

Dance With Me

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This one was just for me.

Chapter One

PAIGE

I haven't had sex for eleven months and three days, and by God, tonight better be the night.

In my makeshift bedroom, above the studio floor of my dance academy, I'm halfway through applying my make-up in preparation for yet another blind date. I swipe up my novelty Magic 8 Ball and give it a firm shake.

'Magic 8 Ball,' I hum when I stop shaking, holding my lips close to the spherical piece of plastic, 'is the magic going to happen for me this evening?'

I look to the flat panel on the bottom of the ball. The answer floats up from the gloom.

ABSOLUTELY, it says.

I raise my brow and shake it furiously again. 'Will he dazzle me with his conversation and wit?'

PROSPECTS LOOK GOOD, the ball says, after a moment.

I shake again. 'Will he be the hottest guy I've ever set eyes upon?'

WITHOUT A DOUBT, is the reply.

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I cock my head to one side, dip the ball downwards, then bring it back up again. ‘So, you’re saying that I’m going to want to sleep with him?’

I wait for the prediction to come. *YES*, the ball says, in no uncertain terms.

A smile floats onto my lips. I pause, then give the ball one final shimmy. ‘In that case... if I sleep with my blind date, is he going to satisfy me in bed?’

I stop shaking and glance down.

DON'T COUNT ON IT, the ball says.

I’m a pub kind of a girl. My parents own a pub, I grew up around pubs. So, when I told my date I wanted to meet at a pub, I let him choose which one, though right now I’m regretting that decision, because our pre-arranged meeting venue – an establishment near Alton – has sticky floors, chipped paintwork, a low ceiling and a suspicious musty smell that permeates the air. It doesn’t exactly scream salubrious. There’s no music on, and the only sound I can detect above the general chatter is the clacking of balls on a nearby pool table.

My date tonight is a work colleague of a friend-of-a-friend-of-a-friend. That’s shorthand for, *it doesn’t look promising*. I don’t do internet dating, nor do I use any dating apps. It’s not so hard to explain why. My fraternal twin brother is a member of the world’s most famous boy band and happens to look *a lot* like me. I’ve learned the hard way it’s best to keep my life in the dating pool offline, rather than on.

So, for the past year, I’ve begged my friends to set me up on blind dates with random guys. It means I don’t have to share photos, admit to the existence of my famous sibling, or

have those initial, awkward getting-to-know-you conversations, and nobody needs mention the beast that is social media.

Lately, though... I'm starting to wonder why I bother at all.

Because no matter who I go on the date with, it always turns out the same way.

And no matter the guy, it takes them all of about 0.5 seconds to make the same damn observation:

Wow. Did anyone ever tell you... you look really like Aidan McArthur?

I wait alone in a shadowy corner, garnering a few stares from some of the locals lined up at the bar as I lean my elbows on the table surface. We're not too far from my family's home, and I can guess their thoughts. They're thinking that I look familiar. Some of them could even hazard a guess at my name. That's a problem where you're famous by proxy. *Almost* famous.

When I was eighteen, I enjoyed all the attention. Then one day, I grew tired of it.

My blind date is late. On entry to the pub, I'd ordered a glass of wine and I've polished off half of it already. When he finally makes an appearance, I'm already checking my watch.

'You Paige?' he grunts, as I look up.

'Hi,' I say, getting to my feet. He's still in his bulky winter coat and I can feel the January cold emanating from him.

He looks me up and down. 'Woah,' he says, a wolfish smile spreading across his features.

He's got the most ridiculous amount of product in his hair, and a dark layer of stubble. He reminds me of someone. He points a finger at me, and the words are out of his mouth before I can even hold out my hand. 'Did anyone ever tell you...'

I stiffen. How fantastic. Zero apology for keeping me waiting. And, as far as my rules for dating go, number one is: *Never tell me I look like my famous twin.*

‘Did anyone ever tell me what?’ I ask innocently with an inward sigh.

He draws an invisible circle around his face with the same finger he’s just been jabbing in my direction. ‘I mean, honestly, it’s uncanny, you really look like Aidan McArthur.’

Sometimes, my response to this statement is, *‘Who’s Aidan McArthur?’*, or *‘I am really Aidan McArthur, but in drag,’* or *‘We were like an amoeba, we split at birth,’* or *‘Thanks for reminding me of my surname, I’d completely forgotten it.’*

Tonight, given that he’s already late, and there’s a row of sleazeballs at the bar who are watching us, I don’t have the energy to make a quip.

‘Yes, I know,’ I huff, hoping my date will leave the topic at that. ‘It tends to happen when you share fifty per cent of your DNA. You’re Tyler, yes?’

‘Right,’ he says. ‘Wow, so he’s what... your...?’

‘Aidan McArthur is my twin brother, yes.’

‘Wow. So, does that make you, like, what... identical?’

I blink at him. ‘Identical twins have to be the same sex. Aidan and I are fraternal twins. One in a famous boy band, one not.’

Tyler realises he’s staring, his gaze shooting to my half-empty wine. ‘Another?’ he asks.

‘I’m fine for now, thanks.’

Tyler goes to fetch a drink. The bar flies observe him, before their eyes come back to me. He returns a few minutes later with his own pint, removing his coat. I get a good look at him as he sits down opposite me. Along with the dark hair

and stubble, he has full lips and a silver stud through his eyebrow, a tattoo on his left arm.

‘You know, people sometimes tell me I look like the American one,’ he says. ‘You know, from Rebel Heart.’

I inhale sharply and realise why he looks so familiar.

‘Danny Miller,’ I mutter, feeling my stomach churn. ‘I can see the resemblance a little.’

‘That’s the one,’ Tyler says. ‘Miller. Do you know him, then?’

Here we go. Let’s get the Rebel Heart questions out of the way.

To be fair, a month ago, before Christmas, the band were everywhere. They were promoting the documentary that filmmaker Lexi Hart made on their previous world tour, which had a three-week cinematic release and cleaned up at the box office. Now it’s moved onto Silverpix’s video-on-demand streaming service, where it’s still sat in the number one spot. Lexi is now Aidan’s girlfriend and living with him in London, and my hope is that she will one day become my sister-in-law.

‘I know Miller a bit, yes,’ I say.

‘He a bit of a wanker, or what?’ Tyler asks. ‘I mean, he’s got that look about him, hasn’t he? People say he’s a right cock.’

‘I can’t say I really know him well enough. So, how about you—’

‘What’s that like then? Having your twin in a boy band? Is it weird? You know, ’cause—’

My eyebrows work their way up my forehead. ‘Because what?’ I venture.

‘You know, what’s it like being, like, the *not* famous twin.’

I struggle to muster a response that isn't seeped in sarcasm. I regret my taxi ride here, wishing I'd driven myself, so I could just get up and walk out without finishing my wine, then drive myself home.

'I quite like the not-being-famous part, actually. I don't know how they do it at times.'

'So, they must get lots of freebies, yeah? Does that all get passed to you? Like Louis Vuitton bags and Gucci trainers and shit.'

'Not really.'

'Do you get into all the gigs you want?'

'No.'

'Does your brother buy you stuff? Like a house?'

'I didn't want a house. I wanted a dance studio, so he bought me that instead.'

'Oh yeah? So, you're a dancer?'

Finally, we can change the subject.

'Well, I teach dance. But, yes, I'm a dancer and choreographer. Remind me what it is you do?'

'I'm a brickie. Build walls all day. So, like, who's the better dancer, you or your brother?'

I inhale again. This is going to be a long night.

The taxi drops me earlier than expected. I pay the fare, then stand on the pavement and watch the vehicle pull away from the kerb.

I glance down at my phone and send a text to Aidan. He's rehearsing in New York for Rebel Heart's upcoming American tour. *Just so you know*, I type, *I properly hate you*.

It takes him moments to reply. *Uh oh*, he writes. *Another bad date?*

Tyler was more interested in you than in me, I type, before my shoulders droop. I don't even bother to read my brother's response.

My dance studio is the last on a row of shops, next to a hairdresser and along from a betting shop. It's a triple plot; Aidan bought me all three vacant lots with the money he made from his first couple of years in Rebel Heart. We knocked the walls through to create space enough for a proper dance floor. I have a healthy number of clients, most of whom are parents with children under the age of twelve, and due, in part, to the fact that the McArthur name has now – where I'm from, at least – become synonymous with Aidan's success. I doubt there is a person living on this planet who hasn't at least *heard* of Rebel Heart. Unless they're living in the deepest, darkest Amazon with no Wi-Fi access.

I unlock the door, and close and relock it behind me once I'm inside. Standing in the darkness, I drop my bag to the floor. I adore my twin; I'd do anything for him, but it doesn't help that people look at me and automatically think, *Aidan*. Like him, I'm tall, though I'm five eight to his six two. I have his same shade of darkest brown hair, though mine is so long now it almost reaches my waist. We have the same silvery-blue coloured eyes. My face shape is the same, though thankfully my nose is more feminine. The difference is that people don't shriek at me when I'm crossing the street. Oh, they'll stare alright, wondering why it is that I look so familiar. Aidan, on the other hand, is instantly recognisable. He's his own brand-within-a-brand. Most days I don't resent him for it. Only days like today, when all my blind date wanted to talk about was my illustrious sibling, and his celebrated boy band. I'm insanely proud of him. But I didn't ask for this. And now, as a

result, there are less people I can trust in the world. New people tend to only be interested in me for one reason.

Rebel Heart.

It used to be that we were once as ambitious as each other. I'm still ambitious, but whilst Aidan's comfortable with fame and all its trappings, as I've got older, I've shied away from it.

Above the studio, I have another, smaller studio. Next to that is my 'flat', which comprises a makeshift bedroom and ensuite bathroom. The kitchen is downstairs, adjacent to the dance floor.

Upstairs, I switch on the light and flop down on my bed. Once more, I reach for my Magic 8 Ball.

'Magic 8 Ball,' I sigh out loud, cradling the black plastic in my palms. 'I'm serious this time. Am I going find a boyfriend by the end of the year?'

I shake it hard with two hands and wait for the answer to float up to the surface.

CONSULT ME AGAIN LATER, the ball says, at which point I let out an infuriated groan.

Lying there, my gaze is drawn to a framed photograph mounted on my wall. It's a recent one, taken just over a month ago at the Leicester Square premiere of *Heartbeats*, Lexi's documentary about Rebel Heart. On the red carpet, Lexi and Aidan are in the centre of the photograph. He's wearing a sharp suit, his arms around Lexi's waist. He's surrounded by his bandmates and their girlfriends, except for Danny Miller, who is single. It's my new favourite photograph of the band, and they asked me to be in the picture. I'm there, hovering next to Miller, though there's an obvious gap between the two of us, because, despite the band's efforts to persuade

me to go as Miller's date, I point blank refused. And besides, Miller never even asked me.

Still, the picture takes pride of place on my wall.

I fall asleep fully dressed, my hair splayed out over the sheets.

I don't know what time it is when my eyes start to flicker and my dreams become feverish. I drift awake, vaguely aware of a high-pitched beeping sound, out of reach. I open my eyes to find they burn, and the edges of my nostrils sting. I raise my head, realising I can't get enough oxygen, the inner lining of my windpipe scorched.

I can't breathe. I can't see. Nothing makes sense.

I stumble to my feet. The air swirls with smoke.

I panic, drop to my knees. My lungs seize up, and instinctively I begin to cough. I crawl on my hands and knees towards the door, my fingers clashing with cheap plastic.

There's a thunderous sound below. I reach out for the door, yank it further open, recoiling at the wall of heat hitting my skin and eyes. Through the smoke, downstairs, towards the dance floor, a vibrant, orange glow blazes.

Fire.

Chapter Two

At three o'clock in the morning, my older brother, Rohan, drives me to my parents' pub from the A&E department at the Royal Hampshire County Hospital. I've been checked over, and despite a little smoke inhalation, there's no lasting damage. The same can't be said for my dance studio. The firemen arrived just as I was scrambling to get out of my upstairs window.

'Can we drive past it?' I choke out through tears from the passenger seat. 'So I can see?'

In the darkness, under the streetlights that seep into the vehicle, I see Rohan wince. He rubs his beard, which he grew with the intention of making sure he looked nothing like Aidan McArthur's older brother.

'Maybe it's not such a good idea,' he suggests. 'Maybe leave it until morning, mmm?'

I let my shoulders droop.

'We can rebuild,' he then says, trying to make me feel better. 'You'll have money from the building's insurance. You can find another space locally. The important thing is, you're alive.'

He reaches out and grabs my right hand, gives it a

squeeze. I look down in my lap. My skin is a little sooty from the smoke. My parents follow in the Land Rover behind us and I can see their headlights in the wing mirror.

At the pub – The Fox Den – on the pebbled driveway, Rohan parks the car. I see the main door open. My sister-in-law Jo-Jo emerges, in her pyjamas, her phone glued to her ear.

‘I can see her, she’s here, she’s fine,’ she’s saying into the phone as I open the car door. She runs over, embraces me and holds out the handset. ‘It’s Aidan,’ she says. ‘He’s losing his mind.’

I put the phone to my ear. ‘Aidey?’ I say, and my emotions catch in my throat.

His voice brings me comfort. ‘Paige? Thank fucking God, are you alright? I couldn’t get hold of Ro.’

‘His battery died in the hospital,’ I say, and my voice trembles. ‘I’m okay. I’m okay. My phone was inside though. I don’t even know if it’s still working.’

‘I’m sorry I’m not there,’ he manages. ‘I called Lex. She’s driving over to you now.’

‘She doesn’t have to do that,’ I say, wiping my eyes. My father comes up behind me and gently guides me inside where it’s warm.

‘I want to be there; I want to hug you,’ Aidan says. ‘I want to get on a plane.’

‘I’ll be fine,’ I tell him, though the truth is I still haven’t processed what’s happened tonight. ‘Stay in New York.’

‘Thank God you’re alive,’ he breathes.

‘I’m home now. I’m at the pub. Everyone’s here to look after me.’

‘But I’m not.’

‘You have more important things to do.’

‘You know that’s not true,’ he says, and his voice cracks. ‘It’s times like this that I don’t care about this stupid job.’

‘It’s gone, Aidey,’ I snivel. ‘The whole place... it’s gone. There’s nothing left.’

‘We can start again. I’ll buy you a new studio. You can find different premises. All I care about is that you’re okay.’

I’m inside my parents’ home now. My niece and nephew – Rohan and Jo-Jo’s young children – are both up, and bleary-eyed. They run to me and wrap their arms around my thighs.

‘Aidey, I need to go. You should get some rest.’

‘How can I rest now?’

‘You must. You have the tour coming up.’

‘I don’t care about the fucking tour.’

‘You are the glue holding that tour together. I’ll be fine. We can talk when you’re awake again. Lexi’ll be here soon.’

‘I love you, P. You know that, right?’

‘I love you, too. Call me when you get up.’

We say our goodbyes and I hang up, returning the phone to Jo-Jo. My family are gathered around me: my parents, Rohan, Jo-Jo and the children. I embrace them one by one, and we all sob. We all know I could easily have died tonight.

‘What’s that you’re holding?’ my niece asks.

I look down. The fingers on my left hand have been clamped around it since the fireman pulled me from the burning building. I don’t know why, but I’ve held onto it ever since and haven’t been able to let it go.

‘It’s a Magic 8 Ball,’ I whisper, and wipe tears from my cheeks. ‘It was the only thing I could rescue from inside.’

Later, Jo-Jo is making everyone hot chocolate, the children tucked back into bed. The rest of us are wide awake now.

‘Must have been arson,’ Rohan says gravely. He shakes his head and paces in the living room. ‘For it to go up in flames that quick.’

I press the bridge of my nose.

‘The police will have to investigate,’ my father says. ‘The fire crew will be able to tell if it was arson or not. But it’ll take time.’

‘But who would try and burn down my studio?’

We look at one another, but no one says a word. Rebel Heart has some crazy fans from all over the globe. We all know it. But it would make no sense for a crazed superfan to try and burn down premises that are known to belong to Aidan McArthur’s sister. It’s not like they have enemies, only people who don’t care for their brand of music.

‘Thank goodness you weren’t injured,’ my mother, Olive, sobs and buries her face in my father’s shoulder. He wraps his arms around her and kisses her forehead. ‘I don’t know what I would have done.’

I go to her and she switches her embrace to me. I try not to think of the charred remains of what used to be my dance studio, or what I’ll do now it’s burned to the ground.

Lexi arrives shortly after four. I’m lying on the sofa with my eyes partially closed when I hear her car in the driveway. I drag myself up and go to the front door, walking out into the frosty January air.

When she gets out of the car, her hands go to her mouth, because I haven’t even showered yet and I’m still covered in sooty black marks. Tears well in her eyes and she strides over to meet me, her arms wrapping me in a bear hug. Before I know it, I’m sobbing again.

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After some moments, she pulls back. 'I came as soon as Aidan called me,' she chokes out. 'I've never heard him so upset.'

Lexi is the coolest, most collected person I know. Even without make-up on, in the dead of night, she looks radiant. The last time I saw her so emotional was when she and Aidan had broken up, yet each still desperately in love with the other, and hurting. Seeing her like this causes another wave of tears to well inside me. Her hands cling to my shoulders.

'I'm okay. I spoke to him. He wanted to get on a plane.'

'You should have let him.'

'I told him to stay in New York.'

'He told me. Honestly, we're both just so relieved you're okay.'

She hugs me again. She and Jo-Jo are the sisters I never had.

'Can you do me a favour?' I ask.

'Name it.'

'I want to see it. The damage. Dad doesn't think I should go, neither does Rohan. They think I'll be too devastated. Will you drive me there tomorrow?'

At eleven o'clock the following morning, after a shower and not a lot of sleep, I stare through the windscreen of Lexi's car. We both gasped when we saw what was left of the building. The roof has collapsed: only a charred, skeleton frame remains, the space that was my bedroom now obliterated. Everything is black and damp from the gallons of water used to put out the blaze and a fire engine is still parked on site. A police cordon marked with blue and white tape surrounds the immediate area. A few early-morning spectators are milling

around the vicinity, surveying the damage to my studio and the hairdressers' next door. A local news crew is packing up.

Lexi switches off the engine. My hands have gone to my mouth, but she grabs one of them and squeezes my fingers.

'You don't have to do this,' she whispers. 'You can change your mind.'

I shake my head vehemently. 'No, I need to see it.'

I get out of the car, walking onto the pavement. I sink to my knees beside the blue and white tape as raw emotion floods my chest. There really is nothing left. Nothing even remotely salvageable. All my stuff is gone.

Lexi sinks down next to me, wraps her arms around my shoulders. I place one hand over hers.

'The picture from the premiere...' I choke out. 'It was my favourite. I wish I'd yanked it from the wall.'

'Pictures are replaceable,' Lexi whispers to me. 'You are not.'

'My phone was in there. My stuff. Everything. How could this happen? How could anyone... wait, what is *that*?'

'What is what?' Lexi asks.

'That poster; that pink poster.'

Lexi follows my gaze. I get to my feet and walk to a nearby lamppost outside the cordon then stare in horror at the hastily put-together poster that has been attached inside a plastic sleeve. I cannot believe my eyes.

*WANT TO CONTINUE YOUR DANCE LESSONS?
DID YOUR LOCAL DANCE STUDIO BURN DOWN?
THEN CONTINUE YOUR TRAINING AT VN8 DANCE
ACADEMY!*

50% OFF YOUR FIRST CLASS, CALL NOW!

There's a phone number to call. 'That bitch!' I explode, my already shredded emotions boiling over.

Lexi appears over my shoulder. 'What is it?'

'Her name's Vanessa Aitken. Her dance studio is about five miles from here. She's trying to poach all my clients before the firemen have even left the bloody premises!'

'You are joking.'

'It's right here, look.'

'Surely it's too early for anyone to start thinking about changing dance academies?' Lexi asks.

'Can I borrow your phone? I'll soon find out.'

We're back at the pub in my parents' living room. Following a visit from the police to interview me about the circumstances of the blaze, exhaustion washed over me. Jo-Jo talked me into taking a nap. Now, I'm pacing in front of the fireplace, having borrowed Jo-Jo's phone again. She has the numbers for some of the parents whose children come to me for classes. Over the course of the last few hours, it's become apparent that Vanessa has been calling my clients personally.

'I'm so sorry, Paige, I really am,' a parent explains to me over the phone. 'Vanessa said it would take you a while to get up and running again and find new premises. She said she could fill in in the interim, you know, just whilst you're getting back on your feet. A few of us have said yes. But we'll come back to you; of course we will.'

I'm reeling. I can't even think straight. I feel like the captain of a sinking ship, the only one left on board whilst everyone else has escaped on a lifeboat. Less than twenty-four hours ago I was giving a dance class at my own academy and contemplating what I was going to wear for my shitty blind date.

Now it's burned to the ground and what remains of my business and personal belongings lies in a charred heap.

Lexi brings me a cup of tea. I sink down into the sofa and feel like an empty shell.

'I don't believe it,' I whisper as Jo-Jo enters the room. They sit either side of me. 'I don't even know what to do with myself. What can I do? I don't have a home; my business is gone. I know I should be grateful to be alive—'

Next to me, Lexi's phone starts to vibrate.

'It's Aidan,' she whispers, glancing down at her screen. 'I hope you don't mind... I texted him about Vanessa.'

I nod. Lexi answers the video call and gives me the handset. It's early morning in New York. Aidey looks fresh-faced, which is just another annoying thing about having a famous sibling, with people dedicated to looking after his skincare routine. Rebel Heart's American tour is due to start in a week.

'How are you doing?' he asks me. 'I cannot believe that shit about Vanessa.'

'I guess I can't blame them,' I sigh with a shrug, getting to my feet. 'They just want lessons.'

'It hasn't even been a day! They could have fucking waited for you to make an announcement. They should have told her where to shove it when she contacted them.'

I shake my head, massage my forehead.

'Are you alright?' he asks.

'I'm fine. I'm okay. Just... in shock, I think.'

'Listen,' Aidey says, and I detect a change in his tone of voice. 'Look, something's gone down here... just this morning. Tell me I'm being crazy, but I had an idea. It might be something to do whilst you get back on your feet.'

I see him swallow, the way he rakes his hands through his dark hair.

‘What happened?’ I ask.

He shakes his head. ‘One of our backing dancers quit this morning. She walked out. Made it clear she’s not going to be coming back either. Problem is, she’s not the first to go, so we’re running out of options. Ziggy’s losing it.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘I’m guess I’m saying... I’m saying you could forget everything that’s happening at home. Instead, you could come to America. Come and be a backing dancer on Rebel Heart’s American tour.’

‘It’s an insane idea,’ Rohan says to me in the living room, half an hour after I’ve hung up on Aidan. ‘I can’t believe you’d even consider it.’

My head is swimming. I’ve lost track of time. Everything is happening too fast.

‘Why’s it an insane idea?’ Jo-Jo challenges her husband from the other side of the room, whilst simultaneously trying to wrestle her kids out of their school clothes.

Lexi keeps quiet.

Rohan paces. He’s done a lot of that today. ‘This is Aidan being selfish. It’s ridiculous. You’ve just lost everything and he wants you to... *join him on tour?* That’s insanity. Why is he even suggesting it?’

‘I don’t know exactly what’s happened,’ Lexi pipes up, ‘but Aidan says they’re desperate.’

‘America’s filled with wannabe dancers,’ Rohan snaps. ‘There’s bound to be someone.’

‘Not necessarily someone with Paige’s talent,’ Jo-Jo argues. ‘She’s the only person Aidan knows who can learn multiple dance routines in a week.’

I grasp the sides of my head. ‘Yes, but teaching kids in a studio is not the same as dancing in front of thousands of screaming Rebel Heart fans. That’s a massive jump.’

Rohan throws his wife a look. Jo-Jo is undeterred. ‘You’d be paid? Ro can look out for new premises and deal with the insurance people in England.’

Lexi adds, ‘I’m sure it would just be temporary. For half the tour at most, whilst they organise a replacement. You could fly out with me when I go tomorrow.’

Rohan baulks at the idea. ‘Tomorrow?!’

Lexi bites her lip. Dealing with Ro is worse than dealing with my dad. My voice quivers when I speak. ‘Aidey says the management company can sort me out with a visa, provided I agree. I mean... it beats sitting around at home.’

I look to Lexi and Jo-Jo for reassurance. Jo-Jo gives a pronounced shrug. Lexi bites back a grin and her eyes twinkle, because it would mean me accompanying her on a flight to New York tomorrow.

‘What about your passport? Was that in the fire?’ my older brother asks.

‘My passport’s here. Upstairs in my bedroom.’

Jo-Jo looks jubilant and Rohan shakes his head in her direction.

‘Oh, come on, Ro,’ Jo-Jo blurts. ‘*Chill*. How often does a girl get the chance to dance in front of a stadium packed with ten thousand screaming fans?’

I remember all the times I’ve spent hanging out with Rebel Heart. I adore all the boys, apart from Miller – who’s an asshole – but I know they would look after me. And I am good at learning set, choreographed routines.

‘What’s the pay like?’ Ro asks.

‘Aidey says it’s a lot more than I’m paying myself now. Plus, meals are provided, and I’d get to stay in fancy hotels.’

Rohan looks at me and shakes his head. ‘You’d need to cancel the remainder of your clients.’

‘Vanessa’s probably contacted them all anyway.’

He knows I’m right; I’ll be lucky if I have a client base left after the fire. I squeeze my eyes shut and let out a groan, which seems to be born out of madness.

‘Alright, then,’ I say, exhaling shakily, not sure exactly what is propelling me to make this decision, ‘I’ll do it. I’ll go on tour.’

Chapter Three

In the baggage hall at JFK airport, I'm drained. Lexi and I watch the luggage carousel, waiting for our suitcases to appear. In my cabin bag is my Magic 8 Ball. It might be made out of cheap plastic, but right now it feels like some kind of lucky charm.

Decision made, it was a rush to get organised. Jo-Jo was pleased for me, yet Rohan made it plain he still thought I was being brash to even consider the change so suddenly. My dad rolled his eyes when I broke the news to him, blaming Aidan for roping me into becoming a temporary backing dancer for Rebel Heart. My parents have grown used to his lengthy absences; ever since the day Aidan and I auditioned for a TV talent show and my twin brother's life was changed forever. I think they always thought – or hoped – I would be one who stayed close, like Rohan. My mother had tears in her eyes when I asked her if I could borrow a suitcase. Jo-Jo lent me a small pile of clothes, including ripped jeans, a pair of biker boots and some jumpers. Rohan drove me to Alton to buy some new Lycra dancewear. My purse was in the fire so he begrudgingly purchased everything for me, groaning that Aidan should be the one to foot the bill.

I think of the charred remnants of my studio and try to see Aidan's invitation as a positive thing. A miniscule part of me is actually excited. Mostly, I'm terrified. It's a long time since I performed in front of anyone other than my students.

As it turned out, Vanessa Aitken had tried to poach ninety per cent of my clients, in the space of twenty-four hours after the fire broke out. I informed the police, because not only was her behaviour vindictive, it was downright suspicious. That said, I have no proof she was involved. I called her mobile from Jo-Jo's phone, leaving her a sarcastic voicemail congratulating her, telling her I was leaving for a while. I didn't tell her why or where I was going, though I was tempted. I'd no desire to actually speak to her in person.

Last night, I sat alone on my bed in my parents' house and gave the Magic 8 Ball a firm shake.

'Is going on tour as a backing dancer a really bad idea?' I'd asked the black plastic orb outright, rubbing my forehead, trying to remind myself that a Magic 8 Ball should not be treated like some kind of oracle whose answers could be resolutely relied upon.

I'd stop shaking and stared as the message floated up to the surface.

VERY LIKELY, was the ball's answer.

As we emerge into the arrivals hall at JFK's terminal 8, pushing through the crowd, I spy Bodhi Callaghan, Rebel Heart's head of transportation and security, waiting with a message board with Lexi's name printed on it. I remember that Bodhi is a former wrestler when he wraps his arm around me and gives my shoulders a hard squeeze.

'Ladies.' He grins, flashing his gold tooth. 'Welcome back to Crazytown.'

‘Hi, Bode.’ Lexi greets him with a laugh, giving him a hug. ‘Are things really that bad?’

He shrugs. ‘Oh, you know. Screamers keep on screamin’. Fangirls keep on fangirlin’. They’re all camped outside the hotel.’

I grin at Bodhi’s reference to Rebel Heart’s obsessive fanbase.

‘Good flight?’ he asks.

‘Decent,’ Lexi replied. ‘Did my boyfriend manage to extract himself like he promised he would?’

Bodhi winces. ‘He told me to say sorry. He couldn’t get away. I’ll take you straight to the hotel though.’

I look at Lexi, thinking I see a flash of disappointment cross her features. She’d been excited to see Aidan at the airport. She offers Bodhi an exaggerated roll of the eyes.

‘Thank you,’ she sighs. ‘Lead the way.’

Bodhi takes control of our luggage trolley. We follow in step behind him and I hook my arm through Lexi’s.

‘Are you upset that he broke his promise?’ I ask.

‘No,’ Lexi sighs. ‘It’s not like he can just turn up in arrivals. He’s done it before, and believe me, carnage ensues. I get that he can’t just go wherever he wants. He’s busy with the tour.’

‘But you wanted to see him here,’ I say with a grin.

She cocks her head to one side. ‘I was *hoping* to see him here,’ she confesses.

Last year, Lexi and Aidan spent two months apart whilst she went to various places across the world, filming for a different documentary. They spent some time together at Christmas, around the time of the premiere, before Aidey had to head back to New York to continue rehearsals, and they accept that, for now, their relationship will be played out across the globe.

We follow Bodhi into a dingy multi-storey car park, walking all the way to a far corner. Looking up ahead, I see movement, when, from the far side of a white car, a familiar figure emerges. I see him before Lexi does, then give her bicep a squeeze.

‘Lex,’ I whisper.

Lexi looks up before her mouth opens in an excited gasp. I feel a rush of cool air as she pulls away from me, bypassing Bodhi. I see Aidan’s wide grin as Lexi throws herself into my brother’s arms, and he lifts her up, twirling her around before setting her back down again, their lips locking together in an ardent kiss. He kisses her for some time before the two are whispering sweet nothings to one another, utterly besotted. Watching their adoration for one another stops me in my tracks. I’m still waiting for that big love to come along, though I’d settle for any love right now. I sometimes wonder, given the quantity of disappointing dates I’ve been on lately, if he’ll ever show his face.

‘You fibber.’ I laugh at Bodhi as we approach them, Aidan pulling a goofy face, his fingers still entwined with Lexi’s. He hugs me with his free arm.

‘Surprise,’ he says, putting on a squeaky cartoon voice as Bodhi loads up the car.

‘I planned on giving you grief for staying in the safe confines of your hotel,’ I admonish him.

He plants another kiss on Lexi’s cheek. ‘As if I wouldn’t come,’ he says, holding her close.

‘Would you have come if it was just me on my own?’ I ask.

‘Of course I would have. Especially after everything. Besides, you’re our newest dancer. We flipping well need you.’

‘Am I going to regret this?’

‘Course not. It’ll be a blast.’

I know my brother. The way he rakes his hand through his hair tells me that he's not telling me the whole truth.

On our journey into Manhattan, I sit in the front passenger seat next to Bodhi, making polite conversation, all the while forced to listen to Aidan and Lexi's kissing noises and loving whispers in the back seat. Much as I adore them both, I am rendered a complete gooseberry.

'So can we pause the PDAs for just a minute while you tell me what on earth is going on with your dancers quitting,' I say, turning and facing them between the seats.

Lexi is curled into Aidan side. Aidan clears his throat and gives a shrug. 'They're just finding... they can't keep up with the tempo, that's all. So... they're walking.'

I narrow my eyes in his direction. 'Now tell me the *real* reason.'

Aidan inhales audibly, his shoulders drooping. 'Miller keeps sleeping with them, so they keep quitting.'

'*What?*'

Lexi's taken aback. Aidan seems to crumple, as though he's been holding onto his admission. He sighs. 'Miller's doing my head in.'

'You should have told me,' Lexi says, poking him in his side.

'I know you've got a soft spot for Miller,' he tells her.

I keep my face between the seats as Lexi shrugs. 'I do. I made my peace with him. Emotionally, Miller's... damaged. He had a terrible upbringing, his mother abandoned him as a boy, his father paid him no attention then died of a heart attack, he dropped out of school. His only role model was his brother, who was sleeping with a new girl every night when Miller was only eleven. It's amazing he's made it this far.'

'What's the man-whore doing now?' I ask Aidan, because

if anyone knows of my abject disdain for Miller, it's my brother.

Aidan looks to his hands. 'He's not engaging. Turning up when he wants, disappearing. Smoking weed in his hotel room. And, yeah... sleeping with all the bloody backing dancers despite Ziggy giving him a final warning. So now he's without a partner.'

The penny drops. My jaw goes slack. *So that's why I'm here.* I turn to face the windscreen again and bury my face in my palms as I groan. My words come out muffled.

'No. No, Aidey. Uh-uh. No. No. *Absolutely not.*' My stomach rolls. 'You did *not* just tell me I have to be dance partners with Danny Miller.'

'I knew if I said that part, you wouldn't have come.'

'Damn right I wouldn't have come! Stop the car, Bodhi!'

'Keep going, Bode,' Aidan counters and I turn to see Bodhi is grinning at our conversation.

'Bodhi, I'm serious!' I shout towards at him. 'Turn this car around, I am going home. Hell will freeze over before I dance a single step with Danny Miller!'

My head whips back round, my glare shooting daggers at Aidan. There's a guilty smile on his face. Lexi looks unsure.

'Just for the record, I had no idea that was the plan,' she pipes up.

'I'm sorry, babe,' he says, planting a kiss on her mouth. I'm horrified.

'Lexi gets a "*sorry*" and I don't? Aidey, you lied to me!'

'I didn't lie,' he pleads. 'I said we needed a dancer. I just omitted the fact that we needed a dance partner for Miller. And I meant what I said: you're the only girl I know who can learn a routine like that.' He clicks his fingers on the word 'that'.

I'm still glaring at him as we speed towards Manhattan. 'I cannot believe you!'

'Every girl we put in front of Miller, he ends up sleeping with, then they can't hack it when he stops paying them any attention. They run away, all heartbroken. You're the only girl he wouldn't dare sleep with. Plus, I know how much you hate him.'

I turn back around, facing the front, crossing my arms across my chest. 'Well, good. Because the man is pond scum. I don't care what you say about him, Lexi, sorry.'

I feel Aidan's fingers squeeze my shoulder. 'I appreciate you coming here, P.'

'Go away.'

'It'll be fun, I promise.'

I stare out of the window. Fun? I very much doubt that.

Chapter Four

Bodhi brings us to the hotel – the New York Marriott Marquis, with breathtaking views of Times Square. We're escorted via the goods entrance, where the car is taken by a valet, because, as Bodhi tells me, there's a dedicated crowd of Rebel Heart fans encamped outside the front entrance of the hotel on the pavement. Once we get inside – our bags to be brought up separately – it doesn't escape my attention that two of Bodhi's team hover near Aidan in the lobby. It's times like this that I'm thankful for my normal life.

'Rehearsal studio is in the building behind this one,' Aidan says. 'I said I'd bring Lexi over there to say hi.'

In the lobby, I cock my head to one side. 'Lexi?' I query. 'Do they know I'll be here too?'

Yet again, my brother winces.

'Oh, for fuck's sake, Aidan!' I blurt, punching him in the arm. 'You are unbelievable! Do they even know I'm coming?'

I can tell that he wants to laugh but he dons a serious face. 'Honestly? No.'

'Why the hell not?' I demand.

'I agreed with Ziggy I wouldn't tell anyone about our plan until you got here.'

For a second time, I bury my face in my palms and groan.

This cannot get any worse. Lexi is looking at Aidan like he's messed up and he puts his arm around her shoulders, as though seeking a cheeky apology from his girlfriend. Once more, I get nothing.

'So, you haven't even broached the topic with Miller?'

'He didn't ask. Like I said, his head's not exactly in the game right now.'

'Well, this should be interesting,' Lexi says, half-playfully, half-concerned, her arms wrapped firmly around my brother's waist. The problem with my brother is that he can get away with almost anything.

I'm scowling again. 'I properly hate you,' I reiterate, poking him emphatically in the ribs. 'Properly. Hate. You.'

'Who'd you hate more, me or Miller?' Aidan grins.

'I never thought I'd say it, but right now? *You.*'

I check in. My room is all paid for, and I've arranged to meet Aidan and Lexi back in the lobby in thirty minutes. I'm standing in my Lycra dancewear, marvelling at the view of Times Square, when they finally decide to make an appearance – late. They've both showered and it's obvious they've had hot-and-heavy, haven't-seen-you-in-two-weeks sex. Normally, this wouldn't bother me, but, given my current predicament, leaves me irritated that my twin is prioritising his relationship with his girlfriend over his plan to dupe me into coming out here. I have zero idea how the band is going to react to my appearance, least of all Miller. Not that I care a single iota what a man-whore like Miller thinks, but still.

'Sorry,' Lexi whispers in my ear, giving me a brief hug when they come back down to the lobby. I forgive her instantly.

‘Are you okay?’ she asks.

‘I’m nervous.’

‘Don’t be. You know the guys adore you. They’ll be thrilled with the news.’

‘And Miller?’

‘We were talking about it upstairs. Miller’s just going to have to live with the decision. And Aidan’s right, at least he wouldn’t dare try and sleep with you.’

I raise my eyebrows, because I’m not sure that’s supposed to make me feel any better. ‘Lucky me.’

‘Ziggy’s on his way,’ Aidan says, checking his phone. ‘Are you hungry?’

My stomach is a bundle of knots. ‘Not right this minute, no.’

‘Then we’ll head to the studio. The guys are already there, I think. Zig’s instructed everyone to gather in our rehearsal space.’

I force a smile through thin lips. Aidan gives my bicep a squeeze. ‘Chill. It’s all gonna be fine.’

I scowl at him anyway.

The first person to clock my presence when I enter the studio is Cal. Caleb Whitlock, a forthright twenty-five-year-old Australian from Bondi, his hair a mop of crazy curls, who always says the first thing that comes into his head, whether or not it might be deemed appropriate.

‘No way... it’s Paige!’ he blurts when he sees me, making the others turn their heads. ‘What are you doing here? Good to see you, mate!’

My chest feels tight. I don’t answer, just mumble something incomprehensible and give him a hug. Cal slaps me hard

on the back. Aidan and Lexi follow me into the studio, Ziggy behind them. Ziggy seems a little frazzled, his bleach-blond hair sticking out in all directions, the stress of the tour prep clearly getting to him. A vape sticks out of his jacket pocket, worn over his standard uniform of a Rebel Heart tour tee stretched over his bulging belly.

Before I know it, Cal's moved on to greet Lexi. Ravi Bala is next. He is Indian Canadian, and on most days, a bundle of excitement. I note that his mannerisms have become more pronounced since he came out as gay in Lexi's documentary. He seems more comfortable in his own skin. 'Aidey didn't say you were comin' to NYC!' he exclaims, holding his arms out wide, embracing me.

I pull back and make a face. 'Did he tell you my studio burned down?'

Ravi covers his mouth with his hands. Behind him I'm aware of three other girls looking my way, their eyes skimming over my attire, presumably the other dancers, the ones who haven't yet quit the impending tour. My gaze darts around the studio, looking for Miller, who doesn't appear to be here. 'Ohhh shit, yes, he told us,' Ravi breathes, cocking his head in sympathy and pushing out in bottom lip. 'I'm so sorry. You must be devastated. Thank God you weren't hurt though.'

'No. I'm very much alive. Where're Miller and J.B.?'

If there's one member of Rebel Heart I could be persuaded to sleep with, it would be Jean-Baptiste Peltier. His mother is Moroccan, his father French, giving his skin a lustrous caramel tone. He's the tallest of the group and the member of the band that most people would liken to a model. He is well and truly off the market though, in a long-term relationship with his childhood sweetheart, Audrey, and father to three-year-old Xavi.

‘Miller’s around. J.B. flew to France this morning.’

‘Oh. Aidey didn’t say.’

‘We’re all meant to be having a break before the tour starts,’ Ravi says, rolling his eyes just as I hear the sound of the door. ‘Tun and I are supposed to be heading to Toronto, but now I’m not so sure. What with everything.’

Ravi looks in the direction of the door and grits his teeth. I turn to see Miller enter the studio, and my heart starts to pummel my ribs. His usually brown hair is dyed electric blue and is full of the usual gunk. He’s wearing low-slung baggy jeans, with a black tight-fitting vest and a grey hooded top. The lower section of tattoos that snake down his right arm are just visible under his clothes. He has that same cocky look about him, walking with that over-confident, devil-may-care swagger of his. He has full lips and what looks to be a new eyebrow piercing, and he’s chewing gum.

Ugh. Everything about him irritates me.

‘Hey, Lex,’ Miller mutters before his eyes settle on me. ‘What is *she* doing here?’

There’s a pause. I tense. Aidan gives a sigh. ‘She’s your new dance partner, mate.’

There’s a second moment of silence as the words sink in. Miller’s face falls as Cal starts to cackle.

‘No,’ Miller says emphatically, beginning to shake his head. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Too late, it’s a done deal,’ Ziggy says. ‘I told you, didn’t I, Miller? We cannot lose another dancer.’

‘Are you kidding me? I’d rather dance with the devil than with her.’

‘Nice to see you too, Miller,’ I snap in his direction, folding my arms defensively over my chest.

‘This is bloody genius,’ Cal hoots.

‘Why did I not think of this?’ Ravi says with a laugh as Lexi looks sympathetically in my direction. ‘Paige, you’re like the perfect candidate!’

‘Aid,’ Miller is saying, his voice pleading, holding up his hands and shaking his head, except he has to stop himself because he’s coughing. He recovers, then adds, ‘I’m serious.’

‘So am I, Mill. We can’t keep going down this same road. Paige is your partner now.’

‘She’s not even a professional dancer,’ Miller says tersely. He jabs his finger at me as he says it.

‘Excuse me?’ I hiss at him. ‘I can dance better than you can.’

‘You teach second graders how to bop along to Beyoncé; it’s not the same thing.’

‘Miller, everyone knows Paige is a brilliant dancer,’ Lexi chips in. ‘Give her a chance.’

Miller’s now tensed up. Since Lexi accompanied the boys on their last world tour, she and Miller have formed this odd little bond, mainly, I think, because they both grew up in single-parent households. Yet, looking at him, it’s comforting to know that I still loathe him as much as I always have. ‘No offence, Lexi, but she’s never done anything anywhere near this level. Look, I can call that last girl personally. Get her to come back.’

‘Jenni said she’d rather gouge her eyes out than dance with you again,’ Ziggy counters in his East London accent. ‘I think it’s unlikely she’ll reconsider.’

Cal’s still hooting with laughter. I stand my ground, my arms still crossed over my chest. I’ve never seen Miller look so irate.

‘Man, I cannot *wait* for this,’ Cal says. He rubs his hands together and Aidan throws him a warning look. He beckons

the other dancers over and the three of them approach us. I'm faced with three very slender, athletic girls around my age, but maybe younger.

'Paige, this is Nikita, Darcey and Jahtoya. Carmen dances with J.B. but she's not here right now.'

'Nice to meet you.' I smile and they all wave blandly, as well as giving me a suspicious, judgmental once-over.

'You're so keen, *you* can dance with Paige,' Miller snaps at Aidan. 'We can switch.'

The moment the words come out of his mouth, Nikita, the Asian-looking girl, seems to bristle.

'I'm not grinding up against my own sister,' Aidan shoots back and Miller doesn't have a rebuttal.

Ziggy's voice booms out. 'Right! This is how it's gonna go! We've got no choreographer. Aidan, you'll stay with Miller and show Paige the routines. Cal, Ravi, you can have the four days off as planned. I want you back at the hotel by Monday. Bodhi's team are outside ready to escort you back to the hotel and onwards from there.'

I look to Lexi, feeling awash with guilt, because if my brother stays with me, it means they don't get their four days alone together, and I'm all too aware that days spent in each other's company are rare. Yet I don't know how I'll be expected to do this without Aidan's help.

Once everyone has said their goodbyes, I'm left in the studio facing Aidan, Lexi and a grouchy-looking Miller. He keeps his head down, avoiding eye contact.

'You guys mind if I sit and watch?' Lexi asks, trying to sound cheerful.

'Of course not,' I say, but Aidan has a guilty look on his face. He inhales and pulls off his hooded top.

Miller gives an exaggerated roll of his eyes. 'Aidey,' he says, holding out his hands towards Lexi. 'Come on, man,'
'Were you going to go somewhere?' I ask Lexi.

'No, not at all,' she reassures me, a flicker of a smile crossing her features. 'We were just going to hang out in New York. But this is fine. Don't worry about it.'

She walks over to the wall mirror, taking a seat on the floor. A muscle flinches in Miller's jaw.

Aidan claps his hands together. He starts talking about the routines. I raise my eyes to Miller. We both look to Lexi sitting down, mutual guilt washing over us.

'Aidey,' Miller says again, raising his voice.

'What?' Aidan snaps.

I see Miller's throat work, his Adam's apple bob up and down. He looks like this is some kind of a punishment. 'Look, I... I got this,' he says.

'Mill, we don't have time.'

'Aid. I can teach her. I'll show her the routines. Alright? Go. Go spend your time with Lexi.'

Lexi looks up. I exchange looks with Aidan; try to give him reassurance that I can do this. But he looks to Miller, as though contemplating whether or not he can trust him. There's a moment of quiet, almost like a stand-off between the two men. I remember days gone by when they were best friends.

'I can do it,' Miller repeats. He coughs again and I realise he doesn't sound healthy.

Aidan points a finger at me. 'She's off-limits, you understand?' Aidan says sternly.

There's a sardonic smile on Miller's face. 'I don't think your sister is liable to jump into bed with me any time soon.'

I grimace. 'Or ever,' I add.

'See?' Miller says.

Lexi gets back to her feet, creeping back over. She looks hopeful. Aidan takes Lexi by the hand before he addresses me, wagging his finger in my face. 'He tries *anything*, you call me. I'll check in with you every few hours to see how it's going.'

I give a nod. 'Understood.'

Aidan lets go of Lexi's hand again and squares up to Miller. 'No more chances, okay?' he says in a low tone. 'This is the last one.'

Miller is unflustered.

'See you tonight,' Aidan says to me, as he squeezes my fingers. 'Me and Lex will take you to dinner.'

'I'll be fine,' I tell him.

Lexi has gone over to Miller. He doesn't look up when she cradles both his cheeks in her palms, keeping his eyes on the floor.

'Thank you,' I hear her whisper, before she plants a kiss on his cheek. Miller blushes, before raising his head and giving her a wink as she lets him go.

'Good luck,' Lexi whispers to me before she and Aidan depart.

We watch the door close behind them. I glimpse a security guard outside.

A thick silence fills the room. Neither of us can look the other's way.

Miller crosses his arms over his chest. Grimacing, he bows his head, then squeezes the bridge of his nose between his fingers.

There are no words. I know that neither of us wants to be here.

But now I have routines to learn, and I'm stuck with my least favourite human being on the planet.

Chapter Five

‘This is all your fault,’ I snap at Miller moments later. He hasn’t moved. ‘If you’d kept it in your trousers then you wouldn’t be in this situation and Aidan wouldn’t have had me on a plane to New York.’

He winces. ‘Man, I forgot your voice is like nails on a chalkboard.’

‘I’ll never understand why Lexi has a soft spot for you.’

‘She regrets choosing Aidan over me is all.’

‘In your wacked-out dreams, maybe.’

He sighs. ‘You gonna quit whining and get ready so I can show you these routines, or not?’

I unzip my top. ‘Oh, bring it on, Miller. I was born ready.’

I notice his eyes rake over my sports tank top and down my bare stomach, to the hem of my Lycra leggings. ‘Shit, McArthur, when did you get a boob job? Or did you just stop counting the calories?’

I grimace. I refuse to get riled up by him. He knows all too well there has been no boob job. And yes, I may have put on a touch more weight since Christmas, after I practically starved myself to go to the premiere. ‘You’re an asshole.’

He too removes his top. Miller always did like working out, and even I can't deny that his muscular figure has its appeal, even if all down his right arm is cloaked in tattoos. He's a natural gymnast. If anyone can produce a backflip on demand, it's Miller. Maybe that's why he has the biggest social media following of any member of Rebel Heart. Why he gets the most likes and upvotes, and why he's considered the bad boy of the band by millions of girls who, actually given the chance to *meet* him, would surely agree with me that his personality means he's little more than pond scum.

He's dropped his top out of the way and comes back towards me.

'Know this,' he says, and cracks his knuckles, 'every dance we do as a couple is a variation on the one we did before. Same moves, just in a different order. Master the basic moves and the opening number, you've pretty much got it down. *Capiche?*'

I nod once. It appears we have started the lesson.

'I can't teach you everything. There are dances we do without the girls, when the girls move to the rear of the stage. Darcey and Nikita will have to teach you those. These are the dances you'll dance with me. You need to warm up first?'

I nod. We do some stretches whilst Miller talks me through the set list for the live shows. I realise we really don't have time to bicker. I already know all of Rebel Heart's songs – embarrassingly – including most of the lyrics.

'So,' Miller continues in front of the wall-long mirror. 'We each get announced with our names in flashing lights, lots of pyrotechnics, et cetera, et cetera. You'll already be in position, I'm furthest right, that corner.'

'Right if I'm looking at the stage, or if I'm looking into the audience?'

‘Stage right. As if you’re looking into the crowd. Crowd is that way.’

He points towards the mirror. I nod. Miller moves behind me. I bristle at his presence, so close I can smell his cologne. I don’t recognise the scent. He stops, and starts coughing again, his chest sounding like it’s rattling.

‘You should see someone about that cough,’ I say.

Miller wallops his chest with a balled-up fist. ‘It’s fine. I’m fine. There’s like a siren going off, before the music even starts up at this point. So... wide leg position—’

Miller gently kicks my ankles to get me to move my legs. I click my tongue at him in the mirror.

‘Bend forward at the waist.’

I bend, keeping my chest out and head up, so I can still see him. Miller positions himself right behind me. He touches my arm. ‘Left elbow up, and bend. Now when I come up behind you, move back up, then throw your right arm out like you’re tryna block me.’

I do as I’m told. As I move up, I move my right arm out, palm out flat. Miller’s arm goes out, mirroring my own, the back of my hand ending up nestled in his palm.

‘Push back harder.’

I push back.

‘*Harder*,’ he says again. ‘Come on, McArthur, show me what you got.’

I tense my arm. He gives a nod, and our eyes meet in the mirror. He’s nestled up behind me, one arm out wide.

‘Left knee turned in as you do. Push your hips back,’ he says.

I roll my eyes, because the moment I do what he’s asking, my backside is pressed right into his groin.

‘Seriously, Miller? This is the first move you wanted to show me?’

‘I don’t have all day, McArthur. You wanted this job.’

I push my bottom back, grinding into him. It’s no wonder he slept with all his previous partners.

‘Actually, Aidan didn’t tell me I was to be your dance partner. He lied to me about that part. He knew if he’d told me the truth, I would have refused to get on the plane. So, no, I didn’t want this job. I still don’t.’ In our reflection, I offer him a pithy smile.

Miller steps back and I straighten. ‘Is this your play? You’re just gonna tell me every five minutes how much you despise me? Because, believe me, I know, and the feeling’s mutual, so how about you just shut your mouth and learn the damn steps?’

‘It frustrates me that you never learn, Miller. If it moves and it’s female, you feel the need to stick your—’ I pause. There’s a silence.

‘Go on, McArthur, you too shy to say it?’

‘You feel the need to have sex with it,’ I finish, with venom. ‘Honestly, quite what possesses these girls is beyond me. They have no idea what you’re really like. All your adoring little Twitter followers have zero idea what a slutty man-whore you are.’

He keeps his eyes down to the floor. A muscle flexes in his jaw again. ‘Are you done?’

‘For now,’ I hum, but there’s a little part of me that’s starting to feel guilty about giving him so much grief. Nobody consulted him on having me here. I decide to keep things simple. To not insult him unless he really deserves it.

‘Good,’ he says, walking over to the sound system and

queuing the backing track. 'Then let's get back to the steps, shall we?'

'Fine.'

I follow his instruction for another two hours, mostly just us, without any music. Miller bossily demonstrates another move, his hands at my waist, before my stomach grumbles loudly.

'Sorry,' I mutter, as a smile tugs at his lips, because my stomach makes the same growl again almost immediately.

'Jeez, when was the last time you ate?' he asks, and I let out a yawn. 'Or slept?'

'Well, we came straight to the hotel from the airport, then straight across to here from the hotel.'

'You want a burger or something?'

'Anything. What do you do for food around here?'

'Going outside is tricky right now. For me, that is. I'll ask Bodhi to go get us some takeout.'

Half an hour later, Bodhi comes into the studio clutching two paper bags of fast food. Miller lays both our hooded tops on the floor before carefully laying out a feast from cardboard boxes onto the material. He sits down cross-legged opposite me whilst I open packets of ketchup and then we both dig in. I hum in approval, and I'm wrapping my lips around a cheeseburger when I realise he's watching me.

'What?' I mumble with my mouth full, a section of brioche bun still stuck between my lips.

Miller picks up a pile of fries. He eats fast. 'I just figured you'd be all sanctimonious about what type of food you put into your body is all,' he says with his mouth full, too. 'I thought you'd be a kombacha and kale shakes kind-of-a-gal.'

I laugh and cover my mouth. 'I think when you last saw me before the premiere, I was on some liquid green diet. As you can see, it didn't last, and instead I put on a ton of weight over Christmas.'

He picks up his drink, pushing a paper straw through the lid and slurping the liquid inside. 'I was kidding about the weight thing. You look fine.'

I take another bite of burger, melted cheese oozing down my chin. 'You don't have to lie, Miller.'

'I'm not lying.'

'The fans are still swooning all over you though, on social media, I see. Aidan told me you've got three times the followers that anyone else has now, after the documentary.'

He gives a nonchalant shrug, chewing some more French fries. 'It's not surprising. None of those guys have time anymore. Aidan's got Lexi, Ravi's got Tun, J.B.'s got Audrey, Cal's got Bianca, and me... well, I've got my seventy-nine point five million followers.'

'Do you blow them all kisses when you go to bed?'

'Don't tell me you don't follow me on social media, McArthur.'

'I most certainly do not. Did someone on Insta dare you to dye your hair blue? Was that it? By the way, you look like a Smurf. And what's with the eyebrow piercing?'

'Got bored of tattoos. Figured I'd make a start on piercings. Thinking about gettin' my foreskin done too.'

I grip my chest as I mock gag on my burger. 'Oh God, that's disgusting.'

'Getting my foreskin pierced?'

'No, you mentioning your appendage whilst I'm trying to eat.'

‘Appendage? You’re such a prude, McArthur. You can’t even call a dick by its proper name.’

I gag for a second time. ‘Can you please not? I’ve not been here a day.’

He looks annoyed. ‘Are we done here? Ready to get back to it? How’s your camel walk?’

He’s talking about a hip-hop dance move. ‘My camel walk is just fine, thank you.’

‘On your feet then. Show me how it’s done.’

‘I’m still eating.’

‘We’ve only got four days, remember, McArthur. Hurry it up.’

I screw up the wrappers and bundle the remnants of our food inside both our hoodies, pushing it all out of the way, then get to my feet, wiping my greasy fingers on my thighs. I’m going to get indigestion. Miller is pacing in front of me.

‘Camel walk, go,’ he says, and my body slinks into the move, my shoulders hunched up, moving in circles.

‘Camel walk into Criss Cross, go.’

I transition smoothly from one move into the other.

‘Into a bounce step, keep it low.’

I do as I’m told, feeling a little foolish that there’s no music playing, but I’m not going to give Miller the satisfaction of seeing me surrender.

‘Keep going,’ Miller barks. ‘Work in some sidekicks, then start again.’

I do it. ‘You know, this is all a bit easy for me,’ I breathe. ‘Maybe I could add in a twerk or two?’

I turn around, twerking in his face, my hips and rear grinding seductively. Miller rolls his eyes. ‘Our routine doesn’t involve any twerking.’

‘Maybe it should.’ I’m working up a sweat, and I’ve got

a full stomach, but I certainly don't plan on complaining. 'Come on, Miller,' I say, still performing each dance move, moving seamlessly from one to the other. 'What's next? You worried I won't keep up? I think we both know that's not true.'

My proficiency has irritated him. It's like he's desperate to catch me out. 'Let's go, from the top,' he snaps. 'Let's get this thing done.'

He comes back up behind me. We stand in front of the mirror. He stops to cough again.

'Please, go to a doctor,' I say.

'And... one,' he begins, ignoring my comment, except exhaustion consumes me and I let out another gigantic yawn. A jetlagged, I've-had-enough type of yawn.

Miller's arms drop to his sides.

'What?' I question tersely.

He massages his forehead. 'Look. Why don't we pick this up tomorrow? I hit the hotel gym at eight. I'll meet you back here for around nine.'

I wonder what time it is. 'We can fit in another hour, can't we? You said it yourself just now. We've now got less than four days.'

'Let's not pretend this is something it's not, okay? Let's not pretend you wanna be here any more than I do. I've had about all I can handle of you today, McArthur. Just try little harder tomorrow, yeah?'

I stare at him for a moment, stunned. 'You are *such* an asshole.'

He turns, going to retrieve his top, removing the leftover food from on top of it. 'Think we established that already.'

He pulls on the hoodie, going to the door and shouting for Bodhi.

‘What am I supposed to do now?’

‘Aidey got you a hotel room, didn’t he?’

‘Miller! You’re supposed to be showing me these steps!’

Bodhi appears and Miller gives him a nod. ‘Tomorrow, McArthur. Nine a.m. sharp.’

The door to the studio closes behind him, and I’m left standing alone in front of the mirror, the food still on the floor.

Chapter Six

When I leave via a back entrance to the studio, jetlag sets in and my bones begin to ache. I don't even know what time it is. Out on the street, it's freezing. As my breath emerges in a vapour, I'm hit with the aroma of New York City; a melee of greasy food, trash bins, and subway smoke, with an undercurrent of stale urine. It reminds me I'm a long way from home, and tears sting the corners of my eyes when I think of the charred remains of my dance studio. I check my new phone, which has a few numbers plugged into it.

Dinner with me n lex later? Aidey texted a while ago.

We finished already, I type out. *Miller left.*

I add a few rolling eyes emojis for good measure.

I meander onto the main street. The gaudy, flashing lights of Times Square are to my left. Yellow cabs honk their horns. I can hear the vague sounds of whooping and screaming cutting through the chill. Reaching Times Square, I glance up, taking in the billboards. One of the biggest ones is an advertisement for Rebel Heart's upcoming tour; the boys all huddled together, posing for the camera. Aidey to one side, next to J.B., Cal in the middle, followed by Ravi, then Miller to the other side. Miller's hair isn't blue in the picture, but,

typically, his shirt is off, showcasing his ridiculous abs. It's an odd feeling, seeing them all up there, knowing them all so well in the flesh. And knowing that I look uncannily like one of them.

I remember the day I became 'Aidan's sister'. Not the day I came into the world, or growing up: the knowledge was always there, of course. He was my twin, my other. The one I shared my mother's womb with. I was Paige; he was Aidan. When we were at school, other kids referred to us as 'Paidan'. Yet, it all changed when we turned seventeen. My identity altered forever when a certain talent show played out on TV screens everywhere. The makers were looking to form one girl band, one boy band, with a diverse range of members from across the world. Successful applicants had to speak English; they had to not only be accomplished dancers, but singers too. Auditions were held in Seoul, Sydney, London, Paris, New York and Los Angeles. (Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East were up in arms.) The finals took place in Los Angeles.

The whispers started the day Aidan was chosen as a member of a newly formed group known as Rebel Heart. Having celebrated his success in the audience after the live final, I flew back to England from Los Angeles with my parents, Rohan and Jo-Jo. In the baggage hall at Heathrow Airport, standing near two teenaged girls, I heard one of them whisper 'That's Aidan's sister!', then snigger. Later that same day, when I was buying supplies in the supermarket, a young girl ran over to her mother at the end of the aisle, shouting, 'Mummy, I just saw Aidan's sister!'

It went on. And on, and on. People saw the significant resemblance and felt the need to instantly point it out. I got used to the whispers.

