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Lucky Me

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LUCKY ME

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Writing

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I rubbed my arms against my upper thighs, hoping to stave off the cold air blasting from the air conditioner. Why do they always keep these places so cold? Sitting cross-legged on top of the exam table, I heard someone's muffled voice coming from the wall at my back. A bark of laughter rang out. Really? I've been waiting here for *what*? I checked my iPhone—fifteen minutes and Doc has time to joke? Reaching up, I pulled at my hair-tie, releasing my long locks from its bun. Looks as if I might be here for a while, I thought. I decided to get comfortable. The thick curtain of hair helped warm my neck. Goosebumps covered my forearm and tiny red splotch marks speckled my pale skin—my body's way of warning me it was trying to recover its balance.

My eyes did another sweep around the room. I had already gone through all the drawers and cabinets. Nothing interesting there. Balloon glove? Nah, I already made two of those. There was no Sharpie in sight so the poor balloons had to go without faces. Picking up the tongue depressors, I reenacted a horrible *Free Bird* drum solo. I picked up my phone again. Still no service.

Slapping my hands down on either side of my legs, I vaulted myself off the table. What was I doing here anyway? Waste of time. Fainting at dance rehearsal was barely worth seeing a doctor about anyway. I was probably being too dramatic. I made my way to the door to make a quick exit when the handle started to rotate. Crap.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Miss Banners.”

Dr. Taylor's white sneakers squeaked against the linoleum as he shuffled into the room. The doctor's youthful wavy brown hair didn't match his ruddy complexion. He was slender but his protruding belly looked like he was wearing a fanny pack. Not quite proportional.

I sighed loudly, and jumped back onto the exam table. “Hey, Dr. Taylor.” I gave an awkward wave. “I uh...I sorta fainted today. No big deal, but my ballet teacher wanted me to get checked out before I go back to rehearsal.” The words rushed from my mouth as if that would help me get out faster.

Dr. Taylor’s small brown eyes examined me without surprise or concern. Exactly as I thought. Much ado about nothing.

He nodded, his fingers drumming against my unopened chart. “Your blood tests came back this morning. You remember I ordered a full panel and genetic markers to complete your missing family history?” Dr. Taylor paused.

What was he talking about? My eyes glanced downward. What blood tests? Oh, right, he’d ordered the panel a week or so back because we had no information on my long-absent father’s side of the family. I’d been so busy in the intervening week, I’d forgotten about the blood tests. I looked up to find him staring at me, expecting a reply. I nodded. How could I possibly forget his uptight self or the half dozen vials of blood the nurse had drawn?

“Good, good, good,” he continued, as he settled into a rolling chair and rolled toward me. “Some of the tests—well,” he paused and looked away from his folder. “Let’s first talk about your anxiety. That’s what brought you in here originally. Can you trace back to when your anxiety attacks started to become more severe?” He clicked his pen and searched my face. Somehow our roles had reversed and I now held all the answers. Where to begin?

I stared at my lap for answers. Letting my arms and shoulders drop and releasing my erect posture, I rested my chin on my collarbone.

The flu. Missed classes. Getting behind in my classes. Statistics, ugh. Yeah, it had all started with the flu and the statistics test from hell.

The shade from the large umbrella outside Barnes and Noble helped keep the metal tables cool, protecting it from the South Florida sun. City Place was quiet this morning. Soft music played through the outdoor speakers. The mellow sounds of flutes and lyres caught in the breeze reminded me of something out of a medieval movie. With my right leg tucked beneath me, I drew my left knee up to my chest. A soft, ocean breeze splayed a wisp of hair against my cheek. I couldn't smell the Atlantic Ocean or taste the salt, but I knew it was there. An east wind wound its way through the labyrinth of buildings. West Palm Beach in spring was my favorite time of year. The sun shone just as brightly as it did in the summer and the grass was just as green, but I could stand outside for a good twenty minutes before I started to sweat. That's about twenty minutes longer than other times of the year.

Scribbled notes in a green notebook stared up at me. Shifting my eyes, I peered at the chapter on bell curves in the statistics textbook. Nope, still didn't make any sense. I rolled my eyes. The example in the book wasn't helping at all. Who the hell wrote this book? Unconsciously, my pen started tapping against the metal table. I heard a dramatically loud throat-clearing and turned to see a young guy sporting a very impressive comb-over and aviator sunglasses, looking pointedly at my pen.

"Do you mind? Some of us are actually trying to work," comb-over guy called from the other table. His deep voice would have been one I might have appreciated over drinks, if he hadn't been complaining about me. I met his gaze and tapped three more

times just for good measure before stopping. The guy probably would get me kicked out and I didn't need that. Not right now.

I leaned back in the metal chair, the warmth of it seeping through my knit top. I stretched my arms above my head. A dancer's stretch. The muscles in my back and neck lengthened before I let them go and allowed my head to drop back, making a long line from chin to sternum. Statistics was wearing on my brain. I rubbed my eyes to try to refocus and opened them just in time to see a petite woman in her late thirties crossing the street. Her heather green pants were rolled up to mid-calf, and she looked elegant in her flat silver sandals, white racer back tank-top and navy scarf. Using my thumb and forefinger, I let out a whistle and catcalled to the woman.

"Looking good!" I yelled, cupping my hands around my mouth.

The woman turned her head toward my voice and smiled. "Why, if it isn't the most gorgeous, studious, talented college student ever!" She crossed the street and redirected her path to the metal tables.

She approached and enveloped me in a long hug. "Hello, my offspring," Brielle said against my shoulder.

