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Spotlight

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Spotlight



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Chapter One

America

Madison stood at the top of the filthy staircase. There was only one way to go – and that was down.

'You know, being a waitress really wasn't that bad,' she pleaded, trying to think of a way out of the situation without losing face. 'And I was getting by on the cash I was making . . . just about.'

'Are you nuts?' Leesa said incredulously. 'You were getting two-dollar tips compared to the two-*hundred*-dollar ones you could be taking home. If you want to make it in Manhattan and really be *someone*, this is how do you do it. And fast.'

The two friends walked down the metal stairs to the basement club, which was just around the corner from the neon lights of Times Square. Leesa led the way up front in her hot-pink cowboy boots, and Madison followed tentatively behind in the patent black stilettos, white micro-mini and cheap red boob tube Leesa had lent her. Together they pushed open the heavy door at the bottom. A security guard sat inside. and he looked them up and down. He was big, butch and bored.

'She's here to audition,' Leesa said breathlessly in a sugar-sweet voice. She pushed Madison in front of her, and while the security guard was checking out Madison's legs, Leesa yanked the boob tube down even further. 'She wants to be a star.'

The guard's eyes lingered on Madison's breasts and hips. The

girl had long chestnut hair, bright blue eyes, and incredible soft, pouty lips. She was young – but not too young – with killer curves and a fresh face. When she smiled he felt his balls ache. She was stunning.

'We're not auditioning today,' he said, struggling to sound uninterested, his voice gruff from a hangover. 'Not her, anyway.'

Leesa put her hand on her hip and grinned. She'd expected this – it was the famous first stage of getting a dancing gig, and she'd been through it herself. 'Oh, come on, honey,' she whined softly, before trying out one of her sticky lip-gloss pouts. 'My friend can really move . . . I've been giving her special one-on-one lessons . . . if you know what I mean.'

Madison felt a blush rising, and told herself to ignore it. If she was really going to go through with this she'd have to get used to being talked about like a whore. This was how it was. If you were working as a 'dancer' in New York you were always in the spotlight. That was the point.

'Look, if you let her audition I'll slip you fifty dollars, and my pal here will dance her socks off . . . along with other things, too,' Leesa added, and the security guard sighed. He was used to girls begging, but this one clearly knew the rules, what to say . . . And she worked here already. How could he say no?

'Go straight through,' he relented. 'And ladies? Don't let me down . . . I'm quality control in this dive.'

Madison felt her heart beating hard. She slithered past the security guard as sexily as she could in such high heels. She was nearly on her way . . . Although to what, she still wasn't sure.

When Madison Miller graduated from high school several months earlier, she hadn't a clue what she was going to do with her life. Since she was a tiny girl, all she'd wanted to do was sing, and from the age of five she'd spent all her time performing in

local competitions and pageants. Her mom – who'd dreamt of being a singer herself, but had fallen pregnant and married young – had coached her, taught her to dance and sing as best she could, and was determined to make her the next big thing.

But as soon as Madison turned fifteen and started noticing boys, she'd put her ambition on hold . . . at least in public. She suddenly became shy – she'd developed some scary, sexy curves – and rather than loving being the centre of attention, she wanted out of the spotlight. She felt gawky and awkward, and even though her mom said she had a body to kill for, Madison was way too reserved to show it off. She still sung in her bedroom (naively leaving the window open in case a record producer just happened to be passing their house in Walkertown, Ohio), still spent her free time making up dance routines, but none of the other kids in school had the same burning ambition, and she didn't want to stand out as someone who would do anything to get ahead. Besides, didn't everyone fantasise about being a singer, and wasn't it time she grew up?

'What do you want to do with your life, Madison?' the career adviser had asked during the mandatory 'chat' in her senior year. She encouraged ambition, and had a friendly, open face. She was someone you could confide in.

'I want to be a singer,' Madison replied, remembering how she used to tell people that this was what she was going to do when she 'grew up'. She'd not voiced it out loud for a while, and it felt kind of awkward, but the moment she said it she remembered just how much she wanted it. It was performing or bust for her.

The career adviser looked over her steel-rimmed glasses at the teenager in front of her, and sighed. That morning she'd seen four wannabe actors, a weedy boy who was determined to be a wrestler, and three girls who were all convinced they'd make millions by being reality TV stars.

'And if the singing doesn't work out?' she asked gently. 'Madison, we need to work out what you can do if you *don't* become a singer. We need to give you some options.'

Madison looked at her as if she were mad. If she couldn't be a singer then she wouldn't do anything else. She'd just settle down in Walkertown and sing as a hobby instead, just as her mom had done. Besides, if being a singer didn't work out she still had Kyle, and so long as he was her boyfriend, she was happy.

Madison had been going steady with Kyle Brockway for just over three years, and he'd changed her life – or at least her reputation. When she'd first started at Walkertown High, Madison had been one of those girls the other kids were only aware of because they'd been at junior high together. She wasn't *known*.

