

PROLOGUE

Emma stood rock still, reeling from the emotions that were pouring over her.

The noise of twenty thousand people clapping and calling resonated through her body, exhorting her to join in but she resisted, instead drinking in the scene ahead of her, wanting to savour every last moment.

The stage, which stretched from one side of the huge arena to the other, was now dark. Only the centre had any illumination, but what it lacked in scale, it made up for in intensity. The swirling fog of violet and white light stung Emma's eyes, pinpointing seven, male silhouettes at its centre.

With their legs apart and arms by their sides, the only clue that they were human was the way their shoulders lifted and fell as they breathed.

Emma wasn't surprised by their heavy breathing; for two hours they had entertained the vast crowd with dance moves that defied human physicality and the finale had been a display of such intensity that she was amazed they could even stand.

Music filled the auditorium, haunting and melodic. The violet light dimmed and then, high above the men, a computer-generated head appeared.

'I am the Dream-Stealer,' it said, the rich voice seeming to mingle with the music. '*Unity* I tried to take your dreams. I threw many challenges in your way and I thought I could beat you.'

The head lowered its eyes. 'But you were too strong,' it murmured.

The music came to a crescendo, the figures each raised their right arm in a slow arc, then, as they sprung their fingers open, there was a clap of thunder, a flash of piercing white light and the computer head shattered.

As the sound of breaking glass filled the air, the crowd erupted.

For a long moment, the seven figures held their poses but then the melodic music faded and was replaced by the opening bars of "*Respect*" by Aretha Franklin.

And suddenly, they were human again. Their bodies relaxed and, jumping and clapping in time, they came to the front of the stage, encouraging the crowd to match them.

Emma joined in, her hands over her head, the connection she was feeling with the whole crowd absolute. She was outside herself, lost for one precious moment in the passion and energy they were all sharing.

But then, with a jolt of sorrow, she realised that the performance was over. She hadn't wanted to come – even the thought of so many people had made her usual, low-level anxiety sky rocket – but now, the thought of it ending was crushing. It had been so long since she'd felt anything, – let alone such depths of emotion – that it seemed like a cruel twist of fate. It would have been better never to have experienced it than to have a taste of something so sweet, only to have it torn away.

The music dimmed and the men's movements gradually stilled, but as they lined up at the front of the stage, the audience didn't stop clapping. Instead, the noise went up another notch.

They stood there, laughing, obviously enjoying the reception and for the first time, Emma was able to make out their faces properly. She pushed away the feelings of pain and loss and instead, took in the men who had so unexpectedly floored her.

They were a mixture of colours – which explained why they were called *Unity* – but she was surprised how young some of them were. Three looked barely more than boys and yet, they'd performed physical feats worthy of any adult gymnast. The other four were older and as she grazed her eyes over them, taking in their physiques, she remembered the power with which they'd danced and a tingle ran down her spine.

Of the four, older members of the group, two were African-Caribbean but the other two were different. They were both tall and good-looking, with swarthy complexions and jet black hair but she couldn't have said from what part of the world they originated.

What was clear, however, was that they were the most talented. The dancing of the younger one had been full of expression and it was obvious from his boyish grin that he knew his worth but as her eyes rested on the other, Emma remembered the way he'd made her feel. It wasn't just the power of his performance, or the way he'd matched every beat, every nuance of the music – he had an aura that drew her in, demanding that she connect with him.

A roadie in black livery appeared from the wings and hurried across the stage, handing him a microphone and as he crossed in front of the line and stood dead centre, the audience stilled expectantly.

He gave a confident smile then lifted the microphone to his lips.

'Ladies and gentlemen, before you leave we just wanted to say a few words,' he said, 'Firstly, thank you. We wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for every single one of you. You've changed our lives,' he said, and there was an unmistakable crack in his voice.

The crowd roared and as he looked around the arena, obviously overcome, the volume went up another notch.

He glanced at the others, shaking his head in disbelief and as he dabbed his eyes, a chant began.

'Mat-vei...Mat-vei... Mat-vei...'

It took a second for Emma to understand what they meant but then realised that it must be his name.

He laughed, and as his face lit up with amusement, Emma's stomach bottomed out. He was captivating her – from the way he moved, the emotion he showed and now, there was modesty too. There seemed no façade or pretence – and the crowd loved him for it.

He allowed the noise to continue for a few moments then gestured for quiet. The effect was instantaneous and as the auditorium stilled, he drew himself up.

'Seriously, your support has been awesome,' he said, his tone rich with emotion. 'And it's what keeps us going, keeps us pushing harder and higher. We made this show to say a huge thank you to you and every single person around us who continues to support us. You have no idea how much it means.'

It wasn't just the words but the way he'd said them. The audience roared their approval, then started clapping and chanting again.

He laughed, shaking his head but he didn't stop them this time, instead, he clapped back at them and the noise rose another decibel.

When the shouts and whistles had finally died down, he scanned the audience, drinking it all in and then, his gaze seemed to come to rest on Emma.

'You all know the challenges we've faced,' he said, his tone serious. 'It's been tough, so tough that sometimes we wanted to quit but tonight was to show you all that no matter what life throws in your way, you have to stay strong and keep the dream.'

The crowd was roaring again but Emma couldn't move. It was as though he'd seen inside her and his words had been meant for her – and her alone.