"Hello, lady who birthed me," I said, playfully. Not the typical greeting between mother and daughter. I had called her that once as an angry teenager, intent on belittling Brielle's mothering, but it backfired when we both erupted in giggling. "I didn't know you were working today." I stepped back from my mother's embrace, aware that her dark, wavy hair contrasted sharply with my blonde straight hair. That was the extent of our differences. We were alike in most other ways, from our mindsets down to our barking laughs. Brielle was quickly approaching forty but still looked like she was in her

late twenties. Genetics had served her well. Of course, taking Yoga four times a week didn't hurt either. Brielle's relaxed, free spirit helped me flourish and grow my creative side. Her work ethic, however, was anything but relaxed, I thought, recognizing yet another similarity between us.

"I wasn't supposed to work today, sweetheart," she said, cupping her eyes from the sun. I motioned for Brielle to sit at the table, and under the umbrella's protection. "But the gallery had a slight problem so we had to move my paintings to a different room. I just need to figure out if the lighting is going to work or if I should swap some of the paintings out," she said, gesturing with her hands as she spoke. "I'm hoping to sell as much as I did at my last show, so I need to make sure this room lets my paintings breathe."

I loved watching my mom talk. It was a little ballet all of its own, with her expressive face, graceful movement of her hands, and the gentle rhythm of her voice. She would have done well as an actress. That had been her dream once, until she was unexpectedly cast in the role of "mother." I'm sure she bemoaned her lost calling. How could you not? She may have improvised her role at first, but she grew into the part and balanced performed it beautifully now.

"I'm sure it'll be great. If not, you can throw a snooty artist's fit," I said jokingly. Brielle wasn't arrogant about her work as so many of her colleagues were, even though she was quite good. She wasn't the type to get walked all over though, either.

"Child," Brielle said, adopting a southern accent, "you know me so well." Brielle adjusted the large canvas tote on her small shoulders and cocked her head towards my open notebooks. "Studying?"

I screwed up my face and plopped heavily down on the metal seat. “I’m stress-studying. I’d be happy with a “C” in the class but that’s not gonna get me an audition for the workshop.”

“Oh, right,” Brielle said sympathetically. She knew what the stakes were.

I needed a 3.0 for permission to audition and I was one ten-thousandth of a point away. No B in statistics, no workshop, no shot at a company.

“If it had it been up to me, I’d have auditioned for Miami years ago and skipped college altogether,” I said with a bit of sulk in my voice. This was an age-old argument between us. In the most sensible part of myself, I knew my mother had been right to urge me to get my B.A. degree first. After all, a dancer has a good ten to fifteen years before a younger body comes around. With no fallback, some dancers struggle with what to do. Depression and drug use are not uncommon. Brielle, who’d been left with a child to raise understood the value of fallback plans, curve balls, and unscripted roles. Having a fallback plan made me fearful. Didn’t that mean I might not make it as a ballet dancer? I had to make it. I wasn’t about to lose my dream. But still, it was something I had to keep tucked away at the back of my mind.

“Forgive me for going without all these years in order to save for your college.”

She dropped herself in the metal chair across from Emily. “Note to self: liquidate Emily’s inheritance because she will not appreciate it in the future,” Brielle mimed, using a pencil and notepad as she spoke. “Seriously, honey,” she said, adopting a more serious tone. “I know you can do it. You just have to—you know—nose to grindstone. You’ll be so glad to have that degree when you’re done. You have to trust me on this one.”

I snorted and rolled my eyes. When I did, I caught sight of a familiar person walking in our direction. “Oh shit! Jez is coming this way. I hope she didn’t see me.” I ducked my head close to the table, shamelessly using my mother as a shield.

“What in the—I thought you and Jez were, you know, tight?” Brielle whispered.

“Tight? I so love your use of slang.” I peeked above my mother’s shoulders and then stooped back down. “We are. It’s just that she tried to cheer me up when I had the flu. I love her to death but oh my God, can she be annoying! If she suggested watching *Oklahoma* one more time, I just might have beat her with a pointe shoe. I’m not kidding. I would have had to call you at 2 am asking for help to move a body. After two days of musicals, smoking myself to death started to look like a viable option.”

“Emily Banners, you need to quit smoking. If I wanted my daughter to have health problems, I would have smoked when I was pregnant! You know what? You deserve this,” Brielle twisted in her chair and dramatically threw one arm in the air, as if she was hailing a cab. “Jez! Jez is that you?” she called down the street. “Here, over here.” Within seconds, a smiling Jez was skipping toward them. “So good to see you. Em was just telling me about some old musical you two watched that last week, is that right?”

“Brielle! It’s so nice to see you” Jez called back as she walked up to their table. “Yeah, Emily and I totally bonded over some movie classics when she was sick.” A small smile flitted across Jez’s lips. Had I blinked, I would have missed it. That jerk *knew* I hated musicals, didn’t she?

Like most ballet dancers, she was a thin girl. The combination of jet-black hair and large hazel eyes made her captivating on stage where she moved with grace and

confidence. But off-stage she often came off as being flighty and slightly clueless. After four years, I could usually tell when she was using that as a defense. Some parents want you to be artistic and some want you to be smart. Then there are those who don't want to be outshined by their children at all. Brielle had wanted me to be both. Jez's mom had wanted her to be neither.

"Well, you girls enjoy your morning," Brielle said, getting up and planting a kiss on my forehead. "Emily, no barre for you until you've finished studying," Brielle knew I would happily blow off studying if it meant just one more minute of dancing. Before I could reply, Jez spoke up.

