Polo Fever

ALSO BY KATHERINE REILLY

Match Point
Ride the Wave

Polo Fever

KATHERINE REILLY



An Aria Book

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For Jilly

Prologue

Thirteen Years Ago

Mateo can hear the other boys sniggering and jeering as he dismounts. His cheeks flushed with shame and heat, he focuses on patting his pony's neck, refusing to look at them. When he hears footsteps approaching, he glances up and his embarrassment deepens.

'You did well, *mi amorcito*,' his mother says, a reassuring smile on her face.

He shakes his head. 'I fell.'

'You got back on again. That player crossed you. It was dangerous. We all saw it.'

Mateo shrugs. 'It doesn't matter. He won.'

'Winning isn't everything.'

'Yes, it is.' His eyes flash up at his mother, alight with fierce determination.

She sighs. 'You will get there, Mateo. I know it. You mustn't give up.' She places her palm flat against her chest. 'Your heart and your spirit. That is what it takes to win.'

Dejected, Mateo fiddles with the reins. 'I should go cool her down.'

His mother steps aside to let him pass as he begins to lead his pony back to the stables, then calls his name to stop him.

'Rossi believes in you,' she says, his eyes fixed on the dusty ground. 'He can see your natural talent in the saddle. He thinks, with some training, you will make a great polo player.' She takes a few steps towards him and lowers her voice. 'You may not have had the same start in life as these boys, but Rossi still believes you can match them. Sometimes, that's all you need, Mateo. Someone to see your talent and recognise that it's worth their time and effort to believe in you.'

Mateo nods and continues on his way to the stable. Her words reverberate in his head as he begins the process of cooling down his pony. He knows she is right. He has been given a rare opportunity to not just work on the *estancia* of one of the best polo players of all time, but to train with him, too. His mother has sacrificed everything for this chance. And he will not waste it. Mateo lifts his chin defiantly.

Polo is all that matters now.

One

The moment I step through the doors of the club in Soho, I'm surrounded by a flock of frazzled-looking people desperately needing answers to their questions. Shrugging off my trench coat and draping it over one arm, I'm forced to hold a hand up to silence them before calmly requesting that they speak to me one by one, like a teacher handling a bunch of overexcited school children.

'Ash, where do you want the extra chairs set up?' a panic-stricken intern asks me.

'No extra chairs,' I answer simply.

'I thought Ren—'

'He's changed his mind,' I inform her. 'We're now going for a bare and minimalist theme.'

'But… what about the flowers?' checks one of the venue staff, practically buckling beneath the weight of two vases filled with large displays of blooms in his arms.

'No flowers.'

He blinks at me over the giant blue hydrangeas. '*No* flowers?'

'No flowers,' I confirm.

'But what do I do with—?'

'Whatever you like. Keep them, give them away.' I shrug. 'But no flowers in here anymore, please. Thanks so much. Next question.'

I begin to walk across the venue to the back, my heels clacking across the shiny floor, my panicked entourage in tow. As I hang up my coat and bag in the cloakroom, I continue to answer questions about the lighting, the music, the caterers, the cocktail menu, the official photographer and last-minute changes to the guest list. On the face of it, I seem cool and collected, perfectly in control despite my boss's sudden U-turn over the theme for tonight's big launch of his latest menswear collection. Under the surface, I'm bricking it.

If I had the liberty to scream, I would.

I never set out to be a fashion assistant. I left university with a degree in history and no set idea of what I wanted to do. I was vaguely thinking something along the lines of a research position or a job in a museum, something to which my skillset would be suited. But after floundering to get a job anywhere, my mum, a TV producer, suggested I apply for the assistant role going with Ren, an up-and-coming designer whose career she'd boosted when one of her breakfast presenters wore a loud shirt of his that got people talking. It was only meant to be temporary while I worked out what I actually wanted to do, but I've worked for Ren for almost four years and am still no clearer on my vocation in life. I should have moved on by now, but the problem is I'm good at this job. It actually helps that I'm not devoted to a career in fashion because I don't feel the need to suck

up to anybody or feel intimidated by those in this industry. I'm a good gatekeeper – nobody gets to Ren without going through me first – and, four years in, I know Ren and his dramatics well enough to prioritise what's important and keep him happy.