She stared back at him, thunderstruck, but then he moved his gaze away.

'And you know where that's got us? Three years on from winning the competition, we've got a sold out tour! Guys, thank you so, so much – you're the best!'

The air was filled with music, the seven of them linked hands and bowed towards the audience and the noise bounced off the roof, engulfing Emma as she stood, frozen to the spot, unable to process the emotions that were pouring over her.

They took several bows then started to troop off the stage. The lights lowered, the roaring of the crowd stilled and was replaced by a hum of excited conversation.

And still she stood, rooted, unable to move, the emotion tight in her chest, watching them until they were out of sight, feeling that they were taking a piece of her with them.

There was a tug on her arm.

'Mum!'

She glanced down and with a jolt remembered that Lucy, her daughter, was standing beside her. The trip had been her thirteenth birthday treat and Emma had reluctantly agreed. It was a shock that she'd lost herself so much, that she'd forgotten that her daughter was even there.

'Sorry,' she muttered.

Lucy grinned up at her. 'Told you they were awesome, didn't I?'

Emma nodded, unable to speak.

'Glad I pestered you to bring me now?'

'Yeah,' Emma mumbled.

'Mum...?' she wedeled, giving her a winning smile. 'Can I have a poster?'

Under normal circumstances, Emma would have baulked at such an extravagance; but she simply nodded.

CHAPTER 1

Emma had hardly slept. She wasn't sure whether it was the images or the words that had done it but the performance was dominating her thoughts. For so long she'd lived a half-life, full of mundane chores, underlying anxiety and self-flagellation with little to remind her that she was alive but now, positive adrenaline was surging through her veins. It was like an addiction. She knew it was bad for her, she knew she should resist but she craved it like crack and ran the evening over and over in her mind, reliving each moment as though doing so could make it real again.

Something was registering in her brain and with a jolt, she realised that smoke was trickling up from the toaster. Cursing, she dashed over to it and pressed cancel.

Viewing the charred slices critically, she sighed and dropped them into the bin before putting in two new ones.

As she was setting the kettle to boil, her husband, Phil, appeared looking grumpy.

'Morning,' she said brightly.

'Yes, it is,' he agreed.

She took his plate of bacon and eggs from the oven where it was keeping warm and placed it on the table.

He sat down without speaking then picked up his knife and fork and started to tuck in.

She made him a cup of tea then leaned back against the side, her head full once more.

He raised his gaze. 'Toast,' he said with a nod to the toaster where a wisp of smoke was issuing into the air.

'Dammit!' she spat.

This time it was salvageable and she scraped the burnt bits off before placing the ragged slices on his side plate. He gave them a dour look but didn't comment.

'So,' she said, 'what's on your agenda today?'

He gave a slight shrug. 'Same shit, different location. The planners are back-tracking on the North Hills development. They want another report from the Environment Agency – apparently some NIMBY has found a rare species so I need to get onto our guys about it – see if we can find a way around it.'

'Oh dear,' Emma said automatically.

It wasn't that she didn't care about Phil's work – after all, it was what had kept them in the manner to which they were accustomed for the last fourteen years – but it was always the same. As the owner of a building company there was always some crisis with the planners, the gangs or the estate agents but then Phil would sort it out and off he'd go again. Even the housing crash had only dented his stride for about six months then he'd landed a social housing project and away he went.

Lucy appeared, still in pyjamas, her long, brunette hair dishevelled.

'Morning,' Emma said.

'Humph,' Lucy replied, sitting down beside her father who was now reading the paper as he shovelled the food into his mouth.

Emma slotted another slice of bread into the toaster then placed a glass of orange juice in front of her daughter.

‘Marmite or peanut butter,’ Emma asked.

‘M’mite,’ Lucy replied.

This time Emma ensured that the toast emerged unscathed then scraped butter and Marmite on before handing it over.

‘Mum, do I have to go to school today?’ she asked.

Before Emma could speak, Phil had speared Lucy with a firm look. ‘Don’t even think about it.’

Lucy gave a melodramatic sigh. ‘But I’m tired,’ she whined.

‘You should have thought about that before you pestered your mother to see those Nancy boys last night,’ he said then swung his gaze on Emma. ‘I told you it was too much on a school night.’

‘The only tickets left were mid-week,’ she said, feeling defensive.

He snorted but didn’t reply. Instead he mopped up the remains of his egg then, taking one last slurp of his tea, stood up.

‘Right, better get on,’ he said. ‘You’ve remembered I’ll be at the golf club tonight?’ he added.

Emma nodded. ‘Will you want to eat when you get back?’

‘No, I’ll bring something in.’

Emma couldn’t help looking at his burgeoning belly and greasy, dark hair, but she knew that suggesting that he go easy on the take-outs would be met with a brick wall at best and a scathing retort about her cooking at worst.

As he went out, Lucy gave her a pleading look. ‘Please, Mum,’ she said. ‘I couldn’t sleep last night and I’ve got PE too,’ she added with a grimace.

Emma sighed. ‘Lucy, your Dad’s right.’

‘But there’s no point in me going. I won’t learn anything – how can I concentrate after *that*?’ she replied desperately.

Emma gave a wan smile. ‘I know what you mean but the answer’s still no. Look, I’ll give you a note for games, if that helps?’