"Oh, don't worry Brielle. The four of us drank way too much last night and probably will be staying in tonight," Jez said with an earnest expression on her heart shaped face.

I stood behind Brielle with my head in my hands, gently shaking it.

"Uh-huh. Right. I do love your honesty, Jez. We need to catch up more often," Brielle turned and clucked her tongue at me before walking north again towards the art gallery, her hand waving behind her.

Smiling, Jez watched Brielle and then turned back to me. I was rubbing my forehead and temple.

"Oh, no. Do you have a headache from your hangover?"

I appreciated the genuine concern on my friend's face. A giggle escaped my lips. "I don't have a hangover. You're killing me, though, when you over-share with my mom!" It's not like I got rip-roaring drunk. I never really went beyond a mojito or two. Letting off steam was one thing. Losing control was another. The first time I drank, I

gulped down about two-dozen jello shots at a house party. I'll never forget it. Well, technically, I forgot most of it except the part where I couldn't feel my fingertips, let alone my feet. I was so drunk, I sobbed. I was sure I was paralyzed. My friends and I were on our way back to my dorm, but everyone was drunk so no one really paid attention to my predicament. After a bout of hysteria and a massive migraine the next day, I learned my lesson. Today my headache came from Jez's unfiltered comments, and yeah, I'll admit it, statistics.

"But, hey, I really have to get back to statistics. Catch up with you later?" I glanced at my watch again, wondering how long I'd have to stay at the studying. All morning I'd had a hard time concentrating, and it didn't help that I was feeling anxious about a piece of choreography I had learned the day before where Giselle joins the Wilis in Act II. Giselle would have to weave in and out of the Wilis with Lord Albrecht, and Ms. Cindy kept changing which side of the stage Giselle would enter. I knew that the minute I felt the familiar wooden barre beneath my hands, and smelled the satin and rosin dust, my anxiety would dissipate. Sometimes though, I felt like a fish stuck in an aquarium—practicing the same routine, hoping for the day I could swim freely outside of the tank. Ballet was my ocean. Full of possibility. In my mind, everything else I did was just to help get me to that ocean.

"Yeah, no prob! I actually have to go inside and buy a book for a class," she said, half-turning toward the large double doorway. "I tried getting it from the library but I still can't figure how to search for it on the computer. I can never tell if the library actually has the book, or not." Jez's eyebrows had scrunched together in frustration. "Anyways, see ya." She took a step, hesitated, then turned back. "The only reason everyone else is

cleared to audition is because you put your math classes off until senior year,” Jez said, trying to make me feel better. “I can help you study, if you want.”

With other female dancers, I would have had my guard up. It’s not like the dance world was known for generous handouts. But one of the reasons Jez was offering to help was because there was no competition between us. Not that either of us easily gave up parts for the other. We just didn’t need to compete. Jez had the good fortune of being the granddaughter of Roselyn Jones, the first African American principal, a position that propelled Roselyn into celebrity status. Her alleged affair with Mikhail Baryshnikov, fifteen years her junior, had never been confirmed. So what if one month later she married some random childhood friend...and seven months later gives birth to Jez’s mom? It just added to her prestige as a legendary dancer. Her talent had, apparently, skipped a generation and landed on Jez. Forty years ago, Roselyn co-founded a small, but impressive, Seattle based Ballet Company. Jez’s early May audition was a mere formality.

“Yeah, maybe.” I rubbed the knot at the back of my neck, “I’ll hit you up later and let you know.” Jez shrugged and pulled open the doors.

I watched Jez disappear into the cool of the store, then squared my shoulders and took a deep breath as if preparing for some great battle. I sat back down at the table.

“Ugh,” I whispered, as I read the next problem. I reached into my bag and pulled out a pack of Parliaments. Gingerly slipping one cigarette from the box, I rolled it between my thumb and forefinger before lighting it, while focusing on the next sample question in my book. The problem stared hopelessly back at me. After puzzling over it

for fifteen more minutes, I just decided it was time to pack it up. I decided to take a short break and get back to it later.

I found myself humming while I closed my books, taking the occasional drag from my cigarette. The sun had warmed the day considerably since I had left my dorm earlier in the morning. I balanced the cigarette on the small ashtray and pulled my hair into a loose ponytail. I kept on humming as I reached for my cigarette but stopped when I realized I had been humming a tune from *Oklahoma*. That's it. Next time Jez is sick, I'm putting *Saw* on repeat.

Droplets of sweat gathered at my temples, my hair matted against my forehead. My pointe shoes had landed with soft thuds after each leap and turn. The hardened box landing against wood. I was alone. The studio had long been empty. Not many students snuck into the dance studio at 9:30 on a Saturday night.

The new blister forming on my left big toe started screaming at me. From the feel of it, the skin had been ripped away. It was probably bleeding. I had long ago stopped wearing toe pads. The lamb's wool pads offered a slight cushion for beginners, and the newer gel toe pads really helped to cushion the toes and prevent the bloody feet that were the bane of the ballet dancer. But *real* dancers never wore gel toe pads. Although they protected the toes and kept them from bleeding, they also stunted the art. It would be like trying to paint the forest with only one shade of green. Sure, maybe Monet, or Bob Ross even, could manage it but anyone else would end up with just an uninspiring canvas. I knew I had talent, but I had to make the most of it by pushing myself to get my extensions, the height in my leaps, and my turnout.

I continued to practice Giselle's solo, imagining myself dancing in the midst of the corps of dancers, gesturing to the phantom dancers who would be in the scene with me. Poor Giselle. What would it be like to be so young—knowing your body was already breaking down? I couldn't wrap my mind around it. Would the knowledge of her impending death make her dance cautiously, or with complete abandon? Would she adhere to her mother's warnings, or defy them and permit her oh so fragile heart to race?