I round the corner to the front of the hotel. Barricades

have been put up on the pavement, ensuring the entrance to the Marriott Marquis is kept clear. Excitable, screaming teen-aged girls are everywhere, holding up placards dedicated to Rebel Heart. I find it funny they're out here, in the freezing cold, probably oblivious to the fact that Cal, J.B. and Ravi have all already left for a few days, and that only my brother and Danny Miller remain. And I know for a fact my brother wouldn't even look at another girl, not whilst Lexi Hart is in his life.

I keep my head down whilst I move towards the entrance. Suddenly the screams rise to a crescendo and I know I've been recognised. I can just about make out, 'It's Aidan's sister! It's Aidan's sister!' amongst the shrieking. I grimace, keep my head down and give a nonchalant wave, walking through to the revolving door and into the lobby. I offer the security guard a wobbly smile, flashing my keycard and make a beeline for the lifts.

Inside my hotel room, I collapse on the bed, face down, burying my face into fluffy pillows. Double-glazed windows block out much of the traffic noise and the screaming outside the lobby below. I roll on my back and let out a gruff sigh. Reaching out, I locate my Magic 8 Ball.

'Magic 8 Ball,' I say, giving it a shake, 'is Miller going to be able to show me these routines in time?'

I sit up and look to the panel, awaiting the appearance of a reply. *OUTLOOK NOT SO GOOD*, it says, and my chin drops to my chest.

I'm yawning when Aidan sends through his room number. I'm tempted to make up an excuse not to join them for dinner, and instead go to bed. Showering and throwing on a clean set of clothes – a cream, sheer top and jeans belonging to Jo-Jo – I take the lifts up to the top floor.

‘Well, it’s a little bigger than my room,’ I say, smiling at Aidan as he opens the door for me. I meander into his superior king-sized suite with an incredible view over Times Square.

He’s wearing slouchy jeans and a white T-shirt. ‘Wanna swap?’ he asks, pushing his dark hair from his eyes as he closes the door behind us.

‘Like you’d slum it down on my floor. Sweet view. Where’s Lexi?’

‘On the phone. She’ll be out in a sec. How’d it go with Miller?’

‘I can declare with absolute certainty that I still hate him.’

Aidan snorts. ‘Did he teach you anything? Anything at all?’

‘Your opening number. I don’t think he enjoyed me calling him an asshole though, quite as many times as I did.’

A smile dances on Aidan’s lips. ‘He’s used to dance partners throwing themselves at him. He won’t know how to handle you. ’Bout time somebody put him in his place.’

‘Can we stop talking about Miller? You’ll put me off my food. What’s for dinner?’

‘Lexi’s favourite.’

‘Uh... Chinese?’

‘UberEats. We went sushi and noodles, is that alright?’

‘Sounds good, though I had a burger about an hour ago with Miller.’

‘Romantic dinner for two?’

‘Hardly. More like arguing over fast food on the studio floor.’

Lexi appears from the bedroom. Behind her, I glimpse the sheets on the bed, in a crumpled, disorderly pile, and I suspect I know how Lexi and my brother spent their afternoon whilst I was learning dance routines from Miller. Though

when I look at Lexi's face, something tells me she's perturbed.

'Hello, my lovely,' she says holding her arms out to me for a hug. I allow myself to be folded into her warm embrace. 'How'd it go with Danny?'

Once she's hugged me, she wraps her arms around Aidan, and the kiss he gives her definitely isn't meant to have witnesses. I wrinkle my nose and remind myself that I'm all alone in this situation, and how much I would like to find a loving, supportive relationship like theirs.

'You do know you're literally the only person left in the world who calls him Danny?'

Lexi laughs. 'He has abandonment issues. He sees me as a mother figure.'

'That's just weird. And slightly gross, given that you're his best friend's girlfriend.'

'Lexi worries about him,' Aidan says with a smirk. 'He's like her little pet project. And I'd hardly call him my best friend right now.'

'What?' Lexi sighs, throwing up her hands. 'I just think behind all those brawny muscles and tattoos is a little boy who only wants to be loved.'

'Or, how about this?' I cut in. 'He was born a dickhead. He will always *be* a dickhead.'

The food arrives and Aidan goes to the door.

'How's everything going?' I ask Lexi, as we settle into the sofas.

She checks over her shoulder to see Aidan's not within earshot, curling her feet under her. The smile she gives me tells me she's content. 'Perfect. Better than perfect. Except I just got offered a job,' she whispers.

'That's great.' I smile back. 'Isn't it?'

She grimaces. 'If I take it, it would mean I have to spend

seven weeks in China and Vietnam. And I'd not be able to visit Aidan whilst he's on tour. They offered it to me just now.'

'Oh.' I raise my brow. 'I take it you haven't said anything?'

Once more, she checks Aidan's position then shakes her head.

'Will you take it?' I ask.

'I don't know,' she sighs. 'It's a great job opportunity, but—'

Aidan's voice comes through, talking to the hotel porter who's delivered our food.

'I've been thinking a lot lately...' she continues, 'about the future.'

My eyebrows are still raised. She looks a little mischievous. 'I'm thirty-one. I don't want to leave it too late. I'm thinking... you know... I'd maybe like to try and start a family.'

The words are barely above a whisper. I can't help but break out into a grin at the thought of becoming an aunty again. 'I take it you haven't talked about this with Aidan either?'

Lexi bites her lip, shakes her head. She clearly doesn't want him overhearing. 'Oh God, no. He's too young. Right? Right. He's twenty-six. He's at the height of his career. I can't tie him down like that.'

'Lex, Aidan worships the ground you walk on. You could tell him you wanted a field of cows and he would build you a dairy farm. And hello? J.B. has a child. He was twenty-two.'

'I know. And I see how hard it is for Audrey. J.B. is always away from them.'

'Talk to Aidan,' I urge her, but I don't get a response because Aidan's shut the door and is bringing the bags of food over to the table.

My belly full of delicious sushi, sashimi, gyoza and Asahi beer, I lie back in the chair, noting that Lexi's curled into Aidan in the sofa opposite. His fingers stroke her hair as we watch the TV. I love how at peace they are with one another. I yawn, feeling like I've been awake forever.

'Tell me about the other dancers,' I say to Aidan. 'Are they nice?'

Lexi stifles a laugh. Aidan screws up his face and grits his teeth.

'They're not even nice?'

'Nikita dances with Aidan,' Lexi says. 'I can happily confirm that she is not the least bit into him. Though I don't think she's into anyone. She keeps herself to herself.'

'And the others?'

'Carmen's okay,' Aidan says. 'She's got a boyfriend. Jahtoya's got a girlfriend, so no issues there, and Darcey... She's...'

He looks to Lexi. Lexi raises her eyebrows, her lips puckered. 'Dangerous,' she finishes for him.

'Dangerous?' I question.

Lexi and Aidan exchange looks. Aidey places one hand on her cheek, then draws her in for a kiss.

'She turned up at Aidan's door one night around eleven-thirty,' Lexi tells me as she pulls away. 'Half-dressed and proceeding to try and flirt her way inside.'

'You're serious?'

'I wasn't around at the time, obviously,' Lexi adds.

Aidan's grinning. 'She didn't stand a chance. I quickly got her out and shut the door in her face.'

'I should hope so too,' I say. 'Who does she dance with?'

Aidan says, 'Cal.'

'You think she's trying to sleep with him too? But Cal's with Bianca, right?'

'Right, right. He's totally loved-up. He would never.'

The story of how Caleb Whitlock got together with Bianca Lawson is well-publicised in the press. A Bogan from Bondi met a New York princess. With some misunderstandings and Twitter drama along the way. It just took Lexi's documentary to bring them together.

'But...?' I venture.

Aidan looks to Lexi. Lexi rolls her eyes. 'Darcey's pretty hot,' Aidan says to me. 'I keep telling Lex she's got nothing to worry about.'

Lexi looks to me, Aidan taking her fingers and giving them a squeeze. 'I'd say she's determined,' she says warily.

Aidan leans closer to her, sliding one hand around the back of her head. 'And I'm very taken,' he says, 'and always will be.'

He leans in and kisses her again, Lexi kissing him back. My eyes go to the TV out of awkwardness, despite being ultra happy for them.

'Maybe I was a bit harsh on Miller today,' I muse.

Aidan lets Lexi go. They look into one another's eyes for a brief moment before he snorts again. 'Sometimes it's the only way to get through to him.'

'Is he staying on this floor?'

'Other end of the corridor, last one on the right,' Aidan says. 'He and Garrett will be drunk or high by now.'

'Who's Garrett?'

'His brother. Hangs around like a leech.'

I'm surprised to hear it. 'Miller's brother is here? In New York?'

Aidan shrugs. 'He comes and goes. But when Miller's

around him, it's like he reverts to type, you know? You think he's a dickhead now, wait till you see him around his brother.'

'Why, what's he like? The brother.'

'Arrogant waste of space.'

'Oh, come on,' Lexi interjects. 'Just because they didn't have a perfect upbringing like you two did. Garrett brought Miller up on his own, and he was practically a child himself. Miller looks out for *him* now.'

'Yes, but he feeds off Miller's success,' Aidey argues.

I yawn again. Getting to my feet, I stretch my hands up to the ceiling. 'I'm done. I feel like I've been up forever. How are you not exhausted, Lex?'

A smile dances on Lexi's lips as Aidan grins at her. 'Aidan and I took little a nap this afternoon.'

I grimace. I'm sure that's not all they did. 'Forget I asked.'

'What's the plan with Miller tomorrow?' Aidey asks.

'Meeting him at the studio early doors. I'd better get some sleep.'

I bid them goodnight. Outside Aidan's room, I toy with the idea of knocking on Miller's door.

I wander down the corridor of the hotel, finding myself passing the lifts and carrying on walking all the way to the end. At the last door on the right, I pause and listen out for sounds that Miller is in his suite. Without thinking, when I hear voices, I reach out and rap hard on the surface.

The voices stop immediately.

'Who the hell is it?' I hear a gruff voice say.

'Check the spy hole,' Miller's voice says, and instinctively I reach up and cover the outside of the hole with my thumb.

'Can't see shit,' the gruff voice says on the other side of the door.

‘Call security,’ a female voice says and I bristle. I wasn’t expecting Miller to have female company.

I remove my thumb just as the door is opened, and I’m bathed in light from inside the suite. Miller stands in the doorway with his coat on.

‘Might’ve known you’d show up,’ he says tersely when he sees me. ‘What do you want now, McArthur?’

My gaze goes past him, to the other two people in the room. One must be Miller’s older brother, Garrett, because I can definitely see the resemblance. That said, his brother’s appearance is grey and haggard, as though he’s taken too many drugs in his time, rendering him not quite as good-looking as his famous younger brother. His brown hair is slicked back, but he has Miller’s same jawline. The girl I recognise from the studio, when we were introduced: Darcey, the dancer Lexi described to me as ‘dangerous’. She’s wearing a lot of make-up. She has bee-sting lips, a straight nose, high cheekbones, her hair pulled back into a tight, high bun. There’s a certain allure to her, I’ll give Aidan that. All three are dressed to go outside, in warm coats, Darcey in thigh-high stockings, a miniskirt and a pair of chunky wedged trainers. Miller’s hair is still electric blue and is styled into a short mohawk, the look of indifference on his face telling me he doesn’t wish to see me any more than he has to. He’s chewing gum but I can smell the stench of smoke emanating from him.

‘I came to clear the air,’ I manage, though I’m irritated by how lame that sounds. ‘Thought we could start again.’

‘Fine.’ Miller shrugs, then he’s coughing again. When he recovers, his voice is strained. ‘Consider it clear,’ he says and looks to the others. ‘Let’s bounce. Bodhi’s downstairs.’

‘Are you going somewhere?’ I ask after Miller has pushed past me, my voice sounding ridiculously English.

‘A club.’ Darcey smirks. ‘Wanna come?’

‘I haven’t slept since I got here,’ I tell her. ‘I’ve been awake more than twenty-four hours. I should probably get some sleep.’

She looks me up and down, gives me an exaggerated shrug. ‘Next time,’ she hums.

Garrett shuts the door, leaving me standing like a lemon in the corridor as they walk towards the lifts.

‘Like, seriously, it’s weird how she looks *so* much like Aidan’s sister,’ I hear Darcey say to Miller on their way out.

Chapter Seven

I'm awake by six a.m. I make coffee in my room and send some text messages to my family. Following the fire at the studio, my father now has a crime number from the police to pass on to the insurance company. I put my Magic 8 Ball out of sight – so I'm not tempted to ask it any more questions – shower, then get changed into my gym kit, which, due to the fire, belongs to Lexi, but we're of a similar-ish size.

By seven, I'm down in the hotel fitness suite. I've been on the treadmill for fifteen minutes when I look up to find Miller entering, flanked by a member of Rebel Heart's security team. I watch in the wall-length mirror as a hotel guest does a double-take in Miller's direction. Miller keeps his head down, as though trying to keep a low profile. He avoids looking my way. After some stretches, he heads for the weights, wearing a pair of shorts and a vest that emphasises his impressive physique.

He's doing bicep curls with an eighteen-kilo dumbbell when I meander over to him, first checking with the security guard that I can make an approach. I don't know why I feel the need to, but that last thing I want is to be wrestled to the ground in public if the guy thinks I'm an over-eager fan.

‘Good morning,’ I say breezily, hands behind my back, my face and neck covered in sweat. ‘How did you sleep?’

Miller doesn’t look my way, controlling his breathing. Sweat already dapples his brow. My gaze is drawn to his eyebrow piercing, then down along the tattoos that cover his right arm. I’ve never had the chance to look at them in detail. The largest is of a phoenix, which I presume is something to do with the fact that Miller originally hails from Arizona. His hair is still Smurf blue, back to being an immaculate mess.

‘McArthur, you’re tripping if you think I’m gonna make conversation with you before eight a.m.,’ he says, his voice especially gravelly. He doesn’t look healthy, let alone sound it.

He looks up at me and I’m surprised to see bloodshot eyes.

‘You look exhausted,’ I say. ‘Did you even make it to bed?’

‘That’s none of your business.’

‘It is when you’re supposed to be teaching me routines all day, and right now you look like you’ll be dead by ten o’clock.’

The look he gives me is practically homicidal. I let out a heavy sigh, which he’s meant to hear, before going over to the exercise bike and watching him carefully in the mirror.

I suppose Miller’s always been the outsider. He didn’t make it into Rebel Heart on the first go. When the reality show ended, the judges had assembled, along with a public vote, a six-piece band, until one member dropped out because he couldn’t gel with the others, and a Korean member left because of homesickness. Miller was one of the last remaining contestants in the final who didn’t make it through, though he always got plenty of votes from viewers. I remember his dance moves being – of course – off the hook, but vocally he

couldn't quite match up to some of the others. There were worries, I'd heard, that he wouldn't gel with the others either, but Aidey had formed a bond with him during rehearsals and was the one to push for Miller to become a permanent member. It worries me now that Aidan no longer has Miller's back, though, frankly, looking at him now, all jaded and worn from his night on the town, I don't find that surprising. However much Lexi tries to make excuses for him, Miller still needs to get his act together.

Twenty minutes later, my workout over, I wipe my face on a towel. Miller is still lifting weights. He doesn't acknowledge my presence, so I leave without saying goodbye.

In the studio, at nine-thirty, Miller is still a no-show. I grit my teeth, rocking back on my heels, hands on my hips whilst I decide what to do. I call Aidan but he doesn't pick up. Leaving him a voicemail, I head back downstairs, out onto the street and back into the hotel, where, on the eighth floor in the atrium lobby, I find Bodhi sipping a coffee.

'Hey, Bode, have you seen Miller?' I ask.

He shakes his head, then checks his phone. 'I got no messages. He supposed to be up?'

'Something like that. Can I take your number? I may need to call you in a sec. Can you give me Miller's number too?'

Numbers exchanged, I head for the lifts, heading straight to Miller's room.

On arrival, I'm impatient, rapping my knuckles hard on the door. 'Miller!' I say loudly, knocking hard for a second time. 'Miller, what the hell? Open up.'

I press my ear to the surface of the door, wondering if

I've missed him and he's already at the studio. Scrolling through my limited list of contacts, I punch his name on the screen with my thumb. A moment later, my ear back up against the door, I can hear the distant sound of his ringtone on the inside.

When the phone rings out, I hammer on his door. I try his number for a second time. Finally, I hear a gruff voice answer.

'Hello?' it says, thick with sleep.

'Miller, it's me,' I snap. 'Open your door. You were supposed to meet me forty minutes ago.'

There's a rustling. 'Shit,' he mutters.

It's some time before he opens the door. He leaves me in the corridor and walks away, back into the suite, before I can confront him. I march inside behind him, realising he's still in his gym gear from earlier.

'Miller, what the hell?' I manage, before my nose wrinkles and I realise the suite is hazy. 'Is that weed I can smell?'

I look up to find the smoke detectors all have socks pulled over them. Miller yanks off his vest and opens the sliding double doors leading out to a balcony, letting in a blast of wintry New York air. The sound of the traffic floats up from below.

'I gotta get showered,' he croaks and then breaks out into a coughing fit, like the kind that produces a lot of disgusting mucus.

I wince. 'You need a doctor,' I say.

He ignores me. I cross one arm across my middle and cradle my forehead. 'This is a disaster. How are you going to get through a day like this, let alone the morning?'

'Quit your whining, McArthur, I'll only be a sec.'

'What time did you go to bed?'

He's walking backwards away from me, a smirk on his face. 'I didn't. Not really.'

‘What the hell is wrong with you?’ I shout after him. ‘We have three days left to learn these routines. *Three.*’

‘I know them already,’ is his rebuttal.

I go towards the bedroom, which is still in darkness. I linger beside the door, losing him for a moment before he walks past me, naked as the day he was born.

‘Oh, Jesus Christ, Miller!’ I snap, my hand flying to my eyes, but when I remove it, I catch a view of his naked backside as he stalks towards the bathroom. For a moment, the sight of him stops me in my tracks. It would seem such a cruel waste: the nicest arse on such an incredibly irritating person.

I hear the shower switch on and snap back to reality.

‘... And chest pop, two three, and bend and dip and up and up and hold—’

In the studio, we’re both out of breath. I feel strung out, like an elastic band that’s been pulled one too many times. I’ve had to bend at the waist, dip back as far as I can go, then snap back up again to a standing position, all the while with Miller’s arm around my waist as my legs straddle his right thigh, which is firmer than I imagined it would be. My hands cradle each side of Miller’s face, my crotch pressed into his hip, and it’s awkward as hell. I realise now why it wouldn’t be appropriate for me to be my brother’s dance partner. Close up, Miller’s eyes are less bloodshot, and the shower has definitely helped. He’s still coughing a good deal.

‘So, there’s a gap in the music here,’ Miller says, his face too close to mine, as in, within kissing distance, much to my abject disgust. ‘Then you’ll hear the drumbeat. When that kicks in, slide your hands down my face to my neck, then all the way down my chest to my belly button.’

Dance With Me

I do as instructed, and ignore the fact that, underneath his white T-shirt, Miller's chest is solid as rock.

'Then what?' I ask.

'Spin out; I'll pull you right back in. As in, spin out from your waist and I'll grab your hand and bring you back to me.'

I push off from his torso, spinning out, at which point I feel Miller's fingers grab my left hand, spinning me back with too much force, so that when I land, his nose collides with my forehead. Miller curses, letting me go, the pair of us stumbling back, clutching our faces.

'Ow! What the hell, McArthur?'

I wince, rubbing my skin. 'That was your fault! You yanked me too hard!'

'It's called counterbalance, you're supposed to provide a little resistance and maintain control, not let yourself go all limp. I thought you were supposed to be an instructor!'

'I teach children, you moron!'

Miller pinches the bridge of his nose, tilting his head back as though he has a nosebleed, which I know he definitely does not. 'You keep the frame,' he states. 'Always maintain your frame! This is basic shit. What kind of dance are you teaching to little kids?'

I shake my head at him but I don't have a response.

Perhaps he's right. Maybe I'm not cut out for this. Maybe it's been too long since I was a performer.

'It won't happen again. Let's just move on to the next bit,' I say limply.

He shakes his head, like he's had enough already, and we've only been going for an hour.

'Take five, alright?' he sighs, going over to his bottle of water. 'I gotta make a phone call.'

'Fine,' I breathe.

‘As in go find something to do for five minutes, McArthur. Leave the room. Take a bathroom break.’

‘Fine!’

I turn on my heel, heading out of the door for the bathroom. Inside, staring at my reflection in the mirror, I can’t quite believe this is happening. My academy burned down, and now I have to take orders from my brother’s bandmate and my least favourite member of Rebel Heart.

When I walk back into the studio, Miller is sitting down with his back against the mirrored wall, his elbow resting on his bent knee. He looks relaxed, almost pleased with himself.

‘I’m sorry about before,’ I say. ‘Is your nose alright?’

‘I’ll live.’

I press my palms together. ‘So... what’s next?’

‘I drafted in a recruit.’

‘You what?’

‘You said it yourself, McArthur. We’ve got two and a half more days to nail this thing. So we’re gonna need a little extra help to get you over the line.’

‘What extra help?’

‘To help me demonstrate.’

‘Miller, will you please just explain?’

‘Darcey. Darcey is coming over here now to show you how it’s done.’

I stiffen. This is ‘Dangerous Darcey’ we’re talking about. Cal’s flirtatious dance partner for the tour.

‘Aren’t we supposed to be avoiding having you make any other dancers leave?’

‘I checked with her; she’s cool with it.’

‘Cool with what? Not leaving if you decide to sleep with her?’

‘It’s not like that.’

‘Oh, I’m sure your relationship is suitably platonic.’

‘Look, Darcey’s not gonna bail on the tour. She’s stellar. And she can show you all the moves.’

‘You’re sure about that, Miller? You must be a real heart-breaker.’

‘Would you give that shit a rest?’

‘You’re the whole reason I got dragged here in the first place!’

‘And no one is stopping you from leaving. If Aidan had asked me in the first place, you’d still be sitting in the shell of your burned down dance studio, wondering how the fuck you’re gonna put your life back together.’

Tears sting my eyes. Miller shakes his head, like he knows he’s gone too far. ‘Sorry,’ he mumbles, exasperated, raking his fingers through Smurf-blue hair. ‘You keep pressing all my buttons.’

I turn away from him. I want to cry. I want to call Aidan and quit, but I know where it would leave them. The tour starts in less than a week.

‘You are an exemplary example of the worst kind of human being who ever existed on the planet, you know that?’ I manage, and swallow my tears, my voice strangled in my throat.

‘Yeah, so you keep reminding me,’ he grumbles as he gets to his feet.

At that moment, the door opens and Darcey strides in, chewing on a piece of gum.

‘Wow,’ she says, stopping and unzipping her top, to reveal a halter-neck bra underneath, her entire bare midriff on show. I wonder if she showed up at Aidan’s door looking like that. ‘Feels frosty in here.’

‘Hey.’ Miller lifts his chin in her direction. ‘Thanks for coming over.’

She shrugs, her eyes taking me in, yet she talks like I'm not even in the room. 'Didn't have anywhere else to be right now. How's she doing?'

'Need someone to help me demonstrate.'

'Where'd you get up to?'

'Start of "Lovesick".'

Darcey removes her zipped top completely and drops it beside the mirror. I watch Miller watching her. She carries out a few rudimentary stretches, pulling one ankle up behind her bended knee and repeating the process before bending at the waist and dropping her palms flat to the floor.

'You practising with the setlist?' she asks.

'On and off.'

Darcey lets out a whistle. I've never felt so small. She walks over to me, pinching my waist. 'Come on, sugar.' She winks at me, as though trying to make me feel better. 'I'll show you how it's done.'

In all honesty, having Darcey in the room makes everything so much easier. She shows me the moves with Miller, and I replicate them with him. Then we dance the entire sequence with the backing track. Watching her dance with Miller, the way their bodies work in such synchronicity, makes me wonder why Darcey wasn't placed with him from the outset of rehearsals. It makes me wonder if they've slept together already; they're not afraid to dance intimately with one another, about which I'm reminded whenever I repeat the moves with Miller himself.

'Don't be afraid to get close to him,' Darcey says, as we pause and she repositions my hands closer into his jaw, her hand guiding my bottom gently forward until I feel Miller's

hard thigh muscle pressing up into my most intimate parts. ‘Cal calls it dirty dancing without the intent.’

Miller chuckles.

‘And how does Bianca feel about that?’ I ask.

‘I tone it down when she comes to watch, obviously.’

‘And what happens when she comes to watch the tour?’

‘She knows it’s all for show.’

Darcey steps away from us. From what Lexi’s told me, I imagine she’d prefer it wasn’t all for show, and that the Australian showed some interest in her. I shift my hips, causing an unexpected burst of friction between my thighs when I rub up against Miller’s leg. When I glance up, Miller’s gaze is locked right into mine and I have to look away. I continue the move as my hands slide down his neck to his chest, south of his belly button. Miller doesn’t shift his gaze, and for a second it almost feels as if I’m getting turned on. Miller spins me out. Then he grabs my hand, yanking me back, and I keep perfect control, landing back in his powerful grasp, my out-turned palm flat against his chest, one knee drawn up against his torso. He goes to kiss me, as per the move, and I back away, performing an exaggerated flick of my hair.

Darcey claps her hands. ‘Alright! Nailed it!’

‘Thank you,’ I say to her, exhaling, relieved. ‘What’s next?’

The next track on the setlist is “Last Night”, a more recent tune which spent eleven weeks in the Billboard Top 10 and was the number one download in more than twenty European countries. It came out whilst Aidan had split with Lexi and he despises singing it, because, as he says, it reminds him of how miserable he was without her. It has a futuristic sound; Darcey

shows me all the moves with Miller, and I still can't get over how good they look as partners.

'The boys do a flip here,' Darcey instructs. 'You do a single spin. Be sure to give him room, so position yourself well back, or else his feet will land in your face.'

'Right.' I nod, watching Miller as he goes from standing into the most perfect backflip, landing on two feet. He does it again with Darcey spinning neatly on the ball of her foot. I practise the move a number of times, trying to watch for Miller so as to give him enough room. On our last attempt, his feet miss my face by a whisker.

'See what I mean?' Darcey says.

I nod in understanding, but my brain is feeling bombarded with instructions. 'Then what?' I ask.

'Girls move to the rear of the stage, then we exit for the rest of the number.'

'Can we take a water break?' I ask, verging on fed up, out of breath, and Miller nods, bending over to grip his knees whilst he coughs his guts up.

'You should stop smoking,' I tell him.

'And you should stop *talking*,' he shoots back, and wipes the sweat from his brow. 'Specifically, to me.'

I roll my eyes, going to fetch my water bottle. 'Every time I think we're getting somewhere, you go and ruin it.'

Miller rolls his eyes. 'Whatever, *Mom*,' he snarks back, causing me to march out in fury, my high ponytail swinging behind me.

Ugh, and he has the gall to refer to me as a *mother*, just because I point out the bleeding obvious. Walking down the corridor to find the nearest water dispenser, I fill my bottle, then chug half the contents. I don't know exactly what it is that irritates me so much about him, only that I'd much rather

be dancing with one of the other boys, more particularly J.B. I toy with the idea of asking Darcey to switch partners, because I know for a fact that Cal would dance with me, if asked. Especially as she seems so in sync with Miller.

When I get back to the door to the studio, I pause, and glance through the crack in the door. Miller is where I left him. Darcey has her back to me. Miller's hands are cupping her behind, his head tilted in one direction, their lips locked together. My heart sinks, because despite what Miller might think I'm not an idiot. I know what this means. And, more often than not, I have a habit of saying what I think, before my brain catches up and I consider whether it's a sensible idea to open my mouth and give my opinion on any given subject (which I usually do).

I kick the door open. Darcey jumps back. Miller raises his head.

'Miller!' I shout impatiently. 'Do you honestly think that's a good idea right now?'

'It's none of your goddamned business.'

I ignore him and look to Darcey. 'I would strongly advise against doing what you're doing.'

Her eyes narrow. 'We haven't done anything wrong.'

'The tour cannot afford to lose you.'

'Since when did you transform into Ziggy?' Miller snaps. 'Or, worse, turn into your brother's mouthpiece?'

I'll admit I may sound a little schoolmarmish, my hands on my hips as I scold him. 'Oh, Aidan will be hearing all about this. Just when I thought it was impossible you could sink any lower.'

'What the fuck?' Miller snaps. 'You don't know a single thing about me.'

'I know *I'm* the one bailing you out!'

‘Oh, thank you, McArthur. Your shitty dance moves are doing me a huge favour, for sure.’

‘You couldn’t do it, could you? Spend a few days teaching me the steps, without finding the nearest female so you could stick your tongue down her throat. Did you not get the memo, Miller? This tour is on the verge of collapse because of you.’

Darcey looks awkward. Miller hooks his thumbs into his belt loops, shaking his head and pushing his tongue into his cheek. ‘I’ve *had it* with you,’ he breathes.

I cross my arms over my chest. ‘Nobody said you had to like me, Miller. You just have to teach me.’

He’s massaging his forehead. ‘You know what? No, I don’t. I didn’t choose this gig, no matter what you, your brother, Ziggy, or anyone else might think. So, I quit. You and I, McArthur, we’re through. You wanna learn the moves? Get your twin to show you. Because I am *done*.’

He’s walked over to the mirror and swiped up his top. He heads for the door, looking to Darcey as he goes. ‘You comin’?’ he asks her.

He waits as Darcey grabs her stuff. Then he takes her by the hand, and together they leave the studio. I’m left alone in complete silence.

It’s a few moments before I walk over to the mirror, bending to locate my phone in the pocket of my hoodie.

Aidan answers on the third ring. ‘Hey. How’s it all going?’

I turn around slowly, looking in horror at the spot where, until moments ago, Miller and Darcey once stood, and I realise that I may have royally screwed up.

‘Uhm,’ I say, into the handset, ‘we may have a problem.’

Chapter Eight

The day final rehearsals are due to start, Lexi knocks on my door.

‘I need to get out of this hotel,’ she says with a grimace. ‘Can we please go for a walk?’

We leave via a back entrance, avoiding the crowds in Times Square, and walk north up Eighth Avenue towards Columbus Circle. It’s one of the less interesting roads in Manhattan, surrounded by grey office-like buildings on both sides, but as a result it’s half empty.

‘Miller’s left the group,’ Lexi tells me and I stop in my tracks on the pavement, my breath emerging as vapour.

‘No, no, not the band, sorry,’ Lexi corrects herself. ‘He’s left the group *chat*. On WhatsApp.’

I grip my chest. ‘Christ, for a moment there I thought you meant he’d left the band. Why’d he leave the chat? What happened?’

‘This morning, Aidan was giving him shit about not putting in the work. About him having to teach you all the dance moves instead of Miller. The others piled in and the next thing we know, it says *Miller left*.’

‘So? Someone should just add him back on.’

‘That’s the thing. Nobody has. Feels like nobody wants to. They’re all frustrated with him.’

I cock my head to one side. ‘You seem bothered by this.’

‘I’m worried about what it means for Miller.’

Aidan spent the last two and half days with me in the studio, teaching me everything that Miller hadn’t. We’d gone over everything, until I felt confident that I could do all the steps in order. Lexi sat watching us patiently, missing out quality time spent with the boyfriend who she rarely sees, and we put in two fourteen-hour days. Miller hasn’t replied to a single message anyone’s sent him, including me, and now that he’s left the group chat, he’s made it clear that he doesn’t want to. He’s even been inactive on social media too, which, for Miller, is wholly out of character.

‘Aidan doesn’t even know if Miller will show up today,’ Lexi says as we cross at another junction, ‘for final rehearsals.’

‘Has he talked about what happens if Miller doesn’t show up?’

Lexi lets out a sigh and shakes her head. ‘We didn’t discuss it.’

‘You think Aidan’s worried he’ll leave the band?’

We stop at a local café and pick up two takeaway coffees. Lexi warms her fingers on her polystyrene cup and we begin walking in a loop back to the hotel.

‘It sounds a stupid thing, but a year ago, the group chat was just Rebel Heart members. Just the five of them, not even Ziggy. Then, when Cal got together with Bianca, he added her to the group, without asking the others. Nobody was that bothered, except Miller. He felt as though Cal had crossed a line, especially because he hadn’t consulted anyone. So, then, as a result, J.B. added Audrey and later, last summer, Aidan added me and Ravi added Tun.’

I give a shrug before I shiver, realising how cold it is out here. ‘It’s just a group chat. Rebel Heart and partners.’

‘Except Miller’s the only one without a partner. It shouldn’t even matter, but I get the feeling Miller felt left out. Just like with the “Fallen” video.’

‘Fallen’ was one of the band’s first ballads, released before Christmas, another song written largely by Aidan about Lexi. It reached number one in a record number of countries around the world. As a filmmaker, Lexi directed the video last autumn, on a frigid Norfolk beach, and it featured each one of the band’s respective partners. Miller had been the exception, because he’d been the only one without a partner at the time, and he’d appeared in the video as a lone figure. I’m reminded that he was the butt of the jokes back then, too, with Cal saying that Miller should have brought an inflatable dummy along to the shoot as a stand-in girlfriend. Needless to say, the suggestion hadn’t gone down well.

I hook my arm through Lexi’s, trying to offer her some reassurance. Her own fractured family situation has made her more sensitive to Miller’s turbulent family background. ‘I know you’re trying to look out for Miller, but he’s a big boy, Lex, he can look after himself. If he wanted a girlfriend so badly, he could get one. He’s always telling me about his millions of followers on Instagram. He’s not your responsibility, you don’t have to play peacemaker. He’ll turn up today, if he knows what’s good for him.’

‘Aidan thinks it’s more than that,’ she sighs. ‘When they split for the first time, Miller was the one closest to cutting a solo deal. The record company were really keen on him, given his social media following. But then Rebel Heart got back together and it didn’t go anywhere. Aidan thinks that Garrett is trying to talk Miller into leaving the band for good. That

there's more money to be made away from Rebel Heart and that he could get away from the boy band image and rebrand himself.'

I frown. I think about the slightly dishevelled Garrett Miller, and whether he would have that much sway with his famous younger brother. 'You really think Garrett's talking to him about that stuff?'

'I don't know. But Miller leaving the group chat... Aidan thinks is a sign that he might be ready to leave in real life.'

I sip my coffee. 'Do you think he'll turn up for the rehearsal?'

Lexi pulls a face, as though she wants to help Miller, and she doesn't like things being out of her control. 'Your guess is as good as mine.'

The first person I see when I enter the busy studio is J.B.: Jean-Baptiste Peltier. A Frenchman with a Moroccan mother, his skin is a beautiful shade of caramel, his head closely shaved, with high cheekbones and the contemporary look of a male model meets an international footballer. Like Aidey, he's tall, and for years now I've said that of all Rebel Heart members he'd be the one I'd most want to date.

He holds his arms out to me and I walk into his embrace. It might be the highlight of my year. He even smells good. He kisses both my cheeks in a French style and I beam at him whilst he greets Lexi behind me, because I always feel slightly lost for words in his presence.

'How's Audrey?' Lexi grins. 'And Xavi?'

'They're good, they're good,' J.B. responds in his deep French accent that drips from his tongue. 'I miss them already. You both good? I hear Miller bailed on you.'

‘We’re good,’ I say. ‘Aidan taught me everything.’ I check around the room. Aidan’s coming over to Lexi. There’s zero sign of Miller.

All the dancers are here, huddled together in one corner, Darcey included. Bodhi’s at the door. I greet Cal and Ravi with hugs.

When Ziggy enters with an unfamiliar woman, everyone stands to attention. He surveys the room, taking in the faces. There’s a silence as he looks to Aidan, who shakes his head. Then Ziggy looks back to Bodhi, who offers him a don’t-look-at-me-like-that shrug.

Ziggy doesn’t hide his irritation. ‘Morning all!’ he announces. ‘Gather round, please.’

We all do as we’re told, though I notice Lexi hangs back. ‘I hope you all had a nice rest and are well-recuperated, ready to start the tour. Special thanks to Paige for bailing us out and learning all the routines. From what Aidey says, she’s got it nailed.’

The boys burst into applause, the other dancers following suit a fraction later, and I feel my cheeks redden.

‘Special thanks to Aidan for teaching me,’ I say, yet no one mentions the elephant in the room, not even Cal, who’s known for his talent of commenting (sarcastically) on absolutely anything.

‘Next two days we’re gonna run through everything, start to finish,’ Ziggy continues. ‘Eloise here is on hand to check choreo. Wednesday morning press interviews start, we’ve got the *Good Morning America* performance in Times Square, Thursday dress rehearsal, then Friday night we’ll kick off at Madison Square Garden for the first show. So, if everyone’s ready, Eloise, over to you.’

There’s some activity whilst everyone gets ready,

removing layers and taking drinks of water. I watch everyone get into their respective couples, and, feeling a little awkward, I go over to Ziggy.

‘What should I do?’ I ask. ‘If Miller’s not here?’

‘I gotta make a phone call to Management, then I got to track down Miller and read him the bloody riot act. Until he’s back, maybe just sit to one side and wait.’

‘Okay.’ I nod, knotting my fingers together.

‘We really appreciate this, Paige. I know we haven’t talked about the money yet. We’re working on the visa part.’

I nod again in understanding. A part of me is disappointed not to be standing up there with the rest of the boys and all the dancers, now that I’ve perfected all the moves. I go over and sit on the floor with Lexi.

‘You were right,’ I mutter. ‘He didn’t show.’

Lexi’s look is one of concern. I hear Eloise’s raised voice. The others are in position, the music starting up.

It’s at that moment that the door opens, and Miller saunters in, in no hurry, followed by a member of Bodhi’s team. The blue hair is gone, back to a natural, darker shade of brown. He wears baggy combat trousers, paired with a black T-shirt and a metallic padded coat. I scramble to my feet, watching as Ziggy marches over to him, and the other boys come to a halt. Eloise the choreographer stops the music.

‘I’m here now, aren’t I?’ Miller is saying, removing his coat.

I exchange looks with Aidan, who I can see is both concerned and unimpressed.

‘G’day, Mill, glad you could join us, mate,’ Cal blurts from the back of the studio.

‘Sorry, I was getting dressed at your girlfriend’s apartment,’ Miller shoots back. ‘Took me a while to get a cab.’

Cal snorts, then rolls his eyes in annoyance. Ravi looks awkward.

‘Just get yourself ready,’ Ziggy snaps at Miller, who tosses his coat, before Ziggy storms from the studio.

Miller looks over at me, and I’m astonished to find him clicking his fingers in my direction.

‘Come on then, McArthur,’ he remarks. ‘Don’t leave me hanging.’

I open my mouth to object but no sound emerges. I walk over to him, to find that Aidan is also heading his way.

‘Where the hell were you?’ Aidan snaps heatedly.

Miller doesn’t flinch. ‘Garrett and I took a flight out to Phoenix.’

Aidan’s taller, so looms over him. ‘Yeah, well, while you were living it up, Lexi had to sit and watch me show Paige our entire routine for two days straight, because you couldn’t pull your finger out.’

Miller shrugs. ‘What can I say, Aidey? I knew you’d do a better job than me. Think of it as quality time with your twin.’

Aidan takes a step closer. Miller is undeterred. ‘You’re a fucking asshole sometimes,’ Aidan seethes.

‘So your sister keeps telling me.’

‘You want to be in this band, Miller, then *be* in the band. Otherwise, go. We can do this just as well without you.’

Miller says nothing, but I see a muscle pulse in his jaw. The other boys look on wordlessly. Aidan backs away, looking to Lexi before going back across the studio dance floor to Nikita.

Eloise claps her hands together. She announces that we’re going from the top. ‘Places, please!’ she shouts.

Miller goes to his spot like it’s second nature. He doesn’t even look around for me. Instead, I walk up behind him in the mirrored reflection.

‘You ready, McArthur?’ he asks.

‘No thanks to you,’ I say without one iota of sympathy for the man.

He holds out his hand. ‘You gonna show me how it’s done, or what?’

When the music starts, I feel like I can’t put a foot wrong, if only to prove to Miller that I’m a better dancer than him, and that, yes, I can learn multiple routines in a very limited amount of time, with or without his help. A small part of me wants to punish him for leaving Aidan and me in the lurch, but pride dictates that I show him I’m just as capable as he is at this, and that my being here is warranted over any other professional dancer Ziggy could have hired instead of me.

I match Miller, step for step. He doesn’t hold back with his moves, almost like he’s testing me to see if I’ll give up, and I hate him all the more for it.

‘Not bad, McArthur,’ he whispers to me during a brief pause, a little out of breath.

He’s behind me, one hand resting against my stomach, my arms to my sides, mirroring the other dancers.

‘Not bad for someone who teaches six-year-olds to bop around to Beyoncé, you mean?’ I grind out.

‘I mean it,’ is his reply. ‘Not many people could learn that much in such a short space of time. If I liked you more, I’d think about congratulating you.’

I smile at him through thin lips in the mirror. ‘You should congratulate Aidan. He’s the one who taught me eighty per cent of the routines whilst you went and smoked weed with your brother.’

We’re into the next track. I nail every move, and my chest actually swells with pride. On the third track, Miller and the

other boys launch into back flips as I spin, and we almost crash into one another.

It throws us off the beat and Miller shakes his head in annoyance. His reaction is irritating, because, quite frankly, he hasn't been here.

Eloise stops the music. 'Do we need to go through that again?' she asks, looking to the both of us.

'No,' I snap.

'Yes,' Miller says simultaneously. 'Else she's gonna end up on her ass in front of thirty thousand people.'

I exchange looks with Aidan. He's just as irritated as I am.

'If I do, Miller, it will be your fault.'

'What did I say to you?' he snaps. 'You gotta move back at the flip, gimme room.'

'I seem to recall that was right before you *left*, leaving Aidan to teach me the rest of the routines.'

He rolls his eyes. 'Let it go, McArthur. You're here to do a job, so just do it. Man, seems like you really live for whining.'

'Mill, you should be bloody thanking her!' Cal raises his voice.

'Yeah, Miller, you can't say shit like that to Paige,' Ravi echoes.

'Why the hell not?' Miller says. 'Because she's Aidey's sister? I didn't ask for her to come here. Why not ask Aidan why he's switching from so-called Unofficial Band Leader to the one making every single decision around here? Don't tell me you don't see it happening! Or maybe you just don't see it because it's behind our backs.'

All eyes go to Aidan. His expression is shrouded in shadow, his jaw clenched, his eyes levelled on Miller. The other dancers all look to the floor.

'Any of you object to Paige being here and helping us out

because Miller keeps royally fucking up?’ he says at length, in an even tone.

‘Not at all, mate,’ Cal responds drolly.

‘You did the right thing,’ J.B. adds, with a nod towards Aidan.

Ravi swallows tightly. ‘Mill, you didn’t give anyone a choice.’

Miller can’t believe it. ‘Oh, so now we’re siding with Aidan’s sister over me?’

‘Nobody’s siding with anyone,’ Ravi continues, pleading with him. ‘We’re doing what’s best for the tour.’

Miller shakes his head. He looks around the room, taking in the faces. You could hear a pin drop. I look to Lexi, who is worried.

‘I’ll give you room,’ I mutter, angry with him, not least because he doesn’t even have the courtesy to use my name. ‘I swear it.’

‘Ok, guys,’ Eloise says, clapping her hands like she’s some kind of American football coach and snapping everyone back to attention, ‘Let’s try that one again. Paige, make sure when you spin, you step right back.’

I nod frantically. Miller gets back into position, but he’s tense.

The music starts and we run through everything again. Miller doesn’t say a word, his jaw clenched shut. It’s like he’s going through the motions. The moment it’s over, he goes to fetch his coat, and walks out.

Chapter Nine

‘Are you okay?’

In Aidan’s suite, the mood hangs heavy. It’s nine p.m. and I’m almost over my jetlag. Lexi has left for London. My brother has barely said a word since her departure.

‘I’m okay,’ he murmurs.

I’d watched them say goodbye in this room, Bodhi lingering beside the door, ready to escort Lexi back to JFK. They’d already said goodbye in private, behind closed doors, but the way Aidan kissed her goodbye, and the way Lexi held onto him, told me that this was going to be torture for them, and they didn’t care who was watching.

‘Are you sure? Do you want to talk about it?’

‘It’s three months. We’ve done it before, and that was way worse. This’ll be a breeze in comparison.’

‘Plus, you can talk every day.’

On the sofa next to me, he reaches out and squeezes my knee. ‘We’re endgame. We’re gonna be fine. One day, we’ll get married and we’ll laugh about all this long-distance stuff.’

‘You planning on asking her to marry you any time soon?’ I smirk, thinking of what Lexi said about having Aidan’s babies.

He blows out his cheeks. 'I just wanna get through this tour first and come out the other side with the band still in one piece. But yes, then I'll think about it.'

'You're serious?'

'Why wouldn't I be? There's never gonna be anyone else besides Lexi. She's the one. She knows that; I know that. We've already bought a house together.'

I grin at him, melting a little on the inside. 'I hope I have what you have one day.'

'You just need the right guy to come along. Not sure you're gonna find anyone on this tour though. Sorry.'

I give a little shrug. 'Unless J.B. suddenly dumps Audrey.'

He laughs at that. 'Never gonna happen, P. Endgame, remember?'

I yawn. 'Girl can dream. Right, I might go to bed.'

I'm ambling back down the corridor leading to my room when Carmen, J.B.'s dance partner, comes out of her room and almost crashes into me. She's got a lithe dancer's figure with mounds of curly black hair, a nose ring and bright red lacquered nails. She squeals at me colliding with her, then quickly calms.

'You're Paige, right?' she blurts.

'I am.' I smile. We didn't manage to get introduced at the session earlier. 'Nice to meet you finally.'

'We're making our own cocktails in Darcey's room, wanna crash?'

Looking at the grin on her face, I'm reminded that I literally haven't had any fun since I got here. Life's been way too serious.

'Sure,' I say. 'I don't have anything to bring though.'

'Don't worry about that; we got plenty to go round!'

‘Ladies, I bought along a stray!’ Carmen says as she bounces into Darcey’s room.

Darcey looks up from the bed, where she’s painting Jahtoya’s nails. Darcey gives me the once-over. ‘She’s not a stray; she’s a McArthur, you dummy,’ she drawls.

‘So?’ Carmen shoots back.

Darcey rolls her eyes. Her hair is loose about her shoulders and she’s wearing two depuffing under-eye patches. ‘So, she’s an imposter; she’s related to the band. Anything we say will get back to her brother and the rest of ’em.’

‘Come on, that’s unfair,’ I say, lingering by the door to the bathroom, where the light is on, cosmetics spewing out of a bag beside the mirror. ‘Yes, he’s my brother, but I don’t have to tell him anything.’

‘You can stay, but you gotta pinky swear that anything we say stays within these four walls,’ Jahtoya pipes up from the bed with a pout. ‘Kay?’

I feel like we’re in school. ‘Fine, I pinky swear.’

Carmen bounds back over and we link little fingers.

‘That includes any comments we make about the band,’ Darcey adds, looking down her nose at me. ‘Or Nikita.’

‘Of course,’ I say, sounding so English. ‘Where is Nikita?’

‘In her room, proly tryna contact alien lifeforms, far as we know,’ Jahtoya says, rolling her eyes as Darcey screws the lid back on the nail varnish.

‘You two are such mean girls,’ Carmen says. ‘There’s nothing in the rules that says we all gots to get along.’

‘You want your nails doing?’ Darcey asks me.

I look down at my fingers. My nails are all chipped. I had my acrylic nails removed before the fire and now I’ve started

biting what's left. 'They're in a bit of a state,' I say, embarrassed, squeezing my fingers into two fists.

'Girl, sit your butt down,' Jahtoya says, moving out of the way. 'Carm, get our English girlfriend a drink.'

'Cocktail?' Carmen grins in my direction.

'What's on offer?' I ask.

'I make a good mai tai,' Carmen hums, and picks up an empty glass that looks like it's been stolen from the hotel bar downstairs.

'I'll have one of those then.'

I kick off my shoes and take a seat on the bed opposite Darcey. Holding out my hands, she grabs my fingers and studies my nails. 'Jeez, when was the last time you used a file on these?'

I feel myself blush. 'I've been busy doing other things!'

'Darce is a qualified nail technician, you know,' Jahtoya tells me as she fans her own nails dry. 'I mean, when she's not dancing.'

'Left school at sixteen,' Darcey tells me. 'Danced my ass off, got nowhere, so my momma told me to get a back-up career.'

Carmen hands me her homemade cocktail which I take with my free hand. 'I feel the need to make a toast,' she says. 'To say goodbye to Jenni and to welcome Paige. Next in line on the factory conveyor belt of Danny Miller's dance partners.'

The other girls all shriek outrageously as they reach for their drinks. I laugh, swallow a mouthful, then wince at the strength of the alcohol in it. 'Fucking hell. Hang on a minute,' I cough, as Carmen gives me a wink and a nudge.

'I'm just playing wit-cha,' she hums. 'Jenni, I didn't really know. Though I do miss Wren.'

‘Wren was a cutie,’ Jahtoya echoes.

‘Girl fell in love too easily,’ Darcey states plainly, moving to the next nail with her file.

‘With Miller, you mean?’ I ask Darcey.

‘Put out way too fast, too.’ Darcey clicks her tongue at the same time as shaking her head. ‘I mean, of *course* Miller gon’ take advantage.’

‘Mmm-mmm,’ Jahtoya echoes.

‘Girl followed her heart!’ Carmen argues, curling her legs under her on the bed next to me. ‘Wren had it *baaaad* for Miller.’

‘So why did she leave?’

‘Paige, don’t you know Miller never sleeps with the same female twice?’ Carmen hoots.

I give a look of disgust. ‘He doesn’t? Ugh. Why not? Once was probably enough to give them all an STD.’

‘Nah. Jeez, I hope not. Ew. But he *is* a commitment-phobe,’ Jahtoya says.

‘Got his pick of da Instagram hotties,’ Carmen adds. ‘I mean, Wren thought he was *actually* into her. Like Jenni after her, and... what-was-her-name before, Wren?’

‘Delfina!’ Darcey and Jahtoya chime in unison.

‘Delfina,’ Carmen remembers, shaking her head. ‘That was her. Poor Delfina. As dumb as the rest of ’em. Just another corpse on the battlefield of Miller’s sexual conquests.’

I grimace, then swallow the rest of my drink.

‘What about you, Paige?’ Darcey asks in a low tone, as she holds out a handful of different-coloured nail varnish bottles for me to choose from. ‘Think you’ll be offering yourself up for ritual, sexual sacrifice?’

‘As in, will I be sleeping with Miller?’ I let out a snort.

'I'd rather get hit by a car or cut off my own foot. This one.'
I'm pointing to a coral pink.

'Good choice,' Darcey says, abandoning the other bottles. 'Which member of Rebel Heart would you sleep with then? I'm not counting your brother in that group.'

'J.B.,' I confirm without question, as Carmen sucks air through her pursed lips. 'And you are so lucky,' I tell her.

'Man, I'd switch J.B. for Aidan any day of the week,' she breathes, then laughs at my mock gagging sounds. 'Sorry, sweetie. Lexi Hart must be thanking her lucky stars he got Nikita.'

'She definitely is. What about you, Darcey?' I ask, though I can already take a stab at her answer.

'Cal, one hundred per cent,' she replies. 'He's got such charisma. That girlfriend of his is such a waste of space.'

'Hey!' I say in pretend outrage, though Darcey *is* being unfair. 'Bianca is lovely.'

'She wouldn't be with him if he wasn't in Rebel Heart, and she wasn't Insta-famous. In mean, let's be truthful here. She's a snobby, rich New York princess. Just take a look at the Twitter spat. He's way too down to earth for her.'

I say nothing. Though I don't know Bianca Lawson well, I know she adores Cal, despite their initial drama that played out on Twitter.

'What about you, Jahtoya?' I ask. 'Who would you choose to sleep with?'

'None of them,' she cackles. 'They all got dicks.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry, I forgot,' I say.

'That's okay, sweetie. Darcey already chalked up one name, didn't you, Darcey?'

'*Ha ha, Toya,*' Darcey remarks drolly as she paints my nails.

‘Oh, come on, sugar, we in a safe space in here!’ Carmen hoots again, and goes to make us all another drink.

My mind goes back to the day Miller left, the sight of him kissing Darcey in the studio, and I realise they must have gone on to sleep together.

‘You slept with Miller?’ I ask her quietly.

‘Several times,’ she responds, switching to the next finger. ‘Don’t judge me.’

‘I won’t,’ I say. ‘I promise.’

She looks up and our eyes meet.

I can’t resist asking. My lips twist. ‘How was it?’

She gives a nonchalant shrug. ‘Boy’s a good kisser, I’ll give him that. And that body... I mean, it’s smokin’. But in the bedroom... let’s just say he’s more of a *wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am* type o’ dude. Takes care o’ number one, you know? Kind of had to fake my finish.’

I stifle a laugh. ‘You’re joking. You mean you faked an orgasm with *Miller*?’

‘To be fair, I don’t think he noticed.’

The way she applies varnish is neat and precise. Her hands don’t even wobble.

I grin. ‘Oh, this is too good. What else? Come on, I need to know what Danny Miller is like in bed.’

She shrugs and she lets out a slow sigh. ‘I mean... meh. Average. It was all over pretty quick. I didn’t expect miracles, you know. But for all the hype he gets on social media, I expected... I don’t know. He’s still just a guy, I guess. Why’d you get so riled up about him anyway?’

‘I’ve known him since he was seventeen. He’s always irritated me. Everything about him irritates me. For a split second, you think you might have glimpsed a sweetness underneath, but no, he’s just an arrogant prick.’

‘Well, you needn’t bother getting nasty in between the sheets with him now,’ Carmen hums, her words beginning to slur. ‘Less you wanna experience the taste of bittersweet disappointment!’

She cackles, and we all laugh. ‘Oh my God, I would *never*,’ I say. ‘But if only the internet knew that, right? I’m surprised Wren didn’t go to the press.’

‘She signed an NDA,’ Darcey states, and her eyes level on mine after she’s inspected her handiwork. ‘We all did.’

‘But I didn’t.’ I smirk, holding up my nails and blowing on them. ‘And thank you.’

‘Girl, you’s different,’ Jahtoya says. ‘You’s family to them.’

In the morning, there’s a banging on my door. It reverberates in my woolly brain. For a second, I wonder if I’ve imagined it, because there’s also a loud ringing in my ears.

It takes me a moment to come round.

I don’t remember the last time I had a hangover this bad.

I limp out of bed, hardly able to open my eyes, my mouth and throat parched. I need Jo-Jo here to bring me two paracetamol, a pint of orange juice and a bacon sandwich: stat. I don’t even know what time it is.

I check the spy hole, then wince. Tun is on the other side of the door. I was supposed to meet him at eight to go through my wardrobe for the tour.

I open the door, pressing my face to the crack, looking at him with only one eye open, suspecting I look like some kind of wild animal.

‘Oh lord,’ Tun gasps and his eyes widen. ‘What happened to you?’

‘I got run over by six mai tais.’

He grits his teeth. ‘Want me to fetch you coffee?’

I rub my forehead, opening the door wider so he can enter. I hobble back to the bed.

Tun makes me a black coffee from the machine in the room. Perched on the edge of my bed, I grunt when he hands it to me, the aroma of cheap hotel caffeine invading my nostrils. I take a sip and grimace, letting out a muffled moan.

‘Are the other girls like this?’ he asks.

‘I have no idea,’ I croak.

‘What time you get to bed?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘Would you rather I didn’t talk?’

‘You talk, I’ll listen. Tell me all the latest updates. I need a distraction from the pounding in my brain.’

Tun has the sweetest face. He’s Asian-American, and his skin always has a beautiful glow to it. He and Ravi have been a couple for some time now, having met when Tun came to work on costumes for the band. Now he gets a hand in their design too, and he gets to follow Ravi anywhere around the world. He’s also the biggest gossip I know, and always has all the intel.

‘Oh, you know,’ he says, ‘everyone’s still talking about Miller. His shitty attitude. That he’s got this ridiculous idea that Aidan’s taking over.’

‘What does Ravi think?’ I manage, trying another sip of coffee but it tastes like acid on my tongue.

‘You know Ravi. Just wants everybody happy and getting along. It’s funny, he and Miller always had this cute little relationship. Miller was the first one Ravi came out to and Miller was so supportive. But right now, Miller’s closed off. Ravi

can't figure out why and Miller won't talk about it. Do you wanna try eating something?'

I shake my head. 'Don't think I can stomach food right now.'

'Can you try some costumes on? We don't have much time.'

I nod, even if the thought of moving off this bed makes me queasy.

'Okay. You drink that. I'll be back in ten.'

I'm still nursing my coffee when Tun returns with a pile of clothing. The walls feel like they're moving as he tosses everything on the bed.

'Wren was tiny, but Delfina was more your size. Most of her outfits should fit. I can tighten things up here and there.' He looks down at my coffee, which I haven't touched. 'Should I get you water instead?'

'Water would be good, yes,' I manage.

'You gon' be alright for the dress rehearsal?'

I feel myself burp, and a little bit of sick ends up in my mouth. I grimace again, but nod my head, and by the look on Tun's face, he knows I'm lying.

I hover in the bathroom for a while to see if I can vomit, before we go through the outfits. There are six changes in total for the show, mostly baggy combat trousers paired with a black bandeau on top. Some of the outfits are stark white.

'Why don't you go back to bed?' Tun looks at me when it's time for me to go. 'I could tell Aidan you're not well.'

'I wouldn't give Miller the satisfaction,' I say, shaking my head, but as I head out of the door, I already know I'm going to struggle to make it through the day.

When I shuffle into the studio, I realise I'm not the only one with a hangover. Carmen is sat on the floor, her head between her knees. Jahtoya looks rough around the edges. Darcey, on the other hand, looks like she didn't touch a drop of alcohol.

'Trust the chicks to get plastered!' Cal hoots from the sidelines, throwing his head back and cackling. Aidan walks over to me, grinning.

'Morning, Sunshine,' he says and I grunt at him in response. 'What the hell happened? I thought you said you were going to bed.'

'I was. Carmen collared me in the corridor.'

Carmen mutters an apology from the floor.

'Are you gonna be alright? You look pale.'

I glance up as Miller enters. He ignores everyone. Aidan rolls his eyes. 'Don't let him give you any shit, okay?' Aidan says as he walks backwards towards Nikita.

Carmen struggles to her feet. She squeezes my hand. 'Sometimes I don't know when to stop,' she sighs and wanders over to J.B., who's also grinning in her direction. I watch him wrap her in an embrace, yet my skin prickles as I hear Miller's deep and sarcastic voice from behind me.

'Heavy night? You look like shit, McArthur.'

I squeeze my eyes shut. 'Please be quiet, Miller. You're not helping.'

'You stink of booze.'

'I showered. I do not.'

'You're not gonna spew, are you?'

Before I left my room, I'd asked my Magic 8 Ball if I was going to be sick during rehearsal. Its response: *IT IS DECID-EDLY SO*. 'I'll be fine,' I murmur and walk over to our start position.

Miller follows me. 'Just don't spew on me, okay?' he grumbles into my ear.

I make it to the backflip. I'm sure to move right out of Miller's way, but as I perform my turn, my stomach fails to catch up with me, and as I try to carry on, it clenches, and I end up vomiting all over Miller's shoes.

Chapter Ten

I need sleep. I can't open my eyes. Above me, I can hear laughter, the unmistakable sounds of my brother and Cal. Suddenly my head is swamped by my pillow as I'm lowered back down to my hotel room bed.

'Mate, this is hilarious,' I hear Cal snigger. 'I always thought Paige could handle her drink.'

Aidan laughs. 'She can. I mean, maybe wine and beer. I thought she was a tequila girl. I can't wait to tell Lexi all about this.'

'Did you see the look on Miller's face? When she puked all over him?'

I groan. I remember that when I was done being sick, I lifted my head and wiped my mouth. Miller had already dived backwards, the liquid contents of my stomach sprayed over the floor and over his brand-new pair of Nike basketball shoes. His jaw was clenched, his gaze nothing short of murderous.

'You are un-fucking-believable, McArthur,' was all he'd said as he looked down at me. 'That is fucking disgusting.'

'I'm so sorry,' I'd stuttered, concealing another belch. 'I think I need to sit down.'

I groan again. Above me, Aidan and Cal's silhouettes are

still laughing. The pair of them had scooped me up off the studio dance floor and brought me back here with Bodhi as an escort.

‘Paige, we’ve got to get back,’ Aidan tells me, and I’m vaguely aware that he’s placing a glass of water at my bedside. He strokes my hair. ‘Get some sleep, okay. I’ll come and check on you later.’

I moan again in response. My ability to speak has been temporarily annihilated by alcohol consumption. I want to ask what Miller will do, but I’m rendered unable.