A quiet girl who didn't excel at school, and only really came alive on stage, Madison blended into the crowd. She used to stare at the popular girls in her class with the kind of admiration people normally reserve for movie stars. They were all confident and sexy, and Madison didn't have the balls even to try joining their set. What was the point?

Her mom, as usual, had different ideas for her.

'Honey, if you're not going to sing, what *are* you going to do?' she asked her daughter one day after school. Madison was in a slump – she missed singing in talent competitions, but she just couldn't stand up there by herself and open her mouth. Not at the moment. Not while she felt like a little girl in a woman's body.

She shrugged and helped herself to an Oreo. 'My homework?' she muttered, separating the top half of the cookie from the bottom and scraping the cream off with her front teeth.

Jeanie Miller sighed. 'You're going to put your name down to be a cheerleader, and you're going to get your confidence back. Being part of a squad will make you less self-conscious. Trust me.'

Madison did as she was told. To her surprise (but not her mother's), she passed with flying colours, and after the cheer squad's initiation ceremony she had a new bunch of friends: the cutest and most popular girls in school, including head cheerleader Leesa Harland. Then it was only a matter of time before the guys in the football team checked her out in her tight, short cheer uniform, and it was after the third game of the season that Kyle asked her on a date. For Madison, it was love as soon as he kissed her in the back seat of his truck.

From that point on, high school was all about making sure everything she did was 'right', and screw her grades or singing. She took her cue from Leesa and the other cheerleaders, and started wearing short skirts and make-up, and spending more time making sure she was popular than on her homework. Sometimes she worried about not applying herself properly, but Madison was on a high from being part of the popular set – and although she didn't like it when the others tripped up the nerdy girl in recess, or laughed at the computer geek with pimples, she didn't say anything. She kept her mouth shut, or, more appealingly, attached it to Kyle's in a cutesy kiss to show everyone that if he loved her, she really was good enough to be part of the cool gang.

After Prom – where Madison and Kyle were naturally made Homecoming King and Queen, and Madison drunkenly and predictably lost her virginity in a motel room – things started to go downhill. It was their last summer together before Kyle went to Ohio State University (safe in the knowledge that he had a job waiting for him at his father's law firm), and Madison tried to work out her next move.

'Baby,' she began one afternoon late in the summer, when the sun was streaming through his bedroom window, 'I'm going to miss you so, so much.' She'd been watching Kyle folding

sweaters to take to college, and every time he put one in his case she wanted to grab it and steal it back. It seemed as though he was slowly packing up his whole life and taking it away from her.

Kyle turned to her and grinned. 'Gonna miss you, too, but we're not going to be that far away from each other, and we can still date.'

Madison felt a stab of fear run through her. Dating wasn't the same as going steady, and she couldn't stand the thought of Kyle seeing other girls, however casually.

'I don't think I can face Walkertown without you. How would you feel if I came to Ohio State and hung with you instead?'

A shadow passed over Kyle's face, and he turned away from her. Kyle had been the broadest and tallest linebacker the Wildcats football team had ever seen, and he was a legend at school. Madison stared at his back and realised he no longer looked like a football-playing teenager, but a man.

'What would you study, Madison? The only things you're good at are singing, cheerleading and being my girlfriend. And I don't think the college would let you major in any of those.'

Madison bit her lip and thought hard. She was desperate. 'They have a vet school. I always liked animals . . .'

'Yeah, but you flunked biology, and besides, you've missed admissions.' Kyle sighed and sat down on his bed. 'I thought we agreed you'd stay here and raise some cash for singing lessons, since the only thing you ever said you wanted to do was be a *popstar*' – he said the word distastefully – 'and it's not like you're ever going to be good at anything else.'

Madison froze. She couldn't believe that Kyle could ever be so cruel. And only a few hours after they'd woken in each other's arms. 'What?'

'You know, one of the things I'm really looking forward to

most at college is meeting girls with ambition. Girls who want a career as well as a husband. Girls with brains as well as beauty.' Kyle looked at Madison properly but ignored the tears streaming down her face.

'You don't love me because I don't have ambition?' Madison asked disbelievingly. 'Because I *have* ambition . . .' Her voice trailed off as she realised Kyle was right. She'd fallen so in love with him that she'd forgotten how much she wanted to sing.

'Madison, your "ambition" amounts to either wanting to marry me and picking out Pottery Barn pieces for "our house", or singing in front of a mirror pretending to be Britney or Tori Catrino. They're little girl daydreams, and neither are going to happen.

'I'm not saying I don't love you, Madison, because I do, really, in a high school kind of way, but there's more to life than Walkertown, and there's gotta be more to relationships than going to the movies and making out in the back seat.'

'You don't want to marry me?' Madison asked in a quiet voice. It choked her to even get the words out, and she felt that with every breath she was being stabbed. She'd never hurt so much.

'You're kidding, right?' Kyle looked at Madison in horror. 'Sure, we can go out when I'm home from school, but you didn't really think we'd end up as Mr and Mrs Brockway, did you?'

