

chapter 1

MIKAYLA

Mikayla Stevens was made of gold.

That's what Miss Annette was always saying, but tonight it was true. She was wearing a gold leotard, and her dark skin was dusted with glittering powder — every time she rubbed her face, some came off on her hand. She considered her reflection in the mirrored wall, and realized she looked like one of those figurines they put on the tops of trophies.

Only gold girls go to Drexton, she recited to herself. But as her gaze drifted down from her face to her body, she cringed, taking in the catalog of imperfections: She wasn't tall enough. Her legs were too short. Her waist wasn't that narrow. *Stand up straight*, Miss Annette would say. *Legs together*.

She forced herself to stand tall and smile. A practiced smile. A *winning* smile.

Halfway down the same wall Mikayla's classmate, Sara, was warming up on a barre. Sara was a foot taller than Mikayla, long-limbed, and rail thin. She wore a shimmering green leotard, her blond hair pulled back in a perfect bun. The younger members of the Filigree Dance Company were across the room, a huddle of eight- and nine- and ten-year-olds, rehearsing their group number.

Only Sara and Mikayla were competing in solos.

The practice room was loud and full of dancers from across the region — ranging from little kids all the way up to teens, some in simple leotards, others in more ornate costumes (Mikayla envied those, even though Miss Annette said they were a distraction from talent), all waiting their turn to take the stage. A banner above the door read NORTHEAST DIVISION REGIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP.

“Five minutes, girls!” Miss Annette called, crossing her arms over a glitzy Filigree Dance Company sweater. Sara would be performing first, followed immediately by Mikayla.

Panic fluttered through her, the way it always did before she went on stage. Her stomach coiled nervously. She knew her dance routine backward and forward and upside down. She knew it inch by inch, and second by second, so it should be perfect.

It *had* to be perfect.

"Filigree dancers," trilled a voice through the intercom. *"Sara Olbright, Mikayla Stevens."*

The room snapped back into focus as Miss Annette gave a definitive clap and ushered Mikayla and Sara out of the room and down a hall toward the stage.

"Good luck, Sara," said Mikayla.

The other girl gave a thin smile. "I don't need luck," she said, heading toward the darkened backstage area. Mikayla reached for the door, but Miss Annette put a hand on her shoulder and crouched to look her in the eye.

"I don't want silver," Miss Annette said sternly. "And I don't want bronze. So what do I want?"

"Gold," replied Mikayla.

Miss Annette smiled, her teeth unnaturally white. "Exactly." She straightened and gave Mikayla a push. "I know you won't disappoint me."

Mikayla swallowed and nodded while Miss Annette scurried off into the audience to grab a seat.

When Mikayla snuck a peek through the velvet curtains, she could see the judges at their long table, the trophies beside them, the cash prizes in elegant envelopes beneath. She *needed* to win. Her parents needed her to win.

Behind the judges sat the audience, a mass of families and friends and coaches and dancers who'd already gone and

were waiting for the awards at the end. Mikayla's mom was out there somewhere, filming on her iPad. Sometimes, Miss Annette told them, there were scouts in the audience, too. Mikayla had seen a poster one time that said DANCE LIKE NOBODY'S WATCHING, but Miss Annette said that was ridiculous; someone important was *always* watching.

Mikayla's pulse thudded in her ears. She closed her eyes, and tried to clear her head, but all she could hear was Miss Annette saying *gold gold gold gold*.

A routine ended, the music giving way to applause, and three cheerful girls bounded offstage, arm in arm, in matching blue outfits.

Sara stepped through the curtain, let out a breath, and disappeared onto the stage. The audience went silent, and the music began, and Mikayla put away the voices and pulled herself together.

She was up next.