

MY LIFE AS A POP ALBUM Copyright © 2017 by LJ Evans

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EXCERPT

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Once everyone had on these absurd outfits, they loaded the backpacks onto their shoulders and Derek held out a hand. “Phillips, you gonna do this?”

Somehow, he had finally figured out that I was legitimately freaked out about this. I shrugged, grabbed the dirty pink backpack and the helmet Mitch had given me, but ignored his hand.

“I’m here. Might as well.”

He smiled encouragingly in response, those stormy eyes taking me in as if I was a horse about ready to bolt. Which wasn’t that far from the truth.

We met our guide and he debriefed us on the do’s and don’ts of spelunking. It seemed like we were going to be doing some crawling and ladder climbing. There was also a good chance we’d hit some mud after the summer storm that had blown through last week, so it was a good thing we were layered up. But the guide promised it would all be worth it. I was going to reserve my opinion until the end.

Then we went in.

And I didn’t have a chance to be nervous any longer. Because I was immediately

challenged by the space and the darkness. I didn't even have one panic attack. Instead I found it an interesting conundrum. How could I wedge myself through the tight darkness to the other side where I could hear Derek's voice cheering me on? "You're almost there, Phillips. You got this."

And every time I got to the other side, the guys would always high five me and act like I'd just solved world hunger or something equally as important. It perked my spirit up in a way that it hadn't been in forever. Since before Jake.

"Come on, Phillips, couple more tunnels before the big show." Derek pulled at me.

I'm not sure why I went from Mia to Phillips in the cave. Maybe it was so the guys would treat me as one of the guys. Or maybe, like Cam and Jake's coaches, it was a way of getting me to focus. I could see that Derek was coaching me through it. Making sure I didn't freak out. And it did help.

After an hour or so in, we stepped out of a dark tunnel into this huge cavern with gypsum crystals, stalactites, stalagmites, and rock formations that I'd vaguely known existed but never really thought about seeing in real life. It was like being flown to another country.

There was even a waterfall inside the rocks. It was breathtaking—cool and peaceful, like I wished my life could be instead of the mess I thought it was. I held my breath at the same time as I felt my heart expand, or maybe that was just my world.

I kind of felt like this whole cave was me. Like on the outside, I looked just like a regular old hillside, but on the inside, I was a series of stunning waterfalls and gorgeous formations that hadn't been seen by the majority of the world. I felt like most people would just drive by not knowing what really lay underneath.

"Crazy, huh?" Derek said and for once my echolocation hadn't worked because I hadn't known he'd come up next to me.

I just nodded.

"It's always a good reminder to me that there's way more under the surface of everything. People. Nature. Even music. Its layer upon layer that gets put together into something whole that people judge for the whole but may be way more if you take it apart and examine all the pieces." He spoke quietly and seriously, almost as if he was in a church.

It was like he'd mirrored my own thoughts. I looked up at him. It was lighter in this part of the caverns and while the shadows played on his face, I could still see those stormy eyes looking down on me like I was the music he wanted to see the layers of, and it both scared me and excited me. This gorgeous BB looking at me like that. Like maybe I could be my own fairytale.

But I reminded myself that my books and fairytales were what had already gotten my heart broken once and turned back to the next crevice.

After we'd spent about four hours underground, we came out dirty, tired, but happy into the main cavern. Where, to my utter amazement, there was a ginormous chandelier and a stage. All set up over three hundred feet under the ground!

"What?" I said.

Derek laughed at my amazement and gave me a shove with his shoulder. "Never heard of the Bluegrass Underground either, I take it."

I just shook my head. How did I not know this existed in Tennessee just a mere hour or so away from home? It was like I had been living under a rock. Not this rock, but a real rock where only grubs showed up.

"PBS puts on concerts here about once a month. What I wouldn't give to play in this space..." He said almost wistfully letting me see again briefly that there was more to this BB than just a carefree attitude.

And, scarily, that attracted me almost as much as his laugh and his smile.

We walked back the half mile to the main building, and thankfully there was a restroom where I could change and wash my hands and face. The bulk of the dirt was on the outer wear I'd borrowed from the guys, but my Doc Martens were probably history.

I slid into my jean shorts and t-shirt along with flip flops. My hair was stuck to my head from the helmet, but I coaxed it back to life enough to look like a regular ponytail instead of a smooshed raisin.

When I came out, Derek was leaned up against a fence waiting for me. The boys were nowhere to be seen.

"You cleaned up fast," he said. He was eyeing me again in that way that made my toes want to curl up in their flip flops. "I like your shirt." It sounded way more seductive than it should have.

I looked down and realized that I was wearing my faded "Mischief Managed" t-shirt. Harry Potter and I have always had a fabulous relationship. But it was his tone that had the red hitting my cheeks like a snowstorm hits the mountains.

"I think I'd like to know exactly what kind of mischief Mia Phillips is capable of getting into."

I crossed my arms over my huge chest and looked away. "I don't think I get you," was all I could respond because I really didn't.

He pushed himself off the fence and came closer. All my insides were screaming to run the other way. Back to the cool caverns and the place where he was calling me Phillips, and I could just concentrate on getting through a tight space to the other side.

“What don’t you get?” He reached out and tugged at the edges of my pony tail, dragging it forward and twirling his fingers into it. I looked down at those slender musician fingers and swallowed hard.

“I can’t be your normal target,” I breathed out.

“Target?” A frown covered his sensual face in a way that seemed almost foreign to him. His hand froze, still tangled in my hair.

“You know. The long line of women that you’ve clearly got trailing after you.”

