

# TURNING



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*A Denene Millner Book*

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *The Barre*

Miss Kuznetsova was right; I don't know what hard work is. I'm ghost-knuckling the barre, doing the opposite of what I was taught in ballet—clinging for dear life, trying to hold myself up. I want to tilt my head to reroute the highway of sweat working its way down my face, but dare I tempt the balance gods and risk eating the floor? On the other hand, I'm hungry. I'm afraid to move my eyes anywhere but in front of me. I've been staring at the corny LET'S GET PHYSICAL poster for ages now. It brings a new definition of spotting.

I remember my first-year training under Miss Kuznetsova. I knew I was great, everyone told me I was. Miss Kuznetsova worked that attitude right out of me with my first pirouette. *Trash. You call that spotting? I'm surprised you aren't picking yourself off the floor. Come back to that spot or leave my class.* That was her being nice.

*God, I miss her.*

"You got this, Genie," Logan tells me. He sounds so sure, loosening his grip around my waist.

"I can't do this." My elbows shake in sync with my voice, I

swear. Is the ground getting closer? Logan tightens his grip on me, and I fall back into him. "Dammit!"

"None of that. Come on. Straighten up. You can do this," Logan says.

He's so close behind me, it reminds me of partnering class. The way his hands round to the curves of my waist. I close my eyes. I want so bad to be back. I want to be lifted. To feel as if I'm soaring through the sky, then put down, ever so gently. But it's not pointe shoes skimming the surface, or boys landing out of jumps that I hear. No. It's the sound of a walker scraping and a metal leg stomping across the room somewhere.

"I'm done with this." My hands start to slide, and I have nothing left in me to straighten myself up. Danny, Logan's assistant, sits on a rolling stool; he holds my ankles, the only thing keeping me weight bearing.

"Okay, hold on." There's subtle defeat in his tone. "Bring me her chair," he orders Danny.

*I hate this place.*

I'm mad at myself. Scratch that. Mad doesn't begin to describe how I feel now that I can't stand on my own and the only place I want to be is at my summer dance intensive. I had so many new dances I wanted show Kuznetsova. This was the stepping-stone to my last year of being a student. Logan lowers me onto the floor, because everything in this place is a test. I'll have to work to get into my chair. "Don't be so hard on yourself." He kneels down and looks at me, but I turn my head.

"You said I'd be able to walk again."

“No, I said you could work toward standing with supports and *maybe* taking some steps, but I didn’t say it would be today.” He takes off the ugly ankle-to-knee braces I wear in therapy and stretches each of my legs out. “You okay?”

Just this morning, Miss Kuznetsova asked me the same thing. She’s been checking up on me since the day after my accident. It’s been nearly three months of daily emails filled with her life affirmations, well wishes, and the same question: *When will I see you again?* I love her too much to reply. But every morning, despite my silence, there’s her email asking me if I am okay. She doesn’t need my answer to figure it out.

I glare at him. “I’m at Disneyland.”

“That’s the spirit.” He smiles and gets up to write some session notes.

I take the time to fix him up with my eyes. Given his long, lean build, he would be a perfect pas de deux partner. Whenever he’s spotting me, I sometimes imagine he’s Chris, my ex-partner and best boy in our level. Naturally, he’d fit me in skill and height for partnering. If I squint enough, Logan’s shaggy brown hair could be Chris’s.

Finally, I’m able to wipe some of the sweat off my face with my T-shirt, which reads VAGANOVA AMERICAN BALLET in the boldest, most sparkliest red letters the school store offered. Pink has never done it for me. The black shirt makes the red pop more anyhow. I should be there now, throwing Black Girl Magic pixie dust in their faces. Funny, right? Now all there is to throw is salt in my wounds.

I watch Kyle, the guy who's usually here with me, shuffling along the length of the room with a walker. Slow but steady, he's making it. Not just his exercise, but this whole rehabilitation thing. Just two weeks ago he could only stand with that walker. Before that he needed all hands on deck to kick a ball. His eyes bulge out of his face, and his patchy head mimics a water slide as droplets make their way down his neck. Not even the railroad-track-like scars lining his head can stop them. Standing. Walking. That will never be me, though. Not as an L1-L3 incomplete paraplegic. We exchange a fuck-this-shit glance and a small, friendly smile. While we're on different sides of the boat, it's still the same boat, so despite the fact that it took me a month to smile back, I can return the nice manners now.

