."

And Tykota had been very poetic. "They remind me of the glaciers in Alaska. When it's just nothing but water and ice for miles and miles."

Mattie sighed and crossed her arms over chest, wishing her own quirks were as simple as sparkling apple juice (Ren's favorite) and mood bracelets (Mici's jewelry of choice). Hers were more deep-rooted, necessitating body coverage from breastbone to waist. No half shirts, tank tops, or bikini tops for her. She had too many secrets to hide, physically and mentally. But then she'd found *Dance Jam Productions*. The music that had followed her throughout her life finally had an outlet. She'd perfected her dance skills by watching her friends and the *DJP* dancers.

Mattie turned her head and scrutinized the studio, blessing the day she had come to have the perfect job of being Rhythm Station's receptionist. Located in a small strip mall off Bell Road, it looked like a typical dance studio. Framed posters of *A Chorus Line*, *Cats*, *Fame*, and *West Side Story* shared wall space with pictures of Baryshnikov, Nureyev, and the Alvin Ailey Dance Troupe. The combined color scheme of black, fire engine red, and sunshine yellow reflected both the owner and the feeling of dance-fun and energy.

Rhythm Station offered Modern Jazz, Ballet, Tap, Hip-Hip, Ballroom, and Highland dancing for all ages at all levels. Dance

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concerts were held twice a year, and in-studio concerts once a month; some students entered nationwide competitions. Mattie learned something new every day about the owner, the company, and the business of dance in general. The job also gave her the opportunity to become privy to all the latest gossip about *Dance Jam Productions*. Such as the upcoming dance contest, for instance. News of *DJP* traveled to her without fail, so she was bugged that this latest tidbit had bypassed her ears. She'd never expected the show to need dancers after being on the air for only two years. Who would want to leave, anyway? All the regulars looked so professional they'd probably worn leotards as babies instead of diapers.

Mattie walked back to her desk, fingering the band of white jade surrounding her right thumb. What would it be like to dance on national television? She didn't have a problem performing in front an auditorium full of people. A panel of judges didn't cause panic attacks, either. National television, however, was a different bag of Cheetos. The double doors were flung open and the object of Ren's affections strode out, interrupting her thoughts.

"Hey, beautiful, how's it goin'?" Chris Morrow greeted with a flirtatious smile.

A smile that flashed lady-killer in blinking red neon lights, Mattie thought.

"Good, Chris. You guys done for the day?" she inquired, rounding the desk to sit down.

"Yep. You're gonna come down to the park tomorrow, right?" he asked.

"I'm not sure yet," she admitted truthfully.

Chris began to walk backwards as the other dancers spilled into the lobby. He was almost out the door when he said, "Oh, and bring someone with you. Preferably one of the opposite sex.

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Unless you know of a female who can do lifts." With a cheeky smile and a waggle of eyebrows, Chris was gone.

Mattie's breath escaped her chest as though she'd been squeezed. A partner. Okay, *that* was something she obviously hadn't thought through very well. It was to be expected, of course. All the regular dancers had partners and the Dance Showcase was an important segment of the program. Yet the idea of close contact with the opposite sex brought up memories she never wanted to relive again. She could handle familial hugs from Ty and his best friends. But dancing up close and personal with someone she didn't know was different. *Maybe I could get out if it somehow*, Mattie thought. *Maybe I could fake a sprain right before—*

The shrill ring of the telephone made Mattie jump. "Rhythm Station, how may I help you?" she took a short calming breath.

"Hello, my island beauty." A familiar smooth, deep voice flowed through the wires.

"Hello, guardian of my heart." Mattie slipped easily into the language Tykota had taught her as a young girl.

He called her every day at work and the exchange was always the same, always in his native tongue. It was a language she had learned during her first year with him, and that was how all their phone conversations were conducted. It was a tactic that was useful in his line of business, for the members of his special unit were fluent in his language.

"How are things going over there?" he asked.

She hesitated for a fraction of a second, hoping Tykota wouldn't notice. "Good."

"I will probe later, but there is something I want to tell you," he said.

"Good news, I hope."

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Mattie could hear the smile in his voice as he said, "Yes, it is good news. Kedren and Skylar are getting married."

Mattie gasped in delight. She had met Kedren Price and his friends and had grown close to them during the time their parents had been employees of Zion Security. When all of their parents had been killed in a plane crash, and it was discovered the crash hadn't been accidental, Kedren and his friends had become temporary employees of Zion Security and Mattie had lost touch with them. At the age of seventeen, Kedren had solved his parents' murder and had fallen in love with Skylar Knight. The scandal surrounding that assignment had rocked Skylar's high school four years ago, and people were still talking about it to this day.

"Oh, Ty, that's wonderful. When's the happy day?"

"Sometime next year. They do not have a set date yet, but knowing Skylar, they should have one soon," Tykota replied. "I hear discontent in your voice, sweetling. I thought you liked that job?"

Geez, beat around the bush why don't you? Mattie thought wryly. "I love this job. I was just debating on what I should do," she said aloud.

"What you should do about what?"

"*Dance Jam Productions* is having a dance contest tomorrow afternoon with a big dance-off next Saturday. The show is looking for another pair of regular dancers and I'm just wondering if I should go. I mean, Ren is totally psyched about this whole thing..." she trailed off.

"But you are not," he guessed.

"I was at first. I mean, I love to dance. *DJP* is my favorite show and I think it would be so much fun, even if I didn't get to be a finalist, but there has to be two people. As in boy and girl."

For a few moments Mattie heard nothing but the faint buzzing of wires. Then Ty intoned solemnly, "People only

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know what you tell them.” After another short pause he continued, "Are you staying late today?"

"Yeah. 'Til six-thirty," she informed him.

"All right. I will come for you at six-thirty."

"Okay. See you then."

Hanging up, Mattie stared unseeingly out the front doors. *People only know what you tell them.* Instinctively, she passed a hand down the front of her T-shirt, coming to rest at her stomach. She'd kept her secret since she was seven years old. *People only know what you tell them.* No one was going to know, she assured herself. Because she was never going to tell.

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