Lucy scowled. ‘Not really,’ she said. ‘And it’s not called games. God, mum, you’re so old fashioned.’

‘But I’m still your mother,’ she replied firmly. ‘So less of that. Now, what do you want in your sandwiches. Cheese or ham?’

‘Can’t I have dinners?’ she asked.

‘No,’ Emma replied.

Lucy gave a heavy sigh. ‘Cheese then.’

‘And a “please” wouldn’t go amiss,’ she added, giving Lucy a firm look.

‘Dad never says please and thank you,’ she complained. ‘Why are you having a go at me?’

It was true – Phil was rarely grateful – but apart from the fact that Emma didn’t want to think about that, Lucy was getting more teenager-ish by the day and needed a firm hand to prevent it getting any worse.

‘Because I’m your mother and I deserve some respect,’ she replied. ‘Come on, eat up, you’re going to be late.’

After finally managing to get Lucy out of the door with at least a chance of getting to school on time, Emma cleared up the remnants of breakfast then paused, feeling restless. With the house now quiet, the day stretched ahead of her dauntingly.

She supposed that most people in her position would spend the day with a friend, but other than female relations of Lucy or Phil's friends, there was no one she could call on. Alternatively, if she didn't have anxiety issues, she might have amused herself with shopping but, as it was, all that lay ahead of her was the never-ending round of household chores but she couldn't muster any enthusiasm for them.

Instead, she made a cup of coffee then went into the living room and turned the television on but there was nothing worth watching and she became restless once more. She switched it off and sipped her coffee feeling uneasy, trying to ignore what was really bothering her but eventually she gave up and allowed free rein to the thoughts that had been trying to surface for the last eleven hours.

'No matter what life throws in your way, you have to stay strong and keep the dream.'

The dream – her dream – was dead.

Six years previously, a near-fatal car crash had left her broken – physically and mentally. The bones, including her smashed femur, had mended after a few months. The long scar on her leg had faded to a dull silver after a year and only plagued her when it was cold but the mental scars had lasted much longer. For two years, the flashbacks and constant anxiety took her to the edge of suicide. Anti-depressants helped her to an extent but it wasn't until she was appointed a counsellor that she was able to start on the road to recovery. As part of the therapy, she was encouraged to depersonalise her feelings through writing and to her surprise she found herself crafting a psychological thriller. There was solace in creating a different world – one in which she was able to control what happened to her characters and also express the dark feelings that ruled her own life – and for the time since the accident she started to feel normal again.

She'd never intended to get it published but when she allowed a friend to read it, she was so impressed that it had given Emma the courage to seek out an agent and so, her ambition of becoming an author was born.

When she landed Julian Marchant, a well-respected agent, and subsequently a publishing deal, she dared to dream that she could be more than just a wife and mother who was limping along, both figuratively and literally through life. She could *be* someone – and in her own right.

But that was before she learned that self-promotion was the key to real success. And self-promotion was something that Emma simply couldn't do, not least of which because she'd vowed never to drive again.

And so, the dream had been snuffed out – or so she'd thought.

Feeling jittery, she hastily tried to find something powerful enough to divert her mind. That part of her life was over. It had been a foolish notion in the first place and she ought to be happy that she had a roof over her head, a beautiful daughter and a marriage that although not perfect was still functioning.

It was enough and it was about time she grew up and realised that reality was very different from dreams. She had everything any woman could want and it was stupid thinking that the grass was greener – it never was.

Feeling a little better, she set about cleaning – which always cheered her up – but after a while, her mind tracked back to the performance and especially to what Matvei had said about the difficulties he'd encountered.

On the train journey home, Lucy had filled her in about the group but most of what she'd said had gone in one ear and out of the other. She knew she should just forget about the whole thing, to resign the experience to the past and move on but the addiction was still there and so, feeling naughty but also exhilarated, she decided to look on the internet for more information.

It wouldn't do any harm and hopefully, once her curiosity had been sated, she could return to some semblance of normality.

She fetched her laptop from the pile of papers on the sideboard then went back to the sofa and switched it on. As it booted up, there was an alert that she had emails waiting – one of which was from Julian. The title of the email was "monthly sales report" and she ignored it, knowing that there was no point in seeing the paltry figures. In the two years since publication, the sales hadn't even covered the small advance she'd received.

Instead, she Googled *Unity* and was rewarded with page after page of information.

She started with Wikipedia and as she read about the origins of the group, her curiosity was piqued further. Matvei – and his brother, Danylo – were of Cossack origin, which explained the swarthy looks. Their grandparents had fled Russia in the wake of the Yalta conference and had travelled the UK as part of a traditional dance troupe – and stayed.

Their son, Petrov, had followed in their footsteps to an extent, although he discovered that working as a backing dancer was more lucrative and abandoned his traditional roots.

There was no mention of Matvei and Danylo's mother but when they were sixteen and thirteen respectively, their father died.

Emma could only imagine how that had affected them but as she read on about the struggle to make a name for themselves with no money and nowhere to practice she was even more impressed.

She didn't know much about dance but she'd imagined that they'd perhaps been manufactured or were products of a large dance school but, it appeared, their success was due to hard work alone. Their meteoric rise to fame came only after years of set-backs; today, they were acknowledged as one of the best Street Dance crews in the world.