In Cardinal Newman High School, I organized a huge senior prank. We gathered pigs and crickets and frogs—first hiding and then releasing them inside the school. I planned to have the releases occur in stages, but after the pigs came squealing down the hallways during first period, the principal nabbed me. For me, that was the worst that could have happened. Jig's up—I'd already been caught. Why not just sit back and enjoy the rest of the show? In that sense, I knew Giselle. Heedless and with nothing to lose, Giselle dances the carefree dance of one who already knew that the worst was going to happen. I got it. Got her. What was there to lose when you already had a death sentence?

After a series of pirouettes, I landed in attitude effacée derrière. I straightened my knee, extending my leg behind me slowly, sickling my left foot. I held this position for a beat, then lowered my leg and switched my weight to my left foot and gracefully rotated my arms to third position. As Adolf Adam's beautifully composed music from Act I of Giselle faded from my iPhone and The Divinyls "*I Touch Myself*" blurted out, I rolled my eyes. Aubrey had hacked into my phone and changed the ringtone to play that song whenever he called.

I dropped my arms and threw my head back. A whoosh of air expelled from my lungs. I walked over to the front of the studio by the mirrors and reached down for my

iPhone. Placing my right hand on my slanted hips, I answered my phone, watching myself in the mirror. "I'm *so* busy right now, what do you want?"

The music was pumping through the receiver and Aubrey was shouting above it. "Oh, attitude," he said over the blare of music. "I like that in my women."

I tilted my head slightly and saw Giselle in the mirror. Curiosity and innocence were displayed in those small movements. "Uh-huh. Where are you? It's so freakin' loud!"

"Yeah, about that...your presence is needed." Aubrey's voice deepened, as if he was trying to convey a secret even with his yelling.

"Not gonna happen." I could feel myself getting irritated. "You know I planned to work in the studio tonight. Speaking of which, I thought you were going to stop by so we could work on lifts." I slapped my thigh to punctuate the point. Fitting since Aubrey was dancing as Albrecht.

"I swear I was going to but Sascha called me and said he needed help and now we both need your help. Can you get down here?" It sounded more like an order than a request. "We're at Blue Martini. City Place, of course. Bring your attitude, we're going to need it."

I turned away from the mirror and grabbed my bag in exasperation. "Fine, but I'm wearing my sweats and I'm not staying long." I quickly untied my satin ribbons from around my ankles and slid off my pointe shoes. Yup, blister was definitely broken. Blood was oozing through my tights. I pulled on my gray sweat pants, adjusting them so that they hung low on my hips. My green leotard had an open back with lots of zigzagging straps. At least my top looked decent, but it probably wouldn't make up for the rest of my

outfit at an upscale bar like Blue Martini. I grabbed some gauze tape and crudely wrapped up my bleeding toes. The makeshift bandage would have to do for now.

Ten minutes later and I was at City Place for the second time in one day. The downtown area looked completely different. A more nefarious and lustful environment had replaced the innocence of the morning and it was reflected in the music, the lighting and the heavily made-up crowd. I rode the escalator to the second floor where the bar-turned nightclub was situated. The pounding music spilled out the door like the overwhelming scent of a strong perfume. Inside there was dim lighting with a strobe flashing periodically—the perfect ambience for indulging your romantic or sexual fantasies. I knew how the club scene drill went. Since it was impossible to hear the person next to you, you had two choices. The person was suddenly your soul mate, or else your bedmate for the night. It depended on which fantasy you wanted to indulge. You went there to take part in the show. It wasn't quite that people were playing you, but more like you were playing yourself. After a few drinks, you could convince yourself that your fantasy was real.

I spotted Aubrey right away. He always stood out. Even if he wasn't 6' 2", his flair for dramatics made him noticeable. He had a James Dean look—high cheekbones, tapered jaw, chestnut hair combed up and back, and broad manly shoulders. Whenever the Florida weather gave the slightest hint of dipping below 75 degrees, he'd break out his black leather jacket. Tonight he was wearing a tightly fitting white V-neck shirt, tan twill pants that clung to his muscular legs, and dark brown ankle boots. His hair was purposely tousled. There was well-manicured stubble on his jaw and his mouth was set in

a horizontal line so that you couldn't tell that he actually had a puffy bottom lip. He was staring hard at someone on his left, but I couldn't see who it was.

Sascha was standing to the left of Aubrey. He was less obvious, not only because he was 5'10", but also because he was quiet and timid—the opposite of Aubrey. His black hair was shaved short on the sides and flopped over and long on the top. He wore a button-down gingham shirt, tight jeans and a pair of black Converse. Although it was less obvious, Sascha was solid, with lean rather than bulky muscles. He was staring in the same direction that Aubrey was.

The two had originally connected because they were among the few male ballet dancers in the area. Sascha's homosexuality and Aubrey's nonchalance towards it solidified their friendship. When Sascha's freshman-assigned roommate cited health reasons for needing to switch, and the next three roommates after that claimed the same, Aubrey put in a request to bunk with him. Aubrey said it was because Sascha's dorm window had faced west and he had trouble sleeping. Bullshit. Aubrey fell asleep standing once during rehearsal. But Sascha never called him on it.