"You should really think about going to group therapy sometime. Kyle goes."

Logan lowers himself onto the floor, and I scoot backwards into my chair. "I won't go."

"Did you miss what I said about Kyle going?" Logan whispers. "You'd be surprised to know you're not alone in this whole recovery thing."

"I heard you loud and clear. Can't see what that has to do with anything."

"If you go, you could actually talk to him instead of secretly wondering what his deal is," Logan reasons.

"Why do that when you could just tell me? Actually, don't." I would hate if Logan told anyone anything about me. Especially my injury.

“It wouldn’t hurt to check it out.”

“Kyle or the QUEST group?”

Logan crosses his arms and smiles that Realtor-ad grin. “Both.”

I use what strength I have left to lift myself into my chair and push off. Pretty sure Logan could’ve picked me up by his pinky.

“Great transfer! Maybe I should get you angry more often.” He follows me out into the hall. “Think you’ll stay the full session next time?” Logan asks.

And watch Kyle pass all his tests? I think not. I keep rolling away, pretending not to hear him.

“Try to have a good day, Genie,” he says behind me. “Buckle up!”  
*Too late.*

I follow no hallway etiquette as I rush by everyone and every room on my way out. It feels like I slam directly into the beaming sun, finally out of that maze. How can anyone move in this heat? If a power chair didn’t cost college tuition, I’d look into one for summer purposes alone. At least there was air-conditioning inside. Now I’m rethinking my signature dramatic exits. As Miss Kuznetsova would say, *Come in with presence. Leave a legend.* Logan would argue I’m not on the stage, and I’m not doing myself any favors, but once prima, always prima. Yep, that’s how I roll now—twenty-four-inch rims.

The good thing is, I still have my amazingly flexible arms to fish around for my bookbag hanging in the back. My hands swim around inside the bag, pushing away Vaseline and a pack of gum, until I pull out my shades and slide them on my face. I readjust my feet on my footplate. Good. Now I can go.

Starbucks's mermaid logo on the corner taunts me. The calories alone used to be deadly to this ballerina. Now the distance is the killer. I make my way down the block. It's slightly uphill, which is why I try to talk myself out of needing a chilled drink. The mermaid won't get to win this round. Double caramel drizzle *will* coat my thick lips like fancy lipstick. Starbucks lipstick. Makes me think of Hannah, my best friend. The girl who would rather wipe her bright lipstick off before class than not wear it at all. I can hear her voice now: *Genie, which one? Selena or Salsa red?* I'd shrug because they look the same to me.

Before I know it, I'm halfway up the block. Just three weeks ago I didn't have the strength or the willpower to make it up a block, let alone up an incline. Logan would be pleased.

How's that for needing a full session?

"You got this, Genie," I chant. "Two more pushes and you've earned yourself a venti iced caramel Frappuccino." Logan's rubbing off on me.

The door is closed.

I'd rather do thirty-two fouettés on pointe any day than open a door now. Before my accident, there'd be someone on their way in or out. All I'd do was slide in. Now people sympathetically open the door for me, but no such sympathy today. Damn, I pushed myself all this way, too. I'm starting to feel like I'm peeling off a Band-Aid every time I lift my arms.

*Don't let this mermaid bitch win, Genie.* I take a deep breath and align myself to pull the door open. Success. *Take that, you scaly bitch!* With my right hand I hold it open for as long as I can, but

it's heavy and my palms are sweaty—the door closes too early and sandwiches me between it and the frame. Touché. We're both being bitches to each other. I've been known to be competitive.

The barista's mouth opens and closes like a fish. She doesn't know what to say. What do you say? Sorry you suck at navigating the world? Sorry you spend too much time leaving therapy early and angry to properly learn how to get through doors?

Trapped, I rock side to side in my seat, trying to squeeze by. Relief hits me as the door opens behind me, and I'm able to wheel myself to the other side of it.

"Thank you. You'd think they'd have automated doors," I say loudly, so the barista hears.

The woman who opened the door gives me a quick nod and smile, making her way to the register. The cool air calms me, and I take in the famous coffee smell. It's not often I get to have these high-calorie frozen treats. I never starved myself, but I did have to diet. Being a little curvier than most, I had lines to maintain. As dancers, our bodies are not just a form of entertainment. They're living art; we have to take care of them. My art died along with my nerves.