‘You’ll be fine in a couple hours, Paigey.’ Cal raises his voice as he leaves the room. If I could feel anything other than dizziness and nausea at this precise moment, it would be mortification. But as I hear the door slip shut, my eyes close and I immediately pass out.

When I wake up, my tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth, but my headache has dissipated, and I feel vaguely close to normal. Checking my phone, I realise I’ve been asleep for around four hours. Downing the contents of the glass of water beside my bed, I send Aidan a text. *Hey. I’m still alive. Is rehearsal still going?* I ask.

Nah, is his response moments later. *Just done practising our interview for GMA. Waiting for Lexi to call me. Feel better now?*

Much, I say. *Do I apologise to Miller?*

Hell no, Aidan says. *He’s done nothing but sulk all day. I’ll catch you later. x*

Sat on the edge of my bed, my shoulders droop, a lump in my throat at the embarrassment of hurling all over Miller’s shoes in front of everyone. I want to pack up my things and head home, but I’m not in the business of leaving anyone in

the lurch, and it's not like I've got anything else to go back to. I get up and walk on unsteady legs to retrieve my Magic 8 Ball. I give it a rough shake.

'Magic 8 Ball,' I say. 'Should I apologise to Miller?'

CONCENTRATE AND ASK AGAIN, it says, and I close my eyes, giving it a second shimmy.

'Magic 8 Ball, do I tell Miller that I'm sorry?' I repeat.

When no answer appears, I hit the side of the ball, sending its verdict floating to the surface. I know what answer I'm hoping for.

WITHOUT A DOUBT, it says, drawing a muffled 'shit' from my lips in response. I need to stop asking a plastic ball for advice on my life decisions.

My hair is still wet from the shower when I make it to Miller's door. I listen first and hear music playing on the inside, so I rap hard on the surface.

A moment later, the door opens ajar. Miller's face appears, and when he sees mine, he gives an exaggerated eyeroll. I note that he's not wearing a shirt.

'What do you want, McArthur?'

I know now is not the time to be getting on my high horse, and instead, I wince. 'I came to apologise,' I state plainly, forcing the words out.

'Fine. You owe me a new pair of shoes.'

He goes to close the door but I stop it with my foot. 'Come on, Miller,' I sigh, pushing the door open when he walks away. 'If we have to be dance partners we could at least try and establish something close to an amicable relationship.'

'What a shame I don't feel the same way,' he mutters, and disappears back into his suite.

I could leave it at that, except I'm me, and I'm not entirely good at letting things lie. I don't like to leave troubles unsettled. I hear him coughing again. I enter the room and linger where I can see him. He's standing beside the table, looking at what looks like a pile of papers and photographs. For a split second I notice the curve of his back, mainly because – as seems to be the general consensus in the Rebel Heart fanbase – Miller looks good with his shirt off.

'Can we just agree to at least not make snidey comments or snap at each other?' I say, reminding myself that I'm supposed to be calling a truce.

He looks back at me. 'Did I invite you in here?'

He starts to cough again while I say, 'Sorry. What are those?'

I walk over to the table as Miller erupts into a full-on coughing fit, the sound echoing around the room. I look down at the table surface. There are some photographs in a messy pile. I home in on one slightly blurry picture of a scrawny-looking young boy in jeans and bare feet, his chest bare, hands on his hips, grinning at the camera with his front two teeth missing.

I pick up the photo and turn it over. Handwritten on the back is his full name. 'Daniel Austin Miller,' I read out loud. 'Age eight. Aww, this is you. You're so sweet.'

Miller recovers, coming over and snatching the photo back off me, then collects up all the others into a muddled pile. 'Put that down. It's none of your business, McArthur, go away,' he grumbles, and I can hear a slight wheeze from his lungs as he speaks.

'I'm just asking.' I pout in my own defence. 'You should see a doctor. That cough is getting worse.'

Miller thumps his chest with his fist. 'It's fine. Can you

just...’ He looks exasperated, rubbing the bridge of his nose. ‘Can you go now? You’re so—’

‘I’m so what?’

‘You’re like your brother. You’re controlling; you wanna have a hand in everything. You think you can *fix* everything. You poke your nose in where it’s not wanted.’

I bristle. ‘I just wanted to apologise for throwing up on you.’

‘And, as we established, apology accepted.’ He points to the door of his suite. ‘You can go now.’

I frown. ‘Why do you always have to be so thoroughly unpleasant?’

He lets out a growl of frustration. ‘This is exactly what I’m talking about! Just accept things for what they are, McArthur. I’ll dance with you, not because I want to, but because I *have* to. It’s just another fucked-up thing about this damn tour, which I don’t even wanna have to go through, by the way. So, unless we’re up there on that stage, stay out of my way, and stay out of my damn business. Alright?’

I feel tears sting the back of my eyes. I know I’ve never liked him, but I don’t remember Miller ever being this hostile or spiteful.

It’s never bothered me to know that he dislikes me quite this much.

So why does it bother me now?

Next morning, the dancers are all gathered in Jahtoya’s room, because it’s on a lower floor with a view of central Times Square. Outside it is two degrees, yet the atmosphere is buzzing. Traffic is being diverted, due to a stage that’s been erected for Rebel Heart’s performance outside the Times Square

Studios. On the TV screen, the boys are being interviewed on *Good Morning America* as a prelude to the tour kicking off on Friday. It's something they did last year when Lexi was still filming the documentary. I've heard tickets have been allocated on a ballot system. There are tourists everywhere, being funnelled down the pavements due to enormous barriers being erected around the stage.

Nikita sits in a chair opposite me, her nose in a book, not in the least bit interested in the proceedings. Jahtoya and Carmen have their faces pressed up against the window, taking in the view of the stage and the bustling crowds below. I'm sat on the bed next to Darcey, who chews gum and rests one elbow against her bent knee, her hair scraped back into a ponytail. The volume on the TV is right up and I'm holding up my handset, zoomed in on the screen.

'Why are you videoing?' Darcey draws next to me.

I pause the video. 'Because Lexi's in China and she can't watch Aidey on the TV. She asked me to send her the interview.'

'She cares that much about some dumb interview?'

'Of course she does,' I reply. 'She feels guilty she's not here for him.'

'She worried he'll stray or somethin?'

'Never. Lexi and Aidan are endgame.'

Darcey clicks her tongue, staring at the screen. I can't help but notice that she always pays more attention when Cal is speaking, her fingertips dancing across her bottom lip.

I restart the video. It's a good interview, though I'm not really listening. The boys look fresh-faced with new haircuts and stylish attire. I zoom in on Aidan talking to the hosts. The whole piece is meant to be light-hearted and fun, except there's one obvious problem: Miller isn't smiling. He's barely

saying a word, sat on the end of the row next to Ravi. He looks moody and distant. His mind seems elsewhere, just like yesterday, and, by all accounts, since before I arrived. I frown and wonder if there is any truth to Aidan's thinking that Garrett Miller is trying to persuade his brother to leave the band and go solo. Whatever is on Miller's mind, it's distracting him, and knowing Rebel Heart's eagle-eyed fans, it won't take long for someone to pick up on the negative vibes.

The interview comes to an end and I stop the recording. I send three separate video files through to Lexi's phone, which hopefully she'll be able to pick up in China. The performance in Times Square is happening in less than twenty minutes.

Darcey glances towards the window. 'Wish we were performing out there today,' she sighs.

'Girl, did you forget how cold it is down there?' Jahtoya argues in her characteristic breathy tone. 'And they sure as hell wouldn't put any clothes on us.'

'*Hmm-mm,*' Carmen hums in agreement.

'Duh, I don't care, it's, like, *national TV,*' Darcey snarks as she rolls her eyes, and studies her perfectly manicured nails. 'Nobody's paying us when we're sat on our asses. Down there's where the money train is.'

Nobody seems to know what to say to her. I can't help but feel that Darcey wants to be seen on national television dancing with Cal, and that she's got her heart set on some kind of drama. The thought leaves me uneasy, except Lexi's not here for me to talk to her about it.

Fifteen minutes later, the screams sound out. It's like an earthquake rumbling up from below. We all rush to the window where we glimpse the boys taking the steps to the stage at street level in central Times Square. I look back at the TV.

Aidan is waving at the crowd, as are the others. I still find it weird that girls scream at my twin. They're wearing matching winter jackets, open to reveal vests underneath. Because, of course, who would think to have their coat zipped up in almost zero-degree weather? Miller raises his hand and waves, but it's half-hearted, and he doesn't crack a smile.

The beat to 'Lovesick' starts up. It was the band's first single and is still one of their most popular tracks. That they're playing it live in Times Square goes down a storm with both the crowd and us in the room: except for Nikita, who remains in her seat. We're all mesmerised by the performance. I stand at the window but my eyes flit back and forth to the TV screen. Rebel Heart always prove the naysayers wrong, because if there's one thing they can do, it's perform live. The music floats up from Times Square and I see the crowd below moving to the beat, a lot of hands up in the air. On the screen, I glimpse the hysteria, the extra-loud scream that Miller receives whenever it's his turn on vocals, and in that moment I realise that Miller leaving would be a disaster for Rebel Heart.

I don't get time to contemplate the idea further before Carmen starts dancing around the room. We turn up the TV to maximum volume and soon we're all on our feet, and we sing along in unison to the chorus as even Nikita is tempted out of her chair.

Minutes later, as the boys move to a difference song, there's a knock at the door. We exchange glances. I presume another guest is coming to complain about the noise. Jahtoya reaches for the remote and turns down the volume.

'Anybody order room service?' Carmen jokes.

'I'll get it,' Jahtoya says.

I can't see the door from where I'm standing next to the window. I hear voices and then Jahtoya's back in the room.

She makes eyes at me before Bianca Lawson, Cal's girlfriend, appears behind her.

'Bianca! Hi!' I blurt with a grin and she offers me a thin-lipped smile in response. She can tell she's interrupted something. The thump of the beat from street level still seeps into the hotel room through both the windows and on the TV. I see Darcey's unfriendly expression and an atmosphere descends over the room.

'I thought you'd be down in Times Square!' I say, going over and giving her a hug.

'I thought about it,' she says over my shoulder.

Darcey looks to the floor. Bianca draws back and squeezes my arm. 'I wondered if we could catch up? Maybe go grab a coffee? I can wait if you'd rather hear out the performance?'

'Not at all. We were just dancing around like complete idiots. I don't need to stay.'

As Caleb's steady girlfriend – and a former reality television star – Bianca's a celebrity in her own right. We end up back in my room, having fetched a drink from the coffee lounge in the lobby, and due to the number of stares that made Bianca feel uncomfortable.

'Sorry. Housekeeping hasn't been yet,' I apologise as I attempt to straighten out the sheets on my bed.

'No, no, I'm sorry we couldn't go out,' she counters.

'You'd be dealing with quite the crowd of fans today.'

'You can say that again,' she sighs wistfully.

She takes a seat on the bed. Bianca Lawson is gorgeous. A New York native, she and Caleb Whitlock have been a couple for a year, since Cal made an impromptu speech outside

her window on a Manhattan street to the strains of Pavarotti, being blasted from the back of a van. The band's song, 'Shame About my Face', was written as a result of a tweet Bianca had written after she caught Cal kissing another girl at the same after-show party she'd been kissing him at thirty minutes earlier. Needless to say, they sorted out their drama, and although today she looks immaculate, in a long black overcoat and heels, her blonde hair styled in a loose side chignon, there's something about her that feels off.

'Is everything alright?' I ask her, still able to hear the noise of the crowd rising up from below my window.

She gives a nod. 'Actually no. Cal and I had our first big fight last night.'

'Oh,' I say and lower myself to the bed. 'I'm sorry to hear that. What were you fighting about?'

She rubs her eyes and lets out a sigh. 'He wanted to take me out for our one-year anniversary, except I made the mistake of agreeing to a night out with my new team at work. He only has a few nights left in New York.'

I know that Bianca has recently started working for a fashion house here in Manhattan, though I don't know what she does exactly.

'That, and I asked him to exchange dance partners with someone, so he doesn't have to dance with Darcey Ellison.'

I feel myself tense. I know Darcey has a thing for Cal. Plus Lexi called her dangerous.

'But Cal adores you. Darcey might flirt with him but he'd never respond.'

She raises her eyebrows before wordlessly sipping her coffee.

'What did he say when you made the request?' I ask.

‘Same as you. He thinks I’m worrying over nothing. According to him she’s just another dancer.’

‘And you don’t trust him?’

She levels her eyes on mine. ‘It’s *her* I don’t trust,’ she says in a low tone.

‘Oh,’ I say. I look down into my coffee cup. A part of me accepts that Bianca’s right to have concerns. The fans sometimes give her a rough time on social media. Most recently, they claimed that the only reason she got her job at her fashion house is because her boyfriend is in Rebel Heart.

‘Just over a year ago,’ Bianca sighs, ‘I was down there. Watching them. We were on the front page of the *New York Post*. A week later he asked me to stay with him on the tour.’

‘So why weren’t you out there today?’

She gives a half-laugh. ‘I’m not exactly a fan favourite.’

‘Why should you care? Your relationship isn’t about any of that stuff. It’s about the quiet conversations you have when you’re in bed at night, or when you’re feeling insecure and you want someone to lift you up, or...’

I’d like to try and make her feel better but I’m not sure it’s working. She runs a finger along the rim of her cup. ‘Paige, I came to you because I want to ask for a favour,’ Bianca says, her eyes pleading. ‘You’re Aidan’s sister, and right now I think you’re the only one I *can* trust. You and Lexi, but now Lexi’s not here. Can you... can you please keep one eye on Darcey for me? I’m gonna fly out to see Cal most weekends, but on the tour, when you’re with the band, could you just tell me if Darcey’s...’

Her voice trails off. She looks like she might cry.

‘If she’s all over him?’ I ask.

She winces, clears her throat then sips more of her coffee, as though swallowing any sign of weakness. ‘Would you

mind?’ she says. ‘I can give you my number. I don’t think you have it.’

‘I can’t promise to have eyes on her all the time.’

‘I know. As Cal tells me, I’m probably worried over nothing. But I’ve seen the way she looks at him. And I know... a lot of girls look at him that way, but they’re not the ones grinding their hips up against him or twirling in his arms for hours every night, for the whole world to see. I’ve seen the way you guys have to dance together.’

I cock my head to one side. ‘Feel sorry for me; I have to do that with *Miller*.’

Bianca lips twist into a genuine smile, the first I’ve seen from her. ‘So I heard. How’s that working out for you two? Cal told me you puked on his shoes.’

I raise my eyebrows. ‘*Aaaand* that about sums up how well it’s going.’

We laugh, but then I take her hand and give it a reassuring squeeze. ‘I don’t think you need to worry about Cal.’

‘Maybe not. But he’s done some dumber things in the past.’

‘I’ll keep an eye on her. That’s a promise.’

Bianca receives a message from Cal that the boys are all in Aidan’s room and we head upstairs. I’ve cheered her up with stories of my dancing with Miller.

When we knock on the door, Bodhi answers. He opens it up wider so we can enter.

‘Ladies,’ he says smoothly.

The atmosphere in Aidan’s suite is buoyant. Cal spies us enter, our arms hooked together, and hops out of his seat, making a beeline for Bianca.

‘Where’d you go?’ he asks her, taking her hands in his, and I let go of her.

‘I’m sorry, sweetie, I wanted to catch up with Paige.’

‘It’s cool,’ Cal says, pushing curly hair from his eyes. ‘You can choose Paige over me. I was just hoping we could... you know...’

They’ve moved close to one another. Cal is gazing into his girlfriend’s eyes, his head cocked to one side, and for a brief moment I find myself wishing I’d had the experience of a man look at me like that.

‘Are we okay?’ Bianca asks shakily and caresses his cheek. Suddenly their drooling over one another is a little vomit-inducing. Before I know it, Cal has captured her lips in his own and I guess their fight is well and truly over.

‘P, get over here,’ Aidan says, and I walk over gladly.

The other boys are all gathered on the sofas. Ziggy is there, pacing, looking serious, speaking to some of the tour staff. Ravi and Tun are curled up together, Tun’s arm around Ravi’s shoulders. Aidan is relaxing with J.B. Only Miller is sat away from everyone in the corner, alone. He ignores everyone around him and scrolls through his phone.

‘Lexi got the videos,’ Aidan says. ‘She said to say thank you.’

‘It was a bit wobbly,’ I say. ‘I wouldn’t make a good cameraman.’

‘No, no, it was fine, she could hear and see everything.’

‘How is she?’

Aidan gives a wink. ‘Oh, you know. Missing me. I hope.’

I raise my eyebrows in his direction. If I know Lexi, she’ll be utterly professional and knee-deep in her documentary filmmaking.

‘You guys looked good out there,’ I say to J.B., because I

like to engage him, despite him not being available, but hey, Audrey is back in France.

J.B. shrugs. He tilts his chin towards Miller. ‘Somebody didn’t want to bother with the interview.’

My lips twist, my eyes flitting to Miller. ‘I saw that.’

Aidan shakes his head. Miller remains oblivious to our conversation. ‘I seriously don’t know what’s going on,’ he mutters under his breath.

I watch Miller over my shoulder and feel uneasy. His attitude is casting a long shadow over this tour.

Chapter Eleven

My palms are sweaty. My skin feels tacky. I'm gulping breaths.

Jahtoya's fetched me a paper bag. I'm breathing in and out of it as Carmen holds my hand. I'm sat on the surface of a table, and Nikita's gone to fetch Aidan. Darcey stares at me like I'm a crazed lunatic.

Perhaps I *am* a lunatic for agreeing to this job in the first place.

Except it's too late now: a sold-out crowd nineteen-thousand strong is waiting for me upstairs.

To dance with Miller.

On the first live show of Rebel Heart's American tour.

I breathe in and out, watching the paper bag inflate and deflate as I do.

I swear I must be insane.

I was nervous when I woke up, a thick knot of anticipation lining my stomach. Yesterday, after the dress rehearsals at Madison Square Garden, when I shook the Magic 8 Ball and asked if I could do this – if I could perform in front of a crowd – the answer said, *PROSPECTS NOT GOOD*.

And right at this moment, in a small airless room in the

bowels of Madison Square Garden in New York City, the prospects are definitely *not* looking good.

‘Try and slow your breaths,’ Darcey says matter-of-factly and studies her latest manicure.

‘She’s *trying*,’ Carmen retorts. ‘That’s not how a panic attack works.’

‘You did consider this when you took the job, right?’ Darcey continues. ‘That you’d have to dance in front of screaming fans?’

The bag inflates and I nod, but the truth is, my dance studio had just burned down and, mentally, I was still dealing with that fallout. Other than teaching, it’s been a long time since I performed in front of anyone and I’ve got anxiety thinking about the size of the crowd. Once upon a time, wild horses couldn’t stop me from getting on stage.

The truth is, I am not prepared for this.

‘I don’t think you’re helping,’ Carmen blurts towards Darcey, and I feel her rub my back.

The door bursts open and Aidan enters. He’s in full costume: baggy, black combat trousers and a fitted white vest. He looks at me and there’s concern in his expression.

‘Can everyone give us a minute?’ he asks, and the girls stand to attention. Together they file out of the room, Jahtoya closing the door behind them.

Aidan comes to me. Gently, he takes both my wrists and I lower the paper bag. He shushes me gently and tears fill my eyes.

‘I don’t think I can do this, Aid,’ I whisper, and I can feel my heart pound in my chest, my fingers trembling.

He wraps me in a firm embrace, stroking my hair. ‘I’m so sorry,’ he whispers. ‘I should never have put you in this position.’

I hug him back. I get to my feet and we stand there for a moment. His presence has a calming effect. He moves back, cradling my face in his palms, making direct eye contact. 'I never thought I could do it either. The first time, I was fucking terrified. But then you get used to it. You get used to the wall of noise.'

'Aidey, I'm scared. What if I mess it all up?'

'No one cares if you mess up. You dust yourself off and carry on.'

'I saw the crowd... there's s-so many people.'

'Don't take this the wrong way, P, but they're not here for you.'

My lips twist and I grant him a light punch in his chest. He grins.

'Remember when we were kids and we'd dance in the kitchen, pretending there was huge crowd watching us?'

I nod at the memory. Back then I was so ambitious.

'Well pretend it's just you and me. I know you can do it. Follow Miller's lead. Yes, he's being a dick, but he knows what he's doing out there. We've done this *so* many times. And I'll be right there next to you.'

'I don't know how you do it.'

'When we first went to the auditions in LA... do you remember what we said? When we saw how good everyone else was?'

A smile touches my lips. 'You told me to fake it till we made it?'

He nods. 'It worked, didn't it?'

'For you, maybe.'

'P, if I can do it, you can. You're a better dancer than me. You're a better dancer than all of us put together. It'll be over

before you know it, and you'll wonder what you were ever worried about.'

I inhale, then close my eyes and breathe out.

'You ready?' he asks.

After a moment, I force a smile. Then he offers me his hand and I take it.

'What the fuck, McArthur?' Miller hisses at me backstage ten minutes later, moments before we are due to perform. 'You thought now was a good time to turn into a cry-baby?'

The boys are hooked up with microphones. They're standing in a row directly in front of us. I stand on one end, directly behind Miller and next to Carmen. We're all in our costumes. My hair has been styled into a too-tight French plait that pulls the skin at my temples. The roar of the crowd from in front of the stage reverberates in my ears. Darcey told me I look pale, even with the layers of stage make-up caked on my face. The support act is finished and they're leaving the stage. We're due to start in minutes.

'Mill, be fucking *nice*,' Aidan snaps at him. 'This whole thing is your fault.'

'It's not my fault your sister can't take the heat.'

I watch Aidan turn, his eyes steely. 'She can take the heat just fine.'

I feel another wave of panic rise up from my toes. I take some breaths. Aidey looks back and gives me a reassuring nod. He's the reason I can't fail at this. As his twin, I can't let him down.

'Guys, can it, will ya?' Cal snaps from the other end of the row, Darcey directly behind him. 'Miller, now's not the fucking time. We're about to go on. It's not Paige's fault you got a stiffy each time a girl came within three feet of you.'

‘Guys, can we not do this now?’ Ravi trills nervously next to Aidan. They’ve already done their little pre-show huddle without us girls. Usually, it’s to get them all hyped up for the show, but, according to my brother, everyone’s feeling Miller’s detachment.

J.B.’s in the centre of their line. He mutters something in French, shaking his head in disgust. I’m not sure if his feelings are directed at Miller or not, but the tension is almost unbearable. The other dancers keep their eyes down. None of the girls want to look my way.

‘Let’s all give Paige a goddamn medal,’ Miller snaps tersely, looking upwards, ‘for saving the fucking day.’ Then he’s coughing again.

‘Mics are going on, guys,’ a production assistant addresses us. ‘Everybody ready?’

There are nods, muffled confirmations. The assistant gives two thumbs up.

Before the boys move, Miller turns back to look my way. He covers his mic with his fingers. ‘Try not to screw this up,’ he says.

My stomach rolls over and I suddenly feel like I might pass out.

The boys are raised to the stage through special panels, whereas we dancers emerge from the staircase. Above the crowd, a gigantic board lights up the name of each member of Rebel Heart in a system that looks like a dot matrix. Aidan’s name is first, followed by Ravi, Cal, J.B., and finally Miller. Once Miller’s name is on the board, we’re supposed to make our move and take up our positions.

My heart hammers when Aidan’s name is announced. The volume from the crowd reaches new heights, to a level I can’t even contemplate. It’s a surreal experience. I feel tiny,

like a drop of water in an ocean. Madison Square Garden is *huge*.

‘You okay?’ Carmen mouths at me, giving my fingers a squeeze. ‘First time up there is always a horror show. You’ll do great.’

I look at the others’ faces in the half-light. Nikita looks indifferent, as always. Jahtoya and Darcey almost look bored. They’ve all done this before. It’s a job for them. I try to tell myself that I’m just like them, but I’m not: it’s like Miller said, I teach six-year-olds to bop along to Beyoncé in my tiny studio. This is not the same thing. I’m an instructor. I’m an *amateur*.

Why did I let my brother talk me into doing this?

I’m Aidan’s sister. The only reason I am here is because I’m filling in. I’m the temp.

And I might act it, but I have *no* idea what I am doing.

The biggest cheer from the crowd is saved for Miller, who is last to take to the stage. Maybe it’s because he’s an American, maybe it’s because he has ridiculously chiselled abs, maybe it’s because he looks moody and broody most of the time – I just don’t get it. Do half these girls really know the man that they’re daydreaming about? Do they know how unpleasant he is in reality?

‘Paige, go, go,’ Carmen whispers, poking me in the back.

I don’t know which direction to look. I copy Darcey to my left, who makes a slow, sultry walk towards J.B. across the surface of the stage. I feel like we didn’t really practise this bit, and I wonder if the girls are going on instinct. From somewhere, I hear the siren. I have to get to Miller in time.

My heart beats frantically in my chest. I reach him, but he doesn’t make eye contact. My palms are still sweaty. I look

out into the crowd and there are a million phones raised into the air. The screams reverberate in my ears.

I hear the opening beats of the first track, the musicians lit up on one side of the stage. That's my cue. I move in front of Miller to one corner of the stage, but my legs feel like they're made of jelly. One more glance into the crowd and I wonder if all those people can see that I'm scared shitless.

I try telling myself I can do this. *I can do this. I can do this.*

And I do. When the show begins in earnest, I try to empty my mind of doubts. I even think I do a good job of keeping up. Keeping rhythm. Moving in sync with Miller whilst he sings at the same time. But he's so much better at this than me.

I make it to the third track, and my spin.

A small voice in my head reminds me to move back. To give him enough room. But the stage is so big and open, that my judgement is off. I'm coming out of it, thanking my lucky stars that I've made it, when, coming out of his backflip, the corner of Miller's shoe slams into my left eye.

In a moment I see a flash of white, before everything goes black.

Chapter Twelve

Somewhere in the near distance, there's a rushing sound. Faint voices. The screams have gone. I seem to be floating, my head lolling back.

My eyes drift open for a brief second. The world is upside down. Then the voices come roaring back.

'I've got her, I've got her,' one says.

'Lower her down,' says another.

I feel a weight push up against my back. My head is supported. Then someone's pushing at my eyelids and bright lights are in my eyes. I groan.

Is that Ziggy I can hear? 'Aidey, go, go, get back out there!'

'I want to stay with her,' I hear the familiar voice of my brother say. 'Is she alright?'

'She'll be alright,' a deep voice says.

'We've got this, Aid, you go, go!' Ziggy shouts.

I try to form a word with my lips, but nothing comes.

I want to tell them I'm okay. That I can carry on.

'Miller's got no bloody dance partner!' Aidan argues.

'Nothing we can do about that now!' Ziggy snaps back. 'He's the reason we don't have a back-up! Now get out there and carry on!'

Someone's pressing their fingers against my neck, up into my jaw. I hear my name.

'She's coming round,' the deep voice says. 'Heart rate's slightly elevated.'

'Paige!' a woman says.

My eyes open. That's when I become aware of the acute pain in my left eye, my hand shooting to my temple. 'Ow,' I say.

'Sir, step back, please,' the female voice says. 'Let us do our job.'

I lift my head, realise I'm moving. I'm flat on some kind of stretcher.

'Paige, it's alright. They're gonna take care of you,' I hear Ziggy shout, but his voice fades away.

'Where are you taking me?' I murmur.

'We have a First Aid facility behind Guest Services, ma'am,' the female voice says.

My head falls back. The pain hasn't subsided. I let myself be transported, my eyes closing again.

'I'm fine,' I say again to the medic. 'I can go back out there. I'm supposed to be on stage right now.'

I'm sat upright on a bed, clutching a drink of water and an ice pack. The room is small. Somewhere, I can hear the beat of the music as the concert continues.

'Ma'am, please, you have a possible concussion,' he says. 'Head injuries should be treated very seriously. Do you want me to hold that?'

He's referring to the ice pack. Frustration bubbles up in my chest. This is killing me. I hate that I'm being held here.

I glance at my reflection in a mirror hanging on the

opposite wall. My eye has blown up, a swollen lump sitting right over my left brow, where the base of Miller's shoe caught me. It still throbs. I raise the ice pack back to my skin and wince at the sensation. They've given me some painkillers.

I'm letting everyone down. I'm letting the band down. I want Ziggy here so he can rant and rave about how I should be back on stage with the others.

I go to get up. 'Can I at least just...?'

I wriggle off the bed. It's not a good idea. My knees buckle momentarily and I have to grab on to the medic's shoulders.

'Ma'am!' he says sternly again and helps me back onto the bed.

This can't be happening. It's opening night.

Honestly, I want to cry.

When the show's over, Aidan is the first band member through the door. A lump of emotion sits in my throat as he sits on the bed and puts his arms around me. He feels damp and I can smell the sweat on him. He's literally come straight off the stage.

'Are you alright?' he says. 'I had to carry you.'

'I'm so sorry,' I breathe and tears sting my eyes. 'This is all my fault.'

Aidan pulls back, his brows drawn harshly together. 'This is not your fault,' he says. 'This is Miller's fault.' He studies my eye and grimaces. 'Does it hurt?'

My hands go to my face. 'I think it looks worse than it actually is. It's not really painful, but they gave me some drugs, so who knows. Aid, I'm so sorry. Did the show go off okay?'

‘It was fine. Miller looked a bit of a plonker dancing on his own but we pulled it back. Ziggy says you’re all over social media right now. You’ve officially gone viral.’

‘What?’

‘People are posting videos of your fall, and me scooping you up and carrying you off stage.’

‘Oh Christ.’

‘Hey, you made me look good, P.’ He winks, giving me a nudge. ‘Don’t worry, it’ll all be fine.’

‘Where are the others?’

‘Getting showered and changed. I arranged with Ziggy that we’d see them back at the hotel. Six security guys had to surround me en route. Bit mental.’

Back at the hotel, when we enter, everyone stops talking. I keep my head down. Aidan hovers close to me. Inside the suite, Ziggy waits with Cal, J.B. and Ravi. Miller waits alone beside the window, looking out across the Manhattan skyline at night. The other dancers are nowhere to be seen.

‘Paige,’ Ziggy greets me.

‘How ya doin’, Paige?’ Cal half-smiles. ‘Man, that’s some shiner.’

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Miller shift position but I daren’t look his way.

J.B. winces, uttering something in French, before he comes over and inspects my injury. ‘You put ice on it?’

I open my hand to reveal a blue, fresh ice pack that I was given by the medic at Madison Square Garden before he let me leave, together with a paper leaflet with information on head injuries. According to him, I need to be monitored for twenty-four hours.

Ravi steps over and wraps me in a huge embrace, careful to avoid my injury. 'You're an internet sensation, Paige,' he says into my shoulder. 'I'm so glad you're okay.'

'Miller,' Aidan snaps in his direction. 'Is there something you wanna say to my sister?'

I see Miller's shoulders physically drop. He turns. I'm shocked at the look of anger I see etched deep into his features. He steps towards me. 'Hell, yeah, I got something to say. I told you, you gotta move back at the flip. What the hell was that? I said if you don't move back, you're gonna end up with my foot in your face, and looks like I'm a genius, because that's exactly what happened out there.'

Aidan lunges at him, grabbing the material at Miller's neckline, thrusting him back towards the window. 'I meant an apology, you motherfucker,' he snarls.

The boys all pile in, trying to pull them apart and de-escalate the situation. Miller looks like he's about to throw a punch at my brother.

Ziggy raises his voice. 'Right! That's enough, all o' you!'

I look to him, concerned. His shouting makes no difference.

'All you had to do was look after her!' Aidan is shouting, J.B. pulling him back. 'You knew she'd never done that before!'

'And I was right, she couldn't hack it!' Miller sneers, Cal blocking him. 'You should have brought in a professional dancer!'

Ravi has positioned himself in the middle of them all, holding out his hands as peacemaker.

My eyebrow throbs. The tension inside the suite is unbearable. Ziggy crosses his arms, observing the group like a ringmaster, waiting to see how it all plays out.

‘You fucking slept with everyone else!’ Aidan counters.

‘You had no business bringing your sister here,’ Miller snaps. ‘You felt sorry for her ’cause her studio burned down, I get it. But she is not trained for this. I had to show her everything.’

‘You?! You fucked off after a day. *I* had to show her everything, Miller, because, as usual, you disappeared! Paige has done nothing wrong. She showed up!’

‘Mate, you should have checked her position out there,’ Cal says to Miller.

‘Guys, please!’ Ravi adds shakily.

Miller’s face is puce. He struggles against Cal’s grasp, yanking himself away. ‘Oh, so no surprise you’re all siding with goddamn McArthur, who isn’t even in this goddamn band! I’m tired of it! You know what, Aid, you’re not the fucking manager around here, despite what you might think. But I’m so sick of your decision-making.’ His hand shoots out to me and I hold my breath. ‘It is not my fault she can’t learn the steps properly. You brought her in here, *not me*. I told you I didn’t want to dance with her.’ He shakes his head. ‘I’m through! I’m done with all o’ you. I quit! I quit the band.’

The room goes quiet. His chest is rising and falling.

‘Wait, what?’ Ravi’s small voice says.

‘*Fine*,’ Aidan snaps. ‘We don’t need you.’

‘Aidey,’ J.B. murmurs.

‘You wanna go, then go.’ Aidan points to the door.

Ziggy holds out his hands, palms up. ‘Right, all o’ you, let’s just sit down. Aidan, take a breath. Miller, don’t be fucking stupid. You can’t quit.’

Miller straightens. His shoulders go back. His gaze doesn’t leave Aidan’s. ‘Too late, Zig,’ he mutters. ‘I already did.’

Then he walks out of the suite.

Chapter Thirteen

I sit alone in my hotel room on the bed, cradling the Magic 8 Ball in my lap. My eye has turned a rather fetching shade of purple and the swelling means I can't even open it properly.

When I woke up today, for a split second I thought it might all have been a dream. Miller leaving the band.

Then I realised. Miller *has* left the band.

How is it possible that I feel worse than after my studio burned down?

There's a weight on my chest. On the bed, I shake my Magic 8 once more.

'Is he coming back?' I question miserably, because it's about the seventh time I've asked, and I'm going to keep on going until I get the answer I want.

NO, is the answer that floats to the surface.

My stomach growls, but I'm not hungry. I had about an hour's sleep.

Unsurprisingly, the news went viral. Soon after leaving the hotel suite, following his argument with the band, Miller tweeted *'I've quit Rebel Heart'*, switching off all comments but not the ability to retweet. This was off the back of the footage of him knocking me out on stage with his foot – coming out

of his backflip and amid my badly executed spin – which was already circulating on social media.

Within hours, his message had been retweeted millions of times. The fandom is up in arms. That the words came from Miller himself is being seen as genuine verification that he's walked. I've never seen so many users post sobbing memes before.

The TV in my room is showing *Good Morning America* on mute. I know the presenters are picking apart the band's interview from a few days ago, analysing the potential signals that demonstrated Miller was on the verge of quitting, because frankly they've been doing it all morning. The red and white ticker tape headline reads *REBEL HEARTS BREAK AS MILLER QUILTS THE BAND*. The footage of my fall on stage has been shown a fair number of times, as it hadn't been apparent to the news outlets until last night that Aidan's twin sister had joined the tour as a dancer. And the fact that I was the one Miller knocked out is being seen as one of the defining reasons behind his departure.

The news is everywhere. I can't escape it.

I've watched the concert footage on repeat. I cringe every time I do, because it's clear I'm the one at fault. I'm far too close to him. Then down I go, caught by his foot as he executes what was otherwise the perfect backflip. Within a few seconds, Aidan kneels down beside me, before my twin valiantly scoops me up and carries me off stage in his arms.

I've watched it from every single angle. There's no denying who is in the wrong.

And it's not Miller.

Yet now, the whole future of the band is in question.

I shower, then make my way upstairs. Outside the suite – the same one from last night – I can hear a cacophony of voices. A member of Bodhi’s team is stationed on the door, and, acknowledging me, he permits me to enter, using his keycard to open the door.

Inside, I come to an abrupt halt.

I can pick out Ziggy and the remaining members of Rebel Heart, but, of all the other people here, I don’t recognise any of them. Aidan is sat down at a table, talking to a man with slicked-back hair. Ziggy is deep in conversation with a man and a woman in suits, deep frown lines etched across his forehead. Cal is alone by the window, typing something into his phone. J.B. is sitting on the sofas with Ravi and Tun, his head in his hands. Ravi is curled into Tun, the latter stroking his hair. A few more people are pacing, on their phones, serious looks on their faces.

Then they see me, and my black eye, and for a split second the whole room falls silent, the air thick with tension.

Aidan gets up and walks over, wrapping me in an embrace. The voices start again.

‘Hey, are you alright?’ he says, after he’s let me go. ‘How’s the eye?’

I search his face. He looks like he’s had less sleep than I have.

‘I’m fine. It’s fine. It looks worse than it is. Who are all these people?’

He rubs his eyes. ‘Management. Record company guys. We’re getting ready to release a statement after last night.’

‘And where’s Miller?’

‘No one’s spoken to him. He’s switched off his phone. Apparently, Bodhi took him to the airport early this morning. Booked himself on a flight back to Arizona.’

I shake my head. This is Miller we're talking about, so nothing should surprise me, but him going back to his hometown makes me think there is little chance of him returning any time soon.

'What about the tour?'

Aidan winces. 'We've had to postpone the two remaining shows in New York. The news is going out with the statement but people are already talking. I've heard people are being advised not to travel, even if they've got tickets. We'll pick up in Boston next week as planned. We're working out who'll fill in for Miller's parts. We'll have to come back to New York at the end of the tour or something. I don't know.'

'So, you'll... you'll carry on as a four?'

He gives a definitive nod, but his mood is sombre. 'We'll carry on as a four. We'll have to. We'll be alright.'

'Have you spoken to Lexi?'

'Yes. She wanted to get on a plane. Talk him round.'

'You know if there's anyone to talk him back around, it would probably be her, right?'

'I know. But this was his decision, P. We all saw this coming.'

I know my brother. I know how protective he is of this band. It upsets me that he can have this attitude to Miller quitting. Why isn't someone going to Arizona to make Miller change his mind? I can't press him on it though, because the stern man at the table is calling Aidan over. 'I have to go,' he says, and gives my fingers a squeeze.

'Wait,' I say, grabbing his arm. 'Promise me you're alright?'

He gives a nod, already distracted.

I pace over to Cal at the window. He's typing away into

his phone. I nudge his elbow. 'Why is no one trying to persuade Miller to come back?'

Cal looks up. He, too, looks exhausted, and he hasn't shaved. Normally he's bouncy like his hair, but the Cal I encounter this morning is morose. 'G'day, Paige. How's the eye?'

I wave my hand dismissively. 'It's fine, thanks, I'll live.' I fix him with my stare, the best I can manage with only one good eye. 'Cal. What's going on? That's it? You're just gonna let him leave?'

Cal lowers his phone, giving me his full attention. 'Why you so bothered? You don't even like Miller.'

'Yes, but I don't think what happened was his fault. I think it was mine. I didn't move out of the way quick enough.'

Cal blows out his cheeks. 'Paigey, darlin', don't take this the wrong way, love, but things with Miller have been bad since before Christmas. He's been mopin' around for weeks. I don't think he wanted to be in the band anymore. So maybe he was looking for an out, and you gave it to him. If he doesn't wanna be a part of this... then what the hell can we do?'

'Have you spoken to him?'

Cal winces, then produces a shrug. 'Dipstick switched his phone off.'

'I feel like I need to apologise.'

'To Miller? Nah, Paigey. Not your fault. Believe me.'

'Where's Bianca?'

He lifts his phone, giving it a shimmy, indicating that it's Bianca who he's been talking to. 'Heading here later on after work.'

Our conversation is interrupted when the man with slicked-back hair, who was sat with Aidan, gets to his feet.

'Everybody, listen up! Can I have your attention? I'm

gonna read out the statement; we'll talk lines to take in a minute. This will go out to all media outlets within the hour. Keep your questions and comments until the end, please.'

A silence descends.

'The rumours are true,' he begins, and I notice everybody, aside from the band, begins typing his words into their devices, verbatim. 'Miller has left Rebel Heart. Cal, J.B., Ravi and Aidan are disappointed that Miller felt he couldn't carry on, but they wish him nothing but the best for his future. Rebel Heart will continue as a four-piece and members will not comment further on Miller's departure.'

I feel wretched as he reads out the remainder of the statement, confirming that tonight and tomorrow's shows will be postponed, whilst the band rejig their performance.

'Questions?' the man asks. 'Boys, are we all happy with that?'

I look to the remaining band members in turn. Aidan, Cal, Ravi and J.B. all sombrely nod their heads.

There are a few questions fired at him from those in the room I don't recognise. His answers are clipped, businesslike. The message is, 'we carry on'.

'Alright,' he states, with a flick of his fingers. 'Get it out there.'

There is a flurry of activity and phone calls. Ravi buries his head in Tun's shoulder. J.B. rests his elbows on his knees, his head dropping back between them. I look to my brother. He looks stern, yet there is sorrow in his eyes. Cal goes back to stare motionless from the window out over the Manhattan skyline.

I swallow the lump in my throat and take three strides over to Ziggy.

‘Paige,’ he says, looking at my eye. ‘You look like you need more ice on that.’

‘It’s fine,’ I say. ‘I just wanted to know if anyone’s going to see Miller.’

‘Management has sent someone to Arizona. Though he’s made it clear he doesn’t want anyone around.’

‘Who did they send?’

He gives a shrug. ‘Dunno. Some flunky.’

I throw him an exasperated look. He knows as well as I do that Miller won’t engage with someone he’s never met.

‘Sweetheart. Let me worry about Miller. I know this means you don’t have a job to do right now but we always need a dancer in reserve. You still have a job on the tour.’

‘I’m not worried about me, Ziggy. I feel responsible.’

He shakes his head. ‘Miller’s been difficult for a couple of months. This shit was inevitable. He wants to go, let him go.’

I go back to my room and sit in front of the TV. It doesn’t take long for the statement to filter down to the news channels and onto social media. The narrative changes once more. Rebel Heart are now officially a foursome.

I pick up my phone, my thumbs hovering over the screen.

Can we talk? I write, and I send the message to Miller’s phone.

Chapter Fourteen

Four days later, in a Boston hotel room, I'm climbing the walls.

I'm bored, staring at another city skyline. My eye looks almost normal now, the swelling and the bruise almost all gone.

News of Miller's departure from Rebel Heart is yesterday's news. After their false start, their American tour has continued. The fans say they miss Miller's presence, but the show is still a hit. Yet I'm not in it.

I'm a spare. A spare part. Ziggy says I'm a reserve, but without Miller I have zero to do. I'm not ungrateful, but I'm not good at being unoccupied.

Miller hasn't answered my message. In fact, he hasn't answered any of the messages that I've sent to his phone.

The morning after a second packed-out show at the TD Garden arena in Boston, I seek out Ziggy over breakfast.

'Zig,' I say. I sit down a fraction too close to him, causing his eyebrows to raise a little.

'Yes, my darlin',' he responds and sips his coffee.

'The management flunky who they sent to see Miller. Did they ever report back?'

Ziggy blinks at me over the rim of his mug. He swallows, then lowers it back down to the table. 'I, uh, I'd have to check with them on that.'

'Because Management have a duty of care to Miller, correct?' I say.

Ziggy nods, looking around at the breakfast spread in the private dining room. I can tell that he doesn't want me here.

'Course,' he says.

'They never told you who they sent?'

He gives a shrug. 'They didn't name names, no.'

'Have you sent him any messages?'

'Who? Miller?'

I stare at him, aghast. 'Yes, Miller.'

Ziggy's fingers creep towards a plate of croissants. 'Letting him cool off, aren't I?'

'I was thinking... I could go and see him.' I bite my lip.

Ziggy's fingers stop still. 'What... you mean, go to...'

'Arizona, yes. I could just go for a couple of days. Then come back, in case you need me.'

'You talked to Aidey about this?'

I swallow. 'Not yet. They've been busy. But Lexi and I have been talking—'

'Lexi?'

'She and I are worried about Miller.'

'Lexi's in flippin' China, ain't she?'

'We talk all the time.'

Ziggy sighs. 'Of course you do.' He reaches for his croissant and tears it apart. 'Talk to Aidey and the boys. They're willing to let you go, then be my guest. Get on a plane.'

I grin at him. 'Really?'

He holds up a single finger, his mouth already stuffed full. 'Boys first. Get their agreement.'

‘Silence,’ Cal says with a shrug, when I ask the question. ‘Total silence, mate, I got *nada*. Dude’s gone dark.’

My mouth has gone dry. I’m nervous. I’m the only one on my feet. The boys are all post-workout, post-shower, gathered in Aidan’s room on the horseshoe-shaped sofas at my request. I can’t help but feel like I’m going against my brother’s wishes.

‘Ravi? What about you? Have you heard from Miller?’

Ravi’s face creases up. His dimples are on show, but it’s not because he’s smiling. He shakes his head. ‘I tried a few times. Goes straight to voicemail. Even sent him a voice note. Single grey tick though.’

I swallow. ‘So not one of you has heard from him?’

My eyes go to Aidan’s. He knows I can’t let things lie. He knows I like to meddle. Maybe it’s the challenge I can’t resist. But with Miller, it’s something else I feel. This whole thing still feels like my fault. I just can’t let it go.

My brother shakes his head. ‘He’s doesn’t wanna be here, P. He’s got Garrett. He’ll be fine. They’ll be sat smoking weed somewhere.’

‘What does Garrett do?’

‘He’s a mechanic,’ J.B. pipes up.

‘And part-time dealer,’ Cal adds. ‘Paigey, look, I got no issue with you goin’ out to Arizona, but I think you’ll just be wastin’ your time, yeah?’

‘Then maybe I am. But what can I say... I’m stubborn.’

Aidan’s lips curl into a smile. ‘You care too much. You make it your crusade to sort everyone out. Like that time when you had Lexi wear that corset for me at New Year.’

I raise my brow. ‘Worked, didn’t it?’

He laughs at that. They all look at me, smiling. There’s a

silent acknowledgement that I'm going to do this, because whether they admit it or not, they all want to know that their friend is alright. Even my brother.

'Does anybody know where Miller lives in Phoenix?'

Ravi reaches for his phone. 'I do. I've got the address somewhere.'

'Any messages I should give him from you guys? I mean... if he'll talk to me.'

They all look to the floor.

I'm booked on an early flight. That evening, before I leave Boston, I'm sure to look in on all the dancers. Jahtoya and Carmen are already in Darcey's hotel room. Nikita is, of course, elsewhere.

'I'm going to Phoenix,' I tell them.

'*Why?*' Carmen says, aghast, a drink in her hand.

'I don't know. I feel responsible. I feel like someone needs to try and talk some sense into him. Plus, I want to check that he's alright.'

'You know he's proolly fine, right?' Darcey says with a sniff. 'I had a message from Garrett.'

'You did? When?'

She shrugs. 'Four, maybe five days ago? Before we left NYC, I think. Said Miller was fine. Just didn't wanna speak to anyone right now.'

I feel the base of my neck grow warm. Jahtoya raises her perfectly plucked brows in my direction. 'Girl, you care too much,' she says.

I swallow. 'Maybe I do. But I can't let it go.'

It's a six-hour flight from Boston to Phoenix Sky Harbor

International. The plane lands just after two p.m. Bodhi told me on the way to the airport that Phoenix has mild winters, and that I wouldn't need a heavy coat.

Shortly after landing, I make conversation with a friendly immigration clerk, who takes my British passport. Her eyes widen when she sees my name, and she does a double-take.

'People must tell you all the time that you look like your brother,' she says, once my passport has been stamped.

I take back my documentation and flash her a grin. '*All the time.*'

Outside, I climb into a cab, asking the driver to take me to North Hillside Drive in Paradise Valley. This is the address that Ravi had in his phone. The journey only takes twenty minutes, even in traffic. Paradise Valley appears to be a wealthy suburb of Phoenix, with big houses built into the arid landscape, which contains a smattering of trees and cacti. Some of the houses are behind gates.

The taxi rolls to a halt. I squint at the property outside the passenger-side window. I can't actually see inside, because it's surrounded by walls, and there's a grey vehicle gate.

'This is it,' the cab driver says, and I reach for my purse. My bank card was destroyed in the fire, and I still haven't sorted out an app for payment, so I've been relying on a wad of cash that Aidan gave me on arrival to cover expenses.

Standing beside my suitcase, I watch the cab pull away. The wind rustles the trees, and it hits me that this might be a really bad idea.

I step up to the vehicle gate, locating an intercom. The gate is solid metal, but I can peer through the gaps to see inside. The intercom has a camera on it, so there's no hiding that it's me. Reaching out, I ring the buzzer.

I stand and wait. In the quiet, other than the slight wind,

I can hear music emanating from inside, but it's barely audible.

After a minute of waiting, I ring the buzzer again.

I wonder if he can see me.

After another minute, I ring the buzzer again, this time holding it for longer, knowing that Miller is as stubborn as I am, and he might think if he holds out for long enough, I'll go away.

After a minute, I let go of the buzzer. 'Miller!' I yell at the top of my lungs, feeling like a prize idiot. The wind rustles through the trees again and I hope to God I have the right place.

Leaving my suitcase against the wall – because there's no one around – I take a walk around the perimeter, following the line of the wall, over the rough terrain. I can see an outdoor pool. Eventually, I reach another door at the rear of the property, but there's no way to peer inside, and, like the vehicle gate, it's made of solid metal.

Back at the front, I kick myself, because I should have taken Garrett's number from Darcey. I try Darcey's phone, but she's not picking up.

The data in this part of the world is not great, or maybe it's my network, because it takes me forever to get online and Google 'Garrett Miller Mechanic Phoenix'. Fortunately, the top hit comes up with the name of the garage where he works. I copy the number and dial it. A female receptionist tells me she will fetch Garrett Miller.

'This is Garrett,' a slurred voice comes on the end of the line.

'Garrett! It's Paige McArthur. Remember me?'

I'm in the middle of nowhere and I sound ridiculously posh and English. There's a pause as the line crackles.

'Sure, I remember.'

'I'm outside Miller's house. I'm in Phoenix. Is he home, do you know?'

He sniffs. 'I got no idea.'

'Well, he's not answering, but I can hear music. I need to speak to him and he's not answering his phone. Do you have a key? Do you know if Miller keeps a key hidden somewhere?'

'I gotta key. Don't know if he keeps one outside anywhere.'

'Is there any way you can speak to him?'

'I mean... I can try.'

I let out an exasperated sigh. I don't want to lose Garrett now that I have him on the phone. 'Can I come to you and get your key?'

He considers this for a moment. 'Guess so. If you want. I can't come to you, I gotta work.'

I confirm his location and call an Uber. The wait time is thirty minutes. And still Miller doesn't hear me shouting for him.

Either that or he's ignoring me.

Exhausted, it takes me ninety minutes to get back to Miller's house, still with my case, armed with the key and a fob to open the vehicle gate.

I try the buzzer one more time for good measure, just in case Miller decides to change his mind, if he is actually inside the property, which, after my epic journey today, I'm hoping is still the case.

I press the button on the fob. 'Jackpot,' I say under my breath, as the gate begins to slide open.

There's a paved driveway. A large, pristine black Ford truck is parked outside a garage. The house is even bigger than

I expected, the different parts each having a flat roof. There are many windows, but the blinds are all pulled down.

I wheel my suitcase up to the front door. I recognise the track playing on the inside, because it was playing earlier. An uneasy feeling floods my stomach. It would appear the music has been playing for hours on a loop.

I slide Garrett's key into the lock, turning it forward. The door clicks open.

Inside, the music is much louder. I step into a white room with a high ceiling, white and grey floor tiles and a white floating staircase snaking up the side next to a set of wall-to-wall windows, the blinds all lowered. There's a TV waiting to be mounted on the wall and piles of unopened cardboard boxes stacked up along the length of one wall, taking up most of the room.

'Miller?' I call out loud.

I follow the sound of the music. In an empty room downstairs, a Bluetooth speaker is plugged in, together with Miller's phone, also plugged into a wall. I press the phone screen and it illuminates to show several missed calls and messages.

I don't know Miller's pin code, but there's an option to pause the music, so I do. The house falls into eerie silence.

'Miller?' I shout again, to which there is no response. 'Miller, are you here?'

I have left the front door open with my suitcase standing upright. I move to the staircase, taking the stairs two by two and reaching an empty landing.

The first room I come to is deserted and unfurnished.

In the second room, the light is switched off. I switch it on.

The sight makes the blood drain from my face.

Miller is ghost white. Lying on a large mattress, bare-

ched in an otherwise empty room. There is a stale smell of sweat. I dive down towards him on my knees. The edges of his lips are blue.

'Miller!' I exclaim, my hands going to his skin. He's burning up, yet he's trembling. I can hear his breathing, shallow and rapid, but it's like he's gasping for air. He's not opening his eyes and remains unresponsive.

'Miller? Danny? Oh God, Miller. I'm going to help you. Can you hear me? Miller! I'm going to get you help.'

I fumble for my phone, a string of swearwords coming out of my mouth in my panic, immediately dialling 999, before realising which country I'm in and changing it to 911.

'911, what's your emergency?' a woman clips on the end of the line.

My voice shakes as I speak. 'I need an ambulance. Uh... eight-six-three-nine North Hillside Drive in Paradise Valley. Uh... male, twenty-five years old... he's... he's not responding, I think he has a fever, he's burning up, but he's trembling and he can't breathe properly.'

I can hear her typing furiously. 'How long has he been like this, ma'am?'

'I found him like this... I don't know.'

'You say he's unconscious?'

I lean down, give his shoulder a gentle shake. 'Miller! Miller!' I say, and he groans. I pull his shoulder forward, trying to move him onto his side. Suddenly he's coughing, and he's sick on my shoes. Except it's not vomit I'm looking at. It's blood.

'He's been sick... oh God, there's blood in it. Please, please hurry!'

'Someone is on the way to you, ma'am. Do you know if the person is under the influence of drugs or alcohol?'

I look around the bed. There are some discarded fast-food wrappers, but nothing to indicate Miller's been drinking or taken any drugs.

'I don't think so. I don't know.'

'And you said he's struggling to breathe? But he's breathing?'

'Yes.'

'What is his breathing like? Can you describe it?'

There are tears in my eyes. I blink them away. 'Shallow. Shallow and fast. His lips have turned blue. He's had a bad cough recently, I told him to see a doctor...'

'Is that the same cough I just heard, ma'am? Deep-sounding like that?'

'Yes, but this sounds worse than before.'

'Are you in a house or an apartment, ma'am?'

'A house.'

'Is there a security gate? Is it open?'

I run out into the corridor. I can't recall if the gate closed behind me or not.

'I'll open it.'

'Ma'am, the ambulance is about twelve minutes away. Someone will be with you very soon.'

I stay with Miller. When the paramedics arrive, there are two of them: one male, one female. They race up the stairs, bringing a stretcher on wheels, which they leave at the bottom. I don't even bother to greet them, having left the security gate and the front door open.

'What's his full name, ma'am?'

I don't hesitate, but my voice is shaky. 'Daniel Austin Miller. He answers to Miller. This way.'

Dance With Me

We enter the bedroom. I stand back, letting them work. 'Miller!' the man says, shining a light into his eyes. 'Miller, can you hear me?'

Miller doesn't respond. He is a rag doll. The woman has put a gadget on his finger. 'O2 sat eighty-nine,' she says, after a moment. 'He's tachycardic.'

I back away, letting them work. My hands cover my mouth. This was supposed to be me holding an olive branch to Miller. To try and make peace with him. To check that he was okay.

Only right now, he's a long way from okay.

Chapter Fifteen

I'm allowed to travel in the back of the ambulance. My world is spinning, with the sirens above my head, the jerking of the vehicle as we race through territory that is wholly unfamiliar to me. I have no idea where we're even going. Miller's bloody vomit is still on the tips of my shoes. And all I know is that he is gravely ill, and when I reach out to touch his hand, his fingers don't respond, not how I want them to. I want them to thrust me off because he's fed up with me, or grab me too tight because I'm getting a dance move wrong and he needs to correct me. Before, when his hand was in mine, it was there out of necessity, not out of choice. I'd give anything at this moment to have him reach out, if only to push me away and tell me to leave him alone. He's strapped to a stretcher, and an oxygen mask covers his face. He was so alone in that big house, with no one to watch out for him.

How long had he been there? Alone like that? I'm angry at Garrett for not checking up on his little brother. I'm angry at the band members, for not fighting for him to stay. And I'm angry at Aidan for letting it happen. I'm angry at Ziggy, for not checking if anyone from Management had flown out

to Phoenix. Because if they had, they would have known. Someone would have seen how unwell he was.

But mostly, I'm angry at myself for not coming here sooner. I'm angry at myself for messing up the move, so that the bottom of Miller's shoe ended up planted in my face. None of this would have happened, and I might have been able to talk him into seeing a doctor for his cough. He would have been looked after. So, in many ways, this is my fault.

Approaching the hospital, the paramedic instructs me to remain seated until Miller has been removed from the back of the ambulance. Then I should report to the emergency room reception and give them Miller's details.

I don't even remember when his birthday is. Is it sometime in April? I find myself frantically Googling the information on my phone.

The vehicle lurches to a halt. I watch Miller being stretchered out, some doctors in scrubs waiting in the ambulance bay, tending to him immediately.

I step from the ambulance on shaky legs. I know I should call people. Tell them. But at this moment I feel confused with shock.

I look up. We appear to be at the John C. Lincoln Medical Centre, somewhere still in Phoenix.

'Are you here with the young man?' a female nurse wearing royal blue scrubs asks me.

I nod, still speechless.

'I'll need to take some details from you, sweetheart.'

I give as much information about Miller as I know before I'm ushered to a waiting area. I take a seat, scrolling through my phone, locating Garrett's number, which he gave me at the

garage an hour ago. He doesn't answer. I try Aidan's number next, but there's also no answer. I proceed to try Ziggy, then every other member of the band, but no one picks up. It breaks my heart that Miller is in a critical condition, and no one can even answer their phone.

'Bodhi, it's me, Paige,' I say, finally getting through to someone.

'Hey, Paige, what's up?' he says cheerfully. 'You make it to Phoenix alright?'

'I did. Bodhi, it's not good. Miller's ill. I'm at a hospital in Phoenix. We've just brought him here in the back of an ambulance. I need to get word to Ziggy and the boys.'

I go through the details, my voice still shaky. I hang up on a worried Bodhi when Garrett calls me back. I'm expecting him to sound more panicked than he does, but I give him my location and he tells me he's coming over.

Then my phone is ringing once more and Bodhi's calling me back. He appears to be running. 'Paige, what's the security like there? Do they know who they've just bought in? News of this breaks and that hospital is gonna be flooded with fangirls tryna track down Miller. You need to find the head of security in that hospital and you need to warn them. I'm gonna get on the phone right now.'

'I will do,' I say, wanting to say I don't care about the bloody fangirls. But he's right. Someone is going to recognise Miller soon enough, and news will break. I've witnessed for myself what some of the Rebel Heart fans are capable of.

I'm roaming the corridors, trying to find someone who looks like a security guard, when my phone rings again. I'm already perilously close to running out of battery, and I realise my charger is back in my suitcase, which is still at Miller's house.

Aidan's name is on screen.

'Aidey?' I say.

'P?' my brother's voice says, and it sounds raw. 'You're on speaker. What's happening?'

I want to sound calm for them, but the truth is that there's a lump in my throat, because I saw how awful Miller looked. 'It's Miller. He's in the emergency room. I got into his house and he wasn't responding. He was struggling to breathe.'

My voice catches, because I'm crying. I cover my eyes for a moment and try to compose myself.

'How bad is it?' I hear Ravi ask, and he sounds scared.

Sobs come out of me, unrestrained. 'I think you need to come here.'

'Paigey, it's Cal. Did he take anything? Is it some kind of overdose?'

'There was nothing I could see. It's something to do with his cough. Maybe an infection, I don't know.'

I hear J.B. say something in French.

'P, I'm gonna call you back,' Aidan says.

'I'm running out of battery. Garrett's supposed to be coming here.'

'Don't worry. We'll be there. What's the name of the hospital?'

I tell him and hang up, wipe my eyes and spy a security guard at one of the exit doors.

'Where is he now?' the guard asks, when I've explained the situation.

'Somewhere in the emergency room.'

'I'll git my boss,' the man says. 'Go back to the waiting area.'

In the waiting area, I speak to Bodhi again, then Ziggy. Aidan sends me a message.