Miraculously, in spite of my shabby attire, I got by the burly bouncer. The place was full, but not crowded at 10:00 pm. It was still early. As I was weaving my way to the bar, a well-dressed suit and tie guy stepped on my left foot. "Ouch!" I yelled. My dancer's feet were as precious to me as hands to a surgeon, and the oaf had just crunched down on my toe with the newly opened blister. Open sandals against heavy men's dress shoes with an even heavier body attached? I couldn't help myself—I shoved my shoulder into his side. In a place like this, my gesture and outcry were barely noticed. *Three feet of*

space, people. It's not that I was claustrophobic. I enjoyed going to a club as much as the next person, but I didn't like my personal space being invaded by people I didn't know.

From one end of the club to the other, couples were locked in an age-old mating ritual. I was pretty sure I had seen some of these moves on the Animal Planet during mating season. Just when I was squeezing past a woman grinding against another woman, I spotted Jez. Hail, hail, the gang's all here, I thought. Jez was easily lost in a crowd because of her height but that was about the only thing that would make Jez inconspicuous, particularly among other women. Her exceptional good looks were definitely not lost on the cradle-robber next to her. Jez's back was turned to Sascha and she had thrown her head back in laughter over whatever the middle-aged guy next to her was saying. I counted at least three empty martini glasses in front of Jez. The guy was handsome. He was tall with a physique that hinted at regular visits to the gym, but he had to be at least twenty years older than twenty-one year old Jez. *Not again.* I walked up to the bar and bumped my hip against Aubrey to get his attention.

"Took you long enough. I'm about to punch this guy in the face but I'm afraid of getting arrested for beating up a geriatric," Aubrey yelled into my ear.

"How long has this been going on?" Aubrey placed one hand on my elbow and leaned down to hear what I was saying. Neither of us let our eyes wander far from Jez. Sascha finally realized that I was there. He shook his head in exasperation and then rubbed his hand over his face. Apparently, long enough.

"I hope you're still warmed up," Sascha quipped. "You may need to kick this guy in the face," Sascha shouted, just as the music started to fade, his words landing squarely

on the ears of the intruder. The cradle-robber glanced over Jez's head at Sascha and smirked.

"Oh, here we go," I muttered. I took a deep breath and squeezed myself between Sasha and Jez. "Hey girl! I think we should head back now, long day ahead of us tomorrow." I gently grabbed Jez's elbow to turn her towards the rest of the group.

"Em! You're here! Meet my friend Wayne." Jez gestured by placing a hand on Wayne's chest. Her cheeks were pink, partly from the heat of the bar, partly from the alcohol.

"Wayne? Don't hear that name much these days but I heard it was popular in 1960."

Even with the loud music, I could hear Aubrey snort and Sascha cough a few times. I turned to Jez and caught her eyes. In her five-inch pumps, Jez and I were facing each other at eye level. "We need to go now." I could see that Jez was about to protest so I didn't hold back. Desperate times and all. I raised my voice to make sure Wayne the slimeball could hear. "Don't forget you're recovering from, you know, your outbreak." I dramatically flicked my eyes at Jez's lower abdomen. "You don't want Wayne to get it." Wayne shifted uncomfortably.

"What are you—" Jez began to sputter. She turned to Wayne, "No, I don't have *anything*." Wayne took one small step away from Jez and looked over her head. He was probably calculating the distance to the exit.

"It's getting late. I'll – uh, I'll call you," Wayne left it at that and walked away. He didn't even bother paying for his drinks, let alone Jez's drinks. Sascha let out a

harrumph and threw a few twenties on the bar. Aubrey grabbed Jez's elbow firmly. I grabbed Jez's clutch and brought up the rear.

The gentle March night air greeted us when we left Blue Martini. West Palm Beach weather was far from cold, even at night, but coming from the sauna we just left, a tanning bed would feel refreshing. Jez pulled her elbow from Aubrey's grasp and stumbled back. She tossed her hair to the side and snatched the clutch from my hands. So much for rescuing the damsel not-in-distress. Sascha tried to reach for Jez but she threw her arms in the air, warding off anyone from trying to placate her.

"What the hell is your problem? You made it seem like I have herpes or syphilis or some other damn thing!" Jez stared at me with bright eyes. I was pretty sure Jez was seeing double.

"Jez, you're yelling. You're making it seem like you have an STD all by yourself." Aubrey spoke with his usual sarcasm. He looked up at the sky when he spoke, his face and tone like that of a bored parent trying to ignore a tantrum. A trio of bleached blonde women passing by snickered at Jez.

"You'll thank me in the morning. You didn't even know the guy and he was way too old for you. Quit acting like you have daddy issues." My sandals clacked along the pavement at the head of the group. The other three automatically fell into line behind me.

"Oh that's right—that would be your role! Poor Emily who never knew her daddy! Wha-wha. Daddy issues! Quit giving *me* a hard time. You're the one with daddy issues. At least you have a mom who cares." Jez was yelling at my back as she trailed behind me. I drew my shoulder blades together and stopped walking and turned slightly. I didn't miss the look that passed between Sascha and Aubrey. Aubrey threw his arm

jovially around my waist. Sascha gingerly laced his arm around Jez's arm. Pas de Deux—partners until the end.

“Daddy issues,” I said. You have got to be kidding me. I had barely any sexual experience. I wasn't a man hater. I wasn't cynical. I was afraid of getting pregnant and being left. I didn't want to make Brielle's mistake and lose everything I'd hoped for. Go figure. And I saw sex as something to be shared with someone special. So far I hadn't met him. “How dare you accuse me of having daddy issues,” I said, turning toward Jez, but Aubrey propelled me forward, not breaking stride.

Instead, he called over his shoulder. “You're drunk, Jez. Go sleep it off. You're ruining my chances of making out with Emily later.” He winked over his shoulder at Sascha and Jez. No one took Aubrey seriously.