After the woman places her order, I'm next. I can see the unease on the barista's face. She's trying to be professional, but my chair makes her uncomfortable. At least it feels that way. I can't tell if I'm being sensitive. It's a turn of events from the glowing looks I could conjure before by just walking in a room. Yes, I'm that gorgeous, but it's like I can't be pretty *and* in a wheelchair. The computer monitor blocks her name tag. Being low is a pain in the ass.

“One venti iced caramel Frap, please,” I order.

“Whip?” she asks.

“Yes, extra drizzle, too,” I add.

“Name?”

“Cripple,” spills out my mouth like a slippery ice cube.

Her eyebrows rise in question or shock. Both? But I’m not in the mood to apologize.

“I’m sorry?” she asks again, probably hoping she heard wrong.

“Genie. Just Genie.”

The space is tight. I survey the room for a spot to wait that won’t be in the way of the line that has formed out of thin air. *Just great.* I swivel behind me, looking for another door to exit out of when I’m done here. Nothing but tables and a bathroom. *What happened to our truce, mermaid?*

People tend to part like the Red Sea around me. No one wants to get rolled over by a person in a wheelchair. The funny thing is, even if it isn’t their fault, they usually apologize. I guess they figure I have it bad enough. Actually, I don’t really know what they’re thinking. “Genie?” The man behind the counter places my Frap on the bar top. He looks out at average height, not even noticing me approach the counter.

The counter’s a bit high, but I push up on my arms to reach it. I grab a straw and place my drink between my legs. If I didn’t watch myself place my drink there, I wouldn’t even know it was there. I have no sensation in my legs, but if you bang my knees hard enough, there’s some reflex capability. The perks of my low-level paralysis. In common terms, it means my back broke just close

enough to my ass that my top half works, while my hips and lower are equivalent to a wet noodle. “Perks” and “paralysis” shouldn’t be in the same sentence.

Out the same way I came in, I make my way to the nearby park and find a shady area to sit under. I need two hands to push myself. Drinking and driving is not an option for me. *Ba dum tssh. Thank you, I’ll be here all week.* I’ll be an artifact before I laugh at that joke.

I’m not doing myself any favors taking out my phone to scroll through social media, but I do it anyway. It’s a struggle to see all the dancers I follow, yet I can’t bring myself to kill my own profile. Scrolling down the page, I hover over a picture of Hannah. Black leotard, arch to die for, 180 degrees of perfect penché, posted just fifteen minutes ago. Hannah smiles, making it look easy. Just fifteen minutes ago I was at a barre, and I didn’t look beautiful. I didn’t look effortless.

Why would Kuznetsova want to see me again when she can look at that? Even though I want to hate the picture, I bring myself to like it. Hannah and I were two of the few minorities at our studio. We connected the minute we started at VAB when we were twelve. Between my caramel and her mahogany skin, we stood out in our black leotards among the girls who looked like they were taken right off a music box. Five years later, Hannah’s living out the dream we planned together on train rides home from class.

Come fall she’ll be auditioning for top ballet companies all around the world. And she’s good, too. Some company will want her. Wouldn’t be surprised if she got a few offers. I figured we’d drift apart from being busy working our way through our respective

companies . . . but I never imagined it'd happen like this. Hannah always wanted to dance in Paris at the super-exclusive Opéra National de Paris, but I fancied Germany. Specifically, Semperoper in Dresden. I haven't spoken to her since my accident. All my doing. I don't want my bitterness to rub off on her.

I look down at my legs, covered in sweatpants. I had plans to wear the shortest shorts possible this summer. Now I don't feel comfortable showing my legs. To me they look misshapen already. Like my bones have forgotten so quick they're supposed to be lithe and muscular and gorgeous like everyone says they are. But they know they're useless, so they're starting to look like it.

My phone rings, and Mom's picture engulfs the screen.

"Yeah, Mo—"

"Where are you? Why aren't you at the therapy center?"

I roll my eyes so far back I can see my brain. "Relax, I'm up the block at the park."

"You need to stop leaving your sessions early because you find them hard." She pauses. "And if you're going to leave the center, at least have some decency and text me, Genie."

She can't see that I'm giving her the speed-it-up hand.

"Leaving." I end the call and shove the phone back into my pocket.

Not in a rush to get back, I sit tight and finish my drink. She can wait if she insists on coming to pick me up every time I have a session. I can take the bus home, but she's too busy suffocating me to allow it.

"Genie?"