Just about to postpone two Pittsburgh shows, he says. We haven't said why but people will know something is up. Waiting to hear when we can fly. Any news?

Nothing yet. When will you get here? I ask.

Don't know, is his answer. Send me any updates if you can.

An hour later, there's still no sign of Garrett.

It's dark outside when a nurse fetches me and escorts me through to an area where there are private rooms for patients. I'm ushered into a room where a doctor studies a chart whilst two nurses appear to be wheeling Miller's bed into place.

'Good evening, I'm Dr Bilaal. You are family, or no?'

'Uh, no. He doesn't really have much family. I'm his friend; I came with the ambulance. His brother's on his way.'

He gives a nod. 'Mr Miller has acute bacterial pneumonia. The infection has spread to his bloodstream. He's also severely dehydrated.'

My mouth falls open. 'Will he be alright?'

'We're treating him with a strong course of antibiotics, together with a steroid. His heart rate's still too high, so we're monitoring him. Time will tell how he responds.'

'Is he conscious?'

'Yes. He's responsive, but weak.'

'Can I see him?'

'Of course. But he'll need plenty of rest. It will take a few days for him to gain some strength.'

In that moment, his delivery feels perfunctory, like Miller is just another patient in a sea of other patients he has to get through. Yet before he leaves, he pauses, turning around again to face me. 'Another day and he might not have pulled through. You may have saved his life.'

I swallow. 'Thank you,' I say.

He leaves the room, as does one of the nurses. I think about updating Aidan and Ziggy, but first I need to see how Miller's doing.

I tentatively approach his bed, taking in the clear mask over his face, two separate IV drips going into his arm, and another tube taped to the back of his hand. There's a screen showing his rapid heart rate. He's gained a little colour since I found him at the house, but not enough that he looks well, which he doesn't.

A nurse is checking everything. She smiles at me as I grip my fingers together.

'Will he be able to hear me?' I ask.

She nods her head. My gaze focuses on Miller. Despite his pallor, and the fact that he's wearing a hospital gown, he still manages to look stupidly handsome.

'Miller, it's me,' I say, pulling on my own sleeve.

A moment passes, and his right eye cracks open a fraction.

'Hi,' I breathe, gripping the rails on the side of his bed, trying to offer him an encouraging smile.

Miller lifts a hand and moves his mask out of the way.

'What are you doing here?' he says, his voice a gentle croak.

'I came to your house. I couldn't get in so I had to go and see Garrett. I called the ambulance.'

Miller's eye closes again.

'Garrett's on his way,' I continue. 'So are the boys. Ziggy's trying to organise a flight for them.'

'Tell 'em not to come,' Miller whispers. 'Don't wanna see 'em.'

'Miller, they're worried about you.'

‘Don’t care. Don’t wanna talk to ’em.’

He coughs a little. The nurse comes over, nudging his mask back into position. ‘He needs to keep this on,’ she says. ‘Probably best that he doesn’t try and talk too much.’

‘Can I stay with him?’ I ask.

‘I’ll get you a chair.’

Whilst I wait for her, I take Miller’s hand. His eye cracks open once more, registering our physical contact, but then, as if it’s too much effort to glare at me, it drifts shut again, and he lets me hold onto him.

Miller sleeps. When I leave the room, I notice two security guards stood either side of the door. Walking down the corridor, I check the level of battery power on my dying phone then glance through a window where a TV is on at a nurses’ station.

I come to a standstill. The red and white headline reads: *FORMER REBEL HEART BAND MEMBER HOSPITALISED IN PHOENIX, AZ.*

I turn around, try to get my bearings and attempt to work out the direction of the front of the hospital. Thinking I know the way, I take large strides down a corridor, determined to find a window. When I find one, I look out.

At ground level, under illuminated streetlamps, there are at least six news trucks parked outside, a short way back from the entrance to the hospital. At least three uniformed security guards are putting up metal barriers. There are already some fans gathered, looking tearful, some with placards made of cardboard that read *GET WELL SOON MILLER!*

And all I can think at this moment is that I want everyone to leave him alone.

Chapter Sixteen

‘Where are you now?’ I ask Aidan the following morning over the phone.

‘Just leaving the airport,’ he replies, as I stifle a yawn. ‘We’ll be there soon. What’s the latest?’

I look down into my coffee in a polystyrene cup, out of a machine. ‘No update. Garrett made an appearance at midnight.’

Aidan clicks his tongue. ‘Surprised he turned up at all. Is he still there?’

‘He’s in with Miller now.’

‘Is Miller talking?’

‘Not much.’

He pauses. ‘Did he change his mind? About seeing us?’

‘I haven’t asked again. You should know there’re hundreds of fans gathered outside the hospital. Journalists everywhere. One of the nurses told me they’re dressing in doctors’ uniforms to try and sneak in the building, so security is tight.’

‘Have you slept?’

‘A little.’

I’m exhausted, having spent the night curled up in a chair. When Garrett arrived, I could smell the alcohol on his

breath. I didn't ask where he'd been. After a couple of phone calls from Pittsburgh, Bodhi had someone procure the correct phone charger and deliver it to me at the hospital, so I now have a full battery. That's how things seem to work in this celebrity bubble I exist in: where the boys are transported across the country by private jet. News of Miller's hospitalisation hit the news before that of yet-more postponed concerts, but I've looked at social media and everyone seems to understand the reasons why. Miller's room is now full of flowers and cards from well-wishers to the point where the nurses don't know where to put them.

The hospital staff appear to be receiving briefings from somewhere, because a PR-type woman shows me some kind of VIP suite that the boys will be able to spend time in on arrival. I explained to her that relations between Miller and the rest of Rebel Heart are a little strained, and that Miller might not wish to see them, at least not immediately. I wonder whether it's Ziggy she's been speaking to, or someone else.

I wait in the VIP suite for the boys to arrive. Aidan is first to walk in and I find myself scrambling for his embrace. He holds onto me for some time, before I give the others a hug. I step back and realise none of them look like they've had much sleep. J.B.'s hair is longer than usual and even Aidan has bags under his eyes. Cal hasn't shaved and Ravi looks to be on the verge of tears.

'How is he?' J.B. asks, as they huddle around me.

'He hasn't said much. The doctor said he'll need time to get his strength back, but he seems to be responding to the antibiotics. He still looks awful.'

Behind them, Ziggy enters the suite together with the man with slicked-back hair I recognise from New York, the day after Miller quit the band. His presence makes me uneasy.

‘Do you think we can see him?’ Ravi asks.

‘Why don’t I go and tell him you’re here?’

Aidan nods, and perhaps he shares my uneasiness, because he knows he and Miller, more than anyone, have burned the most bridges, and somehow I’ve ended up as mediator in this situation.

In Miller’s room, Garrett has moved the chair I slept in next to the bed. His feet rest on the edge of the mattress. Miller has gained a pillow or two, so is more upright, but his eyes are still closed and he’s lying motionless.

‘Hey, Aidan’s sister,’ Garrett says and I offer him a thin-lipped smile. ‘What’s happening?’

I go straight to Miller. I touch his hand again, giving his palm a squeeze. ‘Miller, the boys are here. They’re desperate to see you.’

This time, both of Miller’s eyes drift open. He shakes his head.

‘They fucking threw him in the trash can,’ Garrett says in a low growl from behind me. ‘Why should he listen to a word they have to say?’

I keep my focus on Miller’s face. Yes, Garrett has a point. But my brother’s out there, and I know he’s hurting.

‘Miller, they’ve come all this way. They want you to know that they’re here for you. Please. They don’t have to stay for long.’

‘Tell them to fuck off, Danny.’

I throw Garrett a look that says, *you’re really not helping.*

Miller reaches up and pulls off his mask. ‘I’ll talk to Ravi, that’s it,’ he breathes, his tone hoarse.

‘You don’t owe them nothin’,’ Garrett spits in disgust.

‘Garrett,’ I snap, because I’ve literally had enough. ‘Maybe you could fetch yourself a coffee?’

When I re-enter the suite, the man with the slicked-back hair and the square jaw appears to be holding court, with the boys and Ziggy all gathered around him. ‘— I say you make your apologies to him now, we put out some shots of you guys around the bed, Miller’s got his thumbs up, everybody’s happy, you’ve reconciled, he’s back in the band... Then we give him a couple of weeks to recuperate, then we can reintroduce him on the tour.’

The boys are all listening to him. He’s not even stopped talking before I begin shaking my head.

‘What the hell are you even talking about?’ I blurt out loud. All eyes shoot to me. I don’t think anyone noticed me come back into the room. Not that it deters me, because I’m stalking towards the man like he’s my nemesis, and my only goal in life is to protect Miller from sleazeballs like him. ‘What is wrong with you? Miller can barely even move! He can barely open his eyes! It’s not a matter of him resting up for a few days. He almost died!’

‘Tanner, this is my sister, Paige,’ Aidan says hurriedly, introducing us. ‘Paige, this is Tanner Vincent. From the management company.’

Tanner gives me a once-over, perhaps wondering why I seem to have a say in anything.

‘Do *not* treat this as some kind of twisted PR exercise,’ I state emphatically at him, because I refuse to back down.

‘Mate,’ Cal says in Tanner’s direction. ‘Paigey’s right. He’s gonna need some time.’

‘Doesn’t he want to be back in the band?’ Tanner says.

‘We don’t know that yet,’ Aidan says grimly. ‘We just wanna make sure he’s okay.’

‘He says he’ll talk to Ravi, and Ravi only,’ I say.

The boys look to Ravi. Ravi has the sweetest disposition of them all. Miller knows it, and so do they. Ravi’s never taken sides against anyone.

Ravi nods in my direction. For a moment, he looks nervous.

‘Anything you want me to say to him?’ Ravi says.

Aidan nods. ‘Like we talked about. Tell him we’re sorry.’

J.B. rubs his face. ‘That if he wants back in, it’s not an issue.’

Ravi looks to Cal. ‘Mate, don’t hold back alright? Tell him we love him and Rebel Heart fucking sucks without Danny Miller.’

‘Look at you, Momma Bear,’ Ravi hums to me as we walk down the corridor together. ‘Standing up to Management like that and looking out for Miller.’

A security guard is following us. Ravi wears beige cargo trousers, and a black shirt over a black vest. He garners stares from all those already inside the hospital, because presumably news has spread of Rebel Heart’s arrival.

Garrett has stayed away. In Miller’s room, when Ravi sees Miller, he pulls up short. His face crumples a little, perhaps because he wasn’t expecting Miller to look quite so ill.

‘Oh my God,’ he whispers and I squeeze his hand.

‘Is he awake?’ Ravi asks, moving closer, at which point Miller’s eyes creep open.

Slowly, he removes the oxygen mask. ‘Hey, brother,’ Miller whispers, and Ravi bursts into tears.

‘Don’t cry on me, man,’ Miller croaks and he manages a smile.

Ravi goes to him, leans over and wraps him in a hug. Miller tentatively lifts one arm. I love that Miller, the alpha male, and Ravi, who has only recently come out as gay, have such a special little bond. Seeing them together warms my heart.

Ravi pulls back. 'Thank God you're okay,' he says. 'We miss you, man.'

'Nah, you don't need me,' Miller whispers.

'We do. It doesn't work without you. We all said some dumb things. You gotta come back. We need you. I need you. Aidey's done nothing but beat himself up. Cal told me to tell you that Rebel Heart fucking sucks without Danny Miller.'

Miller tries to laugh, but it morphs into a cough. I move to replace his oxygen mask and I catch Ravi's look between us both.

'You're lucky to have Paige, huh?' Ravi says.

'Guess so,' Miller croaks.

'Can I get the others?' Ravi asks hopefully. 'Please? They just wanna see you.'

'I dunno, Rav,' Miller says.

Miller looks to me. I give him a hopeful smile. I find myself squeezing his hand and Miller lowers his gaze to my fingers. He removes his mask again. 'Alright, already.'

Ravi backs away with a grin.

'Tell them to go easy!' I shout after him.

Alone, we're quiet for a moment. I'm conscious that I'm still holding his hand. 'Thanks for looking after me, Paige,' Miller says, and I think it might be the first time ever that he's called me by my first name.

Minutes later, the boys are all piling into the room at once, clamouring to see Miller, and I feel the need to step back. I let go of his hand and move to one side as Cal is the

first to the bedside, followed by J.B. Ravi comes too. I notice Aidan keeps his distance at the end of the bed. Aidan, who used to be Miller's best friend.

'What the fuck did you do to yourself?' Cal blurts, as J.B. gently fist-bumps Miller.

'Look at you,' J.B. says. 'This is just a bad hangover, right?'

Miller chuckles, lifting his mask from his face. 'What can I say? It was a rough night.'

His gaze settles on Aidan. 'Hey, Aid.'

A smile tugs at Aidan's lips. He shakes his head. 'Glad you're okay. You gave us a scare, man.'

'Guess I can always rely on at least one McArthur to get me out of a jam.'

Aidan looks my way. 'Think you got lucky with the one that you got.' He gets choked up when he adds, 'She insisted, and I'm glad she didn't listen to me.'

I feel the base of my neck warming as all eyes go to me.

'You saved our boy's life, Paigey,' Cal says, as Ravi comes over to hug me.

'I'm so sorry, Mill,' Aidan breathes, and there are tears in his eyes. 'Are we good?'

'We're good, man,' Miller croaks, and Aidan goes to give him a gentle hug.

'Miller, put your mask back on,' I remind him, and he does as he's told.

'Still got McArthurs bossing you around though.' Aidan grins, and a smile tugs at Miller's lips.

We all look up as Ziggy enters the room, followed by Tanner Vincent. I stay in my corner as they too approach Miller, and Tanner gets his photo of Miller and the boys, which annoys me no end. No one has addressed the idea of Miller

rejoining the group, and I can only hope that Tanner respects the need for Miller to be given time to heal.

After he's spoken to Miller, Ziggy approaches me sheepishly. He rubs his hands together before holding up his palms in my direction.

'I said I would worry about Miller,' he says. 'Looks like I didn't worry enough. I have you to thank, for taking care of him.'

'Don't be silly, Ziggy. I did what anyone would do.'

'The fact that you're still 'ere tells me that's not true. You've gone above and beyond for that boy.'

I look to the floor.

'Now, listen,' Ziggy continues. 'Tanner's booked Miller a nurse for when he gets out of this place. A private one. She'll come and visit Miller at his place in Phoenix, at least initially, whilst he's on the mend. For a couple of weeks. But I talked to Aidey. I know you and Miller don't always see eye to eye, but Aidey and I would be happier if you were here to... you know... to keep one eye on him as well. Until he's better. Since you're doing such a bang-up job. How would that sound?'

Aidan comes over before I can give my answer.

'Did you ask her?' Aidan says to Ziggy.

I look to them both. It's not like I have anything better to do with my life right now. 'Of course I'll stay with him,' I say, feeling Aidan's arm snake around my shoulders.

'Thanks, P,' Aidan whispers, and for the first time since arriving at the hospital, I believe I've done a good job. 'You're the best.'

'If I'm going to be staying, I need your help with something first,' I say.

Chapter Seventeen

‘What the hell is all this?’ Cal blurts as I enter Miller’s house with the rest of the band, Ziggy, Bodhi and a couple of other security guards who I’ve not seen before. Tanner Vincent is, thankfully, nowhere to be found.

‘I think it’s furniture,’ I say, happy to see that my suitcase is where I left it. ‘But I’m guessing some of it needs building, and Miller doesn’t have a proper bed. The only thing he does have is working internet.’

‘Someone get me a knife,’ Cal says, peeling off the tape of one of the boxes in one fell swoop, whilst J.B. follows suit on a different box.

Ravi’s doing the same underneath the stairs. ‘I found the couch,’ he calls out, and suddenly all I can hear is the ripping of tape from cardboard.

‘Does Miller have any tools?’ Aidan asks. ‘Like a drill or something?’

Half an hour later, Bodhi’s dispatched the two security guards to buy a couple of power drills. J.B. and Aidan are carrying parts of a bed upstairs to Miller’s room, and Ravi is unpacking parts of a sofa. Cal is kneeling on the floor screwing the flat-packed pieces of table together with an Allen key.

Ziggy has taken his jacket off and is looking to get the large flat-screen TV mounted onto the wall.

'I found a second bed,' Bodhi calls out from a downstairs room.

'Thank God for that,' Aidan replies from over the banister, raising his eyebrows in my direction.

My job is tidying up and working out what else Miller needs in his house. I've washed the sheets from his mattress as well as located a set of clean towels and linen. We're going to need more, and I'm going to need things for my own room. It's an odd feeling, knowing that I'm going to be staying with Miller. At least there'll be a nurse visiting initially.

I order lunch for delivery using Aidan's card, and my brother and J.B. spend the afternoon drilling two king-sized bed frames together. Cal and Ziggy prove experts at constructing flat-packed furniture. Bodhi takes Ravi and I to local home store where we buy a series of rugs and lamps, and I choose some kitchenware, more towels and linen, all paid for by Ravi. A small crowd gathers, and Ravi has to sign autographs for excitable fans.

By the time we make it back and Ravi and Bodhi help me unload the car, the house is looking almost liveable.

'Paige, we gotta get the lads back to the airport,' Ziggy says, looking sweaty.

'Of course,' I say. 'Thank you for this.'

'Come see your room,' Aidan says, beckoning me upstairs.

J.B. is in my new bedroom, loading the mattress onto the bed. 'You buy linen?' he asks and I find myself blushing because he's stripped off his plaid shirt and tied it in a knot around his waist. He's down to wearing only a vest with his jeans.

Aidan nudges me in my back because he knows I'm pervy.

'Yes, we're good. Ravi paid for everything. I can do all this.'

'If it's just you and Miller, you might want to put a lock on your door,' J.B. says with a wink as he leaves the room.

Aidan's expression collapses into a deep frown.

'Miller doesn't even like me,' I remind him, with a playful punch to the arm. 'As we've already established, I am the last girl in the world he would attempt to sleep with. And right now, I don't think he's even capable of trying to sleep with anyone.'

Aidan looks to the floor. 'P, I think I need to tell you something about Miller.'

'What is it?'

Aidan goes to say something when Ravi walks in with the linen we bought. 'Paige, where you want all this?' he hums, holding the pile in his arms.

'Um, just on the bed, thanks, Rav,' is my response, at which point I search my brother's face. 'What were you going to say?'

'Uhm. Nothing. Not important,' he clips. 'Cheers, Rav.'

'So now what's the plan?' Ravi asks me.

'I'll stay here tonight. I'll go back and see Miller in the morning.'

Aidan wraps me in an embrace, brushing a kiss against my temple. 'Shout if you need anything, yeah?'

'I might need money.'

My brother reaches into his pocket for his wallet. He pulls out his credit card. 'Take this. PIN number is zero-three-zero-eight.'

'Our birthday. Nice. Not obvious or anything.'

'Just don't buy any designer handbags with it, 'kay?'

Downstairs, I bid farewell to each of them one by one, all

of them thanking me for taking care of Miller. I wish them luck on the next section of tour, sending my regards to Darcey, Jahtoya, Nikita and Carmen, not knowing when or if I might be back.

And then it's me. On my own. In Miller's house.

I make both the beds, unpack all the items Ravi and I bought together, and start work on decorating the house. When night falls, I work out how to order groceries on the internet for delivery.

I make sure the house is ready for him, for when he comes home.

Oddly, it feels like the sort of thing only a girlfriend would do.

'How's everything?' Bianca says over the phone to me from New York, two days later. 'It looks like madness over there.'

I'm standing by the window that looks down onto the entrance of the hospital. Even now, the press is still gathered outside, as well as fans with their placards, wholly unaware Miller is being discharged in about an hour from now, or that Bodhi has arranged for us to be escorted in the back of a private car that will be leaving from a different entrance.

It's the first time we've spoken since I arrived in Phoenix, but Bianca has been sending me messages of support, having received updates from Cal. 'Is it weird that I feel removed from the madness?' I say.

'I think that just means you're in the eye of the storm. How's Miller doing?'

'Good. I think. He hasn't said much. But the doctors say he's on the mend and I'm waiting to take him home.'

'Home?' Bianca exclaims.

‘As in, his house.’

‘You do know that once he’s recovered, he is going to try and sleep with you, right?’

‘Why does everyone keep saying that?’

‘Because it’s Miller, that’s what he does!’

‘It’s well-documented that we despise one another. You know that.’

‘But you’re gonna be stuck in his house with him. Alone.’

I let out a giggle. ‘I think I can handle myself. Tell me what’s happening with Cal. Is Darcey keeping her hands to herself? I’m sorry I’m not there to keep an eye on her.’

I hear Bianca sigh. ‘So far so good. At least, I think? This new job isn’t allowing me to travel as much as I want, so I didn’t make it to Pittsburgh. Cal says she’s been cool, and I can’t not believe him.’

‘That’s because Darcey knows she doesn’t stand a chance with him. Everyone knows Cal only has eyes for you.’

‘You’re a honey.’

‘I’m *right*, that’s what I am.’

‘Well, best of luck with Miller. Try not to sleep with him, remember?’

I’m still laughing as we say our goodbyes and I hang up on Bianca. I walk back along the corridor to Miller’s room, where two security guards are still stationed outside. They smile at me as I let myself in.

Dr Bilaal and one other nurse are still with him. Miller is sat on the edge of his hospital bed, his legs dangling over the edge. He’s dressed in clothes I brought with me for him to wear – some jeans and a cotton hooded job – clutching a baseball cap between his fingers. He hasn’t shaved and still looks a little pale. The doctor is emphasising the importance of him to rest and recuperate to recover from his ordeal, talking

Miller through the antibiotics he will still need to take, and the need to stay fully hydrated.

There's an impatient look on Miller's face. 'Can I get out of here now, Doc?' he asks with a sigh.

I had hoped Garrett would be here to help me get Miller home, but he said he had to work. So now Miller just gets me. So far, he can't even bring himself to look my way.

The nurse makes a move to grab a hospital wheelchair.

'I am not sitting in that,' Miller croaks. 'I can friggin' walk.'

'Hospital policy, I'm afraid,' the nurse says.

Miller hides under his cap, keeping his head down as two security guards escort us down the corridor to the lifts, Miller ensconced in the wheelchair. I'm holding onto a bag and a pile of cards that have been sent to the hospital for him. At the ground floor, we're escorted to patient discharge, where there is a 4x4 with blacked-out windows waiting for us, meaning we've avoided all the press vans and the majority of fangirls who have remained diligently outside the main entrance. I feel a tad disappointed for them, and impressed by their tenacity, but right now the last thing Miller needs is to be signing autographs or being hugged by enamoured fans. As he slides into the back seat, I get in next to him, and we sit in silence. As if on cue, my phone buzzes with a message from Bodhi.

'Bodhi's making sure there's a guard outside your house for the duration of your stay,' I tell him, as a couple of porters load some of the bouquets of flowers into the back of the vehicle. There are plenty more to follow.

Miller keeps his head down. 'Right,' he murmurs.

Once I've opened the door for him, Miller steps inside his house. He stops, looking around in surprise.

‘Wow,’ he says.

I glance outside at the two men unloading all the flowers from the back of the car. I’m starting to wonder whether we should have left them all behind, because Miller doesn’t own any vases.

‘Ravi put the sofas together,’ I tell him. ‘Cal and Bodhi drilled most of the furniture together down here. Aidey and J.B. put the beds together upstairs. Ziggy mounted the TV. It looks a lot better, don’t you think?’

Miller nods his head. ‘Haven’t seen my phone, have you?’

‘I put it on charge upstairs beside your bed.’

‘Right. Thanks.’

Miller ambles towards the staircase, still wearing his cap.

‘Is there anything I can get for you?’ I ask.

‘I’m good.’

‘You are going back to bed, right?’

‘Yup.’

‘Okay, good. The doctor said plenty of rest, remember?’

‘I got it, Paige,’ he croaks.

‘Okay, then.’

At the top of the stairs, he turns a corner. I hear his bedroom door click shut. The two security guards start bringing flowers into the house. They keep on coming.

A second car arrives with more flowers. By the time both vehicles leave, one security guard is left. He closes the entry gate, putting on his sunglasses to keep watch outside the property.

I close the front door. Upstairs, Miller has turned some music on, and, looking around me, surrounded by endless bouquets of flowers, it occurs to me that I’m in for a lonely few weeks.

Chapter Eighteen

The security guard outside has given me a two-way radio. That way he can tell me whether there are legitimate visitors at the gate.

On the kitchen island, the radio crackles. 'Paige?' the guard says. 'The nurse is here.'

I swipe it up, look for the button, and press it. 'Great. Send her in.'

I go to the front door. I see the front vehicle gate opening and a boxy, blue, mud-splattered Nissan comes and parks beside Miller's gargantuan, shiny Ford truck.

A voluptuous woman gets out wearing navy trousers, a purple top and a mask covering her face, her hair scraped back into a messy ponytail. I open the front door and allow her inside. She carries a small bag.

'You must be the lady Tanner sent,' I say with a smile.

'Who's Tanner?' she questions with a frown.

I bristle. 'From the management company?'

'Sweetie, they just gave me the address.'

I close the door behind her. Little alarm bells go off in my mind. 'Miller's upstairs. We got back a few hours ago. I'm Paige.'

‘Sure,’ she says, though she then squints oddly at me. ‘You got all his medicines?’

‘In a bag, through here,’ I say.

Upstairs, in Miller’s bedroom, I linger in the doorway. I can tell that the nurse’s demeanour has altered. It doesn’t take a genius to work out that she’s recognised Miller, and suddenly she’s being uber friendly. Chatting away to Miller about his Arizonan roots, she takes his blood pressure and listens to his chest, then uses the little pulse oximeter on his finger to check his heart rate and saturation. I’m even more annoyed when she starts asking him why he left the band. Miller says as little as possible, a far-off look in his eye. He swallows the tablets she gives him without question.

‘I knew I recognised you,’ she says as I follow her back down the staircase, when she’s all finished. ‘You’re that Aidan McArthur’s sister, right?’

My lips twist. ‘Yes. I’m Aidan’s sister.’

‘Nobody told me who I was gonna see. Now I see why it was all this big *hush-hush* secret. They only just announced on the local news an hour ago that he’d got out.’

‘Well, we appreciate your discretion,’ I say. ‘You’ll come back tomorrow?’

‘I certainly will. Might bring my granddaughter if you don’t mind.’

‘Actually, I do mind,’ I say, trying to remain polite but firm. Now is not the time for autographs and meet-and-greets.

Something like irritation flashes across her features, but she bites her tongue. ‘I’ll be here around nine,’ she says.

The following morning, the nurse arrives early at 8:30 a.m.

I've only just got dressed from my shower. My hair is still wet to the tips, to the point that it's dripping everywhere.

Once she's inside, I walk her upstairs. She's carrying the same bag as yesterday and wearing what looks to be the same clothes, only instead of trainers there is now a pair of Crocs on her feet. She waddles up behind me, a little out of breath.

'Miller is only just awake I think,' I tell her and push his door open. I look to the bed. Miller's drifted off again, the light still off.

'If you don't mind waiting there, I'm just going to grab a towel for my hair,' I say, disappearing to the other side of the corridor and ducking inside my bedroom.

When I re-emerge moments later, the nurse moves her hands instantly behind her back, a distinctly guilty look flitting across her features. I look at her angle outside Miller's door, and it dawns on me what she's done.

I drop my towel. A moment later, I'm bearing down on her.

'Give me that phone,' I snap.

She leans back, pretending to be affronted. 'I dunno what you're talking about.'

'Give it to me... now,' I growl, reaching behind her back. She dodges me, then holds the handset high above her head. It's an idiotic move on her part, because I reach up and grab her wrist with one hand and wrestle the phone free from her pudgy fingers.

I back away from her. She starts yelling at me. The screen is still open. I navigate to the gallery and find two shots of Miller sleeping, taken through the door but zoomed in in the dim light.

'How *dare* you!' I shriek at her, and she looks shocked at my level of anger.

It's a phone make I'm familiar with, so I delete both pictures from her gallery, before navigating to her deleted items and erasing both images from there as well.

'You can leave now,' I say to her in a low tone, holding out her handset so she can snatch it back.

'I haven't done what I came to do,' she stutters.

'I don't care. You're fired.'

I've never fired anyone before in my life. I've never really had an employee to fire. But I'll be damned if she's ever coming back to this house. 'Get the fuck out,' I say, in case she was in any doubt.

She fixes me with her eyes, which are slightly too close together. 'You can't fire me, you hoity-toity bitch,' she complains.

'I think you'll find I just did. Get out of this house and don't come back.'

She turns and starts waddling. I follow closely on her tail, then out of the door, right to her car. As she's scrambling to switch on the engine, I go to the gate where the security guard is looking at me, all surprised.

'Never let her in this house again,' I fume. 'She doesn't come back here, understood?'

'Why? What happened?' he asks.

'I caught her taking photographs of Miller sleeping. Photographs the press would pay a fortune for.'

'You should call the cops.'

'I don't want to draw attention. But she doesn't come back. Understood? I'm calling Ziggy now.'

The nurse is completing a very awkward three-point turn in her beaten up Nissan, while the guard opens the vehicle gate. As she leaves, she scowls in my direction through the driver's side window, and I offer her a middle finger in exchange.

Inside, I slam the front door, locating my own phone from the sofa. I scroll through my contacts and locate Ziggy's number.

Ziggy answers on the second ring.

'Good morning, Paige,' he says cheerfully. 'How's our boy?'

I don't hold back. 'That nurse Tanner hired was taking photographs of him whilst he was sleeping. Presumably so she could then sell to the highest bidder! Ziggy, I swear to God, Tanner Vincent is a total cowboy. He hired some nurse from the sticks without even running a basic background check. The moment she knew Miller was her patient, she saw dollar signs.'

'Wait,' Ziggy says, unsure. 'She's now got photos of Miller on her phone?'

'No,' I say, reassuring him. 'I caught her red-handed then deleted them from her phone. And then from her deleted items. We should be in the clear. I gave her the sack though. Told her not to come back.'

'Do you need another nurse?'

'No, I don't want another one! I'll be his bloody nurse. I don't trust anyone else in this place. Tell Tanner Vincent I said he's a complete shit.'

'You're worth your weight in gold, my girl, you are. Miller doesn't deserve you.'

My tone softens. 'Well, I'm all he's got.'

'Well done.'

'Are you going to call Tanner?'

'And tell him he's a shit? Nothing would give me more pleasure, Paige. Is there anything else you need?'

'Not now. Thanks, Zig.'

I hang up and toss my handset on the sofa. That's when

I look up to find Miller is stood at the top of the stairs with his shirt off, leaning against the metal railing, wearing only a pair of black jogging bottoms.

‘Wow. You chewed him out,’ he says quietly.

I raise my chin. ‘That nurse was trying to take pictures of you.’

‘So I heard. Good thing you fired her.’

‘She deserved it. Aidan would never have forgiven me if a photograph of you had been published, taken in your own bloody house. You should go back to bed. Would you like me to bring you some breakfast?’

‘If you’re making some.’

‘There’s cereal, or I can make you some toast.’

‘Cereal is good.’

‘Okay, I’ll be right up.’

He lingers for a moment and his eyes go to mine. ‘So... I guess... you’re my nurse now. Huh.’

I force a smile. ‘I guess I am.’

‘This feels more like lunch,’ Miller comments drily when I make it upstairs to his room with a bowl of cereal and a jug of cold milk on a tray. He’s in bed, looking at his phone.

‘I’ve been busy,’ I say, without telling him that I’ve been online to order a blood pressure machine, a digital thermometer and a pulse oximeter for same day delivery.

He grunts in response. I place the tray beside his bed, then reach for his phone and take it right out of his fingers.

‘Hey!’ he croaks at me. ‘I was looking at that.’

‘If I’m going to nurse you, Miller, you get to play by my rules. You can spend thirty minutes on social media a day. That’s it.’

‘That’s ridiculous. I’m not a kid.’

‘Maybe if you don’t act like one, I’ll stop treating you like one. Now, eat your breakfast.’

He grabs the tray and sloshes milk into the bowl. ‘I was better off alone,’ he grumbles, digging in with his spoon.

‘We both know that’s not true.’

He eats his food in silence. I watch him, pretending to clear up, then go to the window.

‘What’s that on the other side of the pool?’ I ask, looking down towards a single-storey building with a flat roof that seems to back onto the garage.

‘It’s a gym,’ he says.

I roll my eyes. ‘Of course it is.’

I let him eat. ‘I need to do something with the flowers today,’ I tell him. ‘They’re taking over the place. Do you want me to keep all the cards?’

‘Whatever you wanna do, Paige.’

‘Well, some of the flowers are already wilting. I could make a list of who they’re all from, in case you want to say thank you?’

‘You my PA now, as well as my nurse?’

I give him a look. ‘Hey, grumpy. It appears no one else showed up.’

‘That other nurse did. You sent her way.’

‘Oh, *excuse me*, I hadn’t realised you *wanted* to be pictured asleep in your own bed on the front page of every gossip magazine in the western world. Next time, I’ll switch the light on for her, shall I, so she can get a better shot?’

I storm out of the room, still holding his phone. I make it to the top of the stairs before I hear his strained voice.

‘Paige,’ he calls, though it’s more of a croak.

‘What?’ I snap.

‘Can you come back in here, please?’

I let my shoulders droop. I turn on my heel, walking back to Miller’s room. I lean against the door frame. He’s moved the tray off his lap.

‘What?’ I question him again.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says, and he sounds sincere. ‘No one’s ever stood up for me like that before.’

I shift my position. It’s not often I get an apology from Miller. Sitting upright in bed, he seems to have lost his boy band aura. He’s rendered almost normal, despite still being infuriatingly handsome. Plus, his hair looks nice when it’s not filled with gunk, and he’s had a shave since yesterday. It makes it impossible to stay angry at him. ‘I’m sure that’s not true,’ I mumble.

‘It’s true,’ he says, moving to get out of bed.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’ I ask.

‘I’m gonna get a soda.’

‘You can have another orange juice.’

‘I’m not even allowed a soda now?’

‘Get back into bed. Rest. I’ll bring you an orange-juice-flavoured soda. Without the fizz.’

‘Paige, your nursing skills are killing me here.’

‘This is me looking after you. Better get used to it.’

He relaxes back into the pillows, unimpressed.

I’m downstairs, sorting through some of the flowers, regrouping some of the healthier stems and getting rid of the ones that are dead or dying. I keep a pile of all the cards that have been written to Miller. There are still more flowers sitting in water in the sink.

There are cards from the record company, from people I

don't recognise, from sponsors, and fans, but mostly they're from local charities: women's shelters, homeless shelters, food banks, right here in Arizona. And the latter aren't generic either. They all thank Miller for his continued support and wish him a speedy recovery.

Miller's phone is on the side. It keeps buzzing with notifications and messages. I'm happy that I did the right thing by taking it off him. My own phone rings moments later. Rohan is calling me.

'Hey,' I say to my brother, as I watch Miller's phone screen light up, this time with a phone call, the name on screen shown as 'Harlan'.

'You're staying in Phoenix?' he asks me outright.

I'd updated my family on Miller's situation, and me being at the hospital. They've seen the news in the press. I hadn't got round to updating them as to my current plans to stay with him.

'Just for the time being. Aidan and Ziggy asked if I would keep an eye on Miller for a while.'

'This feels an awful lot like you doing Aidan's dirty work,' Rohan grumbles.

'I'm still getting paid as a dancer.'

'I should hope so. They're taking advantage of you. Danny Miller doesn't know how lucky he is. I thought you didn't even like him.'

I laugh. 'I'm putting my emotions to one side, Ro. He doesn't have anyone else.'

'So, what, he's your latest charity case? Like that time you found that dog by the side of the road and you wanted to keep it.'

I'm still laughing. A message pops up on Miller's phone

screen from Harlan. *In the car. I'm two minutes out*, it reads. I frown but try to refocus on what Rohan just said.

'Oh my God, that dog was the cutest. I wasn't the only one who wanted to keep him... Jo-Jo wanted to keep him too.'

'Miller's not an abandoned Labrador puppy, Paige. I'm sure he can look after himself.'

'You didn't see him, Ro. He needs someone to look out for him.'

I hear his heavy sigh, but through the front window I'm conscious of a silver-grey car pulling up outside the front gates.

'Ro, I'm going to have to call you back,' I say.

'Okay, fine,' he says, and I hang up.

I go to the front door and peer out of the side window. Outside, the guard is speaking to a man who wears a powder blue shirt over grey trousers and an overcoat. He's looking irate and points towards the house.

I'm guessing this is Harlan, whoever that is. I take Miller's phone with me as I go outside.

'Can I help you?' I say from my side of the gate.

'Says he's here to see Miller,' the security guard tells me.

The man steps nearer to me. He has a weather-beaten face. 'He knows me as Harlan.'

'I don't know you as anything. What do you want?'

'I want what he owes me. I want my money.'

'Money for what?'

He looks me up and down. 'For my services.'

My skin prickles. I don't know what services he's referring to, and whilst he doesn't look dodgy, he doesn't look friendly either.

'Wait here. I'll speak to him.'

The man is annoyed. I feel his glare on my back as I walk

inside. I close the door, then proceed straight up the stairs to Miller's room. He's dozing in bed, his eyes closed.

'There's a man outside the gate wanting money,' I state, and Miller stirs.

He pulls himself upright. 'Shit. Harlan? He's here already?' Miller goes to get out of the bed.

'I'm not letting him in, Miller. He can come back another time.'

Miller rolls his eyes and sighs heavily. 'In the kitchen downstairs. The drawer nearest the window. There's a brown envelope in there. Can you give it to him?'

I walk calmly back downstairs. In the kitchen drawer, I locate the envelope Miller is referring to. My jaw goes slack when I see the number of one hundred dollar bills it contains. Walking back outside, I hold it through the bars of the vehicle gate. Harlan takes it, checks the contents and appears to be satisfied.

'Is that everything?' I ask.

'We're good,' he says, and goes back to his car.

Chapter Nineteen

I avoid Miller for the rest of the day, except to deliver him lunch. He knows I'm annoyed with him, and I can tell he's waiting for me to ask who Harlan was, and about the money.

I'm not going to give him the satisfaction, as I very much doubt I'd get a straight answer.

Outside the gate, there's a changeover of guard for the night shift. The new guard I recognise from the hospital. He's armed and stays inside his car.

My online order arrived in the late afternoon. It's dark outside when I go back up to Miller's room. He lies in bed, a pair of headphones over his ears, wearing a T-shirt and shorts. The 'A' logo on his shirt I now know represents the Arizona Wildcats college football team.

I take a seat next to him, put the blood pressure monitor, the pulse oximeter and the thermometer down beside him on the bed.

'Evening, Doc,' he says, looking down at everything.

I pick up the thermometer, first taking his temperature in his ear. I look at the reading. 'Slightly up,' I say.

I put down the thermometer and pick up the cuff for the blood pressure monitor. I turn Miller's hand so I can slide it

up his left arm, the one with no tattoos. When my fingers brush against his skin, it sends an odd fizzing sensation through me. Miller watches me work, as I fasten the cuff in place.

I press the button on the monitor and it whirs, the cuff tightening around Miller's substantial bicep, the Velcro crackling under the strain.

When it's finished, the cuff loosens, the pressure going out of it.

The reading appears on the monitor and I reach for my phone.

'Am I okay, Doc?' Miller questions a little playfully.

'Be quiet. I'm Googling.'

'You're prettier than Dr Bilaal.'

'Shut up, Miller.'

'Seriously, is it fine?'

'Seems to be. A little high maybe.'

I loosen the cuff, tugging it back down his arm. Now it's the turn of the pulse oximeter. I take him by the hand and I peg the device to his outstretched finger. When the reading appears, I tap the information into my phone again.

'Am I dying?'

'Don't be dramatic.'

'Says the girl who won't let me leave my bed.'

I raise my eyes to him. He's cocked his head to one side and is smiling softly at me. My heart does a little flip. It's not often I see Miller produce a genuine smile.

I pull the pulse oximeter from his finger. 'Who was that man today?'

'Harlan?'

'Yes, Harlan. Why were you paying him money?'

'I couldn't possibly say.'

‘Was it for something illegal? Or don’t you trust me enough to tell me?’

‘Not illegal, no.’

He pauses. I look to my empty hands. He doesn’t have to say it out loud for me to know that he doesn’t trust me.

He shakes his head. ‘I’m just... it’s not something I’m ready to share.’

‘There was a lot of cash in that envelope, Miller. I’d hate to see you—’

‘It’s not what you think,’ he cuts in.

We’ve reached a new level of awkward so I gather up my things. ‘Your saturation level is still a little low. Do you want dinner?’

‘Not very hungry. Might take a shower.’

‘You should eat. I’ll make you something anyway.’

That evening, Aidan sends me some footage of Rebel Heart’s concert in Washington DC. In it, they dedicate a song to Miller, sending him a get-well-soon message. It’s a sweet moment, and as they sing the song on stage, the support given to them by the crowd is touching.

When I go up to Miller’s room, I find him asleep. I watch him in the dim light, his chest lightly rising and falling. He looks serene. Untroubled. I’m still thinking about the stranger named Harlan who came to the house, and why I had to hand him an envelope packed with money. Though I’ve known Miller since I was seventeen, I wonder if I’ve ever really known him at all.

Three days later, I wake to find I’m in an empty house. Miller is nowhere to be found.

I’m already checking with the security guard to see if Miller has left the premises before the penny drops.

It's my first time inside Miller's gym. It's fully decked out, because of course he would put a treadmill together before he's drilled the bed frame or unboxed a sofa. It's a slick set-up: a black spongy floor, all the equipment lined up facing a wall-long mirror, where I find Miller doing a headstand.

'What the hell are you doing?' I demand.

His face is puce. 'I feel better,' he says. 'Thought I'd see how I go. This really gets your heart pumping. Is that my top?'

I glance down at the black hoodie I'm currently wearing, this time with the Arizona Cardinals logo. I helped myself this morning. 'I ran out of clothes. They're drying. I raided your wardrobe.'

'Looks cute on you.'

I tilt my head. 'How long do you plan on staying like that?'

'Maybe 'til I pass out?'

'You'd better be joking.'

'Relax, Paige, I'm not made out of glass.'

He pushes his feet off the mirror, bringing his legs down, gracefully rising back to a standing position. Watching him reminds me he's an accomplished gymnast. The colour slowly drains from his face.

'Maybe we could go somewhere today?' he suggests.

'You're supposed to be resting.'

He gives a shrug. 'I know. Just a walk. I'm tired of staring at the wall.'

'Where could we go?'

'I could drive us out to Indian Bend Park. Fifteen minutes by car. It's greenbelt land. Kinda nice.'

'Indian Bend Park?'

'Trust me, Paige. You'll like it.'

Dance With Me

‘All those times I’ve been to your parents’ place, I never got to show you where I’m from.’

It feels weird. Just me and Miller. Walking side by side. Like we’re friends or something. Except there’s a security guard walking ten metres behind us. Miller doesn’t seem to notice his presence, perhaps because he’s used to it. To me, it feels other worldly.

The sun is out. The park isn’t busy. And he’s right, I like it a lot. It feels good to be out. We walk on a path through well-manicured lawns. I take off Miller’s hoodie, tying the sleeves around my waist. Miller wears his cap down low, should anyone recognise him behind his sunglasses. He’s wearing combat trousers and a fitted blue T-shirt. He coughs occasionally, but it’s clear the antibiotics have worked their magic.

‘So, you grew up around here?’ I ask.

Miller laughs. ‘Uh... no, not here. Not exactly.’

I feel warmth in my cheeks. ‘Oh, I thought...’

‘No one brought me here as a kid. I don’t think I knew it existed. I grew up on the other side of town.’

‘Will you show me? Where you grew up?’

One hand goes to the back of his neck. ‘I mean... sure. If you wanna see it. We can take a drive over.’

‘I’d like that.’

I think I see him smile. ‘Can I ask you something?’ I say.

‘Sure.’

‘The day you left New York. After you... quit the band. To the time that I found at home and called the ambulance. What were you doing in that time? Did you know how sick you were?’

I can’t see where Miller’s looking but he keeps his head

down, shoving his hands into his pockets. He blows out his cheeks, and I think maybe he's regretting bringing me on a walk.

'I wasn't in a good place. I came back here, buried my head in the sand, I guess. Hated on the world a bit.'

'And me, I imagine.'

'Nah. I never hated you. It wasn't your fault.'

'It *was* my fault, Miller. I've watched footage from every single angle. I didn't give you enough room. You warned me, Darcey warned me. I didn't do a good enough job which is why your foot ended up in my face.'

He stops in his tracks. 'Yeah, but how could anyone blame you? You'd barely had a week's preparation. You'd never performed in front of a crowd that size. You were freaked out.'

'I was terrified,' I laugh.

That sets him off too, and then he's coughing. 'I could tell.'

'I never thanked you,' he continues. 'For showing up. For bailing me out. And I'm sorry Aidey had to teach you the majority of the moves. Like I said, my head wasn't in a good place. But that's no excuse for my shitty behaviour. And your studio just burned down; I didn't even ask if you were okay.'

We start to walk again in silence. I absorb his words. It's not often I've seen Miller's vulnerable side. The side of him that's honest, minus all the layers of bravado.

'To be fair, I don't think you found me in the best place either. I'd gone on another shitty blind date, and my night ended up with me being pulled from a burning building. And the only thing I managed to save was a Magic 8 Ball. I mean, I could have grabbed my purse or my phone, but no, I grabbed a cheap piece of factory-made plastic. Rohan said I

was crazy to go on tour with you guys after Aidan asked me to come to New York. He was probably right.'

'You grabbed a Magic 8 Ball in the fire?' Miller laughs.

'Yes! It's in your house right now!'

'Well, you saved my life, Paige, so maybe it's a lucky Magic 8 Ball.'

I sober. 'Maybe it is.'

'Why was your blind date so shitty?'

'He looked like you.'

Miller stops dead. 'Ouuuuch,' he says, gripping his chest.

'I'm joking!' I say, nudging him with my shoulder, and this feels dangerously close to flirting. We carry on walking. 'I don't know what I'm doing wrong. I see what Aidan and Lexi have, and I want that. I want to meet *the one*. But my love life is a seemingly never-ending car crash. Or a bad case of pneumonia. It's like a burning building that... won't stop burning.'

'That's because every guy you've been out with has been a total douche.'

I'm quiet for a moment. 'What do you know about the guys I've been out with?'

In response, Miller goes very quiet. We keep walking. He glances off in the distance. 'I know more than you think. Helps that Aidan fills me in on everything.'

'Oh, I get it, you guys have a good laugh at my expense.'

He stops again, lowers his sunglasses. 'No. That's not it. Never. And Aidan only tells me if I ask. Which is why I'm always sure to ask.'

I look to the ground. 'That sounds a little stalkerish, Miller,' I mumble.

It's his turn to blush, like he's suddenly found himself in uncharted waters. 'I just... take an interest. Or I did before...'

We come to a halt. His voice trails off. I cross my arms over my chest. ‘Come on, then, don’t get shy on me now. What do you know about my love life?’

We’re facing one another. The security guard behind us has stopped, and is now lingering, checking the area around us.

Miller’s lips twist. He can’t look me in the eye. ‘Your first kiss was with a guy named Toby. You were, like, twelve. He was in your class. You gave your V-card to your high-school boyfriend, Pete, on prom night.’

‘It was an end of school dance.’

‘That’s prom, Paige. Not that I ever went to one. And Pete dumped you at the end of summer when he went off to college.’

‘Bastard.’

‘Then the following summer you met Jasper in Cornwall.’

‘It’s *Cornwall*, Miller. Not like it’s a wall made of corn. *Corn-wul*.’

He shakes his head, grinning. ‘*Cornwul*,’ he repeats, in a mock-British accent. ‘He was a surfer.’

‘Very good. Jasper was decent in bed.’

‘Yeah?’

‘He was. Taught me a few things.’

‘Like what?’

‘I’ll never tell.’

Miller laughs again. ‘But you broke up because of the distance.’

‘We did.’

‘Then there was a string of really bad dates.’

‘A *lot* of bad dates. Because everyone wanted to date me because of who my brother was. Because of who you were, and Cal, and Rav and J.B...’

Miller winces. 'Sorry 'bout that. Then after that, there was...'

His voice trails off again. We keep walking. 'Go on,' I say. 'You can say it.'

'Shit-for-brains Liam Walker?'

I sigh. 'Ah, lovely Liam.'

I'm being sarcastic, of course, and Miller knows it.

'Shit-for-brains Liam broke your heart. Single father to a daughter enrolled in your newly opened dance studio. Ro knew who he was and warned you against going out with him.'

'And as usual, Ro was right. And as usual, I didn't listen.'

'And—'

'And I wasn't the only girl he was warming the bed for. But not before I'd fallen head over heels for him. Can we move on?'

Miller has removed his sunglasses and hooked them over the hem of his T-shirt. He turns his cap around and is watching me carefully.

'He wasn't worthy of your attention, Paige.'

'And hence I now only go on shitty blind dates, so guys can't tell me how much I look like my famous boy band brother.'

'Are you kidding me? You look better than your famous boy band brother.'

'I think you're just saying that to make me feel better.'

Miller stops again, bites his lip. Like he wants to say something but is holding back.

'What?' I say, facing him.

'I mean it. You're beautiful. Gorgeous. A knockout. Those guys are all dicks if they can't see you for something way beyond Rebel Heart.'

‘I can live with it, Miller. I am a by-product of my brother’s fame.’

‘You’re not. You’re your own person. I—’

He’s lost for words. The air between us turns thicker and we fall silent. There’s a breeze picking up. ‘We should probably head back,’ I say eventually.

‘Maybe,’ he says.

‘Maybe you walked far enough today.’

‘Yeah,’ he says with a nod, and we turn around.

Miller lowers the driver’s side window and switches off the engine of the truck. ‘Here it is,’ he says. ‘You wanted to see it.’

We took a drive through the city of Phoenix, down wide American roads, past shopping malls and restaurants, big buildings with American flags hoisted above them. I hadn’t really seen the centre of town, only when I was trying to track Garrett down. Miller let me choose the radio station. A little further and we were in residential neighbourhoods. I didn’t really notice exactly when the pavements became splintered and there were weeds sprouting between broken paving stones, nor when the chain-link fences started to appear around shabby looking gardens, filled with junk, with clapped-out cars parked haphazardly in driveways.

The house I am looking at on the other side of the road, through Miller’s window, is painted grey, but the paintwork is inconsistent and cracked. It has a faded red front door. Surrounded by a chain-link fence, the grass in the garden is sparse, yellow and half dead, revealing patches of dry mud underneath. The front gate is missing and the corner of the fence has come loose. There’s a sad-looking tree with two ropes

hanging from it, as though there was once a swing hanging from the branch. I can see threadbare curtains in the windows, but it doesn't seem like anybody is home.

'Wow,' is all I can think to say.

'Not like where you and Aidey grew up, huh?'

I feel embarrassed. Like my whole life I've been surrounded by privilege.

Miller rests his elbow on the door frame. 'Lotta things went down in that house.'

'Is this where you lived when your mother—'

I don't finish my sentence, kicking myself for even starting it. Miller's mother walked out on the family when he was six.

'Yeah,' he says simply. 'My dad passed in this house.'

I wince. 'How old were you?'

'Twelve. He had a heart attack. He smoked too much.'

'I'm so sorry.'

'Because he'd already turned nineteen, and he had a steady job, child welfare services ruled that I could stay with Garrett. They gave us a food allowance, which Garrett mostly spent on weed. I stayed in school till they kicked me out... I lost my virginity in this house too.'

'You did? How old were you?'

Miller bites his lip and shakes his head. 'Do you really wanna know?'

'Oh God, do I?'

'Okay, I'll tell you, but you can't tell the guys because I lied to them about it and said I was sixteen.'

My face falls. 'How old were you really?'

'I'd just turned thirteen.'

'*Thirteen?*' I exclaim in disbelief, covering my face. 'Holy shit, Miller.'

'It was to one of my brother's friends. He was having a

party and he told me I had to stay in my room, but I begged him to send in a girl for me. He must have found a willing volunteer, because she came into my room and crawled into bed with me.'

I stare at him, wide-eyed. 'Please tell me she brought—'

'Oh, yeah. We were all good on that front.'

'How old was she?'

'I don't know. Maybe nineteen, twenty? Old enough to know what she was doin'.'

'What was her name?'

'Jenna.'

'Oh my God, Miller, you weren't even old enough to give legal consent.'

He gives a dramatic shrug. 'My mom left. Even when my dad was around, he didn't give a damn. So, I just... followed Garrett's lead. I wouldn't have even known what consent was, Paige.'

I don't know what to say. I feel guilty for ever having berated him, because his childhood was lacking any level of love. I swallow tightly. 'Where does Garrett live now?'

Miller starts the engine again and it roars to life. 'Not here, that's for sure. I bought him a new apartment across town.'

We drive a short distance before Miller pulls the car up by the side of the road again. This time he leaves the engine running. We're at the back of a row of run-down shops and restaurants, and there's a line of delivery bikes outside the back of two green double doors where all the waste bins are.

'Where is this?' I ask, following Miller's gaze out of the window.

'Paradise Pizza. I worked here as a delivery boy after I got

kicked outta school. Lied about my age on the job application. I was sixteen when I saw the ad to audition for a boy band for *So You Wanna Be a Star?* I could dance better than anyone else I knew. I knew I could sing too, 'cept I'd never had any kind of training. Garrett laughed his ass off when I told him I planned to go to LA to try out. I worked every shift this shithole could offer me so I could save up. I had nothin' to keep me here.'

He's looking at his hands in his lap. My heart swells as I listen, thinking about how lonely he must have felt back then.

'I had this weird feeling that I would get to the finals, you know?' Miller continues. 'Whenever we had to perform for the judges, I could dance every step. I never slipped up. But then when everyone else showed up, from across the globe, and you walked in with Aidey and I watched you both dance for the first time... and I heard Aidey's singing voice... that's when I knew I was in trouble. I was like, shit, these guys are *good*.'

'I wasn't so good at the singing part.'

I watch the grin that creeps onto his lips. It's a thing of joy after everything he's told me. Because he made it. In the end, he made it.

'Your dancing was off the hook though. None of those other girls could touch you.'

'Thank you,' I say, another lump in my throat. 'You weren't so bad yourself.'

We look at one another. Something I don't recognise flutters in my chest, and I have this weird urge to put my arms around him.

'I'm hungry,' Miller says, breaking the moment. 'You wanna grab something to eat?'

'Can we have a Paradise Pizza?'

'I wouldn't if I were you.'

'Oh,' I laugh, and Miller pulls away from the kerb.

Chapter Twenty

Ten days later and I've had to dispose of most of the flowers from the hospital. I've kept all the accompanying cards. According to my readings – with a little help from Google – Miller's blood pressure is normal, as is his blood oxygen saturation, and his heart rate is back to within the expected range for someone his age.

At the hospital, Miller is given a chest X-ray. Afterwards, I wait with him in an exam room. Dr Bilaal walks through the door with a swagger. He wears a white coat over his scrubs, clutching a plastic sheet with Miller's results, which he slides onto a light box on the wall before switching on the unit at the side.

'All clear,' he proclaims, pointing to various points with the tip of his pen. 'I'll just listen to your chest.'

Miller raises his shirt. Dr Bilaal walks over and attaches his stethoscope to his ears, spending a minute or so listening whilst Miller takes deep breaths in and out.

'Fine,' is the verdict. 'All sounds normal. You had a lucky escape.'

'Thanks, Doc,' Miller says, pulling his shirt back down,

holding out his hand to the doctor, who shakes it. 'Paige, do you mind giving me a minute?'

It takes me a moment to realise that Miller is speaking to me, both men looking in my direction as I look up.

'What? Oh, sorry, of course,' I blurt, shooting towards the door.

I wait outside in the corridor, where our security guard lingers close by. This one's name is Steve. Looking to my left, I see a group of young nurses hovering around the nurses' station. It's clear where their attention lies: on the door out of which I have just emerged.

The fact that I have just come out seems to only fuel their level of interest.

'I say we just ask,' I hear one say.

'He's just gotten over pneumonia,' a second comments.

'Don't ask, don't get,' a third says with a waggle of her finger.

'Well, I'm ready,' a voluptuous nurse says at full volume as she pops up from behind them all clutching a Rebel Heart calendar, turned to a picture of Miller.

'*Sbbb!*' the second hisses, her eyes on me, and I look away, my cheeks practically bursting into flames.

'I think he'll be chill about it,' the third nurse says. 'All we gotta do is walk up to him and ask nice.'

The first nurse laughs. 'And which one o' you is brave enough to do that?'

Miller emerges from the door and I see them all straighten, like a row of meerkats.

'Thanks again, Doc,' Miller says, shaking Dr Bilaal by the hand.

Dr Bilaal waves us goodbye. Miller looks to me. 'We all set?' he asks.

I tilt my head backwards towards the nurses' station. 'Think your fan club might have assembled over there. Might be hoping for an autograph. Or twelve.'

Miller leans his head to one side over my right shoulder.

'Hey ladies,' he says, raising his voice and I swear I hear a squeal or two.

He moves past me and I have to follow his lead, checking Steve's position. Miller approaches the nurses' station, each one of the awaiting nurses giving him a beaming smile, and others behind them suddenly paying attention.

'Are you feelin' better?' the first nurse asks.

'Got the all-clear, thanks,' Miller replies, placing two hands on the desk, and I have to admire his level of self-confidence.

'P-please would you sign this?' the second nurse squeaks shyly, thrusting a photograph under his nose.

'Sure.' Miller obliges her, and suddenly more pens and pictures of Rebel Heart appear for him to sign. When I look up, every single nurse has reached for her phone.

'Miller, have you really left the band?' a different nurse asks.

'Yep, that's me done. I'm out. Sorry to disappoint anyone.'

There are saddened sighs. His words take me by surprise. I think I thought that when the boys came to visit Miller in hospital, that was a sign of some kind of unspoken agreement that he would return to Rebel Heart. At least, that's how I'd read it.

I realise now that perhaps it was wishful thinking on my part.

'Will you go solo?' the third nurse asks.

'Dunno what I'll do yet. Too soon to tell.'

I lean my head to one side, seeing the more voluptuous

nurse lingering behind her colleagues, the calendar in her hands, but clearly starstruck, rooted to the spot and unable to say a word. I catch her eye and beckon her over. She takes a shy step forward, and I take the calendar from her hands.

‘This one too, please, Miller,’ I tell him, and he signs it obediently.

‘Are you doing pictures?’ I mutter at him, because I’ve seen how these things work before.

‘Who wants a picture?’ Miller asks and he’s answered with a chorus of ‘*Meeee!*’

‘Right, ladies,’ I say, ‘pile up your phones here; I can take the photos. Form an orderly queue, please.’

‘She means a line,’ Miller says and I throw him a look.

One by one, ten excitable nurses line up for a photo, plus a female consultant who jumps in at the last minute. I have to beckon the voluptuous nurse over because it seems like she’s still terrified, her earlier confidence having melted away.

‘Are we all done?’ Miller says.

‘Last one,’ I say to him, nodding my head in her direction.

‘Come on over,’ Miller says and she takes a few nervous steps, tears already forming in her eyes.

Miller goes over to her. When he gives her a hug, she bursts into tears. After a few attempts, I manage to get a photo with them both grinning.

Miller reaches into his pocket for his phone and passes it to me. ‘Can you take one of me with everybody?’ he asks.

The nurses are keen to oblige, gathering round him while I snap away.

When I’m done, and Miller talks to all the nurses, I feel a presence at my side. I look across to find the second nurse is holding a picture of my brother.

‘Will you sign my picture of Aidan?’ she asks sweetly. ‘You look so like him.’

I give an awkward laugh. It’s a black and white print, with half my brother’s face in shadow. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Can’t believe I got to meet Miller *and* Aidan’s sister all in one day. You’re so lucky you get to spend time with them all.’

On the picture, I write ‘Paige’ in black ink and add a heart. Then I add ‘Aidan’s sister’ in brackets.

‘Here you go,’ I say.

‘Thank you. So... are you and Miller, like, together now?’ she asks. ‘Is that why you’re here with him?’

‘Oh,’ I say and look to the floor. ‘Oh no... we’re not... no, I’m just looking after him after the pneumonia.’

‘She’s pretty great, though, right?’ I hear next to me, as Miller slides his phone out of my hands.

When he looks at me, I feel rooted to the spot. I can’t take my eyes from his, as though everyone else around me has disappeared. There’s a tightness in my chest I can’t explain.

‘Shall we go?’ he asks.

I nod, looking around for Steve, unable to form words. Miller has a magnetism that is hard to describe.