“We all know Emily has more important things to think about.” Jez stumbled. “If she doesn't pass statistics, she won't get to dance. Forget Giselle. Forget being picked up by a company.” Jez said this in a sing-song voice. Apparently, she was even drunker than we realized.

“That's it.” I grumbled as I fully disengaged from Aubrey. I turned around and jabbed a finger at Jez. “You're acting like a pain in the ass. We have emergency practice tomorrow morning and you're already going to have a hangover. Want to add a black eye to that too?” Sascha cracked a smile. Jez shut her mouth. Aubrey rolled his eyes. They were all used to my spunky threats. Not that I had ever hit anyone. But Jez would never take any chances, especially when it came to her face. Years of watching *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* as a kid had paid off. I could act pretty tough.

Turning on my heel, I started walking again. Aubrey put his arm around my shoulder and squeezed me close to his side. He reached back and did the same to Jez so that the four of us were all walking together back to the dorms. Aubrey talked non-stop. He mimicked the university president, raved about Scarlett Johansson's catsuit in the *Avengers* movie, and moved on to talking about a new hairstyle he wanted to try that involved something called paste, which was somehow different than hair wax.

I was quiet. My mind was not. I kept thinking about what Jez said. I didn't want to dwell on it but Jez was right. If I didn't pass statistics, I wouldn't be allowed to audition. Without an audition, I wouldn't be able to dance in a company. This would mean THE END to my ballet career. Ballet was all I ever wanted to do. I felt something flutter in my stomach. I couldn't even entertain that prospect. My heart rate picked up, as if it was measuring half beats. We were back on campus. Back to reality of tests and GPAs.

I glanced to my right and noticed that Sascha and Jez had disengaged and veered off in the direction of Jez's dorm, while Aubrey walked me to my dorm. They'd meet up and go back to theirs together. Ours was a small, private campus; a ten-minute walk to the north and there was City Place, and all the clubs, loud music, and restaurants a student could want, and the beach, a young person's paradise, was a short drive east.

As we made our back to my dorm, Aubrey nuzzled my neck, his fingers playing with a wisp of hair. Both of us knew that if I ever acquiesced to his advances, neither of us would follow through. That became clear one night when we were both tipsy. After talking openly, we decided we valued our friendship too much to experiment with a romance. After I playfully swatted and shoed Aubrey away, he puffed out his lower lip

and sighed dramatically. Once I closed the door and locked it, I heard his boots crunch across the gravel. What a night. All I wanted to do was change and flop on my bed. I was too tired to shower. But dedication to dance went beyond the studio. I had a statistics test coming up, so I had to hit the books. I dropped my keys and bag and flopped into the chair at my desk. My roommate was gone, as she was most weekends, so I didn't worry about waking her up by flipping on the desk lamp.

I sat heavily on my chair and rubbed my thighs. Then I reached for the cursed statistics book. Bell curves and standard deviations, here we go.

I lay in bed staring at the ceiling of my dorm. I pulled up the fleece blanket to cover my shoulder, bending my legs at the knees. I had to make sure my feet stayed covered because a childhood superstition. One, two, three, four...I visualized my audition across the rectangular ceiling tiles. Five, six, seven, eight...my hands came together under the blanket then flicked away to mime the choreographed foot movements.

To dance isn't merely to move. It's not just the extensions with pointed toes; it's the elegance behind the movement that makes the movement art. The elegance must lead the movement, and the acting must exude the grace. I had never been able to act classically. I couldn't convey contrived emotions. That's probably why I was a bad liar. Luckily, though, I mastered the subtle hand movements that ballerinas used when it came to acting—the delicate touch of my fingertips to the heart, the backs of my knuckles pressed to my mouth, the small hand gestures that doubled for a full array of emotions—from fear to excitement and joy—that was dance-acting and that I could do.

Ballet was the cornerstone of my childhood. I'd had a happy childhood, even though it was different from most kids I knew. Brielle devoted her time lovingly to me to make up for my father's absence. Still, it was impossible not to notice how ours was different from other families. There were times when I felt like I was opening up a beloved gift at Christmas, only to realize that the box was empty. I missed having the father who coached the soccer or softball teams. The father who walked away from the field with his little MVP hoisted on his shoulders. Walking away from the field with just my mom, I felt like I stood out in the worst way. But the ballet studio was one place where a father's absence was not noticed.

From the time that I was five years old ballet had become my refuge. It was a secret society of women: female ballet instructors, little girls in tights and bows, moms waiting outside. I could prance around carefree; not worrying whether or not anyone would ask which dad was mine. No one sat in the studio and watched. When the music started, I disappeared in the movements. Dance flowed from me like lava from a volcano. The heat and passion burned, licking over the rocks and transformed into something magical. It made me feel free.

The studio was a place where I could be myself, even if I was broken and scarred. After all, pointe shoes had to be broken in and scarred feet were proof of dedication. I pushed myself and perfected each movement refusing, after a while, to participate in any other sport. I had found my little coven and I wasn't about to leave it. Fifteen years later, my ballet world had broadened but I hadn't. I didn't explore or socialize much, except with my little group of fellow dancers. Not that I was socially awkward. But if I didn't

find my way into the dance studio at least once a day, I felt unanchored. Ballet was as necessary to me as air and water.