There were mentions of the other members, although not in much detail, but she gleaned that Matvei and Danylo weren't the only brothers. The two older black members of the group were Bobby and JJ Rae. The other three were Azim – who was the youngest – Eddie, the other tumbler and Luke who had impressed her with his gymnastics.

Eager to find out more about the individual members, she moved on to the social networking sites. There wasn't much on Facebook but on Twitter it seemed that the whole world was talking about them.

The official page was full of tweets about the tour. As she grazed her eyes down them, it was obvious that they were posted by some PR person rather than the men themselves and she felt disappointed.

She was about to close the page down when one post caught her eye. It was a retweet from Danylo thanking the fans for their support.

Curious, she accessed his personal profile and what appeared was something more satisfying. He personally interacted with the fans and she remembered the way he and all of them had been

on stage. What had struck her most, apart from the incredible talent they exhibited, was that despite their obvious success, they appeared to be themselves.

She scrolled down the tweets and her eyes picked out another retweet, this time from Matvei.

She followed it back and as she found herself on his personal page she was staggered to see that he had over two hundred thousand followers. The tweets were a mixture of promotional ones and more personal but then she was drawn to his photos section. Most had been taken by fans and apart from his un-deniable good looks, what struck her was the genuine pleasure he seemed to be showing. And then she noticed something else – the utter delight of the fans.

The deep yearning took her by surprise. It was stronger than anything she could remember and in the fan's eyes she could see what she herself was feeling. The previous evening had been so golden, so exquisite that she would do anything to be able to touch that magic again, to feel the energy coursing through her veins to enter their world – if only for a moment.

And then, an idea came to her.

An idea that was tantalising and tortuous at the same time and took over her, killing all logic and reason.

She shook her head, feeling stupid but the more she thought about it, and the more Mat's words echoed through her mind, the more she knew that if she didn't try, she would regret it forever.

With her heart pounding, she opened her emails and started to compose:

Hi Julian,

Thanks for sending me the monthly report.

I know this might sound completely barmy but I've had an idea. Last night I went to see the Street Dance group Unity and I was wondering what you thought about me writing a biography of them.

I know it's not my usual style but I really, really want to do it. They literally blew me away and I was thinking it would make an incredible book.

Let me know what you think.

All the best

Emma.

For one heart-stopping moment, she paused and then, before she could talk herself out of it, she pressed "send".

CHAPTER 2

Emma stepped out of the black cab and strode up to the glossy glass doors, then paused.

The feeling of unreality that had gripped her from the moment she'd left her home that morning doubled and a cold sweat settled over her.

The two hour train journey was the first she'd made alone in three years. It had been testing but, using the breathing techniques her counsellor had taught her, she'd managed to keep a lid on her anxieties but now, as she caught sight of her reflection, she could feel them rising again and this time, they were coupled with shame.

She'd made every effort to look good, and had even put on makeup, but as she gazed at her plump form in the glass she wanted to cry. The pencil skirt was too tight, the blouse was straining over her breasts and her dull blonde hair hung in lank curtains around her face. She looked every inch of her thirty five years – and then some.

The temptation to walk away was overwhelming but there was something inside her that said that she'd come this far and that the least she could do was try, not least of which because Julian had made it clear that if she wasn't prepared to give it a go, their professional relationship was over.

She had no choice, she had to see it through, and so, gathering every ounce of her grit and determination, she drew herself up, pushed the door open and stepped inside.

At a desk to the side of the reception area sat a perfectly presented woman who was talking in clipped tones into her headset. She looked up at Emma and without pausing her conversation, acknowledged her presence with a quick smile.

Emma hovered uncertainly, taking in the luxurious, patterned carpet, opaque glass screens and subtle, recessed lighting, feeling out of place. But before she could do anything more than take a couple of steady breaths, the receptionist had finished her conversation.

'Sorry about that,' she said, looking at Emma properly. 'How can I help?'

Emma took in the beautifully made-up face and glossy black hair and felt even worse.

'Um, I've got an appointment to see Mr Johnson.'

'Name?' Miss Perfect asked.

'Charlie Kane,' Emma replied.

That was the other thing making her nervous – her pseudonym. It felt odd and false and she had the feeling that people could see right through her, however, Miss Perfect simply nodded.

'Yes, of course,' she said. 'Please, take a seat. I'll let him know that you're here.'

Emma moved over to the other side of the reception area to where two modern leather sofas sat at right angles around a glass coffee table.

She sat down, placing her document case and bag on the seat beside her then picked up a copy of NME magazine. She flicked through the pages, trying to look bored rather than terrified.

'Ms Kane?'

She looked up to see Miss Perfect smiling at her.

'If you'd like to follow me?'

Her mouth went dry, her heart raced but she put the magazine back on the table with a shaking hand, picked up her belongings and stood up.

Miss Perfect led her across the reception area and down a short but wide corridor at the side of the desk where there was only one door. Miss Perfect knocked on it sharply and Emma couldn't hear a response but Miss Perfect gave a nod, then depressed the handle and gestured for her to go inside.

At the desk sat a middle-aged man who reminded her of a mean-looking Denzel Washington. His suit was bespoke and with a subtle but expensive-looking gold watch on his wrist there was no doubt of his wealth.

He was wearing a stern expression and the words, "*None shall pass*" leapt into Emma's head.