When I spotted him pacing around his glass-walled office earlier in a flap, I knew instantly something was wrong and I was the only person who could help. I gathered myself. Ren's tantrums can be difficult to manage and no one else who works for him is brave enough to face them. I could see that the office floor had coincidentally emptied and the few left were keeping their heads low and their eyes averted. I marched over to knock on his door.

'Everything all right, Ren?' I asked, peering round it.

'It's no use, Ashley!' he cried, throwing his hands up in the air. 'It's no bloody use! I can't do it. I haven't been true to myself!'

I stepped in and shut the door behind me. 'It's natural to feel nervous in the run-up to the launch of a new collection. Remember what happened last time? And that one ended up being a huge hit.'

I was referring to last season's launch date when Ren didn't show up to work and, after calls and messages went unanswered all morning, I had to use my key to get into his apartment. I discovered him curled up in his wardrobe wearing nothing but a silk dressing robe and sunglasses. He was vaping and eating a bag of peanuts, questioning every step he'd made in his career that had led him to this 'meaningless existence'. After applying some tried and tested persuasion techniques that mostly involved flattery, I managed to get him out of his wardrobe and encourage him

to shower and dress while I waited with a car downstairs. He eventually floated down and accepted the flat white I handed him before he reluctantly accompanied me to the office, only to get there and realise his collection was being received well. Then he demanded to know why I'd taken so long to get him.

'This time is different,' he hissed impatiently at me today. 'This is not just any collection. This is… this is—' He stopped pacing, his eyes widening in wonder. 'This is a *cultural moment*.'

While I wasn't sure his menswear had quite the impact on the world he was envisioning, I couldn't deny that this was a big moment in Ren's career. We have secured Australian tennis pro Chris Courtney as the face of this collection, which is a huge deal. He's so famous that the moment we announced the news on social media, we had more engagement than ever before. He's the perfect face for this collection: suave, sophisticated and hot as hell. And when we released a sneak-peek selection of provocative photos from the shoot, there was an online meltdown over his smouldering gaze, carved abs, chiselled jaw and *raw masculine energy*, as one journalist put it. *Real Men Are Back on Top*, the headline of the article claimed, as she went on to applaud Ren's decision to choose someone she described as an 'older' athlete, even though Chris is only in his thirties and reached the Wimbledon final two years ago.

'You're right, this is a big moment and we're prepared for it,' I reminded Ren coolly. 'Chris has already confirmed his timings with me and how excited he is for the launch tonight. It's going to be great.'

But Ren shook his head. 'Nope. No, it won't. I've made a mistake.'

'Ren—'

'I can't do it, Ash, I can't stick with this theme. Every bone in my body is screaming at me to stop it before it's too late,' he declared.

'Stop what? Explain to me what you want to change.'

'The *party*,' he said, bewildered, as though that was obvious. 'I thought I wanted opulence and aspirational luxury. But that clashes with the very heart of the collection!'

Suddenly, I realised where this was going.

'You want to change the theme of the party?' I checked, my voice croaking as panic began to rise in my throat. 'The party that's taking place… tonight?'

He nodded. 'Yes. Destroy the excess. I want *minimalism*.'

I was able to swiftly decipher whether this was a temporary whim I could talk him round from or a serious change of heart. Unfortunately, it was the latter. When he threatened that it would have to all change or he couldn't possibly show his face tonight, I told him I would sort it. Now here I am, hours away from guests arriving, trying my best to persuade everyone else that this is manageable when I'm not entirely convinced of that myself.

I'm talking through Ren's new concept with the lighting designer when my phone rings. I see Chris Courtney's name flashing up on the screen. My heart lurches.