I concentrated on a darkened ceiling watermark just to the left of my head. I saw the scene of Giselle's betrayal. And one, and two, and three, and four, thinking that Giselle's delicate health is no match for the shock of Albrecht's true identity. I was imagining the slow sway and misstep as Giselle is overtaken with grief and infirmity when my right leg jerked beneath the fleece blanket. Weird muscle spasm. Had I remembered to stretch after my workout? I lowered my hands to rub my calf. My body ached with exhaustion but my mind continued to race. Like a second surge of adrenaline. I stretched my leg fully so that my toes peeked out from under my blanket. Tomorrow was going to be a long day. I closed my eyes and tried to breathe in deeply and let my mind shut off.

With my chin resting in my palms and my elbows perched on the polished wood floor, I took a deep breath out of frustration. Two weeks after rescuing Jez, I leaned over to read my statistics' notes. My legs were splayed on the floor and I was wearing a tattered Joan Jett t-shirt over a coral leotard, fresh pink tights with not one run in the new pair.

"Look at you, Molly Ringwald."

I glanced up to see Jez. She was wearing a deep emerald leotard with ornately designed strings and straps on the back. Jez studied her reflection in the mirror as she placed her dance bag down.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” It sounded biting, even to me. I guess I was cranky from lack of sleep. I had been hitting statistics hard every night after practice and was feeling somewhat rundown.

“Pink. You’re wearing pink today...*Pretty In Pink?* Whatever.” Jez leaned in close to the mirror and rubbed extra cover-up under her eyes. I saw her look at my statistics book through the mirror. “Have you given any more thought about my offer for study help? Math is actually my not worst subject. English probably might be.”

I sighed and straightened my back. *Math is actually my not worst subject. English probably might be.* Math used to be my “not worst subject”. What would someone like Jez do if she couldn’t dance? Certainly not teach English. Who was I to talk? I was a queen in the studio, but had been downgraded to plebeian in the classroom—worse, if I didn’t pass this statistics test. Jez’s offer didn’t sound half-bad. So long as she didn’t bring DVDs of musicals with her.

“Thanks. I’ll let you know, okay?” I said.

“Ladies, ladies, try to keep calm. I’m here now,” Aubrey said as he swept into the room. His white T-shirt was drawn tightly across his chest and his gray sweatpants hung low on his waist, revealing black tights. Sascha, similarly dressed, walked in behind Aubrey.

“Oh look, it’s God’s gift to women...and Aubrey,” Jez said, mockingly.

“Jez, if I gave you a shot with me you would hate me in the long run. No other man will ever match me and you’ll die a miserable old hag. Oh wait, you will anyways. Maybe I should at least give you chance.”

“He’s that good. I would know,” Sascha said, dramatically throwing himself at Aubrey and wrapping his legs around his waist. Aubrey laughed and wrapped his own arms tightly around Sascha’s back and kissed him noisily.

“OH! Sold out by your boy!” Jez said as she watched the two men through the reflection in the mirror.

“You guys keep horsing around, you’re going to end up injured. Dumbasses. Besides, everyone knows Aubrey is compensating because he’s still a virgin,” I quipped as I slammed my *Fundamentals of Statistics* textbook shut. I bent my knees and brought them together to sit cross-legged. Sascha started laughing so hard that he lost his grip on Aubrey and plopped painfully on his ass. In the fall, Aubrey’s sweatpants were pulled down, not that he much cared.

Jez let out her usual high-pitched giggle. I took in the sight of Sascha laughing with a pained expression. Aubrey’s shoulders shook in silent laughter. Sadness, like a wave, washed over me and my eyes clouded with tears. Where did that come from? The wave rose up from the pit of my stomach to my diaphragm. Suddenly, I couldn’t breathe. My diaphragm would not contract. My lungs refused to expand. Panic spread from diaphragm to lungs, from lungs to chest cavity, from chest to throat. Rising.

I stood up so fast my vision went black around the edges. I had one thought: I had to get out of this room. I turned away from the picture unfolding in the mirror and started running towards the door. The others stayed in their jovial poses, like the end of an episode of *Who’s The Boss*, laughing without knowing the audience had started moving on and the credits were already rolling. I was just a few feet from the door when it

opened and a dozen other dancers started spilling in, followed by Ms. Cindy, our dance instructor.

“Yes, yes, we will discuss it later, Toby. Ah, Emily, no cigarette breaks. Let’s go, we need to get started immediately. Lots to do and go over everyone.” Her voice rose above the din as she turned toward the dance floor. “Aubrey, either pull up your sweats or take them off completely, you look like a hoodlum.” Ms. Cindy spoke through her nose in her New York, matter of fact way. It left very little room for disagreement.

Tall and middle-aged, Ms. Cindy had an elegance borne of self-assuredness. She saw herself clearly, and she accepted the person she saw. Her large, brown eyes were accented by black eyeliner, and dark roots betrayed her brassy blonde locks. In spite of having employed a respectable career at American Ballet, she hadn’t exceeded beyond the occasional soloist part of Helene in *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* or a Fairy in *Sleeping Beauty*. But time is a ballerina’s enemy. Injuries become more frequent and recoveries take longer. When Ms. Cindy’s career ended, she was left with few back-up employment plans and even fewer romantic choices.

She spat out her instructions, and I concentrated on breathing. It eased the panic some, but it left my neck stiff and my spine tingly. Even though I could see everyone, I felt as if I was all by myself in a fishbowl. They could look at me but not see me. Pressed back into the studio by the incoming herd of dancers, I studied my hands, expecting them to be shaking. They appeared to be steady. I glanced around the studio to see if anyone noticed my shortness of breath and flight to the doorway. No one had. Everyone kept moving and talking. I walked carefully back to my dance bag and tried to empty my mind.