She baulked, wishing for the hundredth time that she had never sent the email to Julian but then she gathered herself together and forced her legs to propel her body towards him.

'Mr Johnson,' she said in her best Charlie Kane manner, holding her hand out towards him.

He stood up and leaned over the desk to shake it.

'Ms Kane,' he replied. 'Please,' he added, gesturing to the chair that was waiting on her side of the desk. 'Take a seat.'

She sat down slowly, wary of straining the seams of her skirt and placed her bag and case on the floor.

'Thank you for seeing me,' she said, giving what she hoped was a confident-looking smile.

'No problem,' he replied. 'Mr Marchant was pretty insistent so I thought I'd better at least hear what you have to say.'

Emma smiled nervously, unsure as to whether to feel pleased or embarrassed. According to Julian, Leo Johnson had a reputation as being a ball breaker and she realised that he must have pulled a lot of strings to get her there.

'So,' he began, fixing her with a challenging stare. 'You want to write a biography for us, is that right?'

The look he was giving her made her recoil with fear but she mastered herself and delivered the speech she'd been rehearsing for the last week – in fact, every waking hour since Julian had given her the startling news that he'd taken her off the cuff email seriously and had managed to arrange the meeting with *Unity's* agent and manager.

'Yes. I really admire what they've done,' she replied. 'Breaking through in such a tough industry is hard enough, but South London boys with no formal training? That's incredible.'

He nodded, looking as though he'd expected the response. 'Nothing to do with celebrity chasing then?' he said with a humourless smile.

She swallowed with difficulty.

'No, as I said, I admire what they've done and what they do. My daughter and I saw them in Manchester and I have to say that for someone who doesn't normally like dance, they floored me.'

He observed her closely then gave a half smile. 'So, I'm guessing that before that, you'd not heard of them?'

A cold sweat settled over her. 'Of course I'd heard of them,' she said laughingly. 'Hasn't everyone?'

An uncomfortable silence stretched between them.

‘I know how it looks,’ she said, desperate to extricate herself from the hole she was digging, ‘but I’m a good writer and the advantage of using me is that I have no agenda. On the one hand, I’m not some sycophantic fan and on the other I’m not a big name. I’d be happy to do it however they wanted me to – and for a reasonable sum.’

It was another set piece which she’d rehearsed and she expected him to blow her off immediately, but to her surprise he bridged his fingertips together and pressed them to his lips thoughtfully.

‘So when you say “reasonable sum” what do you have in mind?’

Emma had no clue. It hadn’t occurred to her that she’d even get past delivering her speech. She was tempted to say that he would have to talk to Julian, but sensed that Leo wouldn’t be impressed.

She shrugged. ‘I’m happy to negotiate. I really want to do this.’

He pursed his lips. ‘It seems so. Alright, let me tell you where I am with this. It’s my job to look after their interests. There are a lot of people out there who want a piece of them and, if you’ll forgive me for saying so, you’re one of them. You’re not the first person to offer a bio and I know you won’t be the last. They’re hot property right now and we’ve had a lot of interest. To be honest, we could probably get pretty much anyone we wanted.’

She nodded, feeling deflated. It was obvious that the interview was going to come to an ignominious end and she kicked herself for her moment of madness. How could she even dare to think that she might have a chance? But then, his expression changed.

‘That said, I like your spirit. It takes balls to do what you’ve done and your agent certainly believes in you,’ he added. ‘I’ve done some checking. By all accounts he seems to have a knack of breaking new talent. So,’ he said thoughtfully, ‘I’m wondering whether it might just be worth considering you.’

Emma stared at him, her head spinning, unable to believe what she’d just heard.

‘And,’ he added, ‘I know my guys. They’ve got no time for people with big egos so a “Name” would probably get less than nothing out of them.’

Emma waited, her heart hammering, the sense of unreality returning.

He shook his head doubtfully. ‘It is risky, though.’

Emma’s brain seemed to be working in slow motion but as what he was saying finally sank in, she realised that there was a chink of hope – but that any moment it could close tight shut.

‘I’ve done a sample chapter,’ she said, desperate to stall him and relieved that she’d followed Julian’s advice and had prepared something. ‘Perhaps you’d like a look?’

His eyebrows rose in surprise. ‘Alright,’ he agreed.

She reached down to get her case and started unzipping it, struggling to make her fingers work. Finally getting the zipper open, she extracted the five loose sheets and handed them over.

He scanned down the pages, his face inscrutable then placed them on the desk.

‘You said you weren’t a sycophantic fan but there seems to be a lot of admiration in it.’

‘I can do whatever style you want,’ she replied hastily.

He shook his head. ‘I didn’t say I didn’t like it. But I get the impression there’s something you’re not telling me. From what I can tell, you’re after a leg up and that ties in with putting a good deal on the table but this,’ he said, tapping the pages with his finger, ‘is something different.’

She held his gaze, aware that the whole thing could rest on her next response. Should she try and hold the official version or give something more honest?

‘I do admire them,’ she began but then stopped, unsure how candid to be.

The look he was giving unnerved her but her mind wouldn’t come up with anything – other than the truth.

‘I don’t know how much Julian told you about my background,’ she said.

He shrugged. ‘Nothing much – other than I should give you a chance.’