'I have to take this,' I say, excusing myself and going to find a quiet corner where I won't be disturbed before I pick up. 'Hi, Chris.'

'Ash, hey,' he says, his smooth Australian accent making my stomach flutter. 'How are you?'

'Great. You?' I ask brightly.

'I heard there's been a change of plan about tonight?'

'Nothing for you to worry about. A simple switch up, that's all,' I say, jumping as the men carrying the giant gold-painted sculpture of Chris's bare torso clip it on the door frame on their way out. 'Everything is going perfectly to plan and we are on schedule.'

'Are you sure? I heard something about Ren having a meltdown…'

I scan the room of staff scurrying around, wondering who blabbed to Chris's people. If any of this leaks to the press, it wouldn't be a good look for us.

'A major exaggeration,' I assure him. 'He's currently at the spa enjoying a massage, so whoever your source is, they're mistaken.'

Through the window, I spot Sam crossing the road towards the venue carrying a clothes bag and closely dodging the elbow of one of the men lifting the torso sculpture into the back of a van. She stops to ogle it before continuing on her way.

'Okay, I'll choose to believe you,' Chris says, his voice more relaxed now.

'Wise decision. Tonight is going to be perfect, I promise.'

'With you in charge, I have no doubt about that.'

Leaning back against the wall, I smile into the phone. Sam is wandering into the middle of the room now, dodging out the way of everyone and craning her neck to look for me. Her eyes finally land on me and she brightens. I wave her over.

'Uh, Chris, I have to go,' I say a little reluctantly.

'I'll see you tonight,' he says.

'See you tonight. Can't wait.'

As Sam reaches me, I hang up and pull her in for a hug.

'Gosh, it's all going on in here,' she observes, pulling back from me with a wide grin. 'Sorry to disturb your call. Anyone important?'

'Chris Courtney,' I admit, sliding my phone back into my pocket.

She gawps at me. 'Not him *personally*. Oh my God, you talk to the man *himself*?'

'It's been necessary during this campaign,' I reason, a little flustered. 'Much easier to talk direct than keep passing messages through someone.'

'Jesus, no wonder you were smiling so big then. He might just be the sexiest man on the planet. Such a shame he's married.' She hesitates. 'By the way, was that a sculpture of his body I saw out there?'

'One of two sculptures, yes.'

'Why is it being taken away?' she whines, appalled.

'Ren's decided he doesn't want opulence, he wants minimalism. No flowers, no performers, no sculptures.' I gesture at all the staff running around us like sweaty, frenzied ants. 'Tonight is going to look a little different than we've been planning.'

'Shit.' She exhales the air from her cheeks. 'You got this handled?'

'Of course.'

'One day, you'll look back and laugh. When you feel like you want to run away and hide, just remember that. One day, you'll laugh about it all,' she advises.

Sam is no stranger to demanding bosses and intense fashion-industry dramas. The editorial assistant for glossy

magazine, *Studio*, she has had her fair share of smoothing dilemmas and soothing divas. We met a while ago when she called in a last-minute favour for a shoot. Ren was so excited to feature in *Studio* that he sent me across London in a heatwave to the warehouse hosting the photoshoot carrying a huge selection of clothes only for the editor to decide on one tie and that was it. Sam brought me a bottle of water while I sat to one side, gearing up to get on the sweaty Tube again, and made me feel better by telling me about the time she was asked by a celebrity they were working with to get a specific salad from a specific shop in North London. She went all the way there to find they were closed on Mondays. When she got back with a different salad, the celebrity in question looked at it and said, 'Where the fuck is the couscous?'

It was the kind of silly story that connects you for life. Bonding over the shitty aspects of our jobs, Sam and I have been best friends ever since and whenever we order food together, we'll look at each other's plates and say in unison, 'Where the *fuck* is the couscous?!'

It's a weird in-joke that is somehow hilarious every time.