We say our goodbyes and walk down the corridor, and Steve follows us out.

We don’t talk in the car. I steal glances at him from the passenger seat. Miller appears at ease and I wonder what can be going through his head. Is he where he wants to be?

His phone starts ringing as we’re walking through the front door. I catch Tanner Vincent’s name flash up on the screen. Miller puts him on speaker.

‘Tanner,’ Miller says. ‘How’s it going?’

‘Miller!’ Tanner’s voice echoes through the living room. ‘Saw your post from the hospital, man. Congrats on the all-clear.’

‘Thanks, man,’ Miller says. ‘I feel good.’

I don’t like the way this conversation is going already. I don’t trust Tanner Vincent at all.

Miller sinks into the sofa, leaving his phone on speaker. I linger. Technically, this conversation is none of my business, but I’m drawn to it, because I can’t shake this feeling that Vincent, from the band’s management company, is not looking after Miller’s best interests, despite that being the main purpose of his existence.

‘You talk to the rest of the band?’ Vincent asks.

‘Not yet.’

‘Look, no pressure from our side, alright? If it’s what you want, we’ll support your choices. You wanna go solo, you know, the record company will absolutely tee things up to allow you to do that. We just need to work out how to manage it in the right way.’

Miller rests his elbows on his knees. ‘Yeah, I need a little time to think about what I want right now,’ he says.

‘I had a call from Hewett earlier. You had a shoot lined up, remember?’

Hewett is the underwear brand that Miller models for and represents. They sent flowers to the hospital.

‘Uhh—’

‘They really wanna keep you as brand ambassador. They’re willing to relocate, have the shoot take place in Phoenix instead of New York. What do you think?’

‘When do they wanna do it?’ Miller asks.

‘This Friday, so three days from now. They’d come to

you. They've already got another model lined up to do it with you. They just wanna know if they can go ahead and book.'

For a moment, Miller doesn't say anything. 'Sure. We can do it. In Phoenix would be better if they can do that.'

'I'll go back and say yes. Be good for you, man, keep you occupied.'

'Sure,' Miller says quietly.

'Listen, I'll tee it all up and get back to you.'

'Thanks. Good to talk, man,' Miller says.

Tanner Vincent says his goodbyes and hangs up.

The silence hangs heavy. It's a contrast to all the smiles at the nurses' station less than an hour ago.

'Miller?' I say.

'Yeah.'

'I...' I begin.

I'm not sure my presence is required here anymore. I have no purpose if Miller is back to full health. Yet, if Miller stays true to his decision to leave Rebel Heart, I know just by being in this room how lonely he'll be. He has a brother who hasn't even bothered to visit him, and I see a young man with precious few real friends, and someone like Tanner Vincent treating him as a commodity: as a means for profit. If I leave, Miller will have no one.

'Will you come with me?' Miller asks jauntily, getting up off the sofa. 'To this shoot? Not to see me in my underwear, you know, but... keep me company?'

A smile tugs at my lips. 'I have no desire to see you in your underwear, Miller. But, yes... yes, I'll come with you.'

He looks... relieved. Pleased, almost.

'Thanks,' he says, coming over. 'I owe you. And thanks again for... for staying with me.'

'Are you really done with Rebel Heart?' I ask. 'Forever?'

He shrugs. 'I blew it. Big time. Why would they take me back?'

'You know that they all would. In a nanosecond.'

'I've watched the footage. Seems like they're doing pretty fine on tour without me.'

'That's not true. They don't have any choice.'

Without thinking, I raise one hand and place it against his cheek. We're standing here, alone in this room, and something shifts in the atmosphere. Or maybe it's me. Maybe I feel differently about him now. I can't put my finger on it. For once, being so close to him doesn't feel awkward or uncomfortable. He stares into my eyes until I look to the floor.

Miller steps back. 'I should hit the gym. If I gotta strip off for the camera, you know.'

I want to tell him that he doesn't need to. That he's perfectly fine as he is. But he's already walking upstairs to get changed.

Chapter Twenty-One

It's one a.m. and I'm downstairs with the TV switched on low. I've downed a couple of bottles of beer. I'm watching a half-decent romcom in almost darkness and munching my way through a bag of tortilla chips when Miller comes down the floating staircase, clutching his phone. He's wearing a black T-shirt with grey knee-length shorts.

'Did I wake you?' I ask.

He flops down next to me on the sofa and exhales, crossing his ankles and resting his feet on the table. 'No. My phone was blowin' up. Garrett messaging me.'

'You mean Garrett who hasn't paid you a single visit since you got out of the hospital? What does he want?'

'He's out at some party. Wanted me to head over there.'

His phone buzzes as more messages flash up. Miller opens up his phone, then hands it to me to read through the thread.

*At a party in Glendale you should come over
Some hunnies here who wanna have sex wit u now that u
out the band*

I love bein your bro.

Always girls who wanna take their clothes off 4 me 4 free

Bjs on tap

Come on man wake up!!!!!!

Get ova herrr

Everybody sayin you all better now

‘He would have known you were better a few days ago, had he bothered to pay you a visit,’ I say drily.

The phone buzzes again. I look down at the next message from Garrett, as does Miller.

You fuck paige mcarthur yet? She’s hot as shit. Shame she hates ur ass

Miller takes back his phone and clears his throat. ‘Sorry ’bout that.’

‘It’s fine. A girl could make herself stand out by *not* sleeping with you.’

Miller stuffs his hands in the bag of tortilla chips. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Err, that you’ve slept with everyone else?’

‘That’s not true.’

‘Well, if you did sleep with me, I’d have to leave because it would be mega awkward, especially as you never sleep with the same girl twice, unless your name is Darcey Ellison.’

‘Hold up, what? I never slept with Darcey more than once.’

‘Well, she gave me the impression that there had been... instances. Plural. Plus, I saw you kissing her that day.’

‘Then she’s lying. I only slept with her once. And I didn’t sleep with her that day you saw us ’cause I got on a plane. And why were you talking about me anyway?’

‘Miller, you should know by now, girls talk about everything.’

He shakes his head in annoyance. ‘What else Darcey say about me? I mean, what level o’ detail are we talking here?’

I stifle a laugh. I feel a tad drunk. I recall Darcey's conversation whilst she was painting my nails back in New York. 'Do you want me to sugarcoat it, or do you want Paige's own brand of brutal truth?'

Miller frowns. I mute the TV.

'I mean, she said it was all over pretty quick. That you were more of a *wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am* type of guy.'

He's still frowning at me in the shadows, but I think I see him wince. 'I'm efficient,' he says tightly. 'I give 'em everything they need and then I... you know... get out of there.'

I roll my eyes. 'Yes, but, do you really though? Is it that you're getting everything *you* need, or are they just making you think you've done a good job?'

'I always do a good job,' Miller states emphatically. 'Girls don't fake their Os with me; they don't have to.'

'But how do you know that?'

'I dunno,' he says with a shrug. 'You know. They make all the right noises.'

'Miller, we can all make the right noises.'

He blinks at me with his brows raised.

'That's not true,' he says.

To make my point, I hand him the tortillas and shimmy further down into the contours of the sofa. I lean my head back against the cushions. I close my eyes for dramatic effect. 'Mmm,' I hum breathily. 'Oh God, there, right there, that's soooo good. Yes, yes, don't stop! Oh God, Miller, you're so fucking good at this, I think I'm gonna... Oh! Ah! Yes! Oh...! Ah... *ungh!*'

As I utter the final groans, I thrust out my chest and work my body as though shudders are coursing through it, my hips bucking beneath me and my mouth falling open in an impressive show of a fake orgasm.

For several moments, Miller stares at me with a slack jaw. 'Holy shit, Paige.'

I reach for the tortilla chips, placing one in my mouth and crunching it, offering him a jaunty grin in the process. 'See? All the right noises. You can feel when it's genuine.'

He's silent for a moment. 'What do you mean, feel when it's genuine?'

I give him a look like he should know this. 'You know, when her... when a woman's walls go into spasm at the point of orgasm. Inside of her.'

He's frowning. 'They do?'

'Jesus, Miller, you've slept with enough girls that you should know this by now.'

'There's no way that actually happens.'

I gape at him. 'What did you think happens?'

His hands go into his hair. 'I... I guess, I...'

'Alright, put it this way, how are you bringing all these women to orgasm?'

He looks awkward. 'Uhh. Either I go down or I... you know.'

'And when you're... you know.... inside her, are you doing anything else? Most women can't come through vaginal penetration alone, Miller. Just like most women can't have multiple Os in a row. It takes care and attention for a genuine O to come – literally – to fruition.'

When he has no answer, I have to bite my lip to stop myself from laughing. Miller looks a little crushed, like I just carved a whole chunk out of his ego.

He comes out with, 'Most people I sleep with I don't know very well.'

'Umm, then try having a girlfriend, maybe?' is my slightly flippant response. 'Then just one girl can go down on

you instead of however many women it is these days who you've managed to coax into your bed.'

'I don't let girls go down on me.'

I frown. 'Why not?'

'Just. Because. What if they go to the press or somethin' after?'

I'm giggling now. He looks deflated and I feel like a mean girl. Aidan had a former girlfriend go to the press and it was no laughing matter. 'Breaking news. Miller has a penis.'

Miller looks to the floor. 'I don't trust anyone not to go to the press, alright? That's the hazard of having your face known. You never know who's on your side.'

I shrug. 'You still sleep with them all though, right? Even if they're not dropping to their knees.'

He grimaces. 'Can we talk about something else?'

Miller's phone buzzes again. 'Please tell me you're not going to go out to Garrett's party,' I say.

He blows out his cheeks. 'I think you just killed my buzz.'

'That's what you get with me, Miller. Brutal truth.' I get to my feet, brushing tortilla crumbs from my T-shirt, and switch off the TV. 'I'm going back to bed. Goodnight. I was definitely not expecting to have this conversation with you.'

I climb the stairs to my bedroom, vaguely aware that Miller is following at a distance behind me. I leave my door open, only to find him standing there, lingering.

I pause. 'What is it?' I ask him.

'That thing you said... that happens when a girl... does it really?'

'Yes. It does.'

'It's just that I—'

'Let me guess. Everything you know about sex you learned from Garrett. Or talking to the boys.'

‘I mean the boys and I don’t go into detailed specifics, you know?’

He’s entered my room.

‘Well, I’m hardly going to give you a demonstration.’

Only the bedside lamp is on, casting shadows across the walls. He’s fixed my gaze, and it’s almost like he’s proposing something.

‘Please,’ he says quietly. ‘For... science.’

I actually snort.

‘We’d never have to mention it again, I swear. We’d pretend like it never even happened.’

I screw up my face. The way he’s looking at me almost makes me feel sorry for him.

‘Think of it like a pity O,’ he says. ‘How am I ever gonna know? If I never know? And maybe I’ve been getting it wrong all this time. Did Darcey say if her O was genuine?’

I fix his gaze. Now I just feel guilty telling him. ‘No, it wasn’t. She faked it.’

He screws up his face. ‘Shit. Do you think they all have?’

‘I’m sure not *all* of them.’

He shakes his head again. ‘Forget it.’

He goes to walk out and I feel bad. Maybe it’s the two beers, but I make a snap decision.

‘Miller,’ I say, and he turns and raises his eyes to me. I point. ‘Lie down on the bed.’

His eyes go wide. ‘Really?’

I roll my eyes in a dramatic way, but the truth is that a little part of me is turned on by the idea of showing him. My dry spell has stretched to more than a year.

I move to the bed and get under the covers. Then I pat the space next to me. Miller’s eyes light up. After a moment, he lowers himself to the bed, remaining on top of the covers.

'You'd really do this for me?'

'What can I say, I feel sorry for you. This is a pity O. For demonstration purposes only. And we are never going to talk about this again, understood?'

He swallows. I raise my brow.

'Understood?' I say again.

'Understood. Holy shit.'

I move my right hand under the covers, widening my knees.

Then I lie back to find Miller hovering inches above my face. 'I can't do this if you're looking at me.'

'Want me to close my eyes?'

I swallow. He does. 'That's better,' I say. 'Do only as I tell you.'

'I love it when you boss me around.'

The first touch of my fingertips to my clit and I shudder. I move them in gentle concentric circles and my arousal flutters down my inner thighs.

'Do you need me to talk dirty to you?' Miller says after a moment.

'I may laugh if you do,' I deadpan. 'Just give me a minute or so.'

'What are you thinking about?'

'Not you.'

'But you could.'

'Miller, *shhh*.'

He bites his lips together. I continue my intimate movements, feeling myself growing swollen and wet. A dull ache now exists between my thighs. I watch Miller's face in the shadows with his eyes closed. Darcey said he was a good kisser. Thinking about kissing him is getting me where I need to go, but I can't cross that line. His lips are inches from mine, and

I'm sure he would kiss me happily, but I refuse to be just another name on his bedpost. To have sex with Miller would constitute the ultimate cliché.

After a minute or so, a small moan escapes my lips. His eyes fly open.

'You close?' he asks and I'm rolling my eyes again.

'I'm not a robot. It's not about pressing a button enough times.'

'I thought that was exactly what it was like.'

'And therein lies your problem with pleasing women. Stop talking.'

'Sorry.'

He closes his eyes again. I quicken my movements, liquid heat making me throb. I'm closer to a climax than I thought.

'Right, slide your hand under the covers,' I say. 'Rest your fingers against my thigh.'

I have to move a little, to allow Miller access. On the side he's lying, he'll need to use his left hand. He does as he's told, sliding one hand underneath. I feel his fingers snake down my side, following the line of my body. I need to stop to shimmy my cotton shorts and underwear down to my knees. When his fingers come to rest against my inner thigh, his skin feels warm.

'This okay?' he asks.

'Yes,' I breathe.

Why is it I feel comfortable doing this for him? Why does his presence not entirely repulse me? It's ridiculous that I'm even offering him a demonstration, like a teenager whose only just lost his virginity. And yet, if I can benefit another woman and save her from Miller's subpar sexual performance, I'm willing to take the hit for humanity.

I circle my fingertips. It's building.

‘Miller, when I tell you, I want you to slide two fingers inside me,’ I say in a low tone.

‘Now?’ he asks.

‘Not yet. Soon. Very soon.’

Little bolts of lightning are shooting down my thighs. This time I can’t stop the moan that escapes my lips, the erratic movement of my hips. My head goes back, my mouth falling open.

‘Now?’ he asks, his tone gravelly.

‘Okay, now,’ I say.

His hand moves. He’s gentle about it. He follows the line of my wrist, then slips underneath. I feel two fingertips probing my wetness.

‘Fuck, Paige,’ Miller whispers, before I feel him push.

I’m so wet that my body welcomes his fingers. They sink all the way in, filling my channel. My eyes have closed. ‘I’m so close,’ I whisper, massaging my clit until I’m on the verge of an explosion.

‘Oh God, Paige,’ he says.

I feel the rushing sensation, the glorious burst of pleasure surging between my legs. More importantly, I feel my walls spasming forcefully around Miller’s fingers, gripping him for the duration of my orgasm. He keeps them there, buried deep. My back arches off the mattress, I stifle my cries – given that this is just science – until I realise Miller’s producing a low growl of appreciation at my body climaxing around him.

When it’s over, I’m breathless. My eyes float open to find Miller is staring down at me, our faces close, desire in his eyes, our chests rising and falling. For a moment, I think he might kiss me. But his fingers slide out of me. Within seconds he is off the bed and has walked out of the room.

Moments later, I hear his bedroom door slam.

Dance With Me

I sit up, not sure if I should be embarrassed or offended
at what just took place.

He asked for it. A demonstration. Isn't that what I gave
him?

Or did he see that as something more than science?

And did I?

Chapter Twenty-Two

‘How’s everything?’ Aidan says over the phone.

I’m stood in Miller’s living room, looking out of the window. In the two days since I orgasmed all over his fingers, he has hidden himself away in his gym, working out in earnest in preparation for his underwear shoot. And just when I thought our relationship was on a reasonably level footing, he’s withdrawn from my company. We haven’t discussed what took place in my bed. As Miller intended all along, we’re pretending like it didn’t happen.

And my proclamations about being brutally honest might as well have floated away like ashes on the wind, because now I can’t even look him in the eye.

‘Fine,’ I say. ‘Everything is good. He’s doing much better. I said to him I would go with him to his underwear shoot tomorrow.’

‘And what happens after that?’

I let out a heavy sigh, changing the trajectory of our conversation, because I don’t have an answer. ‘Aidey, he thinks he’s blown it with you guys. That you’ll never let him back in the band.’

Aidan perks up. ‘Has he admitted that he wants back in?’

‘Not in so many words,’ I say. ‘Tanner Vincent called and asked him if he wanted to go solo, and he said he needed to think about it. But I can’t see him enjoying that life, can you?’

‘P, you can’t force him to come back to us. Of course we’d have him but he’d have to come back willingly. And if he wants to go solo then that’s up to him and I’d wish him all the best.’

‘Aidey, you need to show him that he’s still welcome. And wanted.’

‘I can’t take away the fact that he was a dick for those last two months. If he wants to come back, then he has to be the one to change.’

I’m getting frustrated with my own brother. ‘Maybe you could pay him a visit?’

‘We talked about it. We’ve got a break in a few days. Lexi’s coming over from China.’

‘She is? She’s finished her work?’

He puts on a cocky-sounding voice that annoys me, even though it’s not meant to. ‘No, but said she can’t go without seeing me any longer, and I agreed with her. She’ll be here tomorrow and honestly, I don’t think I’ve ever been so excited in my life.’ His cocky voice has morphed into a genuinely thrilled voice.

‘You guys are so sweet,’ I say. ‘Ugh. I hate it.’

‘Look I’ll sound the guys out. We have a break in the tour shortly before we hit Phoenix anyway. Don’t say anything to Miller about it, though.’

‘I won’t.’

‘Everything else alright?’ Aidan asks. ‘He hasn’t tried to get you into bed, has he?’

I feel my cheeks burn. ‘Aidey. This is Miller we’re talking about. What are the chances?’

I hear him laugh at the other end of the line. ‘I knew you’d never go near him.’

The people from Hewett send a car to take us to the shoot. The studio is in a very unglamorous area of town, in a kind of warehouse protected by a secure fence lined with barbed wire. On arrival, we’re met by a blonde female assistant, who ushers us immediately inside the building, where we proceed down a corridor and up a flight of stairs. All her attention is focused on Miller, who seems uncharacteristically quiet.

She opens a door to reveal a large space, a portion of the room sealed off by a black curtain hanging from a ceiling rail. To one side is a plain white backdrop, which several cameras face. To one corner is a sofa, next to a coffee machine and a box of various snacks.

‘Miller!’ an older, also blonde, female cries out when she sees us, rushing forward to greet him with her arms stretched out. ‘How *are* you? So glad to see you’re better!’

Miller thanks her. She’s wearing tight jeans and a black fitted sweater with a pair of pumps. She kisses him on both cheeks in greeting, clearly on familiar terms with him.

‘Thanks for coming out to Phoenix,’ he says.

‘Don’t mention it. It’s no trouble.’

‘This is Paige,’ he says, introducing me.

‘Oh, hi, Paige. A pleasure of course. The resemblance is uncanny.’

I produce a tight-lipped smile. ‘Nice to meet you,’ I say, my voice scratchy in my throat.

‘Phoebe photographed the last two campaigns,’ Miller informs me.

Phoebe puts her arm around his shoulders, walking him over to the sofa. I follow, feeling like a spare part.

‘The model’s arrived, her name’s Georgia. Completely gorgeous; I think you’ll complement one another perfectly. We’ll get you in make-up in a minute. Can I get you guys a coffee or anything?’

‘I’m good,’ Miller says.

Phoebe looks to me. ‘I’ll have a flat white,’ I say, at which point Phoebe makes eyes at the assistant.

‘Is there a bathroom I can use?’ I ask.

‘I can show you,’ the assistant says.

The bathroom is down another corridor, a stark yellow room with tiny windows at ceiling height and two cubicles, one of which is taken.

On entry, I’m met with the sound of someone being violently sick.

I use the loo in the vacant cubicle next door, but the sound continues, even after I’ve flushed the toilet.

‘Everything alright in there?’ I say, after I’ve washed my hands and before I leave, because I know I can’t leave things alone.

‘No,’ a voice says miserably from inside.

‘Can I get you anything?’ I ask.

‘I’m supposed to be in make-up right now,’ the voice says. ‘If I don’t get in front of the camera, I don’t get paid. And I flew all the way out here.’

‘Is this for the underwear thing?’ I ask.

There’s a silence before the door opens. The face that looks out at me is beautiful, but ashen. She nods. ‘I think I ate something on the plane,’ she half-wails.

‘Do you need me to fetch somebody?’

‘Please,’ she nods. She stifles a little burp and shuts the door again.

Phoebe looks too tanned to come from New York. My guess is she's from somewhere like California, or maybe even Miami. She moves her hands a lot when she speaks. She's taken me to one side.

'So. Paige. Can I call you Paige?'

'Yes,' I say.

'As you know, we have a slight problem.'

'Yes,' I repeat.

'Do you have an agent or anything?'

I shake my head. 'No. I own a dance studio.' I don't mention that it burned down.

'Our model for today... she's got food poisoning. The creative team at Hewett are really keen on having Miller photographed with a model and not on his own. Now, I spoke with somebody and when they heard that Miller had arrived with Aidan's sister...'

She looks a little guilty when she says this. I offer her a tense smile.

'Have you asked Miller what he thinks?'

'Uhh, he doesn't know I'm asking you to fill in.'

I keep nodding my head. 'Let me talk to him.'

Miller is in another makeshift room, standing in only a pair of black Hewett underwear, whilst two make-up artists apply what looks like body foundation all over his skin, except from on his tattoo. One is working on his legs, one on his back. There's a portable table where two make-up bags spew out products.

'Hi,' I say, closing the door behind me. 'Have you got a minute?'

‘Like, right now?’

I have this irrational wish that I’d been able to consult my Magic 8 Ball before coming to him with this. I can picture it now. *Magic 8 Ball, do I step into the lingerie model’s shoes for Miller’s sake? No, you idiot, that’s a really bad fucking idea.*

‘They’ve asked me if I can stand in for the model.’

His gaze shoots to mine. He looks down. ‘Ladies, would you mind giving us a minute please?’

‘Sure,’ one of them says, and both get to their feet.

When we’re alone, Miller pulls on a white robe, tying it at the waist. I face him, the same awkward atmosphere descending over us.

‘I think it’s probably not a good idea,’ I say. ‘That I say yes.’

Miller looks to the floor. ‘I mean, it’s not a bad idea.’

‘I’m not some skinny model.’

‘You look better than any model.’

‘Miller, be serious.’

‘I am being serious. Plus, you know, I hate it when they make me work alongside some girl I’ve never even met.’

I raise an eyebrow. ‘You’re objecting to having to stand next to a gorgeous model who’s only half-dressed?’

He shrugs. ‘I find it harder than you think. But with you – hey, it’s easier with my sworn enemy.’

‘Right.’ I try and laugh. ‘It’s just that... you’ve been weird with me. Since the other night when I let you—’

He doesn’t know where to look. ‘I know. It’s... I’m sorry. I’ve never been so turned on in my life and I was a little too close to embarrassing myself.’

I stare at him. He’s gone bright red and I try hard to suppress my smile. ‘So... should I say yes? To being your model?’

Miller reaches out and touches my fingers. A little bolt of electricity shoots up my arm. 'I'd really like that,' he says.

I have to get showered, and one of the make-up artists hands me a razor, politely demanding that I deal with any 'problem areas'. I'm given a haircut and a blow-dry, and then the stylists have to find a set of Hewett underwear from their selection that fits me, which is a challenge, given that I'm hardly the size of the average lingerie model. A stylist tries to fit my breasts inside one of their bras, without it looking like they're spilling over, which proves impossible, before someone makes a phone call and it's agreed that I can switch to wearing a smooth black branded cotton bra top due to lack of other viable options. I have to stand in the centre of the room whilst the same two make-up artists who were working on Miller first apply a layer of make-up to my face before covering me from head to foot in body foundation. The entire process takes more than ninety minutes.

I'm given a white robe to walk back to the studio, along with a pair of disposable flipflops. I slide along the floor, my heart rate quickening as I'm ushered through the curtain.

I slow my pace. Under professional, bright studio lights, each one surrounded by a soft box, Miller leans against a tall metal bar stool, his white robe hanging open, arms crossed over his chest. He too has had a haircut. He's talking to Phoebe about something. He looks so striking, his torso perfectly chiselled, his muscles flawlessly defined.

He stops talking when he sees me, watching me as I duck under the lights.

'Paige, you look spectacular,' Phoebe says.

'You haven't seen what's underneath this yet,' I say, my

tone intentionally self-deprecating. I swallow, because on the inside, I'm trying not to panic. This was a bad idea. Once again, the seventeen-year-old me would have leapt at the chance to do this. The older me isn't so sure.

Miller's gaze hasn't left mine. He's trying not to grin.

'Are you ready?' Phoebe continues. 'We can take it slow. Paige, if you want to stop at any time, please don't hesitate to say so.'

I thank her then tug gently on the end of tie on the gown. One of the stylists comes over to take it from me. I pause, like I'm not ready, finally peeling it off before she whisks it out of sight. And then I'm left there, standing in Hewett underwear. Miller's gaze takes a tour of my body, the humour in his eyes replaced with something duskier.

'You look amazing,' he says.

I take a step towards him, my hands crossed in front of me. 'You have to say that because I'm the substitute.'

'I've learned something about you lately, Paige. Whenever I compliment you, you either yell at me or make out like I'm doing it because someone's forcing me into it. Which is never true, by the way. So, for once, let me tell you, you look *supremely* hot in that underwear.'

'Thank you,' I say quietly.

Phoebe's using three different studio cameras. She has a tripod and a nameless assistant to help her. Miller's facing left, which means his tattoos are out of shot.

'To begin with, Miller, please can you place your left hand at a midpoint on Paige's right thigh? Ok, that's good.'

I feel warm fingers against my skin. The lights pop and the camera whirs every time she takes a shot. I don't really know what to do with myself.

‘Paige, can you move a couple inches closer?’ Phoebe says.

I shuffle forward a fraction.

‘Good,’ Phoebe says. ‘Try to relax. Look into Miller’s eyes for me.’

She says it likes it’s nothing, like I can just gaze into the eyes of my brother’s bandmate for an extended period in just my underwear, as if that’s a normal thing to do. Except the atmosphere has shifted, and when I raise my eyes, he’s there, waiting for me, silently giving me encouragement. Making me feel comfortable. His thumb lightly strokes my outer thigh and causes a ripple effect, a tingling sensation that travels throughout my body.

‘Paige, can you tilt your head left? Let your hair fall for me? Oh, that’s great, I love it.’

More shots. Miller holds my gaze. I feel the pressure of his fingers, except that I feel it *everywhere*.

‘Nice, now, Paige, could you drape your arms over Miller’s shoulders for me? You guys have the best chemistry.’

I do as I’m instructed. It brings me in closer proximity to my fellow model. My lips twitch. ‘Stop smiling at me.’

‘I’m not smiling,’ he says, before I see his eyes crease and he bites his lip.

‘You are,’ I say. ‘You’re smiling.’

The lights continue to pop. ‘Oh, that’s fabulous, guys, I love it!’ Phoebe exclaims. ‘Miller, can you put your hands on Paige’s waist? Paige, would you mind putting your hands on Miller’s chest for me?’

‘Yeah, put your hands on me, Paige,’ Miller teases. ‘You know they put me on billboards, right?’

‘It’s been my life’s ambition,’ I say sarcastically, sliding my hands over his shoulders and down to his rock-solid chest,

‘to share a billboard with you.’ I then land my fist playfully in his stomach and he groans through his laughter, doubling over.

‘You guys are too cute!’ Phoebe gushes, and the pop-pop-pop of the lights continues. ‘Paige, back into his eyes if you can, please?’

The pair of us stop fooling around. I pause, feeling Miller’s muscles flinch under my palms. He’s so warm. This time there’s a softness to his gaze, a vulnerability that makes my heart melt, and for a split-second heat rushes through me, and I feel overwhelmed.

‘You alright?’ Miller asks me.

‘Fine,’ I say, clearing my throat, quashing the stirring sensation in my stomach.

‘Guys, this is perfect,’ Phoebe says, still taking more and more shots on the camera. ‘Would you mind... Paige, this time can I ask you to tilt your head back, let your hair fall loose... arch your back a little, that’s right. Put your hands on Miller’s shoulders.’

I do as I am told, but it feels provocative. My boobs are thrust out. I can see my father and brothers looking at me with disapproval once they find out what I’ve been doing, and I snap out of the moment, feeling uncomfortable.

‘Okay, okay,’ Phoebe says, pausing. ‘Maybe not that. Guys, let’s take five, okay, so I can take a look at these. Then we’ll go again.’

I step back as the stylist approaches with our robes. I push my arms into the sleeves. Miller does the same.

‘Would you guys like a drink? Sparkling water?’

‘Please,’ I say, my throat suddenly parched.

‘Thanks for stepping in,’ Miller says when the stylist scuttles away.

I blow out my cheeks. 'My brothers are probably going to go ballistic.'

'You think?'

'Standing half naked with you for a photo shoot? I don't think that's what they had in mind when I said I was going to look after you for a while.'

'Are you kidding? They'll be proud of you.'

The assistant comes back with our bottles of water and two glasses, placing them on the small table by the sofa. I walk over.

Miller waits until we're alone before he says, 'I wondered if I could take you somewhere. Tomorrow.'

I twist the top off my water, drinking straight from the bottle. 'Sure,' I say. 'Where are we going?'

'Can I tell you tomorrow?'

'That sounds mysterious.'

'It's not, I promise.'

I search his face, but Phoebe is back before I can ask any more questions. She's raving about the results of the shoot. Soon, we're back on our feet again for round two, and for a fleeting moment, I think I might even be enjoying myself.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Miller has me pack a small overnight bag, so I borrow one of his backpacks. The contents are essentially all I've been living with since I got here. Early in the morning, I come downstairs to find him peering out of the front window, his own small backpack at his feet.

'What are you looking at?' I ask.

'Security.' He checks the time on his phone. 'I've been watching them the past few days. Seven a.m. there's a shift changeover. Usually there's about a ten-minute window where the place left is unguarded.'

'Okaaay,' I say with a frown, slowing down.

'That's when we make our move.'

'And why would we be doing that?'

'Where we're going, I can't have security follow.'

He still hasn't said where he's taking me.

'I'll leave my cell behind and the car in the driveway,' he continues. 'They'll think we're home. Might take 'em a couple hours to realise we're not inside. You ready?'

'Yes, I'm ready. But you're acting weird, Miller. And I know for a fact that both Bodhi and Ziggy get very annoyed when you ditch your security detail.'

'You'll be perfectly safe, if that's what you're worried about.'

'I'm not worried. The point is that my face isn't recognisable like yours is.'

'I'll keep a low profile, I swear.'

'Can you at least tell me where we're going?'

Outside, our latest security guard has finished his night shift and drives away.

Miller leaps into action. 'Grab your bag,' he instructs me, and I do as I'm told. 'Let's go.'

He leaves his phone behind, as he said he would. He locks the front door behind us and I follow him around the side of the house. The black Ford remains parked in the driveway. Waving some kind of fob, Miller opens the garage door and I come to an abrupt halt.

Miller walks inside. I knew the garage was here, of course, but I'd always assumed it was empty.

This garage is far from empty.

I follow and my jaw goes slack. My gaze goes to not one, but three top-of-the-range, pristine, shiny motorbikes parked in a row to my left. Up ahead there is another white shiny 4x4, and behind it is a red and black sports convertible with low suspension.

Miller's pulling something from a shelf.

'You have cars. Plural. And motorbikes,' I say, aghast.

He looks back. He drops a leather biker jacket to the floor. 'You mean motorcycles?'

'How long have you had them?'

Miller gives a shrug. 'Couple years. You ever been on one?'

I shake my head. 'No.'

‘Yeah, well, I don’t really have anyone to buy shit for, except Garrett.’

That might be, but I know now that he’s donated a hell of a lot of money to charity. Before I know it, Miller’s pulling on his own black leather jacket.

‘Come on, Paige, stop staring, we don’t have long. Put your jacket on.’

My heart starts to beat rapidly. I reach for the jacket and do as instructed.

‘It’s about a four-and-a-half-hour ride, is that okay?’ he asks.

‘On a bike? We’re not driving?’ I’m looking at the sports car and he laughs.

‘We’re not drawing attention to ourselves, okay? Not today. We’ll take the Honda, there’s room for two.’

He’s pointing at the biggest bike, the least sporty of the three. My mother would have a heart attack if she knew what I was about to agree to. ‘I don’t know what to do on a bike,’ I say nervously.

‘It’s simple. Put your arms around my waist to hold on. Use the foot pegs. Sit close to me and don’t wiggle around. Mimic my movements, so when I lean, you lean but keep your movements smooth. Don’t worry, I’ll go slow.’

Standing close to me, he reaches for the two sides of my jacket, then fastens the zip almost all the way to my chin. He offers me a jaunty smile.

He then places both of our bags inside the body of the bike, underneath the saddle. Before he fastens his jacket, he swings one leg over the bike, and with barely a glance, brings down his full weight and seems to push through with his foot onto a pedal. I jump as the engine roars into action, the rumble reverberating all around the interior of the garage.

I swallow. I'm surprised at how sexy he looks.

'Can you grab both the helmets?' he raises his voice to me over the noise, indicating a shelf behind me. I glance back at Miller walking the bike out of the garage with the engine running, past the truck. He switches off the ignition, putting the bike back on its stand.

Then he helps me fix my helmet into place. He seems twitchy, like security could be back at any moment, which they are due to be.

'Comfortable?' he asks, and I nod. He helps me hoist myself onto the back of the bike.

'If you need my attention, tap me twice on the shoulder. If you need me to stop the bike for any reason, pinch my waist.'

I nod. Miller uses the fob to close the garage door. He fixes his own helmet into place and within a few moments he's restarted the engine. My heart lurches as he uses a different fob to open the vehicle gate. Aidan never told me anything about Miller riding a motorcycle. I should be worrying about the fact that Miller is going rogue and not taking security with him, but as we turn out of the gate, onto the road and Miller accelerates, the only thing I feel is exhilaration.

A little way up the road, under the shade of some trees, Miller pulls over. He powers down the engine and yanks off his helmet, using his feet on the ground to keep the bike balanced and upright. I stay where I am.

'How do you like the motorcycle?' he asks.

'Are you joking me?' I exclaim, because riding with him, even for the shortest of journeys, has given me such a rush. 'I love it! I want to be in the driver's seat!'

He laughs. ‘Slow down, one step at a time. You bring your phone?’

‘I did,’ I say, unzipping my jacket and reaching for it.

‘These are Bluetooth helmets. You got any music on your phone?’

We spend a few moments hooking up the Bluetooth. I navigate to my music app. The first song it plays is ‘Lovesick’, one of Rebel Heart’s best known and best loved songs.

‘Seriously?’ Miller says, ‘You don’t have anything else?’

I skip over another five Rebel Heart tracks. Miller’s looking over his shoulder, rolling his eyes at me.

We settle on one of my non-Rebel Heart playlists to play through the helmets.

‘Are you going to tell me where we’re going yet?’ I ask, before I put my helmet back on.

‘You’ll see,’ is Miller’s response.

People used to try and convince me that Miller was the bad boy of Rebel Heart. Personally, I never saw it. Whenever I spent any time with him – which wasn’t exactly often – he came across as arrogant and annoying, obsessed with his looks, with his sponsorship deals, his number of followers on social media, and with a steady stream of dedicated fangirls queuing up to sleep with him.

Before I came to Phoenix, Miller gave me the full-on ick.

Yet right at this moment, riding on the back of a motorcycle driven by the very same Daniel Austin Miller, I may have just changed my mind a little bit. Maybe it’s his confidence, the way he handles the machinery. Maybe it’s because I know he’s looking out for me, checking how I’m doing every time we stop at a junction, placing his hands over mine and giving

them a squeeze. Maybe it's because I'm pressed into him, and my helmet is playing my kind of music, the kind I can dance to, that's making me buy into his bad boy image. And maybe it's because I know something all the fangirls don't, that the cocky self-assurance is mainly just for show. Maybe I'm getting to know the real Miller.

Whatever this feeling is, I like it, and it makes me cling to him more tightly.

The landscape on our journey is arid and flat. After half an hour, we go past a sign that reads:

Wickenburg 10
Las Vegas 240
Los Angeles 348

A thrill goes through me, in case we're going to Vegas, because I've never been, and Aidan tells me it's a lot of fun. Though the last time he was there marked the beginning of his break-up from Lexi, so I doubt he'd take the same view these days.

My excitement is heightened when, ninety minutes later, we go past another sign for Vegas. When we stop for fuel, I remove my helmet. Miller does the same, reaching into his pocket for a cap, keeping his head low whilst he pays at the pump. I want to ask him if Vegas is our destination, but before I get the chance to do so, my phone starts ringing. Bodhi's name flashes up on screen.

I look to Miller and he grimaces.

'What do I say to him?' I ask.

'Maybe don't answer?' is his response, as he removes the fuel cap.

I dither, before answering, putting Bodhi on speaker, my voice taut. ‘Hi, Bodhi.’

Bodhi sounds pissed off. ‘Paige? Is Miller with you?’

I look to Miller, unsure. ‘He is,’ I reply.

‘I’ve never heard Bodhi sound so stern. ‘I take it you’re not at his home?’

‘Um. No.’

‘You gonna tell me where you’re both at?’

Whilst pumping petrol, Miller moves his fingers back and forth across his neck in a swift, slicing motion, indicating that I probably shouldn’t give anything away.

‘We’re... um... at a gas station somewhere.’

‘In Phoenix. You heading back?’

‘No, we’re just on a little trip. We’ll be gone a night or so.’

Bodhi goes silent. I hear his anguished exhale. ‘Paige. Let me talk to Miller.’

‘You can’t, he’s gone to... use the bathroom.’

Miller sticks out his bottom lip and gives me a thumbs-up.

‘Then where you going?’

‘Miller hasn’t said. And I think I just figured out why.’

‘Where’s his phone, do you know?’

‘Back in Phoenix.’

Bodhi’s exasperation is audible over the line. ‘I swear... anything happens... I could lose my job for this, and not for the first time. I am the first person you call, alright? Tell him to call me immediately. But I can’t help if I don’t know where you are.’

‘Understood.’

‘Stay safe, Paige. Tell Miller I’m mad at him.’

‘I will, Bodhi.’

He hangs up before I can say bye. I lower the phone and glower at Miller. 'You knew that call was coming, didn't you? That's why you haven't told me where we're going.'

Miller replaces the petrol pump and secures the cap on the bike. 'Usually, it takes him a little while longer. Security guard must have picked up on the fact that we weren't home.'

'I feel like you're in massive trouble.'

Miller shrugs. 'Not as much trouble as I was when I was still in the band. I'm not even in Rebel Heart anymore. Why should they even care how I spend my time?'

'Because. They still have a duty of care to you, and you might not be in the band anymore but the fangirls and fanboys will always care about you, no matter what you do. Now, are we going to Vegas or what?'

He flashes me a smile. 'How'd you guess?'

'Well, it's that, or the middle of the desert.'

'Promise me you won't tell Bodhi.'

'I promise.'

Miller's shoulders droop. 'Yes,' he says. 'We're goin' to Vegas. But not for the reasons you think.'

Miller rides a route through the main casino strip, pointing to things as we go, like the MGM Grand and the Fountains of Bellagio. He seems comfortable with the road, like he's done this journey before, or maybe it's because the band have been here a few times to perform. So I'm confused when we don't stop at any of the fancy hotels, we just keep riding until the buildings all become low rise, and the landscape a lot less flashy. We appear to be in suburbia.

Finally, we pull into a car park, the painted lines all faded and the concrete cracked under the desert sun. We're

surrounded by some kind of strip mall, and we park outside a café-cum-diner with broad windows. I'm glad, because my back has started to ache and I'm sweating a bit. Miller kills the engine. I remove my helmet, and, using the foot pegs, manoeuvre myself off the back of the bike.

Miller stays on the bike and keeps his helmet on. He seems to be paying attention to the windows of the diner.

I look around. 'Is this it? Are we stopping here?'

'Just for a sec,' Miller murmurs. 'It's not far from here.'

'Are we stopping for food?'

'Not here, no.'

I'm still confused. It's not clear why we've stopped. His head is turned away from me. I squint to see what he's looking at.

The diner is on a corner, the windows covering two sides, so it's possible to see all the way through the interior. There's a man behind a counter, and a waitress pouring a customer some coffee.

'Okay, we're done here, let's go,' Miller says.

'Where are we going now?'

'You'll see.'

'Miller, stop being so cryptic.'

'Come on, get on.'

I let out a sigh and put the helmet back on. I shift my leg over the saddle and shimmy back into position. My muscles ache.

Miller doesn't hesitate. He starts the engine and we ride back to the main road. A few minutes later, we pull in again, this time to a small motel. Miller parks near what seems to be the reception and once more kills the engine.

This time he removes his helmet, so I follow suit.

'You get off first,' he says, and I do as I'm told.

'We've arrived?' I ask. 'Where are we?'

'Welcome to West Las Vegas.'

I look at the motel. 'Are we staying here?'

'Yup.'

'Okay,' I say. 'Not entirely what I would have expected.'

'Low profile, remember?'

'Did you book?'

'Don't need to.'

'Right.'

'Come on,' Miller says, getting off the bike and lifting the saddle. He delves into his bag and pulls out an envelope. He pushes the saddle back down, holding on to his helmet, and I follow him towards the reception.

Inside the reception area, the chipped walls are painted a faded shade of dark green, covered with posters and pictures of what looks like old movie stars and movie posters. The place is weathered to say the least. There is an old TV propped on a shelf and a rotary fan facing the desk. Behind the reception desk is a man, perhaps thirty years of age, wearing a check short-sleeved shirt, thick-rimmed glasses and hearing aids in both ears.

'Hey, Howie,' Miller says as we enter.

'Hey! Miller!' Howie beams at him, looking up from his computer, and the two men bump fists.

'How are you, man?' Miller says and I'm bowled over when Miller accompanies his words with some sign language.

'I'm good, man,' Howie replies, also accompanying his words with sign language, but I note his eye contact is minimal. 'Who's the girl?'

'Paige, meet Howie. Howie, this is Paige.'

'You look like Aidan!' Howie exclaims.

‘Aidan’s my twin.’ I smile, because there’s something sweet about the man Miller has introduced me to.

‘She’s his sister,’ Miller says and signs simultaneously.

‘She’s pretty,’ Howie says, and also signs. I laugh shyly.

‘Thank you,’ I say.

Howie reaches for a key attached to a block of wood, hanging in some cubby holes behind the desk.

‘Here you go,’ Howie says to Miller. ‘I sent the maid in yesterday.’

‘Thanks, man,’ Miller says and hands over the envelope, which I note seems to be full of dollar bills. Howie takes it, then hands over a key fob, one that looks more like a car key.

‘See you around, man!’ Howie exclaims, giving a wave.

‘Thanks, Howie,’ Miller says, signing his words again, and I wave back.

I follow Miller back outside. Without talking, we retrieve our bags from the bike, then I follow him as he walks to a metal staircase, leading to the upstairs row of motel rooms under an awning.

At the top of the staircase, Miller turns back on himself and walks all the way to the end of the row. He uses the key on the block of wood to let himself through the door. Without going in, he pushes it wide open and allows me to walk in first.

Inside, the room is dingy and smells a little musty. The carpet, too, has seen better days. There’s one double bed, neatly made, and a picture of sunflowers hanging a little crookedly on the wall. Looking around, it seems like this is someone else’s room, with a couple of books piled up by the bed, together with a pair of headphones.

Miller follows me inside, closing the door behind us. ‘Before you say anything, there’s a mattress in the couch. You can have the bed,’ he says.

I turn around to face him, still wholly confused. 'I don't understand. Whose room is this?'

He looks to the floor. 'It's mine. I pay Howie a cash retainer.'

I'm frowning. 'Why? Where are we? Don't you want to be staying where all the nice hotels are?'

'You mean, stay on the Strip where I'm recognised within about five seconds of my arrival?'

'Miller. I don't understand... why have you brought me here?'

A muscle flinches in his jaw. He looks like he's trying to get the words out, but they won't come.

There's a lump in my throat when I put my bag down on the bed. 'You can trust me.'

One hand goes to the back of his neck. He keeps his eyes down. 'There was a diner. Before. Back there. When I pulled over in the parking lot. Did you see it?'

An uneasy feeling creeps into my chest. 'Yes.'

'There was a waitress. Through the window. Did you see?'

I wasn't really paying attention. Miller's expression is taut. The truth as to why we've come to Las Vegas finally dawns on me.

'Who is she?' I ask, but my heart breaks, because I already know his answer.

'She's my mom,' he says.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The whisper escapes my lips. ‘Oh, Miller,’ I say, before I go to him, my arms going around his neck. I feel his arms go around me, his face buried in my shoulder. We stand there, motionless as I cling to him. I know from the look he had on his face that I’m one of the only people he’s confessed his secret to. Now everything makes sense.

‘When?’ I ask after a few moments. ‘How? How did you find her?’

I pull back and search his face, but he can’t look at me, his gaze going back to the floor. So I take him by the hand, pull him over to the bed and force him to sit down next to me, gripping his fingers in mine. The muscle still ticks in his jaw.

‘You remember Harlan?’ he finally says, his voice strained with emotion. ‘The guy who came to the house?’

I nod my head frantically, tears forming, because his pain is almost visceral.

‘He’s a private detective. I contacted him end of last summer. Asked him to see if he could locate Jennifer Meadows. All I knew about her was her name and date of birth, not a lot else. When she left, my dad threw any photographs of her in the trash, even though I remember begging him not to.’

‘So... the money I gave him—’

He sniffs miserably. ‘That was the last of his finder’s fee.’

‘When did he find her?’

‘Late October. I told the boys I had to go deal with some stuff back home. That was the first time I came here... the first time I ducked out on Bodhi’s security team. They all thought I was just doing it to be difficult. But I’m not ready for this to come out.’

‘Have you spoken to her?’

He takes a moment to answer, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down. It feels like he’s holding back tears. ‘That’s exactly why. Not yet, no.’

I frown. ‘How many times have you been here?’

‘I came out here once in November. Then again at Christmas. When you came to New York in January, when I was supposed to train you, I came out here and let Aidey do the job instead. Then when I quit the band, I came back again. That was the last time I was here before I got sick. Bodhi fucking freaks out every time.’

‘So... no one knows where you are? When you come here?’

‘Other than Garrett, you’re the first person I’ve told.’

‘Mill, why didn’t you tell the boys? They’re your best friends.’

He gives an exaggerated shrug. ‘I don’t know. I was angry, I guess. They were all just... preoccupied. You know? They all... had somebody. Aidey had Lexi, Cal had Bianca. J.B. was all wrapped up with Audrey and Xavi, and I barely even saw Rav. Lexi shot a goddamn music video with all of them and their partners, and I was on my own.’

So Lexi had been right about the ‘Fallen’ video and Miller feeling isolated from everyone. I’d always thought of the boys

being so close – that was the beautiful thing about them – that they would tell one another everything, as genuine friends thrown together by a reality TV show. Now, I realise, there was so much bubbling under the surface, and that Miller was drifting, all alone, the rest of the group oblivious to the fact he'd tracked down the woman who abandoned him as a six-year-old, and the knowledge was tearing him apart.

'When you come here... what do you do?' I ask.

Included in the price of Miller's cheap motel room retainer fee is the use of a mud-splattered, dilapidated, white Ford Mustang, which seems to have once belonged to Howie's mother. We pick up fast food from a drive-thru en route back to the strip mall, where Miller pulls up in a similar position as before, near the diner windows but not close enough to be seen by anyone eating or serving anybody inside. He's put a cap and sunglasses on, to stop him from being recognised.

Inside, the waitress who was visible earlier is still there. The diner is busier now. I crane my neck to get a closer look. She's wearing an unflattering brown dress and a white pair of canvas shoes. Her long hair is scraped up into a high ponytail. For the minute, I watch her. She doesn't stop moving, flitting between tables and going back and forth to the counter with a notepad. She's too far away for me to see any real detail in her face.

'That's definitely her?' I ask.

Miller's eyes flit up, but he doesn't look for long. He nods his head.

'She looks young,' I comment.

'She's forty-seven.'

'That's young.'

My stomach rumbles loudly again. 'Eat something,' Miller says, pointing to the bag.

I dig my hand in, conscious that he's not eating. 'Are you not hungry?' I ask, helping myself to a burger and unwrapping the surrounding paper.

'Lost my appetite,' he says.

'How old was she when she had Garrett?' I ask through my mouthful, not wishing to come across as unsympathetic, but it's late and I didn't have breakfast in Arizona either.

'Sixteen. That guy didn't stick around for long, far as I know. She was a single mom for a while.'

I frown at him, the car filling with the distinct odour of cheeseburger, so I open the door a fraction. 'Wait, so...?'

'Garrett's only my half-brother. My mom met my dad when she worked in a Phoenix car showroom and he was the one fixing cars out back. They weren't married. He knew she already had a kid. She got pregnant with me at twenty-three.'

My eyes widen. Still rocked by the revelation about Garrett, I realise that's also like the equivalent of me having to look after a toddler right now, plus a young son, which I can't even begin to fathom.

Miller blows out his cheeks, sinking further down into the driver's seat. 'Anyway. You asked what I do. This is what I do. I sit here, in this car, tryna have the guts to go inside and introduce myself. Except I never manage to get that far. Too fucking chicken to get out the car. A part of me just likes watching her.'

Whilst I eat, his fingers tap on a random point on the steering wheel.

'It's okay to be scared, Miller. It's okay to be afraid of walking in there.'

'Makes me some kind of a weirdo stalker, though, don't it, right?'

I don't answer. I feel bad prioritising my stomach at such a moment. 'Do you remember it? When she left?'

Miller's silent before he swallows tightly and says, 'I can't talk about that.'

I plough on, because, as usual, I can't let things lie, and even I'm frustrated with my own meddlesomeness. 'Will you tell me why she left?'

He lets out a sigh, and I can tell he's trying not to let his emotions get away from him. 'I never saw my dad give her a beating, but I used to get sent out into the garden with Garrett so they could fight. The signs were there though. Bruises, cuts, sometimes a fat lip. I know he verbally and emotionally abused her too, like he did me and my brother. My dad was a bully, plain and simple. He wasn't a decent person. But I still wonder why she never took me with her. Or Garrett.'

I open my mouth to ask another question, but the flood-gates are already open and I let Miller talk.

'I sit here and wonder what it would be like to speak to her. Like, would I be able to ask her that question? *Why'd you leave? Why'd you leave me?* Does she even know what I did with my life? Does she care? I sit here and wonder, does she think about that moment she turned her back on us? And then I find out from Harlan that she went and got a whole 'nother fucking family.'

He yanks off his sunglasses, wiping tears. I put the rest of my burger into my lap, trying to reach for him, but he pulls away.

'She got married. To some guy called Brian who's a baggage handler at the airport. She had two more kids. Both girls. So, now I have two half-sisters as well.'

Once more, my jaw goes slack. 'You're joking. How old?'

He wipes more tears angrily, keeping his head down.

‘The oldest is fourteen,’ he chokes out. ‘Youngest is ten. They all live together not far from here. She goes by the name Jennifer Garland now.’

‘Oh, Miller, I’m so sorry.’

‘Don’t be,’ he snaps. ‘She didn’t want me. I gotta live with that.’

‘That doesn’t mean to say she doesn’t regret what she did. Everybody makes mistakes.’

He raises his voice. ‘You walk out on your little kid and you don’t even say goodbye? Who does that?’

His reaction breaks my heart. My food abandoned, I try again to reach for his hand. This time he lets me take it and I squeeze his fingers hard. He looks out the driver’s side window, trying to compose himself.

‘I had to tell somebody,’ he says solemnly. ‘I was going crazy.’

‘Thank you for trusting me. You said Garrett knows?’

‘He knows. He thinks I should waltz in there and tell her what a bitch she is. He’s got zero interest in coming here. Some days I wish I felt that way. I wish I didn’t care so much about it.’

‘You cared enough to seek her out. Of course you’d want to speak to her.’

‘I might be the last person in the world she’d wanna see.’

‘I imagine she’s proud of you.’

‘I doubt it,’ he scoffs.

‘I’d be proud of you,’ I say. ‘If you were my son.’

He looks to me, and the pain etched in his features is almost too much to bear. ‘Then if she knows who I am, and she’s proud of me, why did she never try to contact me? Tell me that.’

I don’t have an answer for him. The Miller I thought I

knew is not the man sitting next to me the car. He's lived a life I can't even fathom. And the truth is, I may not be his mother, but I am proud of him. I'm proud of how he's dealt with all of this. Alone. And he's been alone for too long.

'Why don't we go back to the room?' I suggest, and Miller lets go of my hand. He starts the engine, and, with one final lingering glance at the diner, he reverses the car and drives us back to the motel.

The air hangs thick in the room, and not just because it's a cheap motel.

Miller's said nothing. I feel privileged that he's shared his secret with me, yet I can feel him pulling away, just as he did in New York when he was supposed to train me. I think he would benefit from some kind of therapy, but this is Miller we're talking about, and he would probably balk at the idea, but I'm not giving up on him. It doesn't have to be this way.

I'm still holding the paper bag of fast food, grease now staining the edges. Everything inside is probably stone cold by now.

I clear my throat. 'Are you hungry?' I ask.

'Not really,' he murmurs.

I put the bag on the chest next to the TV. Miller seems restless, pacing.

'Can I get you anything?'

'I'm fine,' he snaps.

'I'm just trying to help,' I say quietly.

He's shaking his head. 'I should never have brought you here,' he mumbles.

'You needed to tell someone.'

'I know you, Paige, you'll just try and fix it. Just like you

always try and *fix* things. Some things are unfixable. Alright? You can't fix me.'

'I never said I wanted to fix you.'

He slumps down onto the edge of the mattress, the pain in his features still there. My heart swells in my chest. I go to him, crouching down, sinking to my knees on the floor between his legs. I take his face in my palms, forcing him to look at me.

'You're fine as you are, Miller,' I whisper.

I look into his eyes, my chest rising and falling. I make a snap decision, raise myself up a fraction, until our faces are level, and press my lips to his.

My kiss lasts barely a second. Miller doesn't respond, instead tears himself away, getting back to his feet.

'You can't do that, Paige,' he growls, his hands going into his hair. 'I can't handle it. You can't kiss me like that if you don't mean it.'

Slowly, I get to my feet. Two things occur to me. Firstly, that maybe I've wanted to kiss him for some time, but that I'd never quite realised it, and secondly, that maybe all that Miller seeks is the affection and love, the kind he's always missed out on. Maybe he sleeps with women because he's desperately hoping to find it somewhere.

'I do mean it,' I say, and there's a tremor in my voice.

Miller raises his eyes to me. At first, he looks unsure, but then his eyes come back to mine and I give him a nod, to reassure him that I'm telling the truth.

Within a second, Miller takes four purposeful steps towards me and wrenches me into his arms, his lips finding mine in a heated instant.

I cling to him and kiss him back, and another fact dawns on me.

I pull away, searching his face. 'Holy shit, Darcey was right,' I breathe.

'Right about what?' Miller asks.

'You *are* a really good kisser.'

He barely reacts, only because he's pulled me to him once more, his lips crushing to mine and I might melt with this magic he's bringing to my mouth. Miller kisses like he dances: with utmost confidence, and a rare brand of elegance.

Something in the atmosphere shifts, and our kisses grow heated and needy, Miller's hands pressing me to him. Yet that's the moment he pulls away from me again. He walks away, his palms covering his face.

'I—' I begin, but words fail me and I'm oddly bereft he's no longer kissing me.

'I need to tell you something,' he says, his tone a little strangled.

'Oh?'

He lets out a sigh, looking to the slightly stained ceiling.

'The first time we met... in Los Angeles. When we were seventeen. I thought you were the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen.'

It's not what I expected him to say. His words make me smile. 'You did?'

He looks to his hands. 'You were the whole reason I made friends with Aidey. So I could get close to you.'

This time I can't stop my broad smile spreading on my lips. 'Really?'

He rolls his eyes. 'Except you didn't like me very much.'

I laugh. 'I thought you were cocky.'

'I was. I think I was tryna impress you.'

'You failed miserably. But I think you knew that.'

He laughs, but it gets caught in his throat. 'When I got into the band, I asked Aidey if I could ask you out.'

I can't believe I'm hearing this. 'Seriously?'

Miller gives a shrug. 'He said no. And I didn't wanna jeopardise anything. But I kept on asking him. And he kept on saying no.'

'How many times did you ask him?'

'Enough that I stopped asking because I knew he was never gonna say yes. But I wanted to ask you to Lexi's premiere.'

I inhale in surprise. 'Everyone said to me you were going to, but you never did.'

'The day I'd plucked up enough courage to ask you was the same day I got the call from Harlan and my world turned upside down.'

'Miller,' I sigh.

'A guy like me is never gonna get a girl like you, Paige. You're way out of my league.'

I shake my head. 'That's not true. Why would you even think that?'

He holds out his hand, indicating our surroundings. 'Look at where I came from—'

I've heard enough. I march over to him and my lips find his immediately, and he doesn't need any more encouragement than that.

We kiss for some time, his hands at my waist, my hands in his hair. It feels nice. More than nice. I think it may class as the best kiss I've ever had.

He pulls away and I rest my forehead against his. 'You realise, Paige,' he whispers, 'if we do this, I am never gonna be able to stop kissing you.'

Dance With Me

'Then never stop kissing me,' is my reply and my words elicit a gentle groan from his throat.

'Can I ask you something?' he says, and he's still holding me to him.

'What is it?' I whisper.

'Would you go on a date with me?'

Chapter Twenty-Five

My lips twitch into a smile, because I never thought I'd see the day when Miller asked me out on an actual date.

'When?' I ask.

'Tonight. Here. I mean... it might have to be in this room but we could... maybe dress up, make it special.'

I nod. 'I'd like that.'

He bows his head, but I glimpse his broad grin. 'I've always wanted to do that.'

'What, ask me out on a date?'

'Hell, yeah.'

'Will you do something for me then?'

'Name it.'

'Will you drive me to a mall, or like, some shops? I don't have anything to wear.'

'Of course. Sure. I can do that.'

It's a ten-minute drive in the Mustang to Meadows Mall. In the driver's seat, Miller dons a cap and sunglasses. With one hand on the wheel, he holds my hand the entire way. I look down at my lap, at my fingers entwined with his, and am amazed that I don't want to pull away. On arrival, we agree

that he'll pick me up in two hours, arranging a place because he doesn't have his phone.

Wandering around the stores, I feel like I'm living in an alternative reality, the one where Danny Miller is still hot, but actually *nice*. Thoughtful. Sweet. I'm tickled that he's admitted he liked me all this time, though I'm annoyed at Aidan for denying his bandmate the chance to ask me out. I stop outside a shop window. Would it have changed anything, me knowing he liked me? Would I still have thought Miller was completely atrocious? And would I have said yes if he'd asked me?

Because if I'd known I was going to get kissed like that, I think I may have said yes in an instant.

When he collects me again, I load four bags into the boot of the car. I've bought a dress, new shoes, make-up, hair products and some jewellery, all courtesy of Aidan's credit card.

When I climb back into the passenger seat, I glance across at Miller, who's wearing sunglasses but no cap.

'You get everything you need? Howie says you can have a different room at the motel if you wanna get ready. He gave me the key.'

At the motel, Miller helps me with my bags, and upstairs in the motel shows me to a different room, not far from his own. There's no one else around. He's letting me in when it occurs to me that he's nervous. I linger beside the door.

'Everything alright?'

He balls a fist and pushes it into his other palm. 'I'm sorry I can't take you out to some fancy restaurant. I'm sorry this is just gonna be pizza on the carpet.'

'That sounds perfect to me,' I whisper, and plant a single kiss against his cheek.

'How long do you need?'

'Give me an hour?'

When he's gone again, I empty my bags onto the bed.

Exactly one hour later, I leave the room, walk two doors down along the outside balcony, where the sun is sinking low on the horizon. Hoisting up my dress a little, so as not to reveal too much cleavage, and checking my hair one more time, I knock on Miller's door.