He laughed, his cleft stretching in that way that made me hunger to touch it with my finger or my lips. I wondered how he could possibly be so happy so often. “Where We Land” threw lyrics in my direction because I found myself wanting him to tell me his secrets. I wanted to see what caused those brief moments of thoughtfulness I’d glimpsed. But, I also wanted to let the good times flood into my life led by this happy, sexy man, and I wasn’t sure if I loved that or hated that. I couldn’t make up my mind. But I definitely knew I was afraid to free fall because where would I land if I let him take me into his spiral?

“Did Blake tell you that? He’s such a schmuck. He knows that isn’t true,” Derek said, but he was still smiling so I didn’t know if I could take him seriously or not.

“Cam told me. And Cam always tells the truth.” I pulled back and pushed his hand away from my hair and my face so that I could try to think clearly again.

“Cam?” He frowned again. “I’ve only met Cam a couple times, and I swear to God I can’t think of any woman that would have been around when she was there.”

“Okay, so why would Blake tell her you were a player?”

Realization seemed to hit him like a pebble on the water and he chuckled again. I didn’t think there was anything funny about it. But I guess only a guy would think that being a player was cool and not the turn off it would be to a notoriously serious girl like me.

Derek realized I wasn’t seeing the humor, and his laughter disappeared. “It’s a joke,” he started. “My dad lives at the PlayBabe Mansion, so Blake calls me a player or playbabe or playdude or whatever he thinks will get under my skin the most.”

I realized he meant the actual PlayBabe Mansion, owned by Hugo Brantly. The guy whose magazine had made Playboy and Penthouse look like Christian magazines.

I just stared because, like he’d done multiple times since I met him, he made it impossible for me to figure out what to respond to first. There was probably a dozen follow up questions I could have asked, but it was hard to unravel them all. Instead, I felt both frustrated and oddly relieved.

I was saved from responding by my phone vibrating. And as if she’d realized we were talking about her, the text was from Cam.

CAM: Jesus! Blake just told me that you went caving with the moron. Please tell me you are alive and well.

I stepped away from Derek.

“Mia,” he started to protest, but at the same time the boys came storming out of the restrooms. They were flinging water at each other and laughing like ten-year-olds instead of the twenty-somethings they must be.

I put more space between myself and Derek as I texted back.

ME: I'm alive. It was actually pretty amazing. Mia dirty in a cave. You would have been shocked.

My phone pinged almost instantly.

CAM: I sent that two hours ago! I was almost ready to call your mama.

I'd turned off my phone in the caverns. No signal anyway, and I'd just turned it on as I'd come back out of the bathroom so that I could post pictures on Instagram. Poor Cam. She rarely worried. Especially not enough to call Mama because she knew Mama already worried too much.

ME: Sorry. Was deep underground.

And she came back with:

CAM: Seriously, who are you and what have you done with Mia?

I smiled because Mama had said the same thing last night, and I looked up at Derek as I realized that serious Mia was out of her normal shell because of Dangerous Derek. He was watching me again. I could tell he wanted to finish our conversation, but I wasn't ready for any of it.

“I'm starving, man,” Mitch said as he flung an arm around Derek's neck. I wished I could be so casual with anyone. It wasn't a normal move for me no matter if it was someone I'd known my whole life or not. Jake used to fling his arm around me and rub the top of my head just to torment me. Brothers. God, I missed him still.

“Let's head back into McMinnville. I read somewhere about a good pizza joint they have,” Lonnie suggested.

“You up for pizza?” Derek asked.

“What idiot would say no to pizza?” I replied and all the boys hooted their approval.

Derek eased up next to me as we walked into the parking lot. "Everything okay?" he asked, referring to my buzzing phone.

I nodded. "Cam was worried once she found out I was with you."

"Goddamn, Blake!" Derek swore. "If he wasn't already on my team, I'd swear he had it out for me."

I smirked. "Maybe he just doesn't like you enough to see his sister-in-law with you."

"Who? Me? Everybody likes me." His tone was teasing, but his eyes were serious and stormy.

We got back in the SUV, and even though I offered again to climb in the back, no one would let me. I sighed. At least they'd been taught some manners. Not everyone had. How many times had I squished into the back of Hayden's tiny sports car while his friends rode up front?

I texted Cam.

ME: On the way to pizza with the moron and his gang. Did Blake really tell you he had a string of girls? He insists it's a joke. That Blake is teasing because his dad lives at the PlayBabe Mansion. Don't ask. I didn't.

We'd driven back into town and parked before my phone buzzed again.

CAM: Seriously. Who is this? The Mia I know is not interested in scary sexy musicians, doesn't go caving, and doesn't hang out with a gang of boys.

This was followed by her next response.

CAM: Blake's laughing at me. He says Derek's dad does live in that disgusting mansion and that's why he harasses Derek. He hasn't seen Derek with any particular girl, but he does know that the girls love him. I'm seriously putting the man in time out.

A minute later.

CAM: Mia. This is Blake. Cam is now in time out.

Buzz.

CAM: Mia

Buzz.

CAM: Cam will not be getting her phone back for a while. Do NOT do anything stupid

with the band boy. Come home. Do I need to come get you?

I couldn't help it. I chuckled to myself at the thought of Cam and Blake fighting over her phone. It made the guilt filled knot that had formed over my shredded heart lighten a little more.

Derek held the door open for me and leaned in as I went by. "By the way, that smile is completely my kind of target."

And just that quickly, my smile was swept away as I came to a standstill inside the door. There was nothing for me to imagine in those words. They were straight up.

Derek grabbed my hand and gently pulled me towards the table that his juvenile friends had commandeered. I was completely at a loss for any good words. Did I love it? Did I hate it? I couldn't make up my mind.