'Here,' she says, handing over the clothes bag she's carrying. 'For tonight.'

'Thank you,' I gush, clutching it to my chest. 'You're a lifesaver.'

'Hey, it's no problem. Whenever you need something from the fashion closet, don't hesitate to ask,' she says, putting her hands on her hips. 'I've put a couple of options in there. Both black as you requested but both gorgeous. You're going to look hot.'

'Thank you, thank you. I did have something planned but when Ren changed the vibe to chic and minimalist, I realised that green might not fit so well.'

'Green does look amazing with your red hair,' she says enviously.

Sam has nothing to be envious about, though. She is drop-dead gorgeous with long, blonde hair, tall, slender frame, flawless make-up and an immaculate sense of style which matches with her job description. You can tell Sam works in fashion. I'm constantly having to call in favours with her to dress me from *Studio*'s fashion cupboard for these events. I don't know how much time I'll have to get ready for tonight and whether I'll even be able to get home beforehand. I may have to change in a cubicle here and it's unlikely I'll be able to do much more than attempt to tame my wavy, auburn hair into some kind of loose updo, top up the foundation over my freckles and smudge some eyeliner round my light-brown eyes, disguising tiredness with a smoky effect.

'How are you feeling about tonight?' Sam asks.

'Nervous,' I admit. 'Nothing can go wrong.'

'Nothing will go wrong. And if it does, you'll work out a way to style it out.'

'There will be lots of paparazzi here so styling it out may not be an option.'

'Chris Courtney does attract a crowd,' she muses, before gesturing at the action going on around us. 'But look at all this. *You've* done this, Ash. All that hard work is going to pay off and when tonight goes off without a hitch, you can proudly say it was all because of you.'

'I hope so,' I say on an exhale.

She pulls me into another hug, keeping hold of my shoulders as she pulls away. 'You've got this. I have to go back to work but I'll see you later.'

'Don't be late.'

'Please! The *Studio* crowd are likely to be the first to arrive, we're so excited,' she assures me. 'Oh, quick question, no biggie: are those sculptures I saw for sale?'

I can't stop a smile. 'They will be.'

'Uh-huh. And they're an exact replica of Chris Courtney's body?'

'An enlarged likeness of his bare torso, yes.'

'Uh-huh. And, out of interest, how can one purchase said feats of creation?'

'The artist was planning on auctioning them off from tomorrow. I have to call her to let her know that they'll no longer be on display for the event tonight, though, so I'm not sure how well that's going to go down.'

'Oh, I think she'll have no problem finding them a good home even so.'

I grin at her. 'See you tonight, Sam.'

'Remember,' she says, backing away from me and almost walking straight into someone carrying several LED glitter balloon lamps they've had to remove from the ceiling, 'whatever the stress of today, you'll laugh about it later.'

'That a promise?' I call out after her.

'It's a promise,' she cries back, waving before disappearing through the door.

The moment she's gone, I'm pounced on by someone needing my opinion on whether we still need the menus or if they should be scrapped altogether, whilst someone else asks

what I want them to do with the artificial cherry-blossom decor and the gold palm trees.

By the time the event starts, I'm drained, exhausted, and terrified that we won't pull this off. Sam was right: tonight is down to my hard work the past few weeks and if it goes well, everyone will know that I was behind it. They'll also know that if everything goes wrong, too. But I do my best to mask my nerves with a warm smile, on hand to welcome the crowds of VIP guests filtering into his exclusive party. Everyone knows the moment Chris arrives because there's an eruption of noise from the swarm of paparazzi gathered outside, the frenzy of flashing bulbs from their cameras lighting up the windows. I straighten, my mouth dry, heart racing. *Here we go.*

As he breezes through the door, a cheer goes up and Ren glides over to greet him accompanied by a round of applause. The two of them shake hands, smiling at the room, posing for photos and soaking up the attention of their adoring fans.

Chris catches my eye and breaks into a wide, disarming smile.

And just like that, everything feels okay.