When he opens it, I smile. Miller's gaze rakes over my dress. It's plum coloured, with a top layer of lace, short and off the shoulder, and clings to my every curve. I paired it with a pair of high-heeled mules that raise me up to about the same height as him. In my room, I showered, washed and dried my hair, the latter tied back in a high ponytail that falls in soft curls to the middle of my back. I put on a pair of silver big hoop earrings and kept my make-up simple.

As I take a step through the door, Miller almost looks tortured. It's an odd look coming from someone ordinarily so full of confidence, but it's apparent he can't tear his eyes from me.

'You look incredible,' he breathes as he closes the door.

'Does it suit me?' I ask, giving him a single twirl, pressing my palms to the material.

'That dress was made for you,' he says, and still there's a weirdly tormented look on his face.

I look Miller up and down. Along with his fresh haircut, he's wearing a white cotton shirt with pockets on the front and the sleeves rolled up, together with a loose-fitting pair of green cargo trousers with pockets on the side and a pair of Timberland boots. He's also had a shave.

'You look nice,' I say. 'Did you go shopping too?'

'I had some clothes here from before. This was the best I could do.'

I turn my back to him and take in my surroundings. The

light in the room is dimmed. Miller's tidied up and put candles all around the room. On the floor he's laid a blanket out, along with some bowls of snacks and choices of drink. It looks low-key romantic.

'I like the carpet picnic,' I tell him.

Miller runs one hand across the back of his neck. 'Trust me to ask you out on a date when I literally have nothing at my disposal. Howie's ordering us some pizza. Is that okay?'

I kick off my shoes, thankful I don't have to wear them. I walk over to the blanket and lower myself down. 'Pizza's perfect.'

Miller jumps to attention, coming over to me. That's when it hits me: he's really nervous.

'Can I get you something to drink? We have beer, cola, wine... uh, those're kinda the options.'

'I'll have a beer, thank you.'

He leans across and opens a cupboard. Inside is a small fridge, from which he retrieves two bottles of Budweiser and twists off the caps.

I hug my knees as he hands me a beer. I then take a long sip before digging into the snacks.

Miller is still watching me as he lowers himself down to the floor, leaning his back against the foot of the bed.

'What?' I say, the bottle neck hovering inches from my lips, stretching out my legs so that they're almost touching his.

'Nothing, I... I just figured this day would never come, is all.'

My eyes meet his. 'The day you got to take me out on a date?'

In this light, I can't tell if he's blushing or not. 'In case you hadn't noticed, Paige, I don't exactly date. I just—'

'—sleep with anything that moves?'

The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them and guilt floods my chest.

‘Yeah,’ Miller mutters grimly. ‘That.’

Shit. I need to backtrack. ‘It’s difficult. Everyone knows who you are. Look at the boys, they’ve all had it pretty easy meeting their respective partners.’

‘They have, right?’

‘Ravi met Tun because he designed your costumes, J.B.’s shackled up with his childhood sweetheart, Aidey met Lexi through the documentary. And look at Bianca, she was already famous when Cal decided to buy her a drink after the Madison Square Garden show. None of you have ever dated, Miller, not properly. Thank your lucky stars you don’t have to. It’s a minefield. Take it from me, dating is no fun.’

A smile creeps onto his lips. ‘Tell me about some of the bad dates you’ve been on.’

I don a male voice. ‘*Hey, babe, anyone ever tell you, you look exactly like Aidan McArthur?* When I used an app, that was their opening line. When I went on blind dates, that was the first thing they’d say.’ I let out a sigh. ‘I know it’s not Aidan’s fault. It’s not the band’s fault. But it gets really tiresome after a while.’

He sips his beer and looks to the carpet. ‘Maybe you should date a band member.’

‘You’re not in Rebel Heart anymore, remember?’

‘Ouch.’

I level him with my gaze. ‘You have to talk to the boys. You have to tell them you want back in.’

‘Why would they ever take me back?’

I sit up straight. ‘Because you were going through a lot of emotional shit they didn’t know about and you had no one to talk to about it.’

‘They don’t care about that shit.’

‘Of course they do. But they can’t help if they don’t know. They can’t understand if you don’t talk to them.’

He looks to the floor, shakes his head.

‘Do you want to go solo?’ I ask him. ‘Is that what you want?’

‘No,’ he says. ‘Rebel Heart means everything to me. But I stood there and told them that I quit. I told the whole world that I quit. And they’re on tour. Without me. How do I go back on that?’

‘With honesty, Miller. You have to tell them the truth.’

The ensuing silence is punctuated by a rap at the door.

‘Pizza’s here,’ Miller mumbles, getting to his feet.

Howie’s at the door holding two cardboard pizza boxes and some extras in a paper bag. I watch Miller thank him using sign language and pass him a wad of cash. As much as everyone thinks being in a world-famous boy band is a five-star lifestyle, it must be hard for Miller not to just be able to go and eat at a local restaurant without attracting ridiculous amounts of attention. That’s the cursed part of fame, and I see it with my brother all the time.

I wave Howie goodbye, shouting my thanks. He gives me a thumbs-up before Miller closes the door again.

Miller comes back to the blanket, carrying everything. ‘I remembered your favourite pizza topping,’ he says.

‘I’ve never told you my favourite pizza topping.’

‘Hey, I pay attention. You had a conversation about it with the other dancers just before the start of the tour.’

I vaguely recall a lunch where we had to order for delivery.

‘What if neither of these boxes contains my favourite topping? Do I pretend like you got it right?’

‘Don’t doubt me, McArthur.’

‘Alright, what’s my favourite topping?’

‘Hawaiian.’

I give a dramatic gasp.

‘Am I right?’

‘Well, I hope so for our sakes, if you’ve bought a twelve-inch pizza smothered in pineapple.’

He grins. ‘Come on. Tell me I’m right.’

My lips twist. ‘You are correct, yes.’

Miller subtly punches the air, pleased with himself, before flipping open the lid of the pizza box. I breathe in the delicious aroma of Hawaiian pizza, which fills the room. After I take my first slice, Miller digs into the food hungrily and I realise that he hasn’t eaten anything all day.

In our conversation, we steer off two topics entirely: Rebel Heart and Miller’s mother. Over pizza and beer, I talk him through my worst ever dates, the entire account of the fire, and stories from Aidan’s and my childhood. Before I know it, it’s dark outside and we’ve polished off all the food, and he’s had three bottles of beer to my two. We’re sitting side by side on the blanket, our backs to the base of the bed, our legs stretched out but not quite touching.

I yawn. It hits me how long today has been.

‘You tired?’ Miller asks.

‘A little,’ I say, and suddenly there’s a knot in my stomach because we’ve reached what might have reached what could naturally be considered the end of our date.

‘I can fold out the couch. You can take the bed.’

I’m silent for a moment. ‘We could share the bed if you like.’

‘Prolly not a good idea,’ he says, and I see his throat work. ‘I prolly couldn’t keep my hands off you.’

I raise my eyes to his. The atmosphere shifts, the air between us growing thicker. ‘What if I don’t want you to keep your hands off me?’ I whisper.

Miller shakes his head. ‘Paige... nah, you see? That’s what I always do. I didn’t ask you on a date so I could take you to bed the moment it’s all over. You’re not like all those other girls I been with. And maybe that’s the problem... I never ever take things slow.’

I nod my head emphatically. For the last half an hour, every nerve ending in my body has been tingling at the thought of having sex with Miller.

I get to my feet. Miller seems to grimace, like he’s said the wrong thing yet again.

‘Can I kiss you goodnight?’ I ask from above him.

He looks up at me, his mouth falling open in surprise.

He goes to get to his feet. Shimmying my skirt hem up a couple of inches, I catch him before he can properly move, lowering myself down, my knees pressing down into the fabric of the blanket underneath us. I wiggle down further until I’m straddling him, my palms flat against the fabric of his shirt. I lean back slightly, my core pressing into the zip of his cargo trousers. That’s when I feel his erection flourish into life, pressing deliciously up into me.

Miller lifts his chin, leaning his head slightly back. I lower my head, grazing my lips against his, just gently enough to tease him. The moment I pull away elicits a little moan of disappointment from him.

‘I know you’re trying to be respectful,’ I say, pressing my lips to his once more, ‘But, Miller, you should know I haven’t had sex in a year, and I am so hot for you right now.’

Miller groans, his hands clamping down on my waist, pulling me towards him, capturing my lips in a searing kiss,

shifting his hips a fraction so that I feel the full extent of his arousal.

I pull back, breathless. 'Is that okay?' I ask.

'I don't have any protection,' he states, worried. 'I told myself I categorically could not sleep with you.'

I pause, because this is Miller we're talking about. Miller deciding not to sleep with a member of the opposite sex is like a dog resisting the juiciest bone. Which makes this a significant milestone in his life.

'Why did you tell yourself that?'

'Because,' he begins, looking to the floor again. 'Because it's you, Paige. I never thought I'd get to have this moment with you. And I don't wanna fuck it all up.'

I lift his chin and look into his eyes. 'You won't fuck it up.'

There's an urgency to his kiss and I revel in it. There's a pulsating between my legs where I've grown wet for him.

'I want you so badly,' Miller chokes out in a complete U-turn, pulling me down for another kiss that has me writhing in his arms.

'There are other things we can do,' I whisper back. 'You know... for science.'

His gives a throaty laugh. 'For science.'

Tonight, his kisses are more heated, more desperate, his tongue probing, his fingertips sliding up my thighs and under the hem of my dress. I can feel my own arousal blossom between my thighs, a sexual need taking hold of my body and eclipsing any other emotion. My body's reaction to his touch astonishing me and causing me to moan in pleasure.

His hands grip me, but my dress is tight and restricting my movements. Pulling away from him, I get to my feet, grabbing both his hands until we're both standing. Within seconds we're peeling away clothes, our hands getting tied up in

our eagerness to remove layers of material. When he lowers me to the bed, his mouth on mine, I'm down to my underwear and, in between kisses, I'm panting with anticipation.

Reaching behind me, I unhook my strapless bra, letting it slip from my fingers to the carpet. Miller runs his fingers up over my ribcage to my left breast, caressing the small peak before gently pushing my soft flesh upward and sucking my nipple into his mouth. His hot tongue licks my flesh, until cold air makes me tingle where he's abandoned my nipple to lavish attention on the other. My head goes back as he takes his time, until both peaks are rock hard and vying for his attention.

I lift my head. He's watching me with lustful eyes. 'Miller, go down on me,' I whisper.

'You're sure?' he asks, grazing kisses across my breastbone. 'I mean, you don't have to ask me twice.'

'I'm sure,' I say, and he uses his arms for leverage to shimmy further down my body.

He kneels up. I lift my hips, wriggling out of my underwear, until I'm fully naked for him, the lit candles bouncing shadows across my body. I watch as his eyes roam over me, taking their time.

'You're even more beautiful than I imagined you'd be,' he breathes, hooking his fingers under my bent knees and guiding my thighs further apart. That I'm splayed out for him like this turns me on even more.

Miller keeps his eyes on me, nestling between my thighs, hovering inches from my wet flesh. I'm aching. The first touch of his tongue releases a breath from my lungs and I exhale shakily. Yet as he begins to lick and suck at my flesh, it feels oddly like he's missing the target.

'Miller—' I whisper.

He pulls back. 'Mmm.'

‘Can you go... up a bit?’ I ask.

‘Oh. For sure.’

He does, but he’s not quite in the right place. ‘A little further,’ I instruct him.

I can tell he’s unsure. I haul myself onto my elbows.

‘Can you show me?’ he asks, his voice thready.

I reach out. ‘Give me your finger,’ I say, and he holds it out. I guide it back down, placing the pad of his index finger flat against my clit. ‘This is where you need to focus most of your attention.’

I nod, the look on his face like a student eager to learn. I watch him remove his finger and lower his mouth again. I’m surprised at how much I enjoy watching him work, like I’m the teacher giving him the lesson.

‘Point your tongue,’ I say. ‘Increase your speed a little.’

I feel him adjust his technique. When he hits the spot, my head goes back, my moan making it clear to him he’s just hit the jackpot.

Miller raises his head, my arousal all over his lips. ‘Is this right?’ he rasps.

‘Yes,’ I breathe.

‘This how I make you come?’

‘Don’t stop.’

I think I see a hint of a smile before Miller dives back down and enthusiastically gets to work, flicking and fluttering his tongue over me, keeping rhythm and the right amount of pressure, lapping at me, my nerve endings responding to his movements, sending waves of pleasure through my core. Watching him turns me on like never before.

‘Put your fingers inside me,’ I tell him, and Miller’s hand obeys in an instant. In a second, two fingers brush up against the soft, wet, flesh at my entrance, dipping inside me before

withdrawing, teasing little whimpers from my lips. The pleasure is infinite, yet I want to be filled by him.

‘Miller... oh God,’ I gasp.

In response, Miller pushes two fingers inside me, all the way to the hilt, his firm tongue still working me, keeping pace. When his fingers begin a slow, steady thrust, I almost can’t take it anymore, my hips squirming, but he holds fast. Heat curls inside me. The feeling is incredible, like I’m soaking in a bath full of sensations that are all shooting through me at once, flowing all down my thighs, all the way to the tips of my toes.

He keeps going, inching me closer and closer to ecstasy with every thrust of his fingers and swipe of his tongue. I gasp and writhe and pant and it only encourages him further. That’s he’s desperate to please me makes his eager efforts that much more worthwhile. A little schooling has gone a long, long way. And I’ve needed this.

‘Miller,’ I moan, the sound of his name on my lips getting me to the finish line and my climax explodes, surging outwards from my centre in a tsunami of sensual heat. My back arches involuntarily off the sheets and I feel the walls of my channel clamping down on his fingers in a vice-like grip as I shudder, losing track of the wild, untamed sounds emerging from the back of my throat.

When my orgasm subsides, I go to jelly, boneless and depleted on the motel bed. I feel Miller shift position, coming to lie beside me, propping himself on one elbow and watching as my breaths return to normal, placing one hand against my stomach. I open one eye. He’s looking down the line of my naked body, expression still ignited by desire.

Miller did that to me. Miller. Who for years I’ve called Man-whore Miller. And it was probably the best orgasm I’ve ever had in my life.

I open my other eye. He's watching me.

His lips twitch. It's clear he's enjoyed the experience as much as I did, like it's taken us both by surprise, in a good way.

'Thanks for the direction,' Miller says after a few moments. 'No girl's ever told me what to do like that before.'

I reach up and stroke his hair. 'What, told you that you were in the wrong place?'

'Precisely. I always did like your honesty.'

My hand slides to his cheek. He leans down and he holds me in a searing kiss. Sliding my fingers down across his throat, they end up resting against the muscular plains of his chest. Continuing on their journey, I slide over the fabric of his boxer briefs, my left palm coming to rest against the powerful ridge in his underwear. Miller pulls away, drawing breath.

I raise my eyes to his. I remember what he said about never allowing a girl to go down on him. 'Do you trust me?' I whisper.

He looks into my eyes, his breath rising and falling. He gives a little nod.

I pull myself into a sitting position, then flip myself over onto all fours, straddling his lower legs. Hooking my fingers into the stretchy waistband of his underwear, I ease them down towards me, lifting them over his stiff length and allowing his substantial erection to spring free.

Tossing his underwear, I use my knee to part his thighs, nestling between them. I revel in the feeling of taking control.

All the time, he's watching me carefully.

When I take him in my mouth, all the way to the back of my throat, the sound of Miller's groan fills me with the deepest satisfaction.

It's been the longest day. I don't know what time it is. Most of the tea-light candles have burned out, save one little cluster in one corner.

Miller's curled into me from behind, one arm draped over my stomach, the other underneath the curve of my neck so that our fingers are knotted. He trails tender kisses between my shoulder blades.

'Did I tell you that was the most awesome thing ever?' he hums, his tone groggy.

'Only about twenty times in the last five minutes,' I giggle, but I let out a yawn.

Another kiss. And another. And another.

'I'm gonna keep saying it. I'd go out there and scream it for the whole of Las Vegas to hear if you'd let me.'

'I don't think all of Las Vegas needs to hear the smutty details,' I say with a smile.

He chuckles. Who knew that I could feel so contented, naked in a bed with Miller?

'I never stayed with a girl like this before,' he says softly.

I turn my head.

'I mean, usually I'm out the door by now,' he adds.

'Do you need to go?' I say, elbowing him gently in the ribs. He pulls me closer to him, nuzzling my neck. 'I'd rather stay. Can I stay?'

I press my back into his torso as he plants another kiss on my shoulder blade. 'Yes, you can stay,' I say.

We're quiet for a moment. His breathing slows.

'Miller?'

'Mmm.'

'I was thinking about your mum.'

'What about her?'

'I was thinking maybe I could go and see her. Talk to her.' When he says nothing, I add, 'Only if you wanted me to.'

'Okay,' he murmurs, and a moment later, his breathing alters, and he's fallen asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Six

When I open my eyes, Miller's face is close to mine. He's splayed out on his front and dead to the world. He looks so peaceful. Waking up beside him, the pair of us still naked, I thought it would feel weird. But it doesn't. There's a lump in my throat as I watch him breathe in and out. And last night... last night was good. Better than good. I'll admit, I'm a slightly bossy female – I know that – but the man showed *effort*. And, when I returned the favour, I could tell that he savoured every second of me pleasuring him, which was possibly the most satisfying part.

Looking at him now, my heart melts a little. Whilst he was liking me from afar, I was berating him for being a man-whore. Yet all he's ever sought is affection, the kind he never experienced as a boy. So maybe he was a misguided man-whore. It was unfair of me to label him that way. All this time, I've been a complete bitch to him really. Yet, looking at him now, all I want to do is care for him. How is that even possible? Because it's *Miller*. Daniel Austin Miller. And how is it, out of all his potential options, he chose me?

An odd thought occurs to me. Is it because of Aidan? Is it because I look so like my brother? Someone Miller's always

looked up to? Am I just an extension of my brother, his man crush?

Then a bubble of panic bursts in my chest. What if he just said all that stuff to get me into bed? What if it was just an act all along?

But it didn't seem like an act. It seemed like he was being genuine, that he *wanted* to take me out on a date, and by not bringing condoms he was trying to keep things non-sexual.

Until I jumped on him.

It's like I told Lexi, once upon a time. Sometimes the girl has to make the first move.

Resisting the urge to run my fingers through his hair, I wriggle out from underneath the sheets and get to my feet.

I move to pick up my underwear, my dress and strapless bra. My shoes are by the door. Dressing in silence, I creep out of the room, going back to the room two doors down where I got ready.

I get a quick shower and dress back into my normal clothes, raking my fingertips through my hair and scraping it into a rough ponytail. I redo my make-up. My Magic 8 Ball is in my bag, because it comes everywhere with me now, like some kind of talisman.

I'm not going to vocalise what I'm contemplating. I just ask the question in my head and shake the ball.

The answer floats to the surface. *SEEMS LIKE YES*, it says.

The diner smells strongly of coffee. When I enter, I feel several pairs of eyes on me.

Jennifer Garland is behind the counter. I know it's her, because she was the woman I glimpsed yesterday and she's

wearing a name badge on her dress. Her brown hair – which is the same shade as Miller’s – is tied back, but it’s curly and has volume. She doesn’t appear to be wearing much make-up, if any at all, except for a lick of mascara. She looks tired, but underneath her slight wrinkles I can picture the young woman she once was, and I can see where Miller gets his good looks from. She has a straight nose, brown eyes and several earrings in each ear. I think I peek the glimpse of a tattoo on her bicep, underneath the hem of the short sleeve of her dress. She’s chewing gum.

I approach the counter. There are some pastries for sale under the glass surface.

She is standing at the till, ringing up a sale, one hand on a percolator filled with black coffee. She seems harangued.

‘Good morning, what can I get you?’ she asks, without looking my way.

I open my mouth to speak but no sounds emerge. That’s when she looks at me and I see what I think could be a flash of recognition cross her features.

‘Help you?’ she clips, as the other customer departs.

‘Are you Jennifer Garland?’ I ask.

Her shoulders drop. She puts the coffee down, unsure. Her brow is furrowed.

‘My name is Paige McArthur. I’m a friend of your son’s. Danny Miller.’

She swallows tightly and takes a step back. The percolator abandoned, she looks to the floor then wipes her hands on her apron. Her eyes come back to mine and I think I see tears there, held hostage.

She raises her voice towards the kitchen to her left. ‘Leyland!’

‘Yeah!’

‘Gon take my break early!’

‘You not due on break ’nother hour!’ the voice comes back.

‘I gotta duck out!’ She levels her eyes on me and looks anxious. ‘Come with me out back.’

Outside, at the back of the diner where the wheelie bins are, Jennifer lights a cigarette. Her fingers tremble. I hover, not quite knowing what to do with myself. She hugs her waist with her free hand and paces up and down.

‘I didn’t know if this day would ever come,’ she says, exhaling smoke towards the sky. ‘How did you find me?’

‘Miller... I mean, Danny. He hired a private investigator.’

‘A private investigator?’

‘Yes. They tracked you down.’

She shakes her head, takes another drag, then massages the bridge of her nose. ‘And why’d he send you?’

‘I volunteered. It’s difficult for him. A lot of people know his face.’

She looks me up and down. ‘You’re the... the twin.’

‘I’m Aidan’s sister, yes. So... you do know the band?’

She looks like she might cry. Her throat works. ‘I didn’t watch the reality show. Not the first time out. I remember the first time I saw a picture of them. Everybody was talking about this new boy band, the ones had been on TV. I didn’t even know their names. Then when I saw their picture for the first time, I just...’ She covers her mouth. ‘The people I worked with, they didn’t know about my past. What I left behind... in Arizona. They didn’t know I’d pushed two babies out before then. My husband was the only one who knew what I’d done. And he weren’t my husband back then. I went home and I... My girls. I got two. They don’t know who their half-

brother is. Little Rebel Heart fans, the pair of them... have been for a while. I think maybe a small part of me encouraged it.'

She sucks on her cigarette, unable to meet my eye.

'You must think I'm a real piece o' work, huh? To do what I did.'

I choose my words carefully. 'I don't understand why any woman would leave her children to fend for themselves, no.'

She winces, hugs her waist tighter. Her cheeks hollow out as she sucks hard on the remnants of her cigarette, then flicks ash towards the concrete.

'I would have died in that house. If I'd stuck it out. My momma always did say I had shitty taste in men. But their daddy adored those boys, even when Garrett wasn't his. I knew he would never lay a finger on either of 'em. I knew that they would be safe. But me... he decided he didn't like me much quickly enough not so long after Danny was born. So, eventually... I left. Done a lot o' things I ain't proud of. But I'm still here.'

'But *he* died. Garrett and Miller were left alone.'

Her eyes come back to mine, pleading. 'I'd cut myself off. Changed my name. I left everything behind. Didn't have much to leave, aside from two kids, but the couple friends I did have, I cut out of my life. Wasn't speaking to my momma anymore anyway. I didn't know that happened. That he died. Six years after I left. Not until I watched the TV show and Danny talked about his brother Garrett bein' the one to raise him. It floored me, when I heard that. My heart was filled with regret. If I'd known, I would have gone back there in an instant.'

She's crying now. My heart goes out to her. She tosses

her cigarette butt and wipes her hands on her apron. I can tell she's trying to hold it together.

'So, he knows where I am, does he?' she asks.

'He does.'

'Where is he now?'

'Not far from here.'

Her tears fall, unconstrained. She wipes them away but more come back just as quickly, her throat still working.

'Did you know he'd been in hospital? Recently? In Phoenix.'

Her arms squeeze tighter across her middle. 'Called in sick for my shift just so I could watch the news coverage on TV.'

'You could have got in a car. Phoenix isn't far from here.'

Her expression collapses into a deep frown. 'And say what? *Hey, Danny, it's your mamma. Sorry I left you, but hey, honey, I'm back now. Let's just forget that I left you alone that one time. Sweetie, I'm not that dumb.*'

I wince. She goes quiet.

'I'm here to offer you his phone number,' I tell her.

She's taken aback. 'He told you to give me that?'

I avoid giving her an answer, instead reaching into my pocket for a receipt with Miller's number scribbled on it with a pen I found in the room at the motel. I hold it out to her. 'You don't have to contact him. It's your choice.'

She looks down at my outstretched hand. She knows what's on offer, and that I'm telling the truth.

She doesn't take the paper. 'My girls don't know.' She snuffles. 'I can't lie to them.'

I'm heartbroken at the thought of her refusing her son's number. Have I come here for nothing?

She snatches the slip of paper, thrusts it in her pocket, still not meeting my eye.

'I saw he left the band,' she says. 'Is he... happy?'

I don't want to tell her that she was the guiding force behind his departure. It would feel like twisting the knife at this moment. 'He's doing a lot better now. He has a house in Phoenix. He bought Garrett an apartment.'

Her eyes well up again. 'He always did have a good heart on him. A sweet nature. My boy.'

I want to ask her if she regrets leaving, yet, looking at her now, I think I know the answer. That there were factors beyond her control.

'I gotta get back,' she states, eyeing the door.

I give a single nod. I have so many questions. Like, whether she'll confess the truth to her daughters or whether she might get in contact with her son.

'Thank you,' I mutter. 'Can I pass on any messages?'

The look she gives me tells me she needs time to process that magnitude of what's taken place. She shakes her head.

'Thanks for the number. For dropping by.'

Back at the motel, I knock on the door to Miller's room. I've picked up us some breakfast from a different café. Yet when he opens the door, his expression is laced with uncertainty.

'Where were you? I got worried.'

He's showered and changed. I hold up the cardboard tray of coffees, plus a paper bag. 'I got us breakfast.'

'You must have walked pretty far.'

Guilt hits me squarely in the chest. He doesn't take a coffee and I lower my hand.

'Paige, please don't tell me you went where I think you went,' he says before the door is even closed, a worried frown etched across his features and the words seemingly lodged in his throat. 'Please don't tell me you did that.'

I don't know what to say. This isn't quite the reaction I expected.

'You said it was okay...' I begin.

Miller's arms go out. He raises a stern voice to me. 'I said it was okay that we talk about it! I said it was okay that I consider it! That was not your cue to go see her!'

He's pacing across the carpet, running his fingers through his hair.

'Miller, she seemed nice—'

'I don't care, Paige!' he explodes. 'The point is I don't even know if I wanna meet her yet! God, you have no idea, do you? How do you forgive someone for abandoning you as a kid? You have no idea what it's like to find yourself home alone as a six-year-old with nobody there to take care of you! I didn't even watch TV 'cause ours was busted and my dad never bought us a new one. I didn't grow up like you, Paige! I didn't have someone there to wipe my ass or tuck me in at night, or read me a bedtime story or sit around in my perfect little family unit! When your mom was driving you and your brother to ballet class, I was tryna figure out how I could get a soup can open because I was so goddamned hungry, because my mom up and left and my dad went to work and left me to fend for my fucking self!'

I wipe away tears and put down the tray of coffees on the side. 'I'm sorry,' I whisper. 'I was only trying to help.'

He paces. Miller's tone shakes with fury. 'That's you all over. You try and fix shit that ain't your business. I told you... don't try and fix me.'

His terse words send a fresh wave of tears down my cheeks. In my mind, I thought I would get gratitude. I didn't think I would get shouted at.

'You shouldn't have done that, Paige,' he says. A muscle flinches in his tensed jaw.

It's then that I notice his bag is already packed on the bed.

'Are we leaving?' I ask, stunned and still wiping tears, the events of last night like something I imagined. All the warmth he showed me has evaporated.

'We should get going.'

'You don't want to know wh—'

'No, I don't wanna hear any of it,' he responds emphatically. 'Let's go.'

I stare at him for a moment. He reminds me of the Miller I found when I first arrived in New York. Closed off and cold, unwilling to listen to anyone.

'Can we talk? Just for a minute?' I ask. 'Please?'

'Paige. Some other time. We gotta go.'

My shoulders droop. It's useless. He wants to run again. 'My stuff's in the other room,' I tell him. 'I'll get it.'

Ten minutes later, I wait downstairs outside the reception as Miller returns the keys to both rooms, and the Mustang, to Howie and bids him farewell. I catch a glimpse of Howie behind the desk and give him a wave. He returns it enthusiastically and I offer him the best grin I can manage under the circumstances.

My grin evaporates when Miller passes me. He tugs on the blacked-out helmet and his face disappears from view.

I let out a sigh, follow his lead and yank on my own helmet. I'm not relishing a four-hour journey on the back of a motorcycle when Miller's upset with me. Somehow, I don't think he's going to believe that, by speaking to his mother, I had his best interests at heart.

I might be an idiot.

And I don't know how to fix this.

Which is not to say I won't try. When I manoeuvre myself into the back of the saddle, after he's started the bike, I go to hold on to Miller's waist, only I slide my arms all the way around his middle and slip the tips of my fingers underneath his jacket, under the hem of his white T-shirt, laying my hands flat against the sprinkling of hair that surrounds his belly button. Immediately, Miller tenses up. Leaning back, he takes my wrist, gently guiding my hands away from his skin, placing them back on top of the leather jacket.

Okay, so message received, loud and clear.

We make a single, wordless stop en route so Miller can fill the bike up with fuel. Then we're back on the road, and I could cut the tension with a knife. It's hard to believe that we've barely been gone twenty-four hours, yet so much has happened in that time.

In Phoenix, there's still a guard parked outside the front of Miller's house. He straightens in his seat when he sees us. Once we're through the vehicle gate, Miller uses a fob to open the garage and steers the bike inside. Killing the engine, he keeps the bike in place by putting both feet on the concrete floor. I wriggle out of the saddle and yank off my helmet, my hair damp with sweat.

Miller does the same, smoothing down his hair as he does so, his expression still thunderous.

I stand there, unzipping my jacket and impatiently pulling it off.

'Can we talk please?' I say when I can't take the silence any longer.

'Inside,' he mutters. He yanks off his own jacket and tosses it onto a nearby metal shelf.

Dance With Me

I hate this atmosphere. My stomach churns with an urgent need to fix this situation.

I watch him unlock the front door and follow him inside. As he opens the door to the living room, a large cry goes up. 'SURPRIIIIISE!' the voices all say in unison.

Honestly, their timing couldn't be worse.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Miller stops dead, so that I almost crash into him. On the sofas, facing us, are Aidey, Ravi, J.B., Cal, Tun, Lexi, Audrey and Bodhi, all with inane grins on their faces. The last time they were all here they were assembling furniture for me. Now they're all on their feet or hopping over the backs of the sofas, coming forward to greet us.

'What the hell are you doing here?' Miller breathes, and like him I can't conceal my shock, so instead I swiftly slap on a smile.

'Surprise!' Lexi squeals again and she is the first one to greet us, throwing her outstretched arms around Miller's shoulders, and then around me.

'You're back!' I say, masking my frustration at them all turning up unannounced when what I really want to do is talk Miller into forgiving me. The boys are all greeting him, making a fuss.

'I'm back, I'm done, I'm finished,' Lexi proclaims. 'I can stay for the rest of the tour!'

My brother's next. His arms go around me. 'Where've you been? Why the hell didn't you answer your phone?'

'Forgot to take my charger,' I mutter in an outright lie,

because I switched it off after Bodhi's call to me yesterday and haven't bothered with it since.

I glance across at Miller. Audrey's arms are around him but he pulls back, looking down at her slightly swollen belly, before he looks to J.B. and his eyes go wide. His gaze returns to a smiling Audrey.

'Noooo,' Miller says with a genuine grin on his face. 'When?'

'Four months along,' Audrey says.

I met Audrey once at Lexi's premiere. At the time, I was a little jealous of her, being J.B.'s beloved and all that, but she seemed sweet. Now I look at J.B. and I don't feel a thing. Because I'm looking at Miller and I just want the entire room to clear out. I want to be alone with him again. To drag him up to his bedroom and shower him with kisses until he admits he's forgiven me for doing what I did. Because I'm worried he'll never forgive me for it.

How did I reach this point? Of craving Miller's affection. Of craving Miller, full stop?

'Congratulations, guys,' Miller enthuses, embracing them both again.

'I wanted to tell you to your face,' J.B. says.

It's then that I notice Cal. He's wearing a cap pulled low and he keeps his eyes down. He looks a little dishevelled, like he needs a shower and a shave. He and Miller embrace, slapping one another on the back, but there's something very un-Cal and not-at-all-exuberant about his demeanour.

Ravi's the next to speak. Since the early Rebel Heart days, he's always behaved like an excitable puppy, and today is no exception. 'Where the hell have you guys been? We've been here for hours!'

They're in a semicircle around us, looking at me and

Miller with expectant faces. Miller's cheerful expression evaporates. Suddenly he's awkward.

I try to catch his eye. I give a little nod to him, but I don't think he sees it. I know after this morning that I can't be the one to tell them, but I can still encourage him to confess.

Miller's hand wipes the back of his neck. 'We went to Vegas,' he mumbles.

'What's in Vegas?' Ravi asks innocently.

This time Miller does look my way. I see his tight swallow.

'Tell them,' I mouth to him, now that I've got his attention.

A silence descends over the room. Everyone waits for Miller to speak.

'Last October...' he begins, eyes on the floor as he says it, his shoulders hunched, 'I hired a private investigator to track down my mom. And he found her. In Vegas.'

There are literal gasps. Lexi is the first one forward, putting her arms around Miller. She's had her own fair share of parental strife, meaning she's always had a lot of empathy for him.

He buries his head in her shoulder and I feel an odd pang of envy, but also guilt, because I want to be in her position, comforting him, but I know how angry he still is with me.

I take in their faces. They're all stunned.

'Why didn't you tell us, man?' Ravi breathes.

Miller shakes his head, wipes his eyes. 'I don't know why. I didn't know how. Like, I've not even spoken to her. Guess I figured you were too busy.'

This time Aidan steps forward. He's visibly reeling. 'Mill, you should have said something. We would have listened.'

'Yeah, well, now you know why I was bein' such a jackass all the time.'

‘You’re a fucking idiot, man,’ Cal says, and though he sounds sympathetic, his voice is a fraction hoarse. ‘We agreed we wouldn’t do that. No beef, remember? Everything out in the open.’

Miller’s expression is pained. On the inside, I’m begging him to tell them how he felt.

He shrugs. ‘You guys are all in happy little couples now. I was out on a limb.’

I see Lexi wince. Cal looks away. Something’s going on with him.

‘Miller,’ J.B. addresses him, and his voice – one that sounds so smooth and chocolatey, and once turned my legs partly to jelly – oddly has no effect on me now. ‘We never wanted you to leave the band. We should never have let you leave. We should have fought harder to make you stay.’

Audrey squeezes his hand when he’s finished speaking. He looks to Ravi, almost as though this is a rehearsed speech.

Ravi steps towards Miller. ‘We should have figured something was going on, man. We shouldn’t have left you hanging like that. We should have had your back, and we didn’t.’

My heart starts beating faster, because Ravi looks to Aidan and they’re doing exactly what I hoped they would.

‘What we’re trying to say is,’ Aidan says, ‘we want you back. If you’d wanna come back, that is. We came to say we’d have you in a second.’

Miller’s face crumples. He’s choked up, tears escaping his eyes even when he’s trying to fight them back.

‘Are you serious?’ he chokes out.

‘Are you kidding, man? The American fans all hate that you’re not fucking there. And you not there is making us look bad, you know?’

Laughter ripples through the group.

‘Would you wanna come back, man?’ Ravi asks him softly.

Miller’s busy wiping tears, and it’s clear how much this group means to him. Despite his inability to make eye contact, he nods his head emphatically. There’s an audible sound of relief around the room, and Aidey steps forward to wrap Miller in an embrace. The others follow, piling in. I look to Tun, who like me has remained almost silent, but he’s squeezing his hands together, visibly thrilled that Rebel Heart is back to being a five. Lexi wipes her tears and I go over and hug her. Audrey puts her arm around us both. I glance towards Bodhi beside the TV, and he too is welling up.

‘Shit, you guys are the only ones who can make me cry,’ Miller says, and the boys descend into laughter. ‘And you can’t tell anyone I cried, alright?’

‘*Finally*, I can welcome back to the stage someone who can actually dance!’ Ravi jokes, slapping Miller on the back to the others’ outrage, and the sight gives me a warm and fuzzy feeling in my belly. Though something is still not quite right.

‘What’s up with Cal?’ I mouth at Lexi.

Lexi looks around and nods towards the kitchen. She makes eyes at Tun to join us.

Audrey looks confused, and, feeling bad for leaving her alone, I beckon to her to accompany us, leaving the boys to their enthusiastic conversation. Ushering the three of them into Miller’s kitchen, I push the door gently closed.

‘What’s going on?’ I ask Lexi, keeping my voice down. ‘He looks terrible.’

Lexi sighs, her shoulders drooping. ‘Tun, you tell her. I can’t even say it out loud.’

I look to Tun and he winces. ‘Two nights ago, we were in Denver. Cal slept with Darcey Ellison. We all flew into

Phoenix yesterday, and Bianca came from NYC. Cal confessed everything and she broke up with him. Ravi says he's devastated but the guys are holding him up because they knew we were gonna surprise Miller today.'

My jaw dropped at *Cal slept with Darcey*. I cover my face and groan.

'What is it?' Lexi asks.

I lower my hands. 'Bianca came to see me in New York. Just before the opening night of the tour. She asked me if I could keep an eye on Darcey because she didn't trust her around Cal. What *happened?*

Audrey's face is the picture of concern. 'Jean said he was very drunk. That she went back with him to his room.'

'Did any of the boys see anything?'

'Me and Ravi were in our room, we saw nothing,' Tun says.

'Were you there?' I ask Lexi.

'I only just got back,' she said. 'But Aidan did say that Cal had been arguing with Bianca.'

'Arguing about Darcey?'

'I don't know. I want to go and talk to Bianca but Aidan says I shouldn't get involved.'

I pace a little. Digest the news. 'Shit,' I say. 'This is my fault.'

'How is it possibly your fault?' Tun asks, throwing up his hands. 'Cal's brought it on himself. Besides, you were tasked with putting Miller back together.'

'It is not your fault, Paige,' Audrey sighs.

'Where is Bianca now?' I ask Lexi.

'She checked into a different hotel. She's booked on a flight back to New York this evening.'

Tun straightens his back. 'Ravi told me she's switched off her phone. Won't take Cal's calls.'

I cross my arms over my chest. 'Where are the dancers staying?'

'Same hotel as us,' Lexi says 'Why?'

I poke my tongue into my cheek. 'I don't trust anything Darcey says. What if she's lying?'

'About sleeping with Cal?' Tun says. 'Cal was the one who confessed to Bianca after the event.'

I shake my head. 'I don't know... It's just something about Darcey. What if she's not telling the truth?'

Lexi looks at me, a serious look upon her face. 'Come with me.'

On any other day, I would be chomping at the bit. But after going to see Miller's mother this morning, I know I need to exercise caution. 'Lex, I can't meddle,' I mutter.

'Who said anything about meddling?'

'If you knew the trouble I've already got myself into...'

'What trouble? I just want to check in with Bianca, see if she's alright.'

'Okay, that I can probably do.'

Lexi gives me a look, like she doesn't quite understand what I'm talking about.

'Do we know where she is?' I ask.

'We're staying at the Westin,' Tun pipes up. 'I heard Boddhi drove her two blocks south to the Hyatt Regency and she checked in there.'

'Then I'll come with you,' I say, the words coming out of my mouth before I can stop them. *Does that constitute meddling?* 'I think I'd like to apologise.'

'You've got nothing to apologise for,' Lexi says.

We file out of the room. The boys are still talking animatedly amongst themselves but Aidan comes over.

'What's happening in the kitchen?' he asks as his arms slide around Lexi's waist.

'Paige and I might take a little trip out,' Lexi responds, so that only he and I can hear.

Aidan holds Lexi close, but I can see that he's frowning. 'I'd rather you stayed here with me.'

'We won't be long,' Lexi says, as he draws her in for a lingering kiss. It reminds me of last night, when I was lying naked in bed with a man who is now scrupulously avoiding eye contact with me at all costs.

I spy Cal on his own, and, without thinking, I take my opportunity and go to him.

'Hey, Cal,' I say. 'I heard you—'

Cal stuffs his hands further into his pockets, keeping his gaze firmly fixed on the floor.

I clear my throat. 'You and I can be honest with one another, right?' I ask.

'No offence, Paige, but I'm not really in the mood.'

His eyes are bloodshot. I stand there for a moment, then reach out and grab his arm over his hoodie, pulling him to one corner of the room.

'What were you thinking?' I hiss at him.

'Think it's already been established that I wasn't,' Cal says in response.

'How did it happen?'

'I was blind drunk, wasn't I?' he says, cradling his head in his hands.

'But do you... do you remember the... *err*... act itself?'

His throat works. 'I can't remember a bloody thing! All I

know is I woke up in my birthday suit the next arvo with a banging head, Darcey curled up next to me and a used condom on the carpet.'

'And what did Darcey say?'

'Kept saying what an amazing night we'd had together. Fuck, Paige, can we not talk about this please?'

'You never thought she might be lying to you?'

He presses the bridge of his nose, his eyes squeezed tightly shut. 'What? I don't reckon she can be. Darcey's a decent chick, yeah? But now Bianca's cut me adrift and I don't bloody blame her. I'm a fucking moron.'

His voice cracks as he says it and he hangs his head in misery. It sounds like a plausible enough story. Yet I can't shake what I already know of Darcey.

'So, you don't remember anything else?'

'Jesus, Paige, I don't even remember getting to my room. But I woke up there, didn't I?'

I look up and Lexi's making eyes at me, pointing towards Bodhi. I glance across at Miller who's talking to J.B. and Audrey. I could be making things worse for myself.

'I'm sorry she dumped you, Cal,' I say, squeezing his hand before I get up out of my seat.

'You're both meddling,' Aidan chides me and Lexi outside the house in Miller's driveway, his arms crossed over his chest.

We're waiting beside the people carrier. Neither Lexi or I are confident driving on American roads, so we've commandeered Bodhi to take us to Bianca's hotel, before he comes back for everybody else. I've already grabbed my bag and the rest of my things from my room.

'This isn't meddling,' Lexi says, just as the lump in my

throat returns. 'We're simply going to check on Bianca. See if she's alright.'

'Maybe just let her go? Or call her? Cal fucked up. He knows he did. There's nothing you or any of us can do about it.'

I love my brother, but he tends to see things in black and white.

'You have each other,' Lexi says to him, and Aidan reaches lovingly for her hands, once more pulling her closer to him and gazing down at her face. Lexi wraps her arms around his shoulders. Whilst their addiction to one another is lovely to see, we need to get a move on before Bianca leaves for the airport.

'Why don't you just wait for us?' Aidan sighs. 'We're gonna hit the studio this afternoon to rehearse everything again with Miller. And with you too, Paige, so you're needed.'

I raise my eyes to him. I'd forgotten I'm still also Miller's dance partner, above everything else. Oh God, how can I press my body against his, knowing what we've done and how angry he is with me?

Aidan drops his head for a kiss from Lexi.

'Bianca's all alone in that hotel room,' Lexi says as she pulls away from him. 'We're simply going to check up on her, then we'll head back to the hotel. We won't be long, I promise.'

'Fine. Can you please exaggerate Cal's current state of misery? He hates himself right now. Maybe she could... you know... forgive him?'

Lexi gives him a withering look. 'Hmm. When *we* were broken up, wasn't Cal the one advocating for *you* to forgive *me*? And I believe *you* were the stubborn one and didn't listen.'

Aidan pulls Lexi back to him. 'Can we not talk about that horrible time in my life please?' he says with a grin.

Lexi giggles. They're kissing again and I'm growing impatient.

Finally, when Lexi lets go of Aidan, we spy Bodhi coming out of the house and I clamber into the back of the people carrier. Lexi follows, sliding the door shut behind us.

Once Aidan has waved us off and we're out of the vehicle gate, Lexi gives my knee a squeeze.

'How have you been?' she squeals in an uncharacteristic girlish tone as Bodhi drives us back into downtown Phoenix. 'How's Miller? I can't believe what he said about his mother.'

'I know,' I say, attempting a smile that doesn't come. 'It's wild, right?'

'Has he spoken to her?'

I swallow another rapidly forming lump in my throat. 'Not in person, no.'

She looks at me, and, knowing Lexi, it's like she can see that I'm keeping something from her. 'Is everything alright? What did you mean in the kitchen back there?' she asks, 'About already getting yourself into trouble?'

I give a sigh. She's impossible to lie to her. 'In Vegas, this morning... I may have gone to talk to Miller's mother... on my own. I thought I had his permission... but it turns out I didn't, and he didn't want me to speak to her, so now he's angry with me.'

Lexi gapes at me. 'You talked to Miller's mother?'

I nod and hang my head.

'What was she like?'

'Nice. Emotional, obviously. She had two more children after Miller, so he has two half-sisters.'

Lexi's eyes go wide. 'Do they know about Miller?'

'No. Not yet. I don't know if she'll tell them. I gave her Miller's number. Put the ball in her court, so to speak.'

‘And Miller wasn’t happy about that?’

There’s that lump in my throat again. ‘No. I meddled. Again. I need to stop meddling.’

‘Paige, you’re doing yourself a disservice. You meddle because you care. I’m not sure I would ever have ended up with Aidan if you hadn’t put me into that corset at New Year and encouraged me to go to his room.’

I laugh at the memory. ‘You guys just needed a little push.’

‘See? That’s good meddling. Or meddling with the best of intentions.’

I don’t want to talk about this, so I change the subject. ‘You and Aidan seem... deliriously happy as ever. How are things? Still all good?’

She blushes. ‘Still all good. Definitely.’

‘How was it being away from each other on tour?’

‘Better than expected.’ She glances up ahead at Bodhi navigating the traffic and lowers her voice. ‘We got very good at phone sex.’

I screw my face up. ‘Ugh, I’m not sure I want to hear that about my twin brother.’

Lexi laughs. ‘I won’t divulge all the details.’

I also keep my voice low. ‘Did you tell him you want babies yet?’

Her smile is laced with something akin to worry. ‘No, not yet.’

‘You should. Maybe Audrey being pregnant again will make him broody.’

‘Let’s just finish the tour first, eh?’ she says at normal volume, slapping my knee. ‘You have to go back to dancing with Miller. Is that going to be okay?’

I look out of the window of the car, at the passing buildings and traffic.

An image floats into my mind. At first, it's a memory of Miller and I in bed together, his lips locked with mine. Yet it morphs into him angry with me for going to talk to his mother, and now all I feel is distance between us.

Lexi is right. I meddle because I care. I care about the people around me. Only, with Miller I've crossed a line. And whatever trust we'd built up, I've managed to destroy with one stupid decision.

And he may decide never to forgive me.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

‘Bodhi, can you take us to the Westin first?’ I ask towards the driver’s seat.

‘No problem,’ Bodhi says and beside me, in the back of the people carrier, Lexi looks confused.

‘What are we doing?’ she asks.

‘Going with my gut,’ I tell her, because despite all my reservations, I can’t go against my own instincts. ‘We need to talk to Darcey. Confront her.’

Lexi’s eyes go wide. ‘Woah. So... we *are* meddling?’

‘I think Darcey’s a liar. I think she’d try anything to break Cal and Bianca up. I think she set her sights on Aidan first, and she knew she’d never get anywhere because of his relationship with you. You said she turned up at Aidan’s door that time, yes?’

Lexi’s expression darkens at the memory, before she gives a nod. ‘She did.’

‘And when I got to New York, you told me she was dangerous.’

‘And determined.’ Lexi glowers. ‘You think she had an agenda?’

‘I don’t know what motivates her. But she’s had her eye on Cal for some time. And Bianca knew it.’

When he drops us off, Bodhi gives me the room numbers for all the dancers, then heads back to Miller’s house to fetch the others. It means we’ll track her down eventually. My heart’s thumping as I step out of the lift with Lexi. We’ve ceased all conversation. Perhaps she’s as nervous as I am, because speaking to Darcey wasn’t even part of Lexi’s plan. The ball seems like it is very much in my court.

There’s no answer at the first door. Which means Darcey’s not in her room. But I can hear their voices not far away. Lexi follows hot on my heels as I rap hard with my fist on the door to Jahtoya’s room.

‘Paige!’ Jahtoya exclaims as she answers. ‘You’re back!’

‘Hey, Toya,’ I say, trying to sound cool but coming off as awkward. ‘I, uh, was after Darcey.’

Jahtoya raises her brow, because I haven’t even tried to make small talk. ‘Uh-huh. She in here.’

She opens the door wider and I walk inside. Lexi follows.

Darcey is on the bed, her back rested against the headboard. Carmen is sat on the desk.

‘Paige McArthur,’ Carmen squeals, coming over to me and wrapping me in a brief embrace. ‘How are you? You had enough of babysitting Miller?’

‘Something like that,’ I breathe. ‘You all know Lexi?’

‘Hey, Lexi,’ Carmen says with a friendly grin.

I look to Darcey. She’s said nothing, her head cocked to one side. She wears a white cropped vest-top with a black pair of loose jogging bottoms, big hoop earrings and neon nail polish. Her hair’s scraped back into a high ponytail, much like

my own. The look on her face tells me she might have been anticipating someone coming to challenge her on events involving Cal, except I'm not the person that she was expecting.

I look to Carmen and Jahtoya. 'Would you girls mind if we had some time alone with Darcey, please?'

Darcey looks at me down her nose. 'Don't go anywhere, girls,' she sighs impatiently. 'I can take the Spanish Inquisition to my own room.'

'So... you're back,' Darcey draws once both Lexi and I are inside her hotel room and the door is closed. 'How's Miller doing?'

A bubble of anger balloons in my chest. She's already had her hands all over Cal; she can stay the hell away from Miller.

'He's fine,' I state. 'I'm not here to talk about Miller.'

She looks bored. 'Then what are you here to talk about?'

I glance across at Lexi, whose expression gives nothing away. I keep my tone even. 'I think you know.'

Darcey keeps her back to me. She's over by her desk, near the window, sorting through her beauty products and gel polishes.

'No, I don't know, like... you haven't been here so how am I to know what's going on in Paige-land?'

'What was your intention? Sleeping with Cal? Was your aim for him to break up with Bianca? Because you succeeded.'

Darcey looks over her shoulder and gives me a withering look. 'Oh. That. I don't think I had any intention. I think *he* just wanted to get laid.'

I cross my arms. 'You knew he was in a relationship.'

'Since when did that stop somebody from sleeping with anybody else? He started it.'

‘Did he though?’

She raises her brow. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

My throat’s gone dry. ‘I mean, you’ve been after him from the start. You saw an opportunity and you took advantage.’

‘Well, I certainly didn’t trip and fall on his dick.’

Behind me, Lexi lets out an audible sigh of frustration.

‘So, you admit that you went after him on purpose,’ I say.

‘Paige, I don’t even know why you’re here. Number one, it’s none of your business. Number two, shit happens. Cal slept with me because he finds me attractive and his *so-called girlfriend* was too busy working to join him on tour. Honey, all I did was scratch his itch.’

It feels like I’m fighting a pointless battle. And maybe Cal did mess up, but I’m still having a hard time believing it.

‘Talk me through it. What happened that night.’

Her expression sours. ‘Did no one ever teach you any boundaries? I just told you, it’s *none of your business* what happened that night.’

I give a nonchalant shrug. ‘Okay. Because word on the street is that you’re a liar.’

Darcey puts down whatever it is she’s holding and finally turns to face me. For the briefest of seconds, I think I see her flinch. ‘Says who?’ she snaps.

‘The rest of the boys think he was too drunk to get undressed, let alone have sex you.’

‘Oh, and they were there, were they? The moment he buried his dick inside me?’

‘All Cal remembers is waking up in the bed with you next to him. So, if *he* doesn’t remember having sex with you, the only person whose word we have to rely on is... well, that

would be yours. And I would say there are serious question marks over your testimony.'

This time, there's a definite flinch. 'My *testimony*?' she laughs, yet she doesn't make eye contact and her gaze shifts to the window. She licks her lips. 'I think whilst Miller was recovering, Paige, you were watching a little too many reruns of *Judge Judy*, huh?'

I take a step towards her. 'I don't believe you slept with Cal. I think you set it up to make it look like you did. I think this was your first step... to get Bianca out of the picture. And Cal took the bait.'

I sense Lexi stiffen. Darcey gives a dismissive snort. 'You think what you like, sweetie. I was there. Now, if you don't mind... this little interrogation is kinda boring me.'

'God, I hate her,' Lexi blurts as the lift doors close.

'Do you think she did it though?' I ask. 'That's the crux of it.'

Lexi looks to me in sympathy. 'Of course I want to believe she had... malicious intent, Paige, but you can't just go on a hunch. You need hard evidence. From what Aidan's told me, Darcey's right. Bianca hasn't been on the tour because she's been working in New York. Maybe Cal got lonely, and Darcey did take advantage, yes. But you still can't wish away what he did. You want her to be guilty in your eyes and not him.'

I look to the floor of the lift. Cal isn't the only one for whom I want to scrub out any mistakes.

'I know you want to fix it,' Lexi adds. 'You can't help yourself, it's who you are. You like to untangle everybody's problems.'

To my own detriment, I think, as we leave the hotel via the main entrance and head out onto the street. Lexi seems to know the way to the Hyatt Regency so I follow her lead.

Lexi points in the direction we need to go. ‘The best we can hope for is that Bianca can bring herself to forgive and forget.’

The face I see when Bianca Lawson opens her hotel room door is not one that’s going to forget her boyfriend’s betrayal any time soon. Her cheeks are tear-stained, her eyes puffy. She’s not wearing any make-up. Whilst usually immaculately dressed, Bianca wears a white scoop-neck, off-the-shoulder sweater and skinny ripped jeans.

‘Lexi,’ she chokes out when she sees us, Lexi stepping forward to embrace her as more tears leak down her cheeks. For a moment, I watch as she sobs into Lexi’s shoulder.

‘Hi, Bianca,’ I say when she pulls away and I offer my own embrace. She steps forward and my heart goes out to her as her shoulders quiver.

‘Come on, get inside,’ Lexi says softly.

Inside Bianca’s hotel room the bed is unmade. Her open suitcase on the floor spews out clothes and miscellaneous items.

‘We wanted to catch you before your flight,’ Lexi says.

Bianca sniffs, wipes her face and gathers up her hair. She swirls it into a top knot and secures it with a band. ‘Thank you. I’ve got a cab booked in an hour. I paid for a late check-out.’

‘So, you’re really going?’ Lexi sighs sadly.

‘What choice do I have?’ Bianca says. ‘How can I face him again? Knowing what he did?’

Her voice cracks. She covers her face and her sobs make her shoulders tremble. Lexi goes to her. She wraps her in an embrace as Bianca weeps.

‘How could he do that to me?’ she asks, her voice muffled in the folds of Lexi’s clothing.

‘He’s wretched,’ Lexi says. ‘He feels terrible. I know that holds no weight right now, but he’s broken. I’ve never seen him like this.’

Bianca pulls away, pacing. There’s anger underneath her tears. It’s simmering. ‘I know he’s not the only one to blame. I’ve known it for a long time. She’s been after him since the start of the tour. But I warned him. I told him, *she will try and seduce you the first opportunity she gets*. We got in one little fight and she took her shot.’

‘You warned me,’ I say quietly. ‘You wanted me to keep an eye on her.’

‘This is *not* your fault, Paige,’ Bianca states, whirling around and wagging a finger at me as her eyes flash. ‘Cal walked right into her trap. This is on him. You had your hands full.’

‘Miller’s back in the band,’ Lexi says with a lop-sided smile.

Bianca raises her brow. ‘He is?’

‘We just came from his house.’

‘Is Cal pleased? I mean... are the band pleased?’

‘Of course they’re pleased,’ Lexi says, knotting her fingers together. ‘I don’t think that’s what Cal’s thinking about right now.’

Bianca looks to the carpet. ‘I switched off my phone.’ She sniffs, then more tears come. ‘I told him I never wanted to see him again.’

Lexi and I exchange glances.

‘Paige has a theory,’ Lexi says, her eyes not leaving mine.

‘What theory?’ Bianca chokes out.

I panic. I’m thinking back to this morning and Miller lashing out at me for going to see his mother. It feels like days ago.

‘It’s just a thought I had,’ I say quietly. ‘I wondered whether Darcey could... might have...’

Bianca frowns at me.

‘...invented something,’ I finish limply, self-doubt flooding my veins. I used to like interfering.

‘What do you mean?’ Bianca asks.

I exhale shakily. ‘You told me yourself, back in New York. Before the tour began. You saw the way Darcey was looking at Cal and you were, rightly, worried. But what if he wasn’t responding to her advances, until she saw he was so drunk that she could make him believe that something had happened between them?’

She stares back at me. I think I see Lexi wince.

‘You’re saying she made it up?’ Bianca asks.

‘I guess I’m saying it’s not out of the realms of possibility.’

Bianca looks confused. ‘He woke up naked beside her, Paige, and there was a used condom on the floor,’ she says, the words slicing through the air as her voice cracks for a second time. ‘What else do you think happened?’

I step forward. Her eyes are pleading with me to not go down this route. ‘I know this sounds... I don’t know. Darcey told me back in New York that she’d slept with Miller several times. Miller told me that was a lie. I can’t help feeling like... she told me then that Cal was the band member she would most like to sleep with—’

‘You remember I told you she turned up at Aidan’s door?’ Lexi adds.

Bianca looks to Lexi, then to me, then back to Lexi again. Then, slowly, ever so slowly, she begins to nod.

‘What did Cal say to you exactly?’ I ask Bianca.

She swallows, looks to the window. Tries to regain her composure. ‘He said that he’d had too much to drink. She went with him back to his room. Like I just said, next thing he knows, he’s naked and she’s curled into him. He freaked out.’

‘That’s what he told me,’ I say. ‘So he doesn’t remember the... event.’

‘But the condom on the floor.’

‘It was definitely...?’

‘He said she made a point of showing him.’

I cock my head to one side. ‘See? Don’t you think that’s a little odd? Who references a used condom after the event? Surely you’d just dispose of it.’

Bianca frowns. ‘Like she was trying to convince him. If that’s true, that’s twisted.’

‘If true.’

‘So how do I get the truth?’

I look to Lexi. ‘We spoke to her already. She denies it.’

‘You spoke to her? When?’

‘Before we came here.’

‘And what did Darcey have to say for herself?’

I look to the floor, feeling my cheeks burn. ‘She said I’d watched too many detective shows on TV.’

Bianca walks over to the window. Lexi throws me a worried glance.

‘How did she seem?’ Bianca asks after a moment’s silence. ‘When you spoke to her? Did it bother her... what she did?’

She’s looking right at me. ‘Honestly?’ I say. ‘Not really.’

‘What would you do? In my position? If you were me. Lexi?’

Lexi shifts her stance. 'I'd want to know that I wasn't being lied to,' Lexi says in an even tone.

'What about you, Paige? What do I do? Do I confront her?'

'If it was me, and Darcey was after the love of *my* life? I mean of course I'd want to confront that bitch.'

I see Bianca swallow. 'Where is she now?'

'They're going back to rehearsal now that Miller's back,' Lexi says.

'So, she'll be there?'

I nod my head. Bianca looks to the floor. 'What time is it now?'

'It's just gone three,' Lexi says.

For a moment, exhaustion washes over me. This, morning I woke up in Miller's arms.

Bianca looks to us both. 'Then let's go.'

I hold up a hand. 'Wait. If you confront her, you cannot show an ounce of weakness. She cannot know she's upset you.' I wince. 'So, you might want to consider redoing your make-up.'

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Whilst Bianca gets ready, Lexi calls Bodhi, who comes to collect us and takes us to the rehearsal venue. Bianca sits between Lexi and me in the back seat. The way she's dressed and reapplied her make-up, I can tell she's about to unleash her inner New Yorker. Lexi and I exchange nervous glances from opposite sides of the car. None of the band know Bianca is coming, not even Cal, and we asked Bodhi not to say a word.

I'm nervous about seeing Miller. I'm also terrified that I've walked Bianca into a situation where she'll only confirm that Cal did, in fact, cheat on her, and that she'll regret ever listening to me.

This is exactly what Miller meant. I try and fix things when it isn't my business.

When Bodhi drops us off at the venue, I ask Bianca if she's alright before we climb the stairs.

She's wearing the skinniest jeans, which emphasise her figure, a white cropped T-shirt, a baby pink leather jacket, biker boots with a sharp heel, scarlet lipstick and a thick, smoky eyeliner. She raises her chin a fraction as she walks, and, when we're almost at the door, Lexi and I flank her on either side.

When we enter, my eyes do a quick sweep. The band are huddled together to one side, except Cal, who's sitting over to the other side, his head down, resting his elbows on his knees. Darcey, Jahtoya and Carmen are together, Nikita lingering on her own. Bianca's heels crack against the polished wood floor as we enter and a silence immediately descends, all eyes on her.