She took a steadying breath. ‘The last few years have been tough. Six years ago I had an accident – a car accident – and it took me a long time to get over it. That’s how I started writing – as a way of dealing with what had happened to me, I suppose. A friend who used to work in publishing read it and encouraged me to try and get an agent. When I landed Julian and then a deal, I thought I’d made it but I didn’t realise how much work you’re expected to do to promote.’

She paused, hoping that her honesty would have touched him but the poker expression remained in place.

She gave a wan smile. ‘Despite how it might appear, I’m not normally very forward.’

He raised an eyebrow but didn’t comment.

She swallowed uncomfortably. ‘Anyway, to cut a long story short, I was considering giving up, but then my daughter begged me to take her to see your guys. Their performance was something else but it was what they were saying with it that really got to me.’

She paused, her throat tight with emotion. Her face flushed with embarrassment but before the tears that were threatening could take hold, she forged on.

‘You know, how if you have a dream, no matter what life throws in your way, you have to stay strong and keep hold of it – like they have,’ she said, her voice wavering.

His expression changed. What was it? Surprise? Approval? But before she could pin it down, it was gone and the professional mask was back in place.

He picked up the sample chapter and re-read it.

Emma waited anxiously, not daring to try and guess what he was thinking and after a moment, he put it down again and leaning back in his chair, viewed her pensively.

‘OK. What you’ve written here,’ he said, gesturing to the pages, ‘certainly shows potential but the thing is, this isn’t just my decision.’

He held her gaze for an uncomfortably long moment then pursed his lips.

‘Will you give me a minute?’ he asked, standing up.

‘Of course,’ she replied.

As he left the office, she was unable to hold back any longer. A tear trickled down her cheek and she brushed it away furiously, hating herself for the weakness and berating herself for being so foolish. For all her talk of keeping a dream, this one was one that would have been better left in the realms of fantasy. She’d written one novel – and not a particularly successful one – and to think that she had anywhere near the skills to pull off a biography of this standard was nothing short of insanity.

She was still beating herself up when he reappeared and as he crossed behind the desk, she hastily schooled her expression into what she hoped was a professional acceptance of what was to come.

He took his seat again and for the first time, gave her a genuine smile.

‘Right, I’ve called their admin. They’re up at the studio at the moment so she said that if you pop over, they’ll see you now.’

The world stopped.

She gaped at him stupidly and then, her inner thoughts were spilling out of her mouth.

‘They want to see me?’ she said incredulously. ‘Now?’

‘Yes,’ he confirmed. ‘Unless you’ve got something pressing to get back for?’ he asked, his voice tinged with condescension.

‘Oh...no...’ she said fearfully. ‘No, it’s fine.’

‘There are no promises of course,’ he said, ‘but if you see Elise on the way out, she’ll give you the address. They’re expecting you at one o’clock.’

She found herself standing up. ‘Thank you,’ she said, and her voice seemed to come from outside herself.

He stood up too and held his hand out towards her. For a moment she stood stupidly then started forward and shook with him.

‘Thank you,’ she said again then she released his hand, gathered her belongings and headed for the door.

As the cab entered an industrial park and wove through the maze of roads, Emma glanced at the post-it note which Elise had written the address on doubtfully. She found it hard to believe that the studio would be located in such a place and was about to question the Cabbie when he pulled up outside one of the units.

It looked more like a plumbers’ merchants than the home of the most successful dance group the UK had ever produced and anxiety shot through her, wondering if perhaps Elise had got it wrong.

‘Is this it?’ she asked.

‘Yes, love,’ he replied.

She settled up then stepped out onto the pavement, still doubtful, but before she could ask the man to wait, he’d pulled away.

She looked at the front of the building, seeking out signs that she was in the right place but there was nothing more than a number at the side of the door. Feeling uneasy, she walked up the tarmacked pathway and tried the door but it was locked. She tried knocking loudly but she could see that the small reception area on the other side was empty. She paused and listened and could hear a pounding music beat coming from within.

Relief that the address was correct shot through her but it soon faded as she realised that there was no way in but then, as she looked more closely at the façade, she felt foolish: there was an intercom box to the right.

She pressed the bell and a moment later, a disjointed female voice said, ‘Yes?’

‘Hi,’ Emma replied, leaning into it, ‘I’ve got an appointment.’

‘Name?’

She was about to say “Emma Summers” but with a surge of relief she stopped herself making the faux pas. ‘Charlie Kane,’ she replied.

After a moment’s wait there was a buzz and a click and she was able to push the door open.

With its bright colours and mottled safety flooring, the reception area reminded her of a public swimming baths. It was less intimidating than Leo's office and her nerves eased a little.

The music was much louder now she was inside and she glanced to the door on the left where it was coming from: it had a circular glass pane in it and through it, she could see a dance studio with floor to ceiling mirrors.

'Hello,' said a voice.

Emma spun round to see that a large blonde woman had appeared. She was middle aged and must once been pretty but now looked puffy and sour.

'You must be Charlie?' she said, looking her up and down critically.

'Yes,' Emma replied, uncomfortable under her scrutiny. 'Sorry, I'm a bit early,' she added apologetically.

'And they're running late,' she said. 'Come on, let's get you settled in. Coffee?'

Emma considered that caffeine was probably the last thing she needed but not wanting to seem impolite, nodded.