The voice sends me to a time of sneaking kisses between classes. Hershey's and real ones. Being serenaded with improvised songs about pretty brown girls and the promise of never being left. Freshman year was sweet in every sense. Junior year was beyond rotten. A squirrel squeaking brings me back to the real Nolan. The one in front of me with the water bottle dripping sweat down his arm. Speaking of arms, he's got his muscles and a few new ones on display in the Looney Tunes tank top I got him from Six Flags the first summer we spent together. It makes me sick to see him looking so healthy.

I turn my head, hoping he'll take the hint. He doesn't. He sits down on the bench so close to me, I have to remember we aren't in calculus, let alone dating anymore. Feeling safe with him is no longer a thing. And now the smell of chlorine is attacking my nostrils.

Mowing him down comes to mind, but so does guilt and shame. I hate how he makes me feel. I'm a knot around him, twisted and hopeless to untie. That wasn't always the case.

He hums. That's what Nolan does when he thinks. What is he thinking about? Us? The last time we spoke? What to say next?

"I miss you," he says finally. "You went ghost on me. I was mad close to talking to your mom. And you know how we feel about each other."

That's what he says. No *Wow* or *Are you okay?* I'm not surprised.

"Ghost would mean I died, though. What are you even doing over here?"

"Lifeguarding at the Y up the block. Getting back into

swimming. I work for training.” His earring catches the light. Against his dark skin it’s like a flashlight in a tunnel.

He’s getting his life back while I get to work on not killing myself if I fall out my chair. And only two blocks away.

“I didn’t know you were so bad,” he says, voice low. “Is it permanent?” There’s an uncomfortable hopefulness in his voice.

Maybe it’s the milk from the Frap, but my stomach boils with fury. “Don’t do that.”

He inhales sharply, sucking back anger. “You still look the same to me, Genie. Beautiful.” He licks his lips. “I can come by later and show you what I mean. We got to catch up anyway,” he suggests.

Sweat drips down my forehead like rain on a window. The last time I saw Nolan, he proposed the same thing. And just like before, I’m not having it. He can keep all of that to himself.

I sense him staring at the chair. I don’t want to look, but I can tell he is. Everyone does. Intentional or not. He swallows loudly, and my attention turns to his Adam’s apple. What is he feeling? Guilt? Shame? Disgust? Fear? Everything I feel when I transfer into this aluminum hunk of transportation.

“What’s up with Hannah?” he asks. I know he doesn’t care. He’s just trying to get a reaction.

I think of the picture she posted, stretching against the barre. “She’s fine.”

“Good . . . good.” He nods. Nolan does that when he’s nervous.

His hand lingers over my thigh. I don’t blink. If I do, I won’t know if he touches me. Reminds me of calculus, when his hands would slide up my thigh.

I finally look at him. “Are you going to leave, or do I have to?”

He squints from the sun moving out from behind the clouds.  
 “Something told me to wear this shirt to—”

“My mom’s waiting for me. So . . .” I place my hands on my push rims, ready to go, when he grabs the back of my chair.

*Where were those reflexes that night?* “Let go!” I yell.

He jerks his hands away quickly. “Sorry! Please. Don’t go yet.”

“What do you want, Nolan?”

“I just want to—”

“I have to go.”

I throw my cup into the trash and work my way out of the park. Pretty sure I just made wheelchair drifting a thing. And Nolan better not follow me, but I don’t look back, either. By the time I cross the street, I’m sure he isn’t. There’s nothing like hearing your heart as the soundtrack to the insanity that just played out.

Mom’s waiting for me outside the center as if she thought I might pass her and the blinking hazards on the car. She looks like she’s about to melt. Her twists hang down in front of her face as if she’s started to already. Why not wait in the car?

“You overworked yourself,” she starts. “If only you took direction from me like you did from your dance teachers.” She realizes what she just said and tries to backtrack. “I just mean you’re so stubborn sometimes. Guess you get that from me.”

I dismiss her. “Whatever.”

She opens the car door and tries to help me get in. I push her away.

“Let me help, Genie.”

“No. I can do it myself.”

“What’s wrong with you today?”

“Let’s see, my legs—useless. Bladder—useless. My bowels are like—screw it. It’s hot out here, and instead of you just letting me hurry up and get into the air-conditioned car, you’re asking me what’s wrong.”

That shuts her up for now. What I really want to say is the boy who let me fall off a three-story building showed up today.

But I can’t say that, because she thinks I just lost my balance, which isn’t a total lie, but it’s not the whole truth, either.