Bianca makes a beeline for Darcey Ellison.

Cal looks up. 'B!' he exclaims, scrambling to his feet and approaching her.

Bianca holds up a single finger towards Cal, causing him to stop dead in his tracks. Darcey stands her ground and rolls her eyes as Bianca comes to a halt in front of her.

I look to Miller and he averts his gaze. I then see Lexi and Aidan exchange worried glances.

'Darcey,' Bianca says, and I'm impressed by her level of calm.

'See you bought your squad,' Darcey says, looking to me in particular, her tongue going into her cheek.

Bianca is undeterred. 'I bought two friends who made me see sense. Who reminded me who you really are.'

Darcey looks her up and down. 'Fine, we'll go somewhere. That what you want?'

'Oh, no,' Bianca states coolly and Cal edges closer. 'I want everybody to hear this.'

'Hear what?'

'How I think you're a liar. I don't think you slept with Cal at all. I think you made it look like you did. So he would believe *he* was in the wrong. You saw an opportunity and you grabbed it.'

A ripple goes around the boys. Cal's frowning. They move closer, bearing down on Darcey. I've stopped breathing. This is a stand-off.

Darcey shrugs her shoulders. 'Seem like you shoulda got on your plane. Instead of listening to Paige's little theories about me.'

Bianca cocks her head to one side. 'See, that's the thing about Paige's little theories. When you hear them, everything about them starts to make... sense.'

I see Darcey's swallow. I'm desperate to open my mouth and let the accusations fly, but Bianca's got this. She's got everyone eating out of her hand.

'At no point does Cal recall having sex with you,' Bianca continues, crossing her arms over her chest. 'Now he might be a fucking idiot for getting so drunk, but he's my idiot, and I don't believe for a *second* that he would let that happen, because even as a stupid-ass drunk, Cal still has an opinion on everything. As for whether he would have been *physically* capable to actually go to bed with you, I would question that too, because, sugar, I'm speaking from experience.'

I can tell Cal is desperate to intervene. I widen my eyes at him, urging him to wait to see how this plays out.

Darcey shifts her weight to her other leg, suddenly unable to look Bianca in the eye.

'You're a liar,' Bianca repeats. 'I think you set this whole situation up. I think you're a pretty convincing actress when you wanna be. But do I think that you slept with my boyfriend? No, I don't. Am I right, Darcey?'

'You think what you like,' Darcey says but her tone lacks conviction. She looks unnerved.

'You stripped him down before taking your own clothes off, got into bed with him, unravelled a condom and tossed it on the floor. Anyone can fake a used condom. Hell, all you need is a little coconut shampoo. You convinced him you'd

had some wild night of lovemaking, when in fact, Cal passed out the moment his head hit the pillow. Isn't that true?

There's a silence. Bianca holds her ground. Cal looks to Darcey, confused as hell. Ravi's brow is crawling up his forehead.

'Is that fucking true?' Cal blurts angrily.

Darcey swallows tightly again. She raises her chin, but her eyes are swimming. And then she crumples. 'I faked it,' she whispers. 'I faked the whole thing. I made it look that way.'

There are gasps. A bubble of relief bursts in my chest.

'What the *fuck*?' Cal demands at the top of his voice.

The room erupts. The boys all voice their disapproval. 'You're done here, Darcey,' my brother's low, warning tone sounds out, above the rest of the voices. 'You're fired, get out. Now.'

For a moment, nobody moves. Darcey's tears spill over. She looks to Carmen and Jahtoya, who are as surprised as the rest of us.

'I'll take her,' Lexi volunteers.

Bianca stands there, her chest rising and falling, as though trying to hold it together. She doesn't turn as Darcey sidesteps her, following Lexi to the door, hanging her head. I don't know if she's crying or not, but it doesn't matter.

Cal takes a step towards Bianca, raw emotion on his face as she turns into him and his arms envelope her. I watch as they cling to one another, Cal's head buried in her shoulder. I know now she's crying by the way her shoulders quake.

'I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry,' Cal is saying over and over, holding her.

'It was Paige,' I hear Bianca's muffled voice say. 'Paige convinced me that she might be lying.'

Cal pulls back and cradles her face in his palms. 'Babe, I'm a fucking idiot.'

'But you're my idiot,' she splutters and he captures her lips in a kiss, drawing her closer.

'I'm never drinking again,' Cal says between kisses.

I hear a voice close to my ear. 'Paige saves the day yet again,' Aidan hums, putting his arms around my shoulders. When I look up, Miller's looking my way, but he soon averts his gaze again, and my heart sinks.

'Uhh, guys,' Ravi says. 'I hate to break up the party, but now we're one dancer down again.'

'You don't need another dancer,' I say. 'You just need to rechoreograph. How long till your next show?'

'Five days,' J.B. says smoothly.

'How quickly can you come up with something?' Aidan asks.

I turn my head to the side. 'What? I didn't mean me.'

'Look around you, P. You see any other choreographers in the room?'

'I'm an instructor, that's different. You don't have someone you can call?'

'I think I've got your phone number somewhere.'

I'm aware of everyone's eyes on me, everyone's except Miller's.

'Aid,' I sigh, embarrassed.

His arms around me tighten. 'How long do you need? Can you remember all the moves?'

I wince. 'You might have to walk me through it again.'

'We can do that.'

'You're on a roll today, Paige,' Ravi says with a grin and I feel my cheeks burn.

'You fellas mind if me and B duck out a while?' Cal pipes

up, holding onto Bianca's hand and leading her towards the door. 'Paige, you got this, yeah?'

It's at that moment that Bianca whispers something to him.

'Yeah, you're right,' Cal says to her, and suddenly they're walking towards me. 'Let go, Aidey, I gotta give the oracle a hug,' he then says.

Aidan lets go of me, and suddenly Cal is lifting me off the ground. I squeal, still embarrassed whilst the others laugh. When I glance up, the other dancers just look awkward.

'What's your secret, Paigey?' Cal says as he puts me down. 'You always seem to be coming to our rescue.'

'Uhh,' I mumble in response. 'I just ask a Magic 8 Ball about stuff.'

'I'm serious, you just performed a miracle. And I love ya for it.'

Bianca embraces me. When she pulls back, Aidan rumples the hair on my head. And all I want to do is look at Miller to see his reaction.

'You're very welcome,' I say with a smile, pleased that their relationship has been salvaged without a boat load of drama.

'So,' Aidan says to me when we've bid them goodbye. 'Should we run through everything for you and Miller, then you can redesign the routine?'

I catch Miller's gaze for a fraction of a second. 'You know what?' I say tightly, thinking that I can't face dancing close to him at this moment, 'I think I can remember the whole set. I can rechoreograph it tonight and tomorrow.'

'You're sure?' Aidey asks. 'That's why we love you, P. In that case, let's go celebrate Rebel Heart being back up to five!'

He claps his hands. I watch them head for the door. Ravi makes a little whooping sound whilst Aidan wraps his arm

around Miller's shoulders. J.B. in turn slaps Miller on the back. It warms me that they're so pleased to have him back.

I don't follow, not initially. I know I need to face the other dancers first.

I knot my fingers together, turning to find Jahtoya looking at me with her brows raised, Carmen and Nikita next to her.

'I didn't know, I'd just like to say,' Carmen blurts. 'She told us she'd slept with Cal. Period.'

Jahtoya pouts, then shrugs her shoulders. 'I didn't think she was no liar either.'

'Until she was,' Carmen adds.

'Y'all shouldn't have done that in front of everyone,' Jahtoya says, clicking her tongue disapprovingly in my direction.

'Maybe she just wasn't a very nice person either,' Nikita says, and I'm stunned that she's said anything at all.

'Look, I'm going to need your help,' I say. 'If I have to rechoreo the routine. Can you help me please? Can we put what just happened behind us?'

'I can help,' Carmen volunteers, putting up her hand.

Jahtoya looks me up and down. Her stare is piercing, like she can see through me. Like she can see everything I've ever done.

'I'll think about it,' she states, and I exhale, worried, because the consequences of my interference are abundantly clear: I have to fix Rebel Heart's entire American tour.

Chapter Thirty

In the living area of a large suite at the hotel, Ravi, Aidan and Tun are enthusiastically regaling Miller and Lexi with stories from the first two thirds of the tour. There's a lot of laughter. J.B. is spending time with Audrey. Cal and Bianca haven't emerged from Cal's room.

I'm sitting behind all of them in a bar area with a notepad and a pen. Carmen hovers over me and reminds me of each routine as we talk it through. Most of the routines are a rehash of the one before, so it all comes back to me quickly. The challenge for me as newly appointed choreographer will be to remove the presence of one dancer and put it all back together again in a way that works, and that everyone can remember.

My back has been facing Miller the entire evening. I haven't dared look his way. Carmen yawns and I decide we've done enough for one evening, and, after she's bid everyone goodnight, I get up off my chair.

When Miller gets up and walks towards the bathroom, I take my chance. I can't take much more of this thick tension that now exists between us.

'Miller...'

He turns and faces me. He's got that same vulnerable

look in his eye, a look that before January I would have said has no place on the face of Danny Miller, but, in the last few months, has replaced that cocky, slightly arrogant expression he so often wore, the one that made me so dislike him.

Before Miller can say anything, Aidan comes up behind me and punches me squarely in my upper arm.

‘Hey, twinny,’ he says gleefully.

‘Ow, Aidan,’ I say, irritated, rubbing the spot where he’s just struck me affectionately, before he wraps one arm around my shoulders and squeezes me into him.

‘You deserve a medal, you do,’ he says to me whilst looking to Miller, ‘Taking care o’ this one... even though I know you don’t even like him. Fixing Cal and Bianca. It’s like you’ve got this sixth sense for fixing all the drama.’

My eyes go to Miller’s. For the first time today, he holds my gaze, and his expression is impossible to read. Aidan’s words hang in the air.

‘How’s the choreo going?’ Aidan asks as I shove away from him.

‘Fine, I’ll finish it in the morning,’ I huff.

‘I need the bathroom,’ Miller says, walking away.

I watch him go. Aidan balls his fist, planting a mock punch to my solar plexus. ‘Seriously, P. We owe you a lot. Miller seems like himself again. In fact, he’s not even being such a cocky shit, so I don’t know what effect you’ve had on him, but he was lucky to have you.’

‘It was fine,’ I mutter, then I yawn.

‘Well, thank you. And I love you. Plus, you look knackered; you should get some sleep.’

He’s probably right. My gaze skims past the bathroom door. I need to accept that I’ve done enough fixing for today.

I nod my head. 'Sounds like a good idea.'

He folds me into a hug, kissing the side of my head. 'Thank you for everything,' he whispers. 'I knew I could count on you.'

I force a smile. 'You're welcome.'

Then, whilst Miller's still in the bathroom, I bid everyone goodnight.

I'm in my pyjamas and I've taken my make-up off before there's a soft knock at my door. When I check the spy hole, Miller is standing there.

'Hey,' he says softly, when the door is open.

'Hi,' I say back, surprised to see him.

'Can I please come in for a sec?'

I open the door wider, my heart beginning to clatter. 'Sure.'

He walks inside. I've already closed the curtains, and the only light on is the one beside the bed.

'I was about to turn the light off,' I tell him

'I... I'm sorry. I couldn't leave it... I needed to come and say some shit to you.'

'What else did you need to say to me?' I mumble. 'I've caused enough trouble today, don't you think?'

Miller shoves his hands deep into his pockets and looks to the carpet. 'I wanted to apologise to you. I should never have spoken to you... the way I did this morning.'

My eyes go wide and I take a step forward towards him. 'No, Miller, you were absolutely right to talk to me like that. After what I did. I had no business speaking to your mother without you giving me a clear green light—'

'What you did today,' he interrupts, and, still, he can't

look at me, 'for Cal and Bianca. I wanted to tell you... that was really somethin'. That was... incredible.'

'It was Lexi too.'

'But it was your idea. You were the one who... figured Darcey out. Even I didn't think she'd lie about something like that.'

It's my turn to look at the carpet. 'Maybe.'

There's a silence, the air hanging thick again.

'Are you pleased to be back in the band?' I manage.

He nods his head, and he's sincere.

'I think everyone's pleased,' I add.

Another silence. 'Anyway, that's all I came to say,' he says.

'Right.'

'I should let you get to bed.'

'Okay.'

When he brushes past to me to go to the door, my eyes slip shut.

'Miller,' I squeak out, when his hand goes to the door handle.

He turns.

'I'm sorry I messed everything up between us,' I say.

His eyes come back to mine. He starts to shake his head, before he's walking back over to me. 'No, no, you didn't do anything, Paige. I'm the one who messed everything up.'

'How?' I breathe.

'Because I yelled at you when I shouldn't have. You were only tryna help. You were acting out of goodness, which seems to be all you know how to do.'

A laugh bubbles to the surface but I'm holding back tears too. 'It's called interfering.'

'Well, it's good interference.'

‘It’s really not. I don’t have an off switch; it’s always been a problem.’

‘I’ve never met anyone like you, Paige. I’ve never known someone with such a big heart, who... cares so much about everybody. You are...’

He reaches out, sliding his fingers into mine.

‘You’re the girl of my dreams,’ he says.

I look down to our hands. The atmosphere shifts.

‘That’s all I really came to say,’ he whispers.

I sink my teeth into my bottom lip. Finally, he looks at me and my heart swells. ‘I am?’

‘I’m not a religious type,’ he says, ‘but when you showed up to my house that day, and you called an ambulance... when I woke up in that hospital bed and you were there, I knew it was fate, like, God, or whoever, had sent you to me. And I knew you were meant for me. So... yeah, Paige. You *are* the girl of my dreams.’ He exhales shakily.

My eyes swim as he looks at me. I give his hands a squeeze. ‘I’m so relieved. I thought you hated me.’

‘Never hated you. Never could.’

‘Miller?’

I search his face. He looks sincere. Honest. Vulnerable. Like a man who just bared his soul. ‘Your dream girl would like you to kiss her,’ I murmur, and his mouth breaks into a wide grin.

‘Come here,’ he whispers as I’m folded into his embrace, my lips finding his. The relief I feel is almost overwhelming.

I’m not over the way he kisses me. Long, slow, lingering kisses that tease and caress my lips. The feel of his lips against mine does odd things to my stomach, setting off little chain reactions inside me, until I’m clamouring for him to put his hands on me. A moment later, he obliges me, fingertips

grazing the waistline of my cotton pyjamas, sliding around my waist as he deepens our kiss, his fingers tickling the skin at my lower back, making the tiny hairs stand on end. After a moment, they come back around to trail upward across my ribcage. I gasp against his lips at the cold metal of his watch strap grazing the warm curve of my breast. Miller's reaction is immediate, extracting both his hands and unclasping the strap, sending his watch to the carpet with a dull thud. I lean into him as he pulls me closer, sliding both his palms back under my top so I can press my breasts into them. Miller groans, his mouth moving to my neck, as I draw away the hair at my nape to allow him better access.

'Stay with me,' I whisper, and Miller draws back.

'I came better prepared this time,' he says in a husky tone. My smile widens to a grin, which he mirrors. 'You're sure?' he says, cocking his head to one side. I don't say a word, just lift the lower hem of his hoodie and slowly begin to unfasten his belt buckle. 'I should tell you that even when I was yelling at you, I was picturing you naked,' he adds.

I giggle, and tug the belt fully out of its straps. Another accessory clunks to the carpet. I go for to top button of his jeans. 'You did a good job of concealing it.'

'I'm serious, Paige,' he breathes, and my fingers lower his fly. 'It astounds me what a force of nature you are.'

He's kissing me again, more urgently this time, and I draw back, only so I can lift his T-shirt and hoodie over his head. He lifts my top and tosses it, nudging down my cotton shorts until I'm naked in front of him. Miller's eyes travel down my body as, simultaneously, he lets out an unsteady breath. I have to be careful to navigate his jeans over the bulge that is now straining the material of his Hewett-branded underwear. Miller shoves one hand inside the pocket, retrieving

two square foil packets of condoms, tossing them onto the bed, before kicking off his shoes, socks and jeans.

I step forward into his embrace, running my hands down the warm, firm contours of his chest. I don't think I've done it before, not properly, perhaps at the underwear shoot, but unlike then, I'm not being photographed. This time I can appreciate his form, and I can't help but reflect for a fleeting moment on the millions of his Instagram followers who would be jealous. I can hear both Miller's and my ragged breaths, and he's watching what I'm doing.

'Paige,' he whispers between kisses.

'Mmm.'

'Will you... will you tell me... like last night, if I'm getting shit wrong?'

Last night seems like a lifetime ago. My hands go into his hair at the nape of his neck. 'I will, I promise,' I reassure him, as his hands press up into my bottom, pulling me tighter to him, so I'm fully aware of the extent of his arousal.

'I don't wanna be that guy,' he continues, his hands going back to my breasts. 'The guy who leaves. I wanna stay with you all night. I wanna satisfy you like you've never been satisfied.'

My lips curl into a smile. In the dim light, I take the lead and ease him towards the bed.

I lie down first. Miller follows, and I feel his weight on top of me. Suddenly, I'm nervous, and it's almost pleasing that he senses a shift change in me.

'Everything alright?' he asks.

'I...' I begin, breathlessly, stroking his face. 'It's been a while since I... you know...'

'I promise we'll go slow. No *wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am*, I swear it.'

I giggle. 'You know, I never thought in a million years I would be doing this with you.'

He offers me a cocky grin. 'And now that you're here?'

I draw him in for a kiss. 'I really, *really* want to.'

Miller groans appreciatively into my mouth, just as our tongues collide. I'm growing swollen and wet, my need blossoming until I feel a throb, until all I can think about is being filled by him. I slip my hands into the waistband of his underwear and give him a moment to shimmy out of them. When he comes back to me, I feel his stiff length slide against my slippery folds, and it has us both sighing in shared bliss.

Miller shifts his body again, his right hand traversing my ribs before his fingertips sink into my warmth. I arch my back, my mouth falling open.

'Is that good?' Miller says, finding a rhythm.

'Yes,' I whimper, struggling to respond cohesively. 'It's good. I'm good.'

I think I hear him chuckle. 'I'm in the right spot?'

His nervousness has me laughing. 'You're in the perfect place, yes.'

'Okay, just checking,' he replies as two fingers slip deep inside me and I gasp. My hand goes to the back of his head, guiding him back down towards me, our kisses growing wilder and more passionate. His fingers return to pleasuring me, sending my senses into overdrive, until the point where I know I need all of him.

'Miller,' I whisper, stretching out my hand, then feel around for the foil packets on top of the bed clothes and pass them to him. 'I need you.'

Miller takes them from me, tearing at one with his teeth, and, before I know it, has rolled it down his full length. Discarding the rest, he hovers over me, slowing things down,

trailing soft kisses down one side of my neck as he shifts his hips, lifting my right knee to allow him increased access. I'm happy for him to lead, so intoxicated by the feel of his arousal pressing into my own, anticipating the delicious moment that he enters me. Instead, he takes his time, trailing kisses across my breastbone, his lips and tongue lavishing attention on the taut peaks of my nipples until I'm writhing beneath him.

'Miller,' I plead again, and pull him back up towards me, our mouths clashing again.

He runs his shaft through my wetness before he reaches down, angling himself.

'Mill-er,' I whimper again.

'Slow, remember?' he chides me, a smile tugging at his lips, as he nudges forward, my body receiving him. He pauses to let out a breath before he sinks a little further inside.

He's halfway there. Leaning down, he brings his lips to mine for the most enchanting kiss, before sinking into me fully, and stretching me, and I moan against his mouth in acceptance.

'You okay?' he says on an exhale and I too am gasping for breath. I can't speak. I can't function. How is this possible that Miller is doing these things to me?

I nod, reaching up to touch his hair. He's inside me, but for a moment we just seem to want to revel in one another, absorbing the sensations created by our bodies joined together.

'You feel so good,' I say, with a whisper of a smile.

'So do you,' he responds and there's no denying his delight. As he leans forward to kiss me, it brings about a tiny thrust, sending little lightning bolts out from my core. I wrap my legs around him, my hands flat against his ribcage as he begins his thrusts in earnest. I lose control of the sounds coming out of my mouth as the pleasure engulfs me, our bodies falling into sync with one another as we move.

‘Oh God,’ Miller grinds out as he stops, pulling out, and my eyes fly open to find him leaning on one elbow, a taut look on his face. ‘I’m sorry. I... I need to stop for a sec. You’re too good.’

I’m breathless. ‘It’s alright if you need to—’

He gives his head a shake. ‘Not alright with me. Not when it’s you. Shit, this is not me taking my time... at all.’

He sounds so disappointed in himself. I bite my lip to stop a smile from spreading across my mouth. ‘Maybe we need a different strategy,’ I say, pulling myself up. ‘Roll over.’

Miller does as he’s told as I ease out from underneath him. When he’s on his back, I straddle him. ‘Close your eyes,’ I say, and he obliges me.

‘You know I love it when you boss me around,’ he says.

‘Now, forget about what I’m doing, I want you to name Rebel Heart singles, in order of their release, go. Recite them to me.’

He laughs nervously. ‘Uhh, um, “Lovesick”,’ he begins, as I gently feed him back inside me, inch by inch, gently so as not to set off any explosions. Miller makes a low guttural sound, his eyes fluttering open.

‘Keep going,’ I say. ‘Focus on the songs.’

Miller continues with the Rebel Heart back catalogue with his eyes closed, as I reach for his right hand, and, holding it in my own, place it at the point where we’re joined, guiding his fingers until they’re in the exact spot that I need them. It takes a few attempts to get the angle right, and it makes him stutter over the names of the songs, but this way he can play with my clit whilst he’s lodged deep inside me, and my lack of movement means he won’t climax too soon.

Soon though, heat rushes through me, and Miller loses the ability to concentrate, opening his eyes and watching me,

the names of the songs all forgotten. Pleasure bursts in little peaks as I inch closer to climax, Miller increasing the speed of his fingers just a fraction until it feels like my hips begin to roll of their own accord and I begin to ride him, leaning back to allow him to fully caress me, my whimpers becoming desperate moans. I make eye contact with him, and it's enough to tell him that I'm close. As my orgasm unfurls from within, rising to a spectacular peak, I cry out at the intensity of it, but not only that, I feel Miller's length twitch and pulsate beneath me, his mouth falling open and his head going back. Our shared orgasm happens quite by chance, and to both our mutual surprise.

A while later, after Miller's disposed of the condom, we lie facing one another in my bed. Our breathing is back to normal, our legs are entwined, and the smiles on our faces belong to two people who can't quite get over what just took place, or how good it was.

Miller strokes my hair. 'You are something else, McArthur, you know that?' he murmurs.

In the dim light, I raise my eyebrows and poke him lightly in the arm. 'Charming,' I say.

He takes my fingers in his own, pressing them to his lips. 'No, no,' he says softly. 'I meant it as a compliment. Like the highest compliment you can give a person.'

'Oh,' I say, grinning at him, biting my lip, and he pulls me in for a long, lingering kiss.

'So you're gonna have to let me worship you for a while,' he says, resettling his head against the pillow. There's a look in his eyes I don't recognise, and it sends an odd, warm sensation spreading out from my chest.

Dance With Me

'I'll let you worship me for a while,' I say.

'How about forever? Can I worship you forever?'

'If you want to.'

'I want to.'

This time it's my turn to lean in for a kiss. Miller doesn't hesitate, and he rolls me over, onto my back.

'You make me—' he begins, only he stops when we hear animated voices echoing in the corridor. Without thinking, my eyes go wide. Above me, Miller winces.

We both freeze. Before I know it, there's a hammering on my door.

Chapter Thirty-One

In a split second, panic balloons in my chest. ‘Shit,’ I mutter, because we’ve been caught off guard.

It’s late. I don’t even know what time it is. I’ve been so caught up in... us.

‘Maybe you should hide,’ I say, because it seems like the right thing for him to do in this moment.

Miller clambers off me. I jump up, looking around for my clothes, whilst Miller steps swiftly inside a tall, narrow wardrobe, still naked, and closes the door behind him.

As I dress quickly, I feel guilty for suggesting Miller hide himself away. I want them all to leave us alone.

I cross the carpet, my intention to get rid of them as swiftly as possible.

I open the door a fraction, and squint, as though I’ve been asleep. My brother’s face fills my vision, but behind him I can see Lexi poking her head over his shoulder, as well as Tun and Ravi giggling like children in the corridor.

‘What is it?’ I say, making my voice sound throaty.

‘We’ve lost Miller,’ Aidan blurts and I wonder if he’s been drinking. ‘He’s not in his room. He’s been back in the band five minutes and already we’ve bloody lost him.’

‘Maybe he went home,’ I suggest. ‘Can I go back to sleep now?’

I go to close the door but Aidan sticks out his foot.

‘Rav and Tun have got this crazy theory he might be in here with you.’

I give my best grimace. ‘What? That’s insane. Seriously, Aid, I’m tired, go away.’

‘See?’ I hear Lexi grumble. ‘I told you we’d be waking her up.’

‘So... he’s definitely not in here then?’ Aidan says.

‘No, he’s not in here,’ is my pointed response.

‘We should so totally check,’ I hear Ravi snigger.

‘How old are you guys?’ I snap. ‘Come on. Let me go back to sleep.’

Aidan being my twin brother, he catches me off guard, thrusts the door open and manoeuvres himself inside. He’s definitely had a little too much to drink.

‘Aidey!’ I blurt out in objection.

‘Aidan...’ Lexi moans, seemingly mortified, but she follows him inside anyway, her arms crossed over her chest. ‘I’m so sorry,’ she mutters at me, ‘I told him to leave it.’

Within a second, Ravi and Tun are also over the threshold.

I push against Aidan’s solid frame, which doesn’t budge. ‘Guys, please,’ I grumble. ‘It’s been a long day. Can you please leave me alone?’

Aidan’s surveying the room. Thankfully, I’d kicked Miller’s clothes under the bed. His eyes narrow.

‘Mill!’ he calls out, to silence.

‘He’s not in here!’ I say with added emphasis.

‘See, Rav?’ Aidan sighs in Ravi’s direction. ‘You see, Tun? I told you it was impossible.’

‘Yes, but the point is we’ve still lost Miller,’ Lexi adds soberly. ‘Which is not a good sign. Do we call Bodhi?’

‘Hold on one second,’ Ravi says, and suddenly he’s pushed past Aidan. He leans down, swiping up something from the carpet.

I stiffen. *Oh, shit oh shit oh shit.* It’s Miller’s watch.

Ravi holds it up, studying it before he addresses the room. ‘Whaddaya call this, Paige?’ he questions me in a cartoon voice.

I grit my teeth. I can feel the warmth spread up from the base of my neck. I can’t look at Aidan. There’s a silence that hangs heavy in the air.

‘Hmm, looks a heckuva lot like Miller’s watch to me,’ Tun hums, and when I look at him, he’s beaming.

Lexi is visibly confused. Without warning, Ravi takes one step to his right and opens the door to the narrow wardrobe.

There’s a lump in my throat because it’s game over.

‘Oh!’ Ravi cries out, then momentarily covers his eyes. ‘Oh! Oh! Not expecting to see that today!’

Aidan looks to me in horror. I can’t breathe.

‘*Found yoooo,*’ Ravi hums before laughter escapes his lips. He beckons with his fingers. ‘Come on out. Come on now, don’t be shy.’

There’s now a deep frown scarring my brother’s features. I swallow as Miller steps slowly down onto the carpet, stark naked, clutching his private parts with two hands, his expression a mixture of guilt and irritation at being rumbled.

‘Oh fuck!’ Aidan blurts when he sees his bandmate and squeezes his eyes closed. Tun’s already given a little girlish scream.

Lexi’s shocked gasp morphs into a grin of delight. ‘*Nooo,*’ she exclaims in my direction and my cheeks flare hot.

I glance at Miller. He's looking at Aidan, and I can tell he's worried.

'See? Not so impossible after all,' Ravi hums in delight, stepping aside and giving Miller some room.

'I swear to God, Mill,' Aidan says in a threatening tone.

'I know,' Miller pleads in earnest. 'If I hurt her, you'll cut my balls off.'

'I'd do more than that.'

Miller's throat works. 'I'll take good care of her, I swear to you. You know I wanted this.'

Aidan looks to me, still frowning in disbelief. 'I know you did. I just didn't think—'

'Why did you never tell me?' I shoot towards my twin. 'Why did you never say that Miller was into me?'

'Because I knew you hated him from the start. You literally never had one good thing to say about him.' He looks to Miller. 'Can you *please* put some underwear on?'

'Okay, but if I do, I gotta let go of my junk.'

I am undeterred. 'When he asked you if he could ask me out, you should have said yes and let me make my own mind up!'

'I was just trying to protect you!' Aidan argues.

'Stop trying to protect everyone!' is my terse reply.

'Uh, Aidan,' Lexi says, taking him by the elbow, 'the fact that Miller isn't wearing any clothes would suggest we might have interrupted something? And that maybe we should all leave?'

Aidan's voice comes out strangled. 'Ugh, it's like I've been stabbed in the eyeballs!'

Ravi and Tun are in hysterics. 'I told ya, didn't I? *Didn't I?* There's chemistry!' Tun manages.

'Right, everybody out!' Lexi states, being the grown-up

about this whole thing. She grabs Aidan by the waist and hauls him backwards. 'Let's just leave them to it.'

'You're *actually* into this?' Aidan says to me, gesturing with one hand in disbelief to a naked Miller as he's pulled along backwards.

'I like him too,' I say, and a second later I find myself wishing I'd said it with more conviction. I regret asking Miller to hide in the first place.

'Aidan!' Lexi snaps again as she drags him out of the door. Ravi squeezes my arm as he follows, and Tun gives me a wink.

'How do you predict these things?' Ravi says to Tun, placing one hand on his back as they all leave. 'You're better than Audrey!'

Moments later, the door closes, and we're alone again.

Miller blows out his cheeks and looks to the floor.

A squall of emotion rises in my chest. After that interlude, I shimmy back out of my clothes and take three steps towards him, removing his hands from covering himself and instead wrapping them around me. Miller raises his chin, just as I find his lips with my own.

None of this feels odd anymore. Being caught in his arms feels natural to me now. Natural and right. Like we were meant to be, no matter my past opinions of him. And his lips... well, they do incredible things to my insides.

I don't know which of us starts laughing first, but in a moment both of us are chuckling in between kisses.

'Aidan's face...' I say, holding Miller tightly to me.

'He was not expecting that,' Miller responds.

My hands go into his hair. I sober. '*I wasn't expecting this.*'

His palms cradle my cheeks. 'Thanks for taking such good care of me.'

When he looks into my eyes, I know I'm falling. Because I want to care for him a lot more than I already have done.

'You're welcome,' I whisper with a smile before he's kissing me again.

'I shouldn't have asked you to hide,' I say. 'I'm sorry.'

'It's alright. Although I think Ravi would have loved it if I'd answered your door in my birthday suit.'

I bite my lip, stifling a giggle. 'I think Aidan might have had a heart attack.'

'You think he'll let me stay in the band?'

'He'll have me to deal with me if he tries anything.'

Miller laughs. 'Thanks for having my back, McArthur.'

We stand there in one another's arms, his hard body on mine. It's not the only thing that's hard.

'Did I see another condom over there?' I whisper, my eyes darting to the bed.

Miller smirks. 'Told ya I came prepared.'

And with that, he's grasped my hips and is walking me to the bed.

'They're talking about us,' I whisper to Miller the following morning.

At the door to the private dining room, Miller holds one finger up to his lips. Together, we lean in and listen. We're the last to breakfast, everyone else inside, no doubt with a private buffet. I've seen how Rebel Heart live whilst on tour.

I've been up since sunrise, walking myself through the live routine and making minor tweaks to it, allowing the band to complete their entire live set with only four dancers vs five band members, and I've reached the conclusion that it's eminently doable. I didn't know Miller was awake until I realised

he was watching me, and this morning's shower was the first I'd had with company in a very long time.

'You are yanking my chain, mate,' I can hear Cal saying through the crack in the door. 'There's no way. No possible way she would go there.'

'I swear to you, we saw it with our own eyes,' Lexi argues.

I hear Bianca's voice next. 'I would scream. Literally scream. If it were true. And that's a big "if".'

'We're not winding you up, I swear it!' Aidan exclaims. 'Rav was the one who found the watch and opened the wardrobe.'

'I swear on my mother's life, Cal, I am not shitting you,' Ravi says.

'Boy was as naked as the day he was born,' Tun's voice hums in support.

'Maybe he was. But in Paige's room? That's doubtful. J.B., mate, where were you at this point? Do you believe these fuckers?'

A smile tugs at my lips when I hear J.B.'s French accent. 'I was asleep. Look... we know that Miller likes Paige. Ok, *oui*. But would she like him back? I say it is impossible.'

'See?' Cal continues. 'Plus, if it were true, Aidey, that's like... your sister. You'd be apoplectic right now. If that was my sister, and Miller was doin' the horizontal samba with her, I'd be gunning to knock his fucking lights out.'

There's a pause. 'She says she's into him,' Aidan says.

Cal bursts into laughter. 'See? Now I know you're fucking with me!'

Beside the door, Miller squeezes my hand. Leaning close to my ear he whispers to me and I nod along with his plan.

Moments later, I enter the private dining room alone. The room falls silent.

‘Morning all,’ I say. ‘How did we sleep?’

Lexi’s sitting next to Aidan and grins in my direction. Audrey’s next to J.B., Tun’s next to Ravi and Cal rests one arm on the back of Bianca’s chair.

All eyes are on me.

Miller then enters the room, stopping beside me, but leaving a wide distance, his hands in his pockets. ‘Hey,’ he says in a distinctively Miller, nonchalant kind of way.

Cal slants his eyes at us both. Bianca looks from me to Miller and back again.

‘What?’ I say.

‘Paigey, like, what’s your take on Mill these days?’ Cal says.

I keep my expression neutral. I see Lexi bite back a smile. Aidan crosses his arms over his chest. Ravi is grinning at me, and it takes everything I have in me not to smile back.

‘What do you mean, what’s my take on Miller?’

‘You know... as in like... a guy you’d wanna fool around in the sack with?’

I give a purposeful, disgusted frown. ‘Yuck, Cal. You know exactly what I think of Miller.’

Aidan raises his brow. Bianca is looking at Lexi, who can’t stop grinning.

‘Cause you hate him, yeah?’ Cal continues, studying Miller’s poker face.

‘Oh, absolutely,’ I say, looking to Miller, reaching out and placing my flat palm against the surface of his T-shirt, before I ball the material in my fist and tug him lightly towards me. ‘Hate his guts.’

I turn into him and I feel Miller’s hand curve into the small of my back. When our lips meet, I hear audible gasps.

‘No!’ I hear Bianca squeal.

I purposefully deepen the kiss, just in case there's any ambiguity. Miller meets it with the same ardour, pressing me into him.

'Mate, that's your sister!' I hear Cal exclaim to Aidan behind me.

'I think they're cute together,' I then hear Ravi say, but Miller's lips are stirring sensations in my belly and I pull away, momentarily breathless. I don't care what they're saying because I'm looking into Miller's eyes and he's smiling at me kookily again.

'Are you for real?' Cal blurts. 'Is this a wind-up? Is that a real kiss or a fake one?'

'Oh my God, Cal, you cannot fake that!' Bianca cries.

'No wind-up,' I confirm, turning my head whilst wrapping my arms around Miller's shoulders. 'That was a real one.'

Cal looks to Aidan. 'You're cool with this?'

Aidan shrugs. 'Why wouldn't I be?'

'I'm guessin' Lexi talked you round.'

Lexi nods her head triumphantly.

Audrey is looking at something on her phone. 'If you watch the reality show... there's a moment in the footage... let me find it on YouTube.'

J.B. leans closer to her to see what she's doing. While she looks, Miller and I fetch breakfast from the buffet and take a seat next to one another. By the time we sit down, she is showing everyone.

'It is here, look. In the early days.'

The phone is handed around.

'My God, Audrey, you have such a sixth sense for this stuff,' Lexi says as she watches it. 'I've never seen this before. Miller, you're so sweet! Look, the boy is clearly smitten.'

I look to Miller and colour hits his cheeks. As whatever

they're watching gets passed around and commented on, I'm desperate to see it.

'What are they watching?' I ask him, squeezing his hand under the table.

'I've got a pretty good idea,' he says in a low tone, still embarrassed.

Bianca starts gushing about never seeing the footage before. When Audrey's phone reaches me, I take it, and Miller leans in. I rewind the segment and hit the play button. It's footage from the original reality TV show *So You Wanna Be a Star?*, of which I was a part. In it, I'm sitting on a sofa, aged seventeen, playing with my hair, talking with a few other girls, the ones I was competing with in the finals of the competition in LA. The boys are also scattered about the room, along with the other male finalists who didn't end up making the cut. It's impossible to hear what anybody is saying over the music soundtrack, but the camera pans to Miller standing alone nearby, one foot resting up against the wall. He's twirling one of the strings on his hoodie, chewing gum at the same time, but it's obvious his eyes are trained solely on me, and the camera seems to pick up on it. It's not in a stalker-like way, but as somebody who might have found himself developing a crush on a girl he barely knows. He looks a little lost in his own world, wistful almost, but for a very long moment, his gaze doesn't waver. Like Bianca, although I've watched a lot of the reality show footage, it's not a moment I can recall seeing before.

Underneath the breakfast table, my hand goes to the top of his thigh and Miller covers it with his own.

'I can remember what I was thinking at that exact moment,' he murmurs. 'I was thinking *wow, she's a knockout, how do I get a girl like that to go out with me?*'

I squeeze his thigh. 'I remember the first time we met, you told me I was hot, and I think I told you to go away.'

We laugh and he looks to Audrey's phone. 'This was a few days after that moment. I figured I was gonna have to double down on my efforts to get you to talk to me. So, I thought, *I know... I'll make friends with her brother. That oughta do it.*'

We both look to Aidan, who it appears, along with Lexi, has been listening to our conversation. Aidan gives a dramatic eyeroll but Lexi's still smiling at us.

'It was pretty obvious from the start, Mill,' Aidey says. 'You're lucky I liked you.'

'Didn't do me any good though, did it? You still didn't let me ask Paige out.'

I open my mouth to say something, but Cal beats me to it, tapping his orange juice glass with a knife so that the entire table falls silent. 'Right, shut up for a second, all of you.'

Bianca squeezes his bicep. 'We did already, babe. It's you doin' most of the talking.'

She flashes him a grin and Cal puts one arm around her. 'Right, boys and girls, I think we need a toast. First, I wanna toast Miller, for being back in the band. It wasn't right without you, man, and next time you've got serious shit going on you better fucking tell us about it, because we love you and we're here for you no matter what. It's good to have ya back. I feel like we're five pieces of a whole again. I'm happy that Paige took such good care of you, and apparently in more ways than one.'

I blush, and there's snickering before he continues. 'Second, Paige, not only for taking good care of our boy, but also, along with Lexi, for seeing straight through Darcey for what she was and convincing Bianca to stay with me and not

fly back to NYC, despite the fact that I'm a bloody blind fool. You ladies are amazing, thank you, I owe you everything.'

A cheer goes up as we toast, and Miller plants a kiss on my cheek just as the doors open again and Ziggy walks in.

'Oi oi!' he says cheerfully. 'Mornin' all!'

He is greeted with a chorus of 'Hey, Ziggy.'

He walks around to our side of the table towards Miller, opening his arms out wide. 'The prodigal son returns! You're back!' he proclaims.

Miller gets to his feet and Ziggy wraps him in a warm embrace, slapping him hard on the back.

'If you'll have me,' Miller mumbles.

'Didn't want you to leave in the first place, did I? Honestly, you lot, I go away for twenty-four hours. Bodhi says Darcey quit.'

'She didn't quit, we fired her,' Aidan states darkly.

'Well with Miller back, it also means we're down another dancer. Bloody again.'

'It's fine, Bode,' Aidan says with a shrug. 'Paige is rearranging all the choreo.'

Ziggy eyes me up and down. 'What? All of it? Do we need to call somebody?'

'Chill, Zig,' Cal says. 'Paigey's all over it.'

'I'm all over it, Ziggy,' I confirm.

'Fine. As a temporary measure. So how we announcin' Miller's back in the band then? Management don't even know yet.'

'Why do they need to know?' J.B. questions. 'I say we announce it at the next show, right here in Phoenix.'

'Can you imagine the reaction?' Ravi chimes in.

'I love that,' Lexi says. 'The fans won't expect it. Miller gets introduced last onto the stage.'

'You good with that, Mill?' Aidan asks.

'I'm good with anything,' he says with a shrug, reclaiming his seat next to me, and underneath the table he reaches for my hand, sending shooting sensations all the way to my toes.

'Can you not tell Management then, Zig?' Aidan asks.

'Alright. If that's what you want. Just try to keep it on the down-low, eh? I can't control the blimmin' paps.'

'Even if they see something, you just don't confirm anything,' Bianca says. 'In fact, if they do see something, that works in your favour. Stirs things up a little. The rumour mill can be a powerful tool.'

'Look at you, all media savvy,' Lexi says.

Ziggy looks concerned. 'Right, band meeting, fifteen minutes. My suite. Hop to it when you've finished your brekkie.'

Lexi waits until the boys have all departed and the door is closed, before her face lights up and all eyes are once again on me.

'I want to know *everything*,' she says, beaming at me.

Bianca leans across the table towards me. 'And no skimping on the juicy details.'

I sigh, because part of me is impatient. 'Did you all know? That he liked me?' I ask them.

'Uh, of course?' Tun hums. 'Ravi tells me all the good stuff. But until last night, I honestly thought you hated him.'

'Cal told me that Miller had wanted you to ask you out years ago but then Aidan vetoed the idea,' Bianca volunteers.

'Lexi?' I ask, staring across the table.

'I didn't know until much more recently,' is Lexi's reply. 'Aidan confessed when I was in China. He questioned whether sending you to look after Miller might result in something like this happening. And, clearly, he wasn't wrong.'

I look to Audrey, giving her back her phone, which was still on the table. 'Did you not see it?' she says in her very demure manner. 'The way he always looked at you?'

'Well clearly I wasn't seeing what everyone else was,' I say.

'Seriously, first kiss, when?' Bianca demands.

'Las Vegas,' I say. 'And not that long ago.'

'Have you done more than kissing?'

'Oh, definitely.'

Bianca and Lexi squeal. Tun nods knowingly.

'Ok, when?' Lexi comes back with. '*When?* When did you know you liked him?'

They are all looking at me, ready to hang on my every word. I squeeze my lips together, because my feelings for Miller came on so gradually, but there was definitely an instant everything clicked into place.

'I think maybe it was the moment I rode on the back of his motorbike for the first time...' I say, and the room descends into laughter.

Chapter Thirty-Two

‘Paige,’ Bodhi calls out to me at the hotel.

I’ve returned with the other dancers and I’m sweaty. Rehearsals for the last three days have been intense. The first Phoenix show takes place in less than twenty-four hours, and today was our final dress rehearsal before the last one at the venue tomorrow morning. I’ve grown fond of this city. We’ve been ferried to and from the hotel to the studio daily, making sure we keep a low profile, Miller and I always with our hoods up in case of paparazzi. Ziggy’s had all the hotel and studio staff sign a non-disclosure agreement; even the tour crew is sworn to secrecy about Miller’s return. Somehow, we’ve managed to keep a lid on the fact that Miller has rejoined the band from the entire world. Yet with the knowledge of the tour continuing tomorrow, a fluttering sensation has appeared in my chest. Partly because I know I’ll be dancing on the stage in front of a live crowd again, but partly because I don’t want to let Miller down. Whilst I’ve altered the choreography for the show, we’ll still be dancing together at times, and I don’t want a repeat of anything like what happened in New York a few months ago. This will only be Miller’s second show of the tour, and I can tell he’s as nervous as I am.

Ziggy has called another short band meeting. Keen for a shower, I head for the lifts, which is where Bodhi intercepts me.

I let the other dancers go ahead. Bodhi comes to a halt, an awkward look on his face.

‘Can I help?’ I ask.

‘When you were at the studio... Miller’s brother came by. Garrett, is it? He was asking for Miller.’

‘Oh. Where is he now?’

‘I let him into Miller’s suite. He’s up there.’ He looks concerned. ‘Did I do the wrong thing?’

I put one hand against his arm. ‘Of course not. I’ll go up there. Does Miller know?’

‘I’ll go find him and tell him.’

Upstairs, in the corridor outside Miller’s hotel suite, my heart starts to race. Garrett’s finally made the effort to see his brother. About bloody time.

I open the door to the suite that I’ve practically moved into and look around. Garrett’s nowhere to be seen. I walk through to the bedroom and freeze. I find him lying with his feet up on the made bed – the same bed that Miller and I have had sex in countless times in the last few days – the TV that faces it on low. He’s chewing gum. He looks tired and unshaven. His shirt is crumpled and there are grease marks on his fingers. He’s clearly come straight from work. The last time I saw him in person was at the hospital, the day after Miller was admitted.

‘Hi, Garrett, how are you?’ I ask, mustering my best smile but with a lump caught in my throat.

He leans up on his elbows. I spot my Magic 8 Ball behind him on the bed.

‘Hey, Aidan’s sister,’ he says, his tone languid. ‘Just back from a workout?’

‘We were at rehearsal.’

Garrett looks peeved. ‘So, what, like Miller’s rejoined the band? I tried to tell him he’s an idiot for even thinking about it.’

‘Why does that make him an idiot?’ I snap back. ‘For doing something he loves?’

Garrett snorts. ‘Dumbass boy band. Always told him he’d be better off goin’ solo. But he never listens to me. What you doin’ in his room anyway?’

‘Bodhi said you were here.’

I feel heat rising to my cheeks when I realise what he’s holding.

‘These yours?’ Garrett hums, a pair of my lacy underwear dangling from his fingers. I step forward and snatch them back. ‘Figures,’ he adds. ‘Always did have a thing for you. This yours too?’

He’s picked up my Magic 8 Ball. I say nothing, my jaw clenching, yet I raise my chin. I’m ready for any comment he’ll throw at me.

Garrett gives the ball a shake. ‘Let’s see,’ he says, getting to his feet. ‘What to ask. Is Aidan’s sister fucking my little brother?’

He stops shaking and glances down at the ball. My heart’s beating fast. ‘*Without a doubt,*’ he reads from the ball. ‘Interesting.’

He shakes it again.

‘How ’bout... does Aidan’s sister like it rough?’

I stiffen. He stops shaking and stares at the ball, his smile more of a sneer.

‘Garrett, do not say another fucking word,’ I hear Miller’s voice behind me say in a warning tone.

I turn in surprise. Garrett straightens.

‘Well, hey there, little bro.’

Miller’s expression is murderous. He steps forward and snatches my Magic 8 Ball from Garrett’s fingers.

‘This is not yours,’ Miller says, putting it down beside the TV and taking my hand, standing shoulder to shoulder with me.

Garrett looks down to our linked fingers. ‘Aw, did Danny get a girlfriend?’ he says in a cutesy, mocking voice.

‘What do you fucking want?’ Miller bites back.

‘Ain’t seen you in a while. Went to the house and you’d gone. Knew that Rebel Heart were in town so I figured you couldn’t wait to get back together with your little crew.’ His gaze shifts to me. ‘And I see you finally got what you wanted.’

‘What of it? Paige is my girl now.’

‘I told you, man, you don’t need a girlfriend in your line o’ work. Why would you even want that?’

Miller raises his voice. ‘You mean why wouldn’t I wanna be with the one person who took care of me, who looked out for me? I didn’t see you showin’ up for me, Gar, not fucking once since I got outta that hospital.’

Garrett stares his brother down for a moment, still chewing his gum. Not a single iota of guilt creeps into his expression. Instead, his eyes travel to meet mine. ‘He tell you he found his mommy? He tell you he’s too scared to even say hello to that bitch?’

‘Garrett—’ I say.

‘I told her everything. She knows everything because I trust her. Because she’s got my back.’ Miller’s tone lowers. ‘You’re here for money, right? Is that what you want?’

‘Next time, check your messages. Or pick up your phone.’

‘I’ve been busy.’

‘Well, I’m all out.’

Miller lets go of my hand. He crosses his arms, his chest rising and falling in anger. He doesn’t reply immediately, as though he’s grappling internally with something.

As a result, Garrett softens his tone. ‘Come on, man, help a brother out. Got some debts to pay.’

I see a muscle pulsating in Miller’s jaw. ‘How much? How much do you owe?’

Garrett’s lips twist. ‘Some. Here and there. You good for it?’

‘Apologise to my girlfriend.’

Garrett frowns. ‘What?’

‘Apologise to my girlfriend for the way you spoke to her, Garrett, you motherfucker, or I ain’t giving you zip.’

Garrett flushes red. One hand goes to the back of his neck. ‘Alright, alright. Sorry, Paige. You guys make a cute couple. I guess.’

‘Now get the fuck out.’

‘Want me to get you any pills?’

‘No,’ Miller states emphatically, growing more and more agitated.

‘Figures. Guess you can’t get high when you got a prissy girlfriend keepin’ you in check. So, you gonna transfer me the cash or what?’

Miller lowers his voice again, his tone a mixture of fury and exasperation. ‘I’ll do it. Now get out.’

Garrett moves towards the door. ‘Jesus, man, when did you get so uptight?’

He leaves. Together, we wait in silence to listen to him exit the suite. When the door closes, Miller exhales, his

shoulders drooping. In response, I curl my body around into his, and we cling tightly to one another, Miller crushing me in his arms, burying his head into my shoulder. I stroke his back. For several moments, we just stand there, holding on.

‘I love you,’ Miller breathes, and his words are barely audible.

I draw breath. These past few days... I think I already knew he felt this way about me.

Miller pulls back, not meeting my gaze. He takes both my hands in his, keeping his gaze fixed on the floor. ‘I love you,’ he manages. ‘It’s too soon to say it... I know that. But I can’t not say it. It’s always been you, Paige. From the moment I first saw you.’

Hearing his words causes a warm glow to spread out from inside my chest. I press my lips together, perhaps to stop an immediate reaction escaping my lips.

He’s right, it is too soon for those three words, but as I’m finding with Miller, he has a sweetness about him under the surface that I didn’t know was there before, and he has been known to do things prematurely.

And when I say those words back to him, I want to be sure.

‘You don’t have to say anything back,’ he says, after a beat, as though reading my thoughts.

I place one hand against his cheek. ‘Look at me,’ I whisper.

He doesn’t, at least not initially, not until I take both his cheeks in my palms and guide his chin up. It’s funny how I’d always thought of him as this ultra-confident alpha type.

He winces, before closing his eyes and shaking his head. ‘Man, I wish I hadn’t said all that. Can we just pretend that I didn’t say that out loud please?’

I smile. ‘If you prefer.’

'Let's just rewind to us leaving rehearsal and pretend Garrett didn't just come here and get me all riled up.'

'Fine,' I say, and I look at the Magic 8 Ball beside the TV. I pick it up and give it a shake. 'Magic 8 Ball,' I say. 'I'm going to get a shower, should I ask Miller to join me?'

I stop shaking and we both look down.

MY REPLY IS NO, the ball says.

'I don't know why you're still carrying that thing around,' Miller says.

'It's my lucky charm!'

'It doesn't know shit. I mean, *of course* I should join you in the shower.'

'Hmm, I don't know, the ball says otherwise.'

'Can a Magic 8 Ball get you naked and give you orgasms though?'

'I suspect not.'

'And that's precisely why you should listen to me instead. Because I can both get you naked *and* give you the best orgasms of your life.'

Discarding my Magic 8 Ball, I grab a fistful of Miller's T-shirt and yank him towards me. 'Then prove it,' I say.

And he does.

The following night, I glance down at my phone.

Boys are at a meet-and-greet, the message says. *They're hiding me away. Come see me?*

I type my response, a grin on my face.

'Oh, look at her.' I hear Carmen's voice hum. 'So smitten.'

In the ordinary room set aside for use by the dancers, underneath State Farm Stadium, I feel my cheeks warm.

'I am not,' I shoot back at her.

There's a thumping above my head. A crowd, 60,000 strong, awaiting their idols, unaware that there will now be five, and not four of them.

Nikita has her nose in a romantasy novel that's the size of a brick. Jahtoya cranes her neck to speak to me. 'That boy couldn't keep his paws off you during this morning's rehearsal. In case you hadn't noticed, rest of us could tell you'd been getting freaky in the sheets, like, *all* night long.'

I bite my lip. She's not wrong. Neither Miller nor I got much sleep last night. Through a lot of practice, we've worked out that if Miller lavishes me with attention until I'm on the brink of an orgasm, and only then does he sink inside me, it results in a climax for both of us at roughly the same time.

'Oh my God, look at her!' Carmen squeals and I bite my lip. 'Girl's in love!'

'In *lust*,' Jahtoya corrects her. I say nothing, but in my mind, I want to disagree.

I hop to my feet. 'I'm going to see Miller for five minutes,' I say. 'He's lonely.'

'Girl, go keep him company,' Jahtoya hums. 'And the rest.'

I go to the room Miller has directed me to in the stadium basement. The support act is due out on stage any minute. I don't recognise the guards on the door but they seem to know me.

Inside, I realise that the room is meant for use by the whole group, rather than just Miller on his own. There's an entire food-spread to one side and a drinks fridge. Miller gets up immediately and comes over to me, but then he stops short, wincing.

‘What?’ I say.

He looks troubled. ‘Last time you were dressed like that, I... launched my foot at your face.’

‘By accident,’ I add, approaching him and taking his hands in mine. ‘And because I didn’t move out of the way. And I will die on that hill.’

I take him in. I haven’t seen him all afternoon. We were all being preened, and Bianca spent about an hour braiding my hair into a pretty French plait. Miller’s had a yet another haircut, whereby his hair has been styled into a short, modern, mohawk and shaved a little shorter on both sides. It’s a look that does something to my insides, because he looks like the ultimate bad boy. Like all that’s missing is his motorbike.

‘What do you think?’ Miller says, indicating his new look.

‘You look hot.’

His lips curl into a smile. It’s the first time I’ve called him hot, and I mean it.

‘Not as hot as you though,’ he says.

I take a step closer and pull him in for a kiss. He kisses me back willingly, and, without warning, I’m incredibly turned on.

‘I can’t mess the hair up,’ Miller says between kisses. ‘I’m under strict instructions.’

‘How long do we have?’ I ask.

There’s a sofa over in the corner. I guide Miller over to it. He sits down and I straddle him, and before I know it, we’re getting a little too hot and heavy.

‘What about the hair?’ I whisper.

‘Fuck the hair,’ Miller responds and I moan as his lips go to my neck.

His hands are all over my body, lifting my top and

caressing the curves of my breasts, making me whimper, when I hear the door and realise the boys are back from their meet-and-greet. I don't manage to get off Miller in time.

'Oh! Oh!' Cal shouts as he sees us, covering his eyes, and I bolt upright. 'Foreplay alert!'

'Not fucking again, you two,' Aidan grumbles, rolling his eyes.

'Might wanna rephrase that, Aid,' Ravi comments.

'Miller, this room is *communal*,' J.B. adds.

'Sorry, guys,' Miller mumbles as he adjusts himself, getting to his feet. 'How'd the meet-and-greet go?'

'They were all asking if you might come back to the band,' Ravi says.

'Yeah? You think they have any idea?'

J.B. comes over and places one hand on each of Miller's shoulders. 'I need to say it. It's not the same, all this madness. It's not the same without you. And, no, they have no idea.'

Miller breaks out into a grin. J.B. hugs him, and the other boys come over and form a group hug. My heart is singing.

Aidan extends his arm out towards me. 'Get in here,' he says, and I'm folded into the group. 'You're a big reason why he's back.'

'By the way, Tanner Vincent's on his way, mate,' Cal says and the hug collapses. 'Zig told him you were back in the band and word has it he hit the roof no one told him.'

'Management can suck it,' Miller says and it feels like balance has been restored.

'You guys should spend some time together,' I say to him, giving his hand a squeeze. 'I'll see you shortly.'

Miller pulls me in for another heated kiss goodbye, the others all voicing their outright objection to our over-enthusiastic PDA.

I'm laughing as I pull away. 'Good luck out there,' I hum as I leave the room.

I'm waiting on the far right-hand-side of the stage. The lights are all low, and the noise from the crowd reverberates inside my chest. The atmosphere inside the stadium is electric, camera phones held high as Rebel Heart prepare to make their entrance. I thought I'd be nervous again, but I'm oddly excited.

As per my last concert in New York, a gigantic light-board is behind me, systematically lighting up the name of each band member one by one, row by row in a kind of dot matrix, as they arrive on stage. The crowd are already screaming when Aidan's name appears, but it only increases in volume. Ravi's name is next, followed by Cal, then lastly J.B.

It's at this point the music should start.

Except tonight, they're doing something a little different.

The boys gather at the front of the stage, with hand-held mics.

'Hold it! Hold it!' Cal says into his mic. 'Wait!'

The crowd screams. The music stops completely.

'What is it, man?' Aidan asks Cal, to more screams.

'Feels like we might be missing something,' Cal says.

'Guys, what the hell?' Ravi interrupts. 'We've got a show to do.'

'I think we need some quiet,' J.B. says, indicating to the crowd to quieten down.

It takes a moment, but they do, to an extent.

'Yeah, maybe we need the lights down too,' Cal says.

Inside the stadium, the lights are lowered. The band continues to shush the crowd. When a rumble starts up over the

speakers, I'm desperate to look round. Just below me, I spy Lexi, Bianca, Audrey and Tun in the VIP area with gigantic grins on their faces, clutching their hands to their chests in anticipation.

I glance back for a second. The lights for Miller's name begin to appear.

'Phoenix!' Aidan shouts to the crowd, 'Have we got a surprise for you!'

The volume of the scream that comes back, at the realisation of what is happening, shakes me to my very core. Still Miller's name appears in lights, creeping up the panel. When it's almost finished, I can no longer resist looking over my shoulder, and when I do, I can see him, standing at the rear of the stage with his back to the crowd, their local boy. As the stage lights come back up – and just when I don't think it's even possible – the screams only increase in volume, to the point that the band are all looking at one another in delighted disbelief. It's like nothing else I've ever heard in my life. I look out into the crowd, and I see the shock and excitement across people's face, their genuine euphoria at Miller's return, the sense of joy that it brings.

On stage, the boys fold Miller into a hug for the second time tonight and my heart swells at the love they have for one another, but right at this moment I have to cover my ears in order to cope with the sound. It's hard to fathom that I'm here, experiencing this, in person.

When the hug collapses, the boys let Miller have his moment in the centre of the stage, stepping back and allowing the screams to continue. When he smiles, a shy smile, almost in embarrassment – that's when I know. Because I can feel it, in every cell of my body.

That's the moment I know that I love him.

Chapter Thirty-Three

‘You’re very quiet.’

We’re staying at the Bellagio. I rolled my eyes when they told me that’s where we would be. Except, last time I was here in Las Vegas – barely a week and a half ago – Miller and I were staying in very different digs in a far less glitzy side of town. My two trips to Nevada could not be more contrasting.

Outside, it’s thirty-two degrees and sunny, and I’m in a bikini loaned to me by Bianca, lying on a sunbed in between Bianca and Lexi. The other dancers aren’t far away, all in their swimwear, and I can spot various tour crew-members dotted around the outdoor pool area. We’ve been here for two days already and the boys are currently doing a radio interview. Miller’s return to Rebel Heart has brought with it unrelenting, enthusiastic press interest, not to mention the nuclear-sized bomb that went off on social media at the footage of his return. Thankfully, my name hasn’t appeared in any of the coverage.

I look over at Lexi, who pulls down her sunglasses at my comment. ‘I’m fine, I promise,’ she says.

‘You’re sure?’ I ask, squinting in the morning sun.

‘Honestly?’ she replies, ‘Being back in Vegas is weird. Just over a year ago I left this place completely devastated.’

I reach out and grab her hand. ‘But that’s all in the past. You and Aidan worked everything out.’

Lexi shakes her head. ‘It’s silly. I shouldn’t think about it. I don’t know why I’m even dwelling on it.’

‘Everything is fine with Aidan, though, right?’

‘Everything is perfect with Aidan. I’m not working, he’s thrilled Miller’s back in the band, we’re getting to spend a ton of time together...’

‘So what’s the issue?’

Lexi gives a half-laugh. ‘There isn’t one! I don’t know. I think it’s just this place.’ She then lets out a heavy sigh. ‘It brings back unpleasant memories.’