The woman led the way down the corridor that was at the side of the studio then turned right into a room half way down.

It was an office. There were four desks with piles of papers, empty coffee cups and discarded clothes. It was another sign of normality and Emma's nerves eased down another notch.

'Sorry about the mess,' the woman said with a smile. 'Boys will be boys. Just grab a seat and I'll get you that coffee. How do you take it?'

'White, thanks,' Emma replied.

As the woman went out, Emma stood awkwardly but then, realising how stupid she would look when the woman returned, she pulled a chair away from the nearest desk and sat down.

As she thought about what was to come, her nerves surged again. What the hell had she gone and done? She was a sham, a charlatan and she was about to be found out.

She started absentmindedly shredding the post-it note but then, seeing confetti on the floor, panicked. She bent down and hurriedly gathered it together, looking frantically for a bin, and was emptying the pieces into it when the woman returned.

'I guessed no sugar,' she said, holding it out to her.

Emma straightened up, trying to look nonchalant and nodded. 'Thanks.'

An awkward silence fell and Emma felt compelled to fill it.

'So, what do you do here?' she asked.

'I look after the admin side,' she replied. 'And I'm also Matvei and Danylo's mum, Daphne.'

'Oh,' Emma said in shock but then, realising what a fool she must appear, forced a smile. 'You must be so proud,' she said.

'Yes,' Daphne agreed, 'but I would've been proud whatever they did.'

Emma didn't know what to say. It was as though she'd inadvertently insulted her.

'My daughter's thirteen,' she said, in the hope of steering the conversation into safer waters.

'And what does she want to do?' Daphne replied.

'Oh, last week it was a vet, this week a journalist. Next week, who knows?' Her voice sounded falsely bright and she kicked herself.

'At least she doesn't want to be a dancer,' Daphne replied sourly.

Emma's curiosity was getting the better of her and she was about to ask why not, when she heard voices in the corridor.

She felt slightly faint and wondered whether she might be able to sit down without making herself look a complete idiot, but before she could, the group started coming into the room.

Bobby and JJ came first and were laughing. Their similarity was even more marked in the flesh – as was their muscular physique – and they were joshing with Luke, who, as the only blonde member of the team, looked a little out of place. Azim and Eddie were next. They too were laughing and Emma was struck by how young they were – just fifteen and sixteen according to her research.

They were followed by Danylo. She had a mental image of him being fun and happy but the man in front of her now bore little resemblance to that. His good looks were marred by a bitter expression and he was resolutely ignoring the others.

And finally, there was Matvei.

Emma lost all sense of propriety and gaped at him, slack-jawed.

Even in the mundane setting and wearing tracksuit bottoms and a tee shirt like the others, his presence filled the room. She supposed that it was partly his height but there was a quality to him that took her breath away.

Suddenly his gaze came to rest on her. She snapped her mouth shut and froze, all rational thoughts leaving her head.

He held his hands up in the air. 'Guys, guys!' he said. 'Calm it down. We've got company.'

Emma recoiled as seven pairs of curious eyes alighted on her.

'Hi,' she said, her voice croaky.

Matvei's eyes swivelled to his mother and he gave a look as if to say "*who the hell is that?*"

'This is Charlie Kane,' she said. 'The writer?'

Matvei frowned.

'About the biography?' Daphne added.

Understanding flooded his face. 'Oh yeah,' he said then swung his gaze on Emma again.

Forcing her body to move she walked towards him and was about to offer her right hand when she realised that it was still clutching the coffee mug. Feeling foolish, she hastily swapped hands then held her now free right one out, her heart pounding.

'Thanks for agreeing to see me, Matvei,' she said with as much confidence as she could muster.

His grasp was warm and as his hand closed around hers, she looked up into his face.

His features were fine and his dark brown eyes were framed by curving eyebrows. His hair was cut short at the sides and longer on top and it accentuated his bone structure to perfection. He might have looked effeminate if it wasn't for the strong jaw which was peppered with stubble and his muscular physique which, although not as bulky as Bobby and JJ, was clear through the fabric of his tee shirt.

Currents of electricity ran through her body and she smiled, but the pleasure wasn't reciprocal.

'I prefer Mat,' he said coolly then he released her hand then turned to the others. 'Half an hour guys, yeah?'

As they and Daphne exited, he went over to the one relatively tidy desk which was at the far end of the room and sat down.

Emma hovered, wondering what to do.

‘Grab a seat,’ he said without emotion.

She stepped forward and pulled a chair away from one of the other desks and manoeuvred it awkwardly, struggling to do it and keep hold of her bags and the mug of coffee. Compared with his easy physical grace, she felt like an elephant and blushed deeply with embarrassment, unable to meet his eye.

She sat down then placed the mug on the table and her belongings at her feet then slowly straightened up, wary of straining the buttons on her blouse.

As they came face to face, she could do nothing but stare at him. She hunted desperately for something sensible to say but the only thing in her head was how amazing he looked.

To her relief, he saved her the trouble by speaking first.

‘So,’ he said, in a business-like tone, ‘you want to write a biography of me, is that right?’

She stared stupidly at him, her mind blank.

With a sigh, he fixed her with a challenging stare then waved his hand in front of her face. ‘Hello!’