Madison did, but she wasn't going to let Kyle know that. 'No, of course not,' she said quietly, wishing she could stop herself from crying, wishing she could hold it together. 'Not at all.'

Madison walked out of his bedroom, feeling as though the best part of her life had ended and she'd never be happy again.

*

'God, he's a bastard,' Leesa muttered down the phone to Madison that night after she'd heard what Kyle had done. 'Are you okay?'

Madison shook her head and took a deep breath. She couldn't stop crying, and it made it hard to speak. She'd only kept in touch with Leesa via Facebook the past year – it had been hard, as Madison had been so busy with Kyle and cheerleading, and Leesa had left Walkertown the previous year and was living a frantically fun life in New York – but she was glad her best friend was there for her now.

'No,' Madison whispered, struggling to get a hold of herself.

The girls had bonded the moment Madison joined the cheer squad. Leesa was a year older, and Madison had hero-worshipped her from the moment they'd met. She thought of her as a big sister. With long, strawberry-blonde hair, huge blue eyes, a Cupid-bow mouth, and a year-round tan, Leesa had been the sexiest girl at school, and therefore the most popular. She was the 'Girl Most Likely To', and although the Brains and the Emo kids muttered that that meant she was most likely to go all the way, Leesa was the golden girl. She got straight As, had been a child model, and was always the lead part in the school plays. When she graduated, nobody was surprised that she planned to go to New York to make it on Broadway. If anyone was going to put Walkertown, Ohio, on the map, it was Leesa Harland.

'And he said he didn't want to be with you because you don't have ambition?' Leesa asked incredulously, cracking her gum in irritation. Madison winced. She still felt raw. 'What a load of shit. All he aspires to is sleeping his way around his new campus and then working for Pop in his law firm when he comes back. He's full of it.'

Fresh tears sprang to Madison's eyes when she thought about Kyle sleeping with other girls, but Leesa had made her smile,

too. She was right; he wasn't the most ambitious guy on the planet, and compared to Leesa, who was actually in New York City making something of herself, he was small town.

'Why don't you come out and visit me for a vacation?' Leesa continued. 'Even better, why don't you move out here? I've got space in my new apartment, and now you've graduated and ditched that awful meathead there's nothing stopping you. We can be the New York Wildcats. It'll be fun! I'll become an actress, you'll become a singer, and when we're rich and famous we'll tell everyone we met as cheerleaders. It will be so cool!'

Madison smiled. 'I thought you were already an actress?' she teased, but this was met with an awkward silence.

'I've put the acting on hold, and I'm an exotic dancer now, Mads,' Leesa said breezily, as if it didn't matter. Madison could tell it did. 'It's easy money, and it's real classy, honest. Loads of girls start off this way just to get noticed . . . and yeah, I'm not quite singing and dancing on Broadway yet, but give it time. How could they fail to want me?'

Madison's heart sunk. If Leesa – beautiful Leesa – couldn't make it as an actress, how would Madison become a singer? Leesa had always made everything seem so easy. 'If you want something,' she'd say, 'all you have to do is smile, flirt and fight until you get it.' But what if it wasn't that easy? What if she moved to New York and ended up 'dancing', too?

Although she'd not done anything about it, Madison dreamt about appearing on *American Idol* or *Teen Star USA* and winning over the judges. She knew that becoming a famous singer was just a fantasy – didn't every girl in America want to be the next Christina Aguilera? – but she'd be happy just to make a living out of singing, whether it was in a small dusky blues club or as the headline at Madison Square Garden (which always made her laugh – 'Madison at Madison Square Garden' had such a ring to

it). But if Leesa couldn't even get cast in a commercial, how would Madison ever get a singing break?

'I'm not sure me moving to Manhattan is such a good idea, Lees,' Madison said, after thinking about it for a moment. 'I mean, I don't know how to become a singer. It's not like there are job ads for it.'

Madison could hear Leesa's smirk in her voice. 'Babe, there are loads of job ads for singers in the city. You just don't know that because you're not here yet. I know a couple of girls who sing in bands as well as one or two who do the bar circuit – they're always getting approached by people in the industry,' she said, half truthfully, not mentioning that most of the time the girls were approached for sex, not music contracts.

'Plus, think of all the great singing coaches out here. If you want to have singing lessons in Walkertown, the only person who can help you is Mrs Baranowski.'

Madison pictured their old music teacher at Walkertown High, and shuddered. Mrs Baranowski was old, smelt of dog, and had a hairy wart.

'But where will I live?' she said. She wasn't prepared for the fantasy life Leesa seemed to be offering her.

'With me! I told you I got a new place, and there's space for two, if you don't mind a room the size of your mom's pantry. It's in Harlem, and it's cool.'

'But . . . what about my parents?'

Leesa laughed. 'Your mom will practically push you onto the plane. Trust me, your parents will be made up for you. I'll see you soon.'