This feeling of anxiety was becoming all too familiar. I reassured myself with the thought that it would ease after I passed statistics and clinched the part of Giselle. As soon as I touched the barre and the warm up started, my heart began to slow down. Now sweat matted my hair to my temples, forming little curls that I kept trying to smooth back behind the hairline. I positioned myself as far to the left of the studio as I could and stood perfectly still in fourth position, pointing my right foot. I wiggled my toes as best I could in my point shoes. Ms. Cindy clapped the tempo, four claps evenly spaced.

“One, two, three, four, go!”

Beneath my thin leotard, my shoulder blades stood at attention. Imagining the grace of Giselle, I flicked my hands into fourth position, extended my right foot outwards and spun into a pirouette.

“Now, ladies and gentlemen, watch how she spots so that she can release from the triple pirouette and transition into the switch leap perfectly.” Ms. Cindy pursed her lips, gracefully mimicking the dance movements with her hands. “Good, Emily! Make sure you control that left hand though. You did a weird flick at the end. Okay, ladies?” She gestured toward the underclassmen that made up the corps and nodded earnestly. “Jez, come to the front with Emily. This time, you both leap to your Pas de Deux partners. Aubrey!” Ms. Cindy stomped her foot, accenting the stomp by thrusting her arms down to her sides. A single brassy tendril freed itself from her tight coiffure. “Put that down, Aubrey! Why do you even have a comb in your hand? You’re worse than Jez!”

Feigning a horrified look, Aubrey clutched at his heart. The gesture was more comical because he didn’t take his eyes away from his own reflection. I was still

breathless from my demonstration. Ironically, waiting for Aubrey re-ignited my anxiety. I resisted the urge to run out and grab a cigarette. My heart started racing again. Did he have to take his sweet time? Anxiety mixed with anger made for a potent cocktail. I was overcome by rage.

“What the fuck, Aubrey?” I shouted. “We don’t want to be here all day!”

“Emily!” Ms. Cindy’s large eyes practically popped out of their sockets. “This is ballet. We exude grace.” Her hands gently rotated at her wrists. “You want to talk trashy, dance in a club, but not in my studio.” Her voice had gone from incredulous to iron-stern.

I clenched my jaw so tightly that my temples started to throb. Aubrey sauntered over dramatically, probably to draw attention away from the eruption.

When he reached me, he leaned down and whispered, “Emily, look at me.” The studio had gone silent during Ms. Cindy’s reprimand, but now the room was buzzing. I cut my eyes to the side at the other dancers. “You all right?” His raised eyebrows formed little creases on his forehead and his mouth was twisted as if he tasted something sour.

“Fine,” I retorted through clenched teeth. I walked back to the left side of the dance floor with my head held high, and shoulders drawn back tightly. No, I wasn’t fine but I was desperate to look okay. I was never the smug, haughty dancer. That wasn’t me. But I was angry and anxious and embarrassed and wanted desperately to cover up those emotions. I had to draw from the reservoir of characters I’d played over the years. Some women may hide emotions behind a pleasant mask, but a dancer knows better than to have only one mask. Shakespeare got it wrong. All the world is a ballet, not a stage, and you need to know when the black swan needs a solo and play the character that exudes

confidence and haughty indifference. Although my barely controlled rage managed to silence the whispers, it did little to soothe my anxiety.

The piano started up again and the rehearsal resumed. The tension in the room eventually rose and left the room, like mist.

I glared at my iPhone. Jez had just tried to call. That made three missed calls from her, plus six texts from Aubrey. The only one who hadn't bombarded my cell was Sascha. Scratch that, I thought as I read a new text from Sascha vibrating through my iPhone. I sighed. Clearly my friends were worried. To be honest, so was I. The anger I displayed in dance class was uncharacteristic of me. It was as if a stranger had invaded my body. My friends would have to wait until I got a better handle on it, on me. I couldn't text them back in the middle of statistics anyway. Why are they texting me when they know I'm in class? I put the phone down and tried to focus on the professor and what he was saying about standard deviation.

But I couldn't dismiss the vibrating text message alerts and my own distracted thoughts. My hands grew clammy and my heart sped up. The foreigner was back. Anxiety started to give way to anger. It rose from the base of my spine one vertebra at a time, radiating a red glow and seeping into my bones and cartilage. Were my friends purposely trying to get me to fail? Was that it? Maybe Aubrey really wanted to partner with Jez instead of me. That must be it. While my thoughts raced, the professor's voice droned on.

Wait a minute, what the hell is going on? Was I jealous? Where were these thoughts coming from? I shook my head and let out a low laugh. The saner part of me knew I was

getting worked up over nothing. Jez was left-handed and had always favored her left side, which is why she never partnered with Aubrey. Jez had never tried to steal parts from me. We had never gone beyond friendly competition. Besides, Jez and Aubrey were mismatched as dance partners. There was nothing to worry about. I was being silly. The anger dissipated and the tightness in my bones seemed to melt. Dimly, I noticed everyone turning pages in the statistics book and realized that the professor was moving onto a different sample problem.

Discreetly, I reached for my iPhone to send a quick text-reply to Aubrey when the statistics professor's back was turned, but my hand jerked and knocked the phone off the desk. Great. My face flushed and the anxiety that had settled down in my abdomen immediately flared, settling in my ribcage, squeezing my lungs. I felt like I was onstage in the worst way. My nerves were jumping with intensity, like the sudden blast of music in the Russian Dance sequence in "The Nutcracker". Another panic attack? Where was this coming from? Jesus, help. Someone.

I looked around. No one seemed to notice, or if they did, they didn't let on. That was good, and bad. I was alone, like a child drowning at a party while the adults were too busy in conversation. My