She snapped back to the present and gave a slight cough, struggling with the dryness in her mouth. And then, with a jolt, she realised what he’d just said.

‘Um, actually,’ she said, trying to hide her unease, ‘it was more to do with the whole group.’

‘Oh, right,’ he replied, looking surprised.

Anxiety rocketed through her as she wondered if she’d dented his ego but to her surprise, his expression was curious rather than annoyed.

‘So,’ he resumed, his tone softening a little. ‘Why us?’

Her brain was operating on a go-slow and as time seemed to stretch on, panic overtook her. She couldn’t just sit there like some stupid teenager. She had to say something.

‘I really admire what you’ve all done,’ she blurted out.

He nodded, looking unimpressed. ‘Thanks,’ he said automatically.

Her insides were writhing with embarrassment. Claspings her hands around each other to stop them shaking, she took a steadying breath. It was going from bad to worse and she wanted nothing more than to make her excuses and leave, but she was frozen to the spot.

And then she remembered what had got her there in the first place – the performance and his words, which had done nothing but rattle around her head continuously ever since.

It was her one chance and as she looked at him, she realised that despite his aura, he was just a man.

She exhaled slowly.

‘You must think I’m a complete idiot,’ she said, finding her normal voice at last. ‘The thing is, I was only expecting to see your manager and I have to confess that I’m a bit shell-shocked. You see, I saw you at Manchester the other week in front of all of those people and now I’m here. It’s a bit surreal.’

He looked unmoved. ‘I get that,’ he said. ‘But if you’ll excuse me being blunt, I’m on a tight schedule so if we can skip the rigmarole of how I look different in the flesh and all that, I’d appreciate it.’

She blushed, feeling chastened. ‘Sure,’ she replied.

He looked at her meaningfully. 'You were telling me why you'd chosen us to write a biography about.'

He made it sound like she had other options and for a moment she was thrown, but realising that pretty soon he'd lose patience if she didn't get to the point, she pushed on.

'It was the bit at the end where you said that if you have a dream you have to hold on to it, it really struck a chord with me.'

He frowned. 'And because of that, you want to do a bio of us?' he said doubtfully.

'Yes... well no,' she said. Angry at herself she clenched her jaw. 'It's more to do with how you've got where you are. You know, it's like pop groups like the Beatles – you weren't manufactured but came together because you love dance and wanted to show that ordinary guys from South London could make it. I particularly like how humble you all are – even now with all the success.'

It was another of her set pieces and she realised the moment it was out of her mouth that it was a mistake.

He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. 'Nothing to do with being a struggling author and needing some publicity then?'

'No!' she said, more strongly than she'd intended. 'No,' she said more calmly, 'not at all. The thing is, things haven't been that easy for me and I was considering giving up the writing altogether but then I saw you perform and you said what you did and you inspired me – so much so that I just had to ask if you might consider...'

He was looking at her without any emotion registering on his face and she tailed off, feeling deflated. Tears of anger at herself clogged her throat and she gave a sad smile.

'I'm sorry,' she muttered. 'I'm wasting your time.'

She bent down and started gathering her belongings but then, to her astonishment, he started laughing.

She looked up at him in bemusement.

'Charlie, isn't it?'

'Yes,' she replied doubtfully.

'Well, Charlie, am I correct in thinking you're a novelist?'

She nodded, unable to speak.

'How many books have you done?'

She swallowed nervously. 'One,' she offered with a grimace.

'One?' he snorted. 'Come on! You serious?'

She stared at him, unable to respond, wishing that the ground would swallow her up.

He was shaking his head in disbelief. 'And have you brought your one book with you?'

She reached into her hand bag, thankful that at least she'd had the presence of mind to bring it, and handed to him.

He glanced at the back page then opened it and started to read.

Emma watched anxiously but as he scanned down the page then turned the second, his face was inscrutable. After moving on to the third page he closed the book and looked at her.

'OK – so you can write,' he said, placing the book on the desk.

She wasn't sure whether it was a compliment or not.

'And you've never written a biography before?'

She shook her head dumbly.

He gazed at her incredulously. 'Alright,' he said with amusement, 'I'll play the game. What sort of deal did you have in mind?'

It was all she could do not to blurt out "anything you like". 'Um, as I said to Mr Johnson, I'm open to negotiation.'

'I'm sure you are,' he said wryly. 'The thing is, you're not the only writer offering to do a bio.'

'Yes, Mr Johnson mentioned that,' she said dully.

'Although you're the only one who's never done one before and has only published one book,' he said with a disbelieving laugh.

It stung, but she did her best to hide it and shrugged. 'I suppose I was running on the assumption that you have to be in it to win it.'

His eyebrows shot up in surprise but then a slow smile crept across his face. 'You know, I don't think I've ever met anyone with as much swagger.'

She hadn't heard the term before but recognised it as a compliment.

'Thanks,' she said, blushing.

He viewed her for a long, uncomfortable moment and her colour deepened. However, his expression was different. It was warmer and there was curiosity in his eyes.

She waited, not daring to think that maybe, just maybe, she'd pulled off the impossible but then he tipped his head quizzically.

'Are you in a hurry to get off?' he asked.

'Um, no,' she replied.

'We're on lunch. You wanna come and meet the guys properly?'

'Sure,' she replied, trying to sound professionally interested rather than like the giddy schoolgirl she felt.