She’s referring to last year’s break-up with Aidan, when Aidan discovered she’d been filming the band without their consent for her documentary. I was angry with her at the time, particularly as it mirrored another betrayal from his early years in the band, but once Aidan saw the finished film, he’d understood why she’d made the decision she did. I may have had a heavy hand in engineering their reunion. I refuse to call it meddling.

‘What about you?’ Lexi asks. ‘Tell me how everything’s going with Miller. Honestly, I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so happy. The boys are all saying he’s a new man. That he’s utterly obsessed with you.’

I grin, because everything is going well. Almost too well. Although, since his return to the band, I haven’t told him I love him yet. I want to find the right moment. To make it special. Plus, I can’t shake that we’re back in Vegas. Back where I know his mother is, where *he* knows his mother is, and I can’t help but feeling he’s shutting himself off from that

portion of his life, pretending he hasn't been visiting here in secret for the last five months on and off, torturing himself.

'Cal said exactly the same,' Bianca says with a giggle, her face tilted up towards the sun, her eyes protected by the most stylish pair of sunglasses I've ever seen. 'Have you had the long-distance talk yet?'

I frown in her direction. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean, you know... when the tour comes to an end. What happens to your relationship after that? When you have to go home and you start working out when you're next gonna see one another.'

I look to Lexi. She's removed her sunglasses, her raised brow and thin-lipped smile making me feel nervous, like she knows exactly what Bianca is talking about.

'I...' I begin, swallowing the enormous lump that had just lodged itself in my throat. 'I haven't thought about that, no.'

'What's happening with your dance studio?' Lexi asks.

'I think Ro's still waiting on the insurance money for me.'

'Is it your plan to open another one?' Bianca asks.

Panic rises in my chest. I've been so wrapped up in the tour and everything with Miller that I'd forgotten that in a month or so all this will come to an end.

'It's a shame Rebel Heart don't need dancers all year round,' Bianca muses when I say nothing. 'I mean, there's technically nothing wrong with being a groupie.'

'What about you?' I blurt. 'When do you have to go back to work?'

Bianca blows out her cheeks. 'Next week. Honestly? I'm thinking of quitting. But what the hell would I do with my time? Cal knows I'd go crazy without something to keep me occupied. I need my own life.'

I need my own life too, I think. Dancing – or teaching dance – is all I know how to do. And I love it. But if Rebel Heart don't need dancers until their next tour, am I just meant to be Miller's girlfriend? A hanger-on?

I'm still thinking about the end of the tour and what I'm supposed to do with myself when it's over when I return to my and Miller's room.

'Hey,' Miller says when I enter.

'You're back,' I say in surprise. 'That didn't take long.'

He's smirking, shifting closer to me as I toss my sunglasses and bag on the bed, sliding out of my flipflops. I frown at him.

'What is it?' I ask, slanting my eyes suspiciously at him.

He takes my hand and presses his lips to the back of it. 'So, now that you're my girl, you're gonna have to let me spoil you a bit.'

'Miller,' I chide him. 'I told you... I don't need gifts. You don't have to buy me anything.'

'No, but I really want to.'

'I'm serious, I don't need a single thing.'

'Says the girl whose livelihood burned down.'

I roll my eyes. 'I meant I don't need anything m— *holy shit*, are those real?'

He's holding out an open box containing what look like diamond earrings, a very satisfied smile on his face.

'Five-carat diamond studs.'

I can't say anything because my mouth's hanging open.

'Do you like them?' he breathes.

'Do I... do I *like* them?' I take the familiar aquamarine coloured box, admiring the contents. 'Are they from—?'

‘Yes.’

‘Miller, they’re gorgeous. But this is too much; you can’t give me these.’

‘I told you, I wanna spoil you. I never had a girlfriend to buy anything for before. Will you let me spoil you? Just for a little while. Please?’

I’m staring at him because something just dawned on me. ‘Hang on, when did you get time to go to Tiffany?’

Miller looks a little guilty. ‘They came to us.’

‘*When?*’

‘After breakfast.’

‘What? Hang on, wait a minute... did Aidan buy anything?’

Miller winces. ‘I can’t tell you that.’

‘Miller, I’m your girlfriend. You cannot *not* tell me.’

‘Alright, if I tell you, you cannot tell a soul. Aid made me swear I wouldn’t tell you.’

I mimic zipping up my mouth. ‘Did he buy a ring?’ I whisper.

‘Yup,’ Miller confirms with a grin on his face.

My eyes widen to saucers.

‘We all helped him pick it out,’ Miller adds.

‘When?’ I ask. ‘When’s he going to ask her?’

‘Tonight.’

I let out a squeal. ‘But Lexi’s all blue about being in Vegas because of what happened last time.’

‘He’s taking her back to the same hotel. Same suite they broke up in. He’s got the whole thing worked out. It’s gonna be the most romantic proposal.’

My voice lowers further. ‘Wait a minute... how long have you known about this?’

Miller flipflops his head from side to side, looking guilty again. 'A little while. I was sworn to secrecy.'

My lips twist. 'Then it's a good thing you bought me expensive earrings to make up for it.'

'Do you like 'em?'

'I love them. Thank you.' *I love you*, I want to add, the words wavering on my lips.

Miller moves closer to me, guiding my hair over my ear. 'But you can't wear 'em yet. Not until after Aidey's proposed to Lexi.'

I snap the box shut. 'Deal,' I say, before he pulls me in for a kiss.

It's late. We're inside Aidan's suite: all of us, except Aidan and Lexi. Even Ziggy is here, and the other dancers, and selected members of the tour crew. It's ten-thirty. The lights of Las Vegas glitter outside and across the horizon.

We're all quiet. Nervous. The champagne is on ice and we've all dressed up.

'What if she says no?' Ravi whispers, because we've been waiting a long time.

'In what universe is she gonna say no?' Cal blurts at full volume and Bianca shushes him, placing one hand over his mouth.

Audrey giggles. This is supposed to be a surprise party. Miller is sitting next to me, holding my hand, his thumb brushing up and down my skin.

We hear voices in the corridor. I put one finger to my lips. Aidan is supposed to have messaged someone but no word has arrived.

Ziggy leans out. The door to the suite is nudged open.

Aidan's hand appears, making a thumbs-up symbol. Ziggy makes a thumbs-up to everyone and we silently get to our feet.

I hear Lexi's voice. Aidan enters first. He's wearing a suit and a shirt with an open collar and even I have to admit he looks handsome. When Lexi enters, holding Aidan's hand, we all shout, 'Congratulations!' in unison.

Lexi squeals in shock, her eyes going wide, her left hand covering her mouth. On her ring finger is an exquisite diamond engagement ring.

'She said yes,' Aidan confirms with a grin on his face, his arm around her shoulders, and I don't even know who to hug first. I briefly embrace my brother before launching myself at Lexi.

'Congratulations!' I repeat, because I could not be more thrilled that she'll be my sister-in-law. 'Let me see! Let me see!'

Lexi holds out her ring hand. Ravi, Tun, Bianca and Audrey coming scurrying over, crowding round to inspect her brand-new engagement ring. Aidan is being congratulated by Miller whilst Cal pops the champagne corks.

'Oh, it's beautiful,' I gush, holding onto Lexi's fingers.

'It's stunning,' Bianca echoes.

'Gorgeous,' Tun says.

'Was it romantic?' I ask.

'Oh, my goodness, I cried,' Lexi says. 'He'd thought of everything. All my ugly memories of Las Vegas evaporated completely.'

'He got down on one knee though, right?' Bianca asks with a single eyebrow raised.

'He did,' Lexi confirms with a big smile, and Bianca seems to approve. 'It was everything and more. I can't believe you all knew! I hope you all got something from Tiffany, too.'

Tun points to a single diamond stud in his ear and to a

silver chain whilst someone hands me a glass of champagne. Audrey shows off a series of bracelets and Bianca has slid an intricately designed, wide Tiffany cuff on her wrist which definitely wasn't there before.

'Hang on, I was told not to wear my earrings!' I exclaim and I look over to Miller.

He's standing back from Aidan, who is now being congratulated by Ziggy and some of the other tour crew members. He's staring down at his phone with a furrowed brow, his body language completely altered. He repockets the handset, his jaw set in a fixed line. Though the moment lasts barely a second, I can tell instantly that something is up by the way he's fidgeting.

It takes me a few more moments to extricate myself from the group. When I reach him, I wrap my fingers around his bicep.

'Everything okay?' I question lightly.

His smile is forced, his fingers brushing up against my waist. 'Everything's fine. Honestly, I'm pretty beat. I might go to bed.'

'You don't want to stay for the party? Come on, you haven't congratulated Lexi yet.'

For the rest of the evening, I watch him closely. He doesn't check his phone again, but it's clear something has distracted him. I get caught up in a conversation between Jahtoya and Carmen before I realise that Miller is no longer in the room.

'Where's Miller?' I ask my brother.

'Said he was tired; he's gone to bed, I think,' Aidan responds, one arm draped over Lexi's shoulders, a glass in his hand. For once, their mutual display of delirious happiness doesn't bother me.

‘Everything alright?’ Lexi asks.

‘Everything’s fine.’

‘I still cannot believe you fell for Miller’s charms,’ Aidan says to me. ‘That wasn’t my intention when I asked you to look out for him, you know. That day you had us put furniture together at Miller’s place... I was trying to tell you that Miller had always had a thing for you, except I bottled it.’

‘Well, I wish you’d told me.’

‘You would have run for the hills.’

‘Maybe at that point I would have. But not later.’

Aidan squeezes my shoulder. ‘You’ve made him the happiest guy on Earth, P. Apart from me, maybe.’

I force a laugh and hug them both, but something about Miller leaving the party early bothers me. By the time I wobble back down the corridor towards our room, I’ve lost track of what time it is.

The lights are off. Miller’s in bed, asleep, or pretending to be. I don’t bother taking my make-up off, just shimmy out of my clothes to my underwear and clamber under the sheets, pressing my body up against his back, spooning him, trailing gentle kisses between his shoulder blades.

‘*Mmm*,’ Miller mutters.

I slide my hand across his back, down across the top of his thigh. Before I can go any further, he reaches for my hand and moves it back to my side of the bed.

His voice sounds gravelly. ‘I need some sleep before the show tomorrow. That okay?’

‘Sure,’ I reply after a moment, and I’m stung because for the first time in a while I’m reminded of old Miller. Miller who could be crass and indifferent.

Maybe it’s because I’ve had a little too much champagne, but hot tears sting my eyes.

‘Don’t shut me out, okay?’ I whisper.

I can feel his entire body stiffen. After a moment, I feel him move as he leans up and switches on the bedside lamp. He pulls himself up into a sitting position and I follow suit, placing one hand on his bent knee. He reaches for his phone and unlocks it, navigating to his messages. Then he passes me the handset with the screen lit up.

The number is unrecognised. My eyes flit across the screen, absorbing the contents of the message.

Hi Danny, it reads. Your friend Paige gave me your number. Guess I wanted to tell u that I got tickets to be at your show tomorrow night. I told my girls all bout u. I’ll understand if u don’t want to see me. Mom x

‘Wow,’ I say when I’ve read it. ‘Are you alright?’

‘I’m good,’ he says flatly. ‘I’d rather not talk about it.’

‘Will you reply?’ I ask.

He takes the phone and switches it off, placing it back beside the bed. Then he turns off the light and moves back down under the covers.

‘I just wanna sleep,’ he murmurs, and I feel that the last thing he wants to hear is my voice disagreeing with him.

Chapter Thirty-Four

All around the breakfast table, the atmosphere is still buzzing from Aidan and Lexi's news. There has been non-stop wedding talk: when, how, where, who's coming, what to wear. Bianca is leading the charge on the discussion of wedding dresses.

I look around the table. It might seem odd to some that Rebel Heart, as a band, would all take breakfast together, but right now it feels like we're a family.

And it breaks my heart to know that one member of Rebel Heart is back to where he was at Christmastime: putting himself through emotional turmoil and not telling anyone about it.

Which is why I'm stunned when I feel Miller's fingers brush tentatively against mine, and he takes me by the hand underneath the surface of the table. I turn, giving him an encouraging smile, giving his fingers a hard squeeze. In response, Miller lifts a knife and taps it against his glass of orange juice.

The room falls silent, all eyes looking our way.

'I got something I need to say,' Miller says, his voice sounding a little raw. 'First of all, congratulations again to Lexi and Aidan, I am genuinely thrilled for you guys.'

‘Thank you, Miller,’ Lexi says.

I see his throat working. ‘I left the party early last night because I got a message from my mom.’

A ripple of surprise goes round the table.

‘What did she say?’ Ravi asks.

Miller winces. ‘She’s got tickets to the show tonight. She’s told my half-sisters who their brother is.’

‘You alright, man?’ Aidan says.

Miller nods his head. ‘Just... my world is kinda... spinning, I guess. What do I do?’

It makes my heart sing, that he’s finally opening up to them and asking for their advice.

Cal blows out his cheeks. ‘No matter what, mate, I say you go out there and give it everything. You got nothing to apologise for. You are who you are, and you got nothing to prove to anyone.’

Miller nods his head, as does J.B. ‘Cal is right,’ he says. ‘It doesn’t matter if she’s there or not.’

‘But do I message her back?’ Miller asks.

Aidan looks to his now fiancée. ‘I think Lexi can answer that.’

Lexi leans forward, her gaze filled with empathy. ‘Miller, I’m not going to tell you what to do either way, but if you don’t contact her... you may live to regret it. We all make mistakes, some of us greater than others. I’ve forgiven my dad for leaving. You mother will have had her reasons for doing the same.’

‘For what it’s worth, if it was up to me, I’d wanna take that risk,’ Ravi adds quietly.

I can see a muscle pulsating in Miller’s jaw. ‘I’ll think about it.’

‘You know we’ll support you either way, right?’ Ravi says. ‘Whatever you decide.’

‘Thanks, man,’ Miller says and he’s bordering on tears again, which in turn makes me well up.

‘You okay, bro? Happy to go on stage tonight?’ Cal asks, and Miller inhales audibly.

He nods, leaning back in his chair and massaging the back of his neck. ‘Yeah. I’ll think about it. Now can we talk about something else?’

After breakfast, back in our room, Miller is quiet.

I let out a sigh, though it comes out heavier than I was aiming for. ‘You haven’t asked me what I think you should do,’ I say.

‘Because I already know what you think I should do. You gave her my number.’

I give a guilty shrug, my eyes going to the floor. ‘I was just trying to help out.’

Miller comes over, wrapping his arms around me. ‘And it’s what I like about you, Paige: you’re always trying to help people. Only it’s not as straightforward as all that. I don’t know that I can forgive her just like that.’

‘But this is your opportunity to make your peace! She’s coming to *your* show. She’s going to watch *you* perform. You’ll be in the same vicinity. Maybe Rav is right. Isn’t it worth the risk?’

‘I’ll think about it.’

‘Miller!’

The avoidance tactics go on all day. More management and record company types arrive. Rebel Heart are kept busy – and away from me – until I’m back in a room with the dancers in the evening again, in my costume and waiting to go on stage, staring at my phone because Miller isn’t answering any of my messages.

‘Trouble in paradise already?’ Jahtoya asks with a single eyebrow raised.

Carmen puts on a coarse Southern accent. *‘That’s what ya git when ya boyfriend’s all fay-muss.’*

I roll my eyes playfully at them, but I’m not in the mood. I need to find Miller.

‘I’ll be back, alright?’

Carmen goes back to being serious. ‘Paige, they’re gon call us, in like, ten minutes.’

‘Don’t panic, I won’t be long.’

I race along the corridor in Allegiant Stadium, not entirely sure where I am going. I can hear the crowds from somewhere nearby. As I glance behind me, I slam into a solid wall of man a foot or more taller than I am.

‘Please, I have to get through, I need to see the band.’

‘Sorry, ma’am,’ he booms at me in a resounding baritone.

‘No, you don’t understand, I’m one of the dancers. I’m about to go on stage.’

He crosses his arms and gives me a blank look.

I’m desperate. ‘Aidan McArthur is my twin!’ I blurt.

‘You need a lanyard to come through, ma’am.’

‘It’s back that way.’

‘I’m sorry.’

Bodhi appears, clutching a radio. ‘Bodhi!’ I screech at him.

‘Paige, what are you doing? You’re about to get called.’

‘Please, I need two minutes with Miller. It’s urgent.’

Bodhi nods at the security guard and he lets me through. Bodhi then leads me down another corridor to where the boys are readying themselves to go on stage.

When he opens the door, I launch myself inside. The

boys are gathered, in costume, miked up. Lexi is there too, along with Bianca and Tun.

‘P, what are you doing here?’ Aidan blurts. ‘We’re about to go on.’

‘I need just one minute with Miller in private. Please.’

‘Paigey,’ Cal laughs. ‘I’m pretty sure Miller makes it quick in the bedroom, but I’m not sure he’s *that* fast.’

Miller’s looking at me with a frown on his face. ‘What’s going on?’

I punch Cal in the arm, but I’m looking Miller’s way. ‘I just need to talk to you.’

‘Paige, now’s not exactly a good time,’ he says.

Several assistants turn up outside the room and start calling Rebel Heart to the stage.

I look to Aidan. He knows my pleading face. The face I make when I really want something.

He rolls his eyes at me. ‘Right! Everybody out!’

There’s a lot of chatter. Everyone files out of the room, until I’m standing there facing only Miller, the muffled sounds of the bustling outside seeping in from the other side of the door.

‘Babe, I gotta go,’ Miller says. ‘We can talk later, okay? I promise.’

My heart is racing. ‘Did you make up your mind yet?’

Miller looks irked. ‘Paige, stop putting pressure on me. I talked to the guys. They agree that if I don’t wanna contact my mom, then I shouldn’t have to, so it’s cool. So what if she’s here tonight? So are thousands of other people. Makes no difference to me.’

I try not to look peeved. ‘So that’s it. You’re just going to leave it?’

‘I know the fixer in you doesn’t like it... but yeah. I’ll leave it.’

There’s a knock at the door. ‘Miller! Gotta go!’ a voice calls out.

‘Can I just say something?’ I ask.

‘Can it wait?’

I step towards him. ‘No, it can’t. I need to you to know all the things that surprised me about you, after I came to Phoenix that day. For one... it surprised me how many get-well-soon cards you got from charities, until I realised that you’d given money to *all* of them. It surprised me that you took the time to sign all those autographs in the hospital and how sweet you were to all the nurses. It surprised me learning about how lonely you must have felt as a child. It surprised me that you used sign language with Howie. It surprised me that you were the one to stand up for me in front of your brother, and that you still bail him out *every* time, even though he’s a total shit to you. It surprised me that you didn’t know exactly what you were doing in bed, and that you wanted to learn to please a woman. It surprised me when you told me that you love me. A lot of things have surprised me lately about you, Miller, so, you know what, it’s fine if you don’t want to see your mother. It is. But, for what it’s worth, I want *her* to know how amazing the man I love is. I want *her* to see the man you’ve become.’

He stares at me. ‘Millerrrrrr!’ somebody shouts from outside, and there’s a banging on the door. ‘Now, please!’

I look at him. His eyes are swimming. ‘You love me?’ he asks.

‘I love you,’ I repeat, in all sincerity. ‘And I am *so* proud of you, whatever you decide to do.’

Miller pulls me towards him, capturing my lips. His

passionate, heartfelt kiss is brought to a premature end when Ziggy barges through the door and marches in.

‘Miller! Come on! You’re up!’ He stops beside us. ‘Paige, can you not cavort with my band members, please? Not now, anyway – we need you on stage as well.’

Miller’s still holding onto me, a big grin plastered on his features. ‘Sorry, Ziggy,’ I say, without looking up. ‘I was just saying to Miller how he should go on stage and give it everything.’

Ziggy clicks his tongue impatiently. ‘Good advice, darlin’, but you could have picked a better moment, yeah? Now get a bloody move on!’

The energy on stage tonight is felt by everyone, even backstage. I didn’t know it was possible to improve on the Arizona shows, but somehow the boys manage it. None of them puts a foot wrong. The crowd’s reaction to Miller’s name is, once more, ecstatic, and he soaks it up, putting his heart into every number. As I look out on a packed-out stadium, I can’t help but wonder if Miller’s mother is there, and what she must think of her son tonight.

When it’s over, after the second encore, there are high-fives all round. An acknowledgement that Rebel Heart smashed it out of the park – or stadium – with their performance tonight.

I’m with Miller, holding his hand, walking with the entire group as Bodhi’s men escort us back to the hospitality suite. Once safely inside, I can see that Miller is distracted.

‘Everything alright?’ I ask under my breath.

He paces a little. ‘You think I can change my mind?’ Miller asks me.

My lips broaden into a grin. ‘Of course you can change your mind.’

He paces restlessly some more before the others realise something is up.

‘Everything alright, bro?’ Cal asks.

I see Miller swallow. He looks to them all, one by one. ‘I think I wanna call her. Like right now. Maybe even meet her.’

‘Do it, man,’ Ravi says, bounding over.

‘You could call her, see where she is,’ I suggest.

He looks nervous. ‘What if she never came to the concert?’

‘You won’t know unless you ask.’

He nods his head, going to seek out his phone. Ravi and I exchange excited looks.

‘What’s going on?’ Aidan asks.

‘Miller’s gonna call his mom,’ Ravi blurts.

‘I could go out and get her,’ I say. ‘If she’s here.’

Lexi’s heard what’s going on. ‘I can help,’ she offers.

‘Why not go back to the hotel?’ J.B. says. ‘Have her come there?’

‘Cause he might have bottled it by then, mate,’ replies Cal. ‘*Carpe diem* and all that.’

Miller comes back over, cradling his phone, his chest rising and falling with every uneven breath.

I hold his gaze. ‘You can do it.’

‘What do I say?’

‘You say, *Hi, it’s Danny, your son.*’

Ravi put his arms around Miller’s shoulders. ‘You got this, man.’

Miller blows out his cheeks. Opening his phone, he navigates to his mother’s earlier message. He looks to me and I give him another nod of encouragement.

The room goes silent as he hits the call button. He turns his back, puts the call on speaker, so we can hear.

Jennifer Garland answers after three rings. ‘Hello?’ she says in an uneven tone, and I wonder if she knows it’s Miller calling. There’s a lot of background noise.

‘Mom? It’s me, Danny...’ His voices hitches. ‘Your son.’

There’s a crackle and then what sounds like sobs. ‘Danny?’ she says again, and her voice cracks.

I move backwards. I see the tears that spring to Miller’s eyes, and mine are swimming too.

‘Are you at the stadium?’ Miller asks, one hand in his hair as Ravi holds onto him.

‘Yes... yes...’ is her shaky response. ‘I’m outside... with the girls.’

‘You wanna come back in again?’ Miller says, trying to keep his composure. ‘I’m still inside.’

‘We would... oh my gosh, we... would love that.’

I press my lips together because she’s definitely holding back tears. ‘Can you tell me where you are?’ Miller asks.

‘I’ll get Bodhi,’ Cal says, moving towards the door.

‘We’re on the east side... the freeway side, near the airport. In the parking lot. I don’t think they’ll let us back in again. There’s a lotta people streamin’ out.’

‘Can you come back toward the stadium?’

‘I can see a sign for VIP entry, but it’s through a gate.’

‘Go wait by that gate. I’m gonna send Paige and Lexi out to get you, okay?’

‘Okay. We’ll wait there.’

Miller hangs up. Ravi wraps him in an embrace, slapping him on the back. ‘You did it, man!’ he exclaims.

Amongst the onslaught, Miller passes me his phone. ‘Take this in case you can’t find her.’

I grin at him. 'How do you feel?'

Ravi lets go of him.

'Honestly?' Miller says. 'Fucking terrified.'

'You're doing the right thing,' Lexi says as Aidan and J.B. move closer, both giving him a hug. 'We'll bring her back here. And you boys had better find somewhere else to hang out. You can't all be here; it'll be too much.'

Cal comes back with Bodhi. 'Here's your escort, ladies.'

I turn to Lexi. 'Let's go.'

I then squeeze Miller's hand. 'You'll be fine,' I whisper. 'Just be yourself.'

Inside the stadium, there are people still queueing for the stands selling merchandise. Accompanied by Bodhi, Lexi and I get some looks as we run towards where we need to be. Outside, it's dark. It doesn't take us long to locate Miller's mother. I slow to a halt when I see her, nudging Lexi. She's wearing a maxi dress with a denim jacket and white trainers, her curly hair tied back. She's holding hands with two adolescent girls. The older one is about fourteen years of age, who wears baggy jeans and an official Rebel Heart T-shirt. When I see the younger girl, I baulk, because her resemblance to Miller is uncanny. Her hair is tied back into spiky bun, and she's also in a Rebel Heart tee paired with sparkly leggings.

I give a little wave on approach. Jennifer straightens and looks like she's just trying to hold it together. Bodhi hangs back.

'Hi, Jennifer,' I say and I feel both the girls' attention come to me.

'Oh, please, call me Jen,' she says as we shake hands.

'Ok. Jen. This is Lexi.'

Lexi shakes her by the hand.

‘Nice to meet you, Lexi,’ Jen says.

‘You’re Aidan’s girlfriend!’ the younger of the girls blurts in her direction.

I wink at her. ‘Actually, she’s his fiancée now. And what’s your name?’

She holds her hands up to her mouth, eyes going wide. ‘Willow,’ she manages.

‘Nice to meet you, Willow. I’m Paige.’

She screws up her face. ‘I know who you are!’

‘Did you know that Paige is also Miller’s girlfriend?’ Lexi adds.

Jen’s mouth falls open. ‘You didn’t say.’

I feel myself blush. ‘It’s kind of a new thing. It wasn’t a thing when you saw me last.’ I look towards the other girl. ‘And what’s your name?’

She looks to the floor, perhaps embarrassed. ‘Faith,’ she manages.

‘Hi, Faith,’ I say.

‘You guys wanna come back inside?’ Lexi asks.

They look to one another nervously, then nod their heads.

‘Did you guys enjoy the show?’ I ask as we start walking, and they’re all still nodding, their smiles seeped in nervous anticipation because they know exactly where we’re going.

Back inside the stadium, we make polite conversation but my heart is racing. I sneak glances at Jen as we walk and can only imagine what she must be going through, preparing to see her son in the flesh for the first time in almost twenty years. By the time we reach the door to the private hospitality suite, her tears are already threatening to brim over.

Lexi hangs back, giving me two thumbs up. I reach out, placing one hand on the door handle, and hold my breath.

Chapter Thirty-Five

I lean my head around the door. Miller's alone in the suite, one balled-up fist clasped in his other hand. Tension fills his expression. I offer him a smile and open the door wider.

I beckon Jen and the girls inside. Jen's face crumples, the tears she's been holding in for the last ten minutes already leaking down her face, before she's even entered the room. Her daughters give her a nudge. Her feet take baby steps forward before she leans inside.

I watch Miller carefully. He rubs his lowers arms. The moment he sees her, any resolve he might have had left evaporates.

Jen bites her lip. 'Hi, Danny,' she manages through gasps of air. Her sobs are already bubbling to the surface.

'Hi, mom,' is his throaty response, as he wraps her in an embrace, burying his head in her shoulder.

They stand there for a long moment, holding onto one another. Jen's shoulders tremble. I bring the girls inside and shut the door.

When Miller pulls back, his cheeks are wet. Jen wipes her eyes, attempting to regain her composure.

'You look s-so g-grown up,' she whispers. 'My boy.'

‘Mom?’ Willow says behind her, snapping her out of her thoughts.

‘Danny, these are my girls. This is Faith and Willow.’

‘Hello,’ Willow says to him, beaming.

Miller holds out his hand and she shakes it heartily. ‘Nice to meet you, Willow. Did you enjoy the show?’

‘It was decent.’

Miller mock reels and I smile. ‘Decent? That’s all? Ouch.’

‘I really liked it,’ Faith mumbles, looking to the floor.

‘Thanks,’ Miller says. ‘Faith, right?’

She nods her head, still unable to look in his direction, her shoes an endless source of fascination.

‘It’s nice to meet you guys,’ Miller says.

‘I cried the whole way through,’ Jen says and Miller’s eyes are swimming again. ‘Even the encore. I’m so proud of you.’

Miller offers her a hug for a second time, and she sobs again.

‘Like, we were totally *not* expecting you to be our brother,’ Willow states, flicking her hair and Jen squeezes her lips together. It’s sweet how Willow lightens the mood.

‘Yeah?’ Miller says. ‘And now that you know, what do you think?’

She shrugs her shoulders, taking in her surroundings. ‘I mean... I could get used to this lifestyle.’

‘Will,’ Faith hisses, but Miller’s grinning.

‘You know, this is weird,’ he says. ‘Because not only do you look like me, you kinda sound like me too.’

Willow holds up one finger. ‘Uh-uh. I think it’s the other way around, wise guy. You kinda sound like *me*.’

‘Okay, you two are definitely related,’ I snicker.

Miller laughs. Jen wipes more tears and I put my arms around her shoulders.

‘The other guys really wanna meet you,’ Miller tells them. ‘Would that be too much?’

Faith looks stunned. Jen breaks out into a smile. ‘We’d love to meet them. Wouldn’t we?’

‘I’ll go,’ I say, noting that Faith now looks terrified.

When I go outside, the rest of Rebel Heart are already waiting, together with Lexi. I beckon them in through the door.

Back inside, Miller introduces the band, one by one. Each of them puts his arms around Jen, pulling her in for a hug. Willow keeps everyone entertained with her sass. Faith flushes scarlet, but is visibly thrilled to meet them all, most particularly J.B. Miller hangs back for a moment, pulling me close, planting a kiss on the side of my head.

‘You did the right thing,’ I whisper.

‘You talked some sense into me, McArthur,’ he responds. ‘As usual.’

When the conversation dies down a little, Jen comes over to us. ‘Would you both have any spare time tomorrow? I’d love for you to come by the house, maybe? Meet my husband, Bri? We could... talk a little more. Get to know each other.’

She still looks nervous. Her last comment is aimed at Miller, I know, but she asks both of us, and I like her all the more for it.

‘I’d like that,’ Miller says. ‘I’d like to get to know you.’

We agree on a time and that she’ll send the address.

‘Thank you,’ she says to me, squeezing both my hands. ‘Thank you for coming to see me at the diner. I’m so pleased my boy has found such a wonderful girlfriend in you.’

Miller pulls me closer. Out of the corner of my eye I can see both Aidan and Lexi looking at me, like they’re both pleased.

I used to think that love would happen for me in a dramatic way, like it did for them. That I would meet someone, and then I would wrestle with powerful emotions, at which point I would just know I'd met the one. I didn't expect it to creep up on me, that my feelings wouldn't be an immediate tidal wave, instead a gentle blossoming of the profoundest sentiment, deep inside me, like nothing I've ever felt for anyone before. And never in a hundred years would I have said that I would have those same feelings for a man I thought I didn't like very much.

The same man who is now holding onto me tightly. Tight enough that I think he never wants to let me go.

It's midnight by the time we make it back to the hotel. We've said our goodbyes and arranged to meet Jennifer and the girls at their Las Vegas home tomorrow morning.

In our absence, in our room, there's been a turndown service. The curtains are closed and there's a swan made out of a white towel gracing our bed sheets. I'm still gushing about it, about all this evening's events, when I realise Miller is stood stock still beside the door to the bedroom, watching me, his hands thrust into his pockets.

I pause. 'What?' I say eventually. 'What is it?'

A smile touches his lips. 'I just wanna know what I did to deserve you. Because whatever I did, I feel like I hit the jackpot.'

I cock my head to one side and smile back. I move towards him. 'You didn't do anything. Life just sets you on a particular path sometimes. And you don't know where it will take you.'

'Then if that's the case, why'd you do all this shit for me, McArthur?'

I'm opposite him now. 'Because one day the balance

tipped into me loving you and being proud of you and wanting what's best for you.'

'You really love me?' he asks on an exhale.

'I thought you loved me.'

'I do... I just... I think I was waiting for the day when you realised that I'm a total jackass and questioned why you were with me in the first place.'

'Oh, I don't doubt there will be days when I call you a jackass to your face. But I promise I'll still love you.'

Miller locks eyes with me and this time I'm the one holding on tightly to him. 'I love you from the farthest corners of my soul, Paige. I always have done, I always will do, and I swear on Aidan and Lexi's upcoming wedding, I'll never hurt you. I will worship you for as long as I have the breath to do so.'

I'm stunned. My fingertips trace the firm line of his jaw. 'Who are you,' I murmur, 'and what have you done with Daniel Austin Miller?'

He smiles, then leans forward. When his lips touch mine, I melt a little in his arms, because I realise that this is exactly the kind of love that Lexi and Aidan have, the kind of love that I craved, and I never thought I'd find. And it doesn't matter how I got here. It matters that I'm here, and so is Miller, and that he's the one causing this squall of emotions to explode in my chest.

Our kisses are unhurried. I'll still never get over how good his lips feel against mine. If I could only experience one thing for the rest of my days, I would choose Miller's kiss. When his hands dip underneath my top and slide up my back, I press myself into him. Because, despite me having something to say about any given topic, I can't find the words to express what I feel in this moment.

He breaks our kiss. 'So, what do you say, McArthur?' he

whispers, dropping a kiss on the end of my nose. 'You wanna get it on, or what?'

I stare at him, then break into gentle laughter. '*There's* the Miller I know and love.'

'Love?'

He says it like he doesn't believe it. I cradle his face in my palms. 'I love you, Miller,' I breathe. 'Don't doubt it for a minute.'

'I can't hear those words enough.'

'So,' I say, brushing my lips softly against his, 'how about we *don't* get it on, how about you make love to me?'

I feel the physical reaction in him, what my words do to him, his expression growing duskier as his erection twitches against my thigh. This time, when he kisses me, it hits a little different, maybe because our hearts are fully open, and we're ready to give ourselves to one another completely.

And when he scoops me into his arms, I moan softly into his mouth, because I need him to know that I want this as badly as he does.

When he lays me on the bed's crisp sheets, I let him take control, allowing him to peel my clothes away piece by piece, layer by layer, until I'm lying stretched out and naked for him, every nerve of my being trembling in anticipation.

I watch him discard his own clothes, tossing them from the side of the bed, until he comes to lie beside me.

'Are you cold?' he says. 'You're shaking.'

'Not cold,' I whisper, pulling him closer, 'more like incredibly hot for you.'

This time it's Miller groaning into my mouth. As we kiss, he moves his body atop mine, then shifts lower to lavish attention on each of my breasts, licking and sucking until my nipples are taut and standing to attention. As he teases them

with his tongue, he tells me he loves me, over and over, until I'm panting with need. He moves lower still, his hands caressing my belly and thighs, trailing lazy kisses across my skin, edging closer to my most intimate part.

When his fingers press against my thighs, urging me to open my legs for him, I don't hesitate, because I'm so at ease and it feels natural.

'Wait,' I say, grabbing at the pillows, moving them underneath me, so I can raise my head. 'I want to watch.'

I can tell he likes that, as he leans up and helps me to get comfortable. When I'm ready, he gently guides my thighs apart again, positioning himself, and, just by a glance, he can see how wet I am for him.

'You're beautiful,' Miller murmurs as he moves lower, keeping his eyes on mine as he licks the length of my seam, a gasp of pleasant surprise escaping my lips, and my head tips back momentarily. We've had enough practice now that he knows what I like, and when his tongue flutters over my tight bundle of nerves in a perfect rhythm, I am undone. My body shudders as his tongue works its magic, and the look of contentment in his eyes as he satisfies me causes my muscles to tighten even further. The pleasure is already at an intense level, and within a moment I'm rocketing towards my release.

Maybe it's my moans, but Miller seems to sense I'm going to come too soon, so he slows the rhythm of his tongue to a level that is pure torture.

'I need you,' I choke out. 'I need you inside me.'

Miller backs away, trailing kisses down the inside of my thighs, wet with my own arousal. Though I'm desperate for him to continue, I'm grateful we can prolong one another's pleasure.

Which is why I'm not going to let him fuck me yet. I

want our lovemaking to last and last. Urging him to lie down, I clamber atop him. I trail hot, damp kisses across his chest, shifting lower to his stomach. I savour the sound of his low, appreciative groan as my lips brush against his erection, teasing him, licking him before my cheeks hollow out, taking his full length in my mouth. My head begins to bob up and down, my tongue flicking over his tip. He's raised up a little by the same set of pillows, and I know from the noises he's making that he's enjoying watching me. Plus, I know me using my mouth on him drives him wild, which honestly makes me want to make this as memorable as possible. I fall into a slow rhythm, taking him all the way to the back of my throat, until his groans become deep and needy.

'Paige, Paige, you gotta stop,' he whispers, touching my face and I pull back.

'You're too damned good at that,' he laughs, and I'm laughing too. I love that we've reached a point where we can laugh with one another whilst trying to make each other feel good. I lean up and kiss him, and he kisses me back like he's ravenous.

'Need you now, baby,' he says and I'm nodding in agreement. I hover over him, pausing for a moment, because this is only the second time we haven't had to worry about contraception, and I'm still getting used to that idea.

When I realised things were getting serious, I told Miller I was going back on the pill, but that I wanted us both to get tested. When he told me he'd never been with a girl without suiting up first, I believed him, but he agreed to a test all the same. When both our test results came back clean, if anything it's made us more committed to our relationship.

I position myself, leaning up, taking him in my hand and dragging his tip through my wet folds, so that he can feel how

aroused I am for him. Miller doesn't break eye contact, just gives a low hum of approval. It's only when I nudge him close to my entrance, feeding his tip inside me, does his head go back for just a second. But then he's back, watching me, as I tilt my hips, sinking lower, heavenly sensations whooshing up my spine as he fills me.

'I love you,' he whispers when he's only halfway inside.

'I love you,' I say back as I sink down on him fully, and, for a moment, we just revel in the blissfulness of our union.

'You feel so good,' Miller chokes out. 'You're still shaking.'

'In a good way.' I smile before I roll my hips for the first time and moans escape both of our lips.

'Go slow,' Miller reminds me, because we both know what happens when I move too fast. 'Real slow.'

I obey, falling into an unhurried, pulsing rhythm and we hold hands as I ride him. Miller's mouth falls open. 'You feel so good,' he manages. 'Can I touch you?'

I nod and let go of his hand, letting it drift between us. The nicest thing about sex with Miller is that all he wants to do is please me, and today is no exception.

'There?' he says, as he circles my clit with his thumb. I reach down and he allows me to take control, trying some different angles. He's patient with me, because I know how much he wants me to reach a genuine climax.

'Right there,' I say, once we've found the spot. 'A little faster... that's it.'

I ride him slowly as he rubs me, the friction sending delicious sensations through my core. After a couple of minutes of restrained, languid and sensual lovemaking, my hips buck faster as I lose control, Miller letting out another groan, and we're each chasing our releases.

‘Miller,’ I choke out, because his fingers have kept to a perfect rhythm this whole time and the sensations are growing stronger. I can feel my orgasm closing in.

‘That’s it,’ he whispers, and I never want this to stop. He feels so good below me, inside me, his fingers working some kind of magic. The tremors begin achingly slow, the pressure building and building. I whimper, feel myself beginning to tighten and clench up around him. I don’t even recognise the cries emerging from between my lips because I have no control over them. The sensations peak, and my climax follows, splitting me in half, my head tipping back as my body shakes. I writhe as pleasure courses through my entire being, the pace of our movements meaning it’s the most deliciously prolonged orgasm of my life.

Miller sits up, hands at my waist. I widen my knees a fraction, and he pulls me down hard onto him. Within a matter of seconds, I feel him twitch and pulse inside me, resting his head against the curve of my neck as he comes with an agonised groan.

For a moment, neither of us moves, our breaths coming out in ragged gasps. His arms move around me, holding me tight against his chest, and I revel in our closeness. When he lifts his head, our lips collide, desperate at first, until he deliberately slows our kisses down, his hands moving to my breasts, damp with sweat.

‘It’s never been that good,’ I giggle, the movement making me realise we’re still joined.

Miller grins. ‘Ok, I’m glad you said it. I didn’t think we were gonna top the other night, but that was...’ He laughs. ‘That was somethin’ else.’

The laughter is gone again when I look down into his eyes.

‘You saved me, Paige,’ he whispers. ‘Thank you. I wouldn’t be here without you.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘It is true. I’d prolly still be sulking in my house in Arizona if you hadn’t come for me. I might never have left that hospital. And I wouldn’t be back in the band. I have you to thank for everything.’

‘Then it’s a good thing you hit that jackpot.’

‘I’m serious. I had all these millions of followers on social media, but I felt empty. All I wanted was you as my girl, and I got my wish. I love you, Paige. I’ll never love anyone else.’

My heart sings. Tears prick my eyes. I’m enjoying being worshipped, but also the feeling of receiving love and giving it, in equal measure. Because this is the kind of love that people wait for, and some never find.

Except I’ve found it. Right here. In Miller’s arms.
And, weirdly enough, I never plan on letting go.

Chapter Thirty-Six

In a New York hotel room, I scroll through social media on my phone. Speculation around my relationship status with Miller is rife. Aidan warned me not to take any of the comments to heart, so I'm refusing to get riled up by a bunch of gnarly keyboard warriors.

I put my phone away when I hear the door. Bianca scurries inside.

'Okay, they're coming now. You ready?'

I give her a big grin. 'Ready.'

We've been cooking up something for a couple of weeks now, as the tour neared its conclusion, and we're finally ready to share our plans.

Outside in the corridor, I hear voices and the familiar beep of a hotel keycard. Cal and Miller are mid-conversation.

'Alright, ladies,' Cal says. 'What's going on?'

I've already got to my feet. Miller comes straight over to me, wrapping his arms around my waist and kissing my cheek. I've never had an attentive boyfriend, and to others it must be vomit-inducing, but I love that he only has eyes for me.

'We've got something to tell you both,' Bianca says. 'So, sit.'

Miller and Cal exchange glances.

‘Wait,’ Cal blurts. ‘Is this separate to Miller’s surprise thing?’

‘What surprise thing?’ I ask. I look across to see Miller’s looking at Cal with one finger on his lips. He then checks his watch.

‘Oh, shit, that’s a *different* thing,’ Cal mutters and I’m left confused. ‘Where do you want us, ladies?’

Cal and Miller take a seat next to one another on the sofa and, facing them, Bianca and I stand side by side.

‘Okay, I’m nervous now,’ Miller says, his gaze flitting between us both.

I look to Bianca, because she’s going first.

‘Ok, so as you both know, I recently quit my job in NYC,’ Bianca says, and Cal gives a muted whoop. ‘And, Cal, you were feeling all guilty about me taking a career break. So, Paige and I have been talking a lot lately, and neither of us want long-distance relationships, so we’ve come up with a plan.’

On hearing her words, Miller leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. I’ve known for a couple of days now, but I’ve kept the news to myself, until Bianca and I were certain we wanted to go ahead.

‘With my reality TV contacts,’ Bianca continues, ‘my experience, and everyone I know in the industry... I’m gonna start my own mobile talent agency.’

Cal’s eyes widen. He looks pleased.

Bianca takes my hand. ‘And I just signed my first client... Ms Paige McArthur. Ta-da!’

I’m looking at Miller. He’s looking at me with a hopeful smile on his face. ‘I’m going to be content creator,’ I tell him. ‘I’m going to teach dance on YouTube, with my own channel. And I can do it from anywhere. Almost like a virtual studioooooh!’

Miller's leapt up. He wraps me in the tightest embrace, practically lifting me off the floor.

'Are you serious?!' he says into my hair, and I love that he's ecstatic.

'Yes.' I grin at him once he's let go. 'But I'm going to need your help. I've literally not done this befo—'

He stops my mouth with a kiss. I'm vaguely aware that Cal and Bianca are embracing too.

'And it means I can stay with you,' I laugh. 'Maybe not all the time, but I don't have to move back to England. I've got all the money from the buildings insurance from my studio burning down. They're demolishing the remains next week.'

'This is the *best* news ever,' Miller says, holding onto me tight.

I pull back from him. 'And you'll help me?'

'I'll be your little dance monkey. I'll do anything you want me to. You just name it. It's the same as having your own studio. It's just a virtual space. You'll ace it. I know you will.'

'You gave me my confidence back,' I say. 'And I love you for it.'

'I love you more,' he says and I'm vaguely aware that I'm kissing Miller again in front of Cal and Bianca.

'Man, it's still super weird seeing Miller this happy,' Cal says when we break apart.

'Shut up, man, you're one to talk,' Miller retorts, but I know he's joking. Cal's wrapped his arm around Bianca.

'Can I show you *my* surprise now?' Miller says to me. 'We need to cross to the other side of the corridor.'

'Did you know about this?' I ask Bianca with a frown.

'Uh-uh,' she says, shaking her head. 'But now I'm intrigued. Cal, are you in on whatever surprise this is?'

‘To be fair, Mill only told me on our way here.’

We file out of the door, Miller holding my hand. We walk down the corridor towards Aidan’s suite. I can already hear raised voices.

Miller knocks loudly on the door. Lexi opens it.

‘You’re here!’ she squeals at me excitedly.

‘Did we miss it?’ Miller asks.

‘It literally just appeared,’ Lexi exclaims.

I peer inside, suspicious, until Lexi yanks me into the suite. Aidan is at the window, looking out into Times Square. His phone is out and he’s taking a photograph of something. Next to him, Tun is pointing. J.B. has his arms around Audrey from behind and is rubbing her swollen belly whilst they look out in the same direction and Ravi plays with Xavi at floor level.

‘What just appeared?’ I ask, looking to Lexi and then to Miller, as Cal and Bianca enter the suite behind us.

‘Didn’t you tell her yet?’ Lexi asks.

‘Nope,’ Miller says with a wolfish grin.

‘Oh my God, Paige, you *have* to see,’ Lexi says, closing the door.

‘There she is!’ Aidan shouts at me. ‘I just sent a video to Ro and Jo-Jo. I didn’t send it to Dad. I think he might freak out when he sees it.’

‘What are you even talking about?’ I ask.

Aidan points out of the window. ‘*That*,’ he says.

I look back at Miller accusingly. He screws up his face in what can only be an admission of guilt.

‘You look awesome, Paige,’ Ravi says.

I crane my neck and look out of the window. My jaw drops.

Outside, on one of the biggest electronic billboards in

Times Square, is an enormous advert for Hewett underwear, featuring none other than myself and Miller.

I'd completely forgotten about the underwear shoot we completed back in Phoenix. It seems like so long ago now and so much has happened since.

'Oh. My. God,' I say as I stare out at it.

Miller comes up behind me, his arms sliding around my waist. 'Surprise,' he whispers into the curve of my ear. 'Do you like it?'

In the image, my head is tilted back, my hair hanging loose and long, my forearms resting around Miller's neck. He's perched on a stool, wearing just his underwear, his hands are on my hips and he's gazing at me. It's a pretty spectacular black and white image, if I do say so myself.

'Miller, my dad is going to *murder* me,' I choke.

'P, I was joking, he'll be proud of you,' Aidan says with a smile. 'How many people get to be on a billboard in Times Square? You look amazing.'

'So. Paige, I'm curious. I gotta know...' Tun says, wagging a finger in our direction. 'Was this taken before or after you and Miller, like, started hooking up?'

'I'm going after, definitely,' Cal chips in.

I look back at Miller and smile. 'No, actually, it was before. Although I think I kissed you the next day?'

'You did,' Miller says. 'In Vegas. Best moment of my life.'

'But look,' Audrey says, pointing at the billboard, which disappeared but has come back again. 'You can tell Miller is already in love here. Just see the way he is looking at her.'

J.B. hums in agreement and everyone else voices their agreement.

Miller's cheeks flush red. 'Yeah, that's definitely true. Couldn't believe my luck when that other model got sick and

I suggested to the photographer they ask you to do it instead.'

'Hang on, hang on, you *asked* them to ask me?' I exclaim.
'I did not know that!'

'Hey, I wasn't gonna turn down a chance to see you in your underwear. I mean, look at you, you look incredible.'

'He's right,' Bianca says, coming up beside me. 'You know, we could expand this YouTube thing. Maybe I could get you some more modelling gigs? I mean... now that you're on a billboard.'

'What YouTube thing?' Lexi and Aidan ask simultaneously.

I look around shyly. All eyes are on me, and it seems like everyone's forgotten about the billboard already. 'Well,' I say, and Miller squeezes me tight. I already know he's grinning. 'Bianca and I have got some news...'

In Madison Square Garden, on the penultimate night of Rebel Heart's American tour, the crowd is screaming. Literally screaming.

I know why. The billboard in Times Square all but confirmed it, and now, the low-level speculation on the internet of whether I am Miller's girlfriend has turned into an all-out social media frenzy. And tonight, at this very moment on stage, we're about to perform the same routine that, last time, resulted in Miller leaving the band, after he'd kicked me in the head.

It would seem appropriate, then, that tonight, we nail it. Miller's so pleased that he takes me in his arms and kisses me in front of a crowd almost twenty-thousand strong.

It wasn't a surprise. We talked about it, and I know I can deal with any negativity.

Hours before, Miller had picked up my Magic 8 Ball in our room and given it a shake.

‘Magic 8 Ball,’ he’d said. ‘What d’you say? Is the world ready for the Paige and Miller show?’

The answer was a resounding *YES*.

Epilogue

MILLER

This girl. She's everything.

I still haven't gotten over the fact that she's mine, and has been for almost six months now.

'What do you think?' she asks, giving me a twirl in the shimmery light green bridesmaid's dress she's got on. Her hair is tied up in some fancy style. We're upstairs at her parents' pub in England. My jaw has already dropped and I'm shaking my head. I literally don't have the words.

'Sensational,' I breathe and she looks so good I'm swallowing a lump in my throat. 'You're a goddess.'

'Yes, well, you haven't seen Lexi yet,' she says in that blunt accent I'll never be able to get enough of.

'No offence to Lex,' I say, because God knows Lexi's awesome, 'but I know who my eyes are gonna be on all day today. You look incredible, baby.'

She comes over and puts her arms around my neck. 'Thank you,' she whispers, kissing my cheek. 'You don't scrub up too bad yourself.'

I'm a groomsman. The whole band are. I've never felt so dressed up my entire life.

'Where's your mum?' she asks.

'Downstairs with the girls and Brian in the garden.'

Lexi and Aidan insisted on inviting them to the wedding, which they didn't have to do. But Paige and I have spent some time with them now, and it's feeling a little like I have a family again.

'Come here,' I say as I slide my arms around her waist, pulling her to me. I'll never be able to get enough of her smell either.

I'm about to kiss her when the door opens and Bianca hollers at me. 'Miller! Don't you dare! You'll make her dress crease and I just did her make-up all nice!'

My gaze shifts to the left. Bianca also looks stunning, though she totally looks mad at me right now. She comes over and punches me in the arm. 'What are you doing up here anyway? You can't stay away from her for five minutes?'

'Ow!' I say, as I let go of Paige to rub my arm. 'I guess I can't. Did Cal see you yet? You look very pretty, by the way.'

'Thank you,' she says sweetly before the fire returns to her eyes. 'And, no, Cal hasn't seen me. He's not supposed to. *You* are not supposed to, Miller – none of you are. Now get the hell outta here!'

'Can I see Lexi?' I ask, and I'm grinning as I say it.

'No, you cannot!' Paige blurts.

'Can I get a kiss goodbye then?'

Paige leans over and gives me a peck on my cheek.

'You call that a kiss?'

'Miller!' Bianca snaps again.

I push out my bottom lip and Paige laughs, then presses

her lips to mine. I pull her closer and our kiss ends up being deeper than I expected. God, I love this girl.

‘And now you’re wearing her lipstick,’ Bianca says over an exasperated sigh as Paige pulls away, raising her fingers to my lips to wipe away the plum-coloured stain.

Love you, I mouth to Paige as I back away.

Love you too, she mouths back and blows me a kiss.

‘What’s going on?’ I hear before I make it to the door as Lexi enters the room from the same side as Bianca, wearing her wedding dress.

There are gasps. Bianca instantly pounces on me, covering my eyes with her fingers. ‘Miller, don’t look!’

Paige gasps simultaneously.

‘My eyes are closed!’ I yell back.

‘Did you see anything?’ Bianca asks, hands still on my face.

‘No.’

‘It’s my fault,’ Paige confesses with a groan. ‘I was messaging him.’

‘I didn’t see anything, I swear!’ I reiterate.

I’m lying, of course. I saw enough. I saw how beautiful she looked. I know that the sight of Lexi in about sixty minutes from now is literally gonna make Aidan goddamn cry.

‘You’re sure?’ Bianca says accusingly.

‘I saw a blurry white shape, that was it.’ A stunningly beautiful, angelic white shape sent from fucking heaven. ‘Lexi, I’m sure you look breathtaking, but I didn’t see.’

Okay, I’m taking that to the grave. Plus, the fact that I think Paige looks even better. Probably because she’s my girl. I’ll die on that hill too.

I hear Lexi say in a serene tone, ‘Thank you, Miller. Now, stop trespassing. Go and check if your bandmates are ready.’

My eyes are still squeezed tightly shut, but at least Bianca

has let go of me. 'I will. Want me to pass any last-minute messages to Aidey?'

'Tell him I can't wait to be Mrs McArthur. Now, go!'

I grin as Bianca and Paige both manhandle me out of the door and it slams shut behind me.

Out in the corridor, I straighten out my suit pants and go back downstairs. Outside in the garden, Mom is with Faith, Willow and Brian.

Lexi and Aidan invited Garrett too, only he refused. No doubt he's in some titty bar back in Phoenix and throwing my name around for attention. Ever since he found out I met Jen, he's kinda frozen me out. I'm hoping one day he'll get over it. I know he'll be back when he wants more cash.

My mom's wearing a blue dress with some feathers in her hair. 'You look incredible,' I say.

She's already gotten to her feet. 'Look at you,' Mom replies, coming over to straighten out my tie, or cravat, or whatever it's called. 'So fancy.' She frowns and rubs her thumb across my bottom lip. 'Is that Paige's lipstick?'

'Uh, yeah,' I laugh.

'She got her dress on already? You know you're not supposed to see the bridal party before the ceremony, Danny.'

'You sound like Bianca. She's just been giving me shit.'

My mom lowers her voice, finishing up with my collar. 'I'm guessing Paige looks gorgeous?'

'She does.'

'Are you gonna marry Paige one day?' Willow blurts out at the table.

I catch Faith rolling her eyes. She's wearing a pantsuit and she's straightened out her hair.

'If I have anything to do with it... you bet.'

Willow beams. 'Can I be a bridesmaid?'

‘You sure can. Faith, too. If we can get her into a dress.’ I wink at her. Brian is laughing. Faith throws me a look of disgust. The more I get to know her, the more I think she’s as like me as Willow is, but maybe without the smart mouth.

‘You doin’ alright, Bri?’ I ask.

‘Are you kidding me? I’ve been trying to persuade the girls we need to move to England!’

‘The weather’s not always like this,’ I inform him.

‘Well, we sure lucked out today, didn’t we?’ Mom says.

‘When you’re back from vacation, can we go back to Disneyland?’ Willow asks me.

‘Summer’s over, kid. You’ll have to cut class if I’m gonna take you back.’

‘For a weekend, then?’

Brian and Faith roll their eyes. Mom and I are laughing.

Willow’s tenacious. Like I was at that age. She reminds me a lot of me. She wants me to teach her how to dance and she’s already subscribed to Paige’s YouTube channel, as has Faith. Paige has been nothing but sweet to them, and my mom and Bri. It’s one of the many reasons I love her so much. She takes care of everybody.

When the wedding’s over, I’m taking Paige to the Maldives for ten days. Our first proper vacay together and I cannot wait for some alone time with her wearing just a bikini.

‘I gotta go check on the guys,’ I say. ‘I’ll see you at the ceremony, okay?’

Mom’s kissing my cheek. ‘See you later, sweetheart.’

I wave to them, then make my way around the side of the house to Aidey’s annex above the garage. The red door is already open, and I take the stairs two at a time.

‘Where the hell you been, mate?’ Cal says to me at the top of the stairs.

‘Nowhere,’ I say, out of breath.

Cal narrows his eyes at me. ‘You fucking went to see, Paige, didn’t ya? You couldn’t resist.’

‘Maybe.’ I give him a wink. ‘Bianca looks awesome by the way.’

He flicks my shoulder. ‘You fucker! You saw ’em! Did you see Lexi too?’

‘No,’ I lie. I look to Aidan, who is on the far side of the room, Rohan helping him with his tie. ‘Aid, Lexi says she can’t wait to become Mrs McArthur.’

‘You saw her in her dress?!’

‘No! I swear it.’ *Yup. That’s never comin’ out.*

‘You all set?’ I ask him.

‘I’ve been ready since I asked her.’

‘Nervous?’

‘Were you nervous?’ he asks Rohan.

‘I was shitting myself on my wedding day, remember?’ is Ro’s response. ‘I had to change my shirt twice, I was so drenched in sweat.’

‘Did you cry when you saw Jo-Jo for the first time?’ I ask. ‘I mean... seeing her walk down the aisle in her wedding gown?’

‘He was balling,’ Aidan laughs.

Rohan laughs. ‘I did *not* hold it together.’

I look to Aidan. ‘I’ll bet you a hundred bucks, you’re gonna cry.’

‘I already know I’m gonna cry.’

‘Audrey says we’re all going to cry,’ J.B. comments. ‘Just wait.’ He’s on the bed with Xavi, who now has a baby sister, Delphine. Along with Finn, Aidan and Paige’s nephew, Xavi is the official ringbearer.

At the ceremony, when the bridesmaids appear, Ravi is the first one of us to blub, which doesn't surprise me, and Tun has to wrap his arm around Ravi so he can hold it together. Cal's not a crier, but the way he's looks at Bianca tells me he might break his tradition. But then the moment I see Paige, I well up too. The tears spill over when Lexi comes in to view down the aisle, escorted by her father. Even my mom is crying. Then I look to Aidey, standing next to Ro, and he's a complete mess. Lexi has six bridesmaids altogether: Paige, Bianca, Audrey, Jo-Jo, Meredith, and Aidey's niece, Georgia. They all look divine.

At the reception, after the meal and some hilarious speeches, we have a dance-off. Ravi and I clean house against Paige and all her dancer friends, until the moment Paige drops into the splits and the whole crowd surrounding the dance floor erupts. Hell, I know I can't top that, and Ravi starts kowtowing to her. That's my girl.

Later, Paige runs over and pulls me back onto the floor.

'Dance with me,' she says, as we come together in a slow dance.

'Aidan just told me something,' she whispers close to my ear. 'He's given me permission to tell you but on the condition we one hundred per cent keep it to ourselves.'

I pull back and search her face. 'What is it?'

She pulls me close again. 'Lexi's pregnant,' she says.

I pull back again, eyes wide. Paige presses one finger against her lips. We slide back together and continue to sway to the music.

'Holy shit, I wanna congratulate them,' I say.

'You can. But later. When everyone's left. He's not going to tell the boys just yet. Except you... because, well, you're

family now. Once everyone's back from holiday, he'll break the news.'

'How far along is she?'

'Almost fourteen weeks. It's why she's not really drinking today.'

'Shit, I'm so stoked for them.'

'I'm going to be an auntie again!' she squeals, albeit quietly.

I squeeze her close. I love slow dancing with her. The way her body feels against mine is insanely good. I can't wait to spend afternoons making love to her in the Maldives.

Aidan and Lexi having a baby is incredible news. The best. I couldn't be happier for them.

I know that Rebel Heart will remain as a band for as long as we want to go on. I know it might not last forever, but the bonds we've formed over the years are unbreakable. We're all family.

'I think I'd like to make a baby with you one day,' I murmur in Paige's ear.

This time, she's the one to pull back. A smile tugs at her lips. I think I could even say she's melting a little. 'You would?'

'Definitely. I mean... baby Lexi or baby Aidan is gonna need some baby cousins, right?'

Paige grins. She pulls me close again. 'I would very much like that,' she whispers against my mouth, and, for a blissful moment, we kiss.

'I think I'd also like to ask you to marry me one day,' I tell her, since we're being so honest with one another. 'You think you'd like that too?'

Her hands are in my hair. 'Definitely,' she hums.

We sway to the music. I don't think I could love her more.

Dance With Me

‘You think I should practise on the Magic 8 Ball first? See what it says?’

I feel her chest move as she chuckles.

‘I mean... you could ask. But I really think we need to stop listening to the random deliberations of a circular piece of plastic.’

‘You said it was your lucky charm.’

Paige cradles my face between her palms. ‘I don’t need a lucky charm anymore, Miller. These last six months, I’ve had all the luck I think I’ll ever need.’

I’m grinning at her, because I couldn’t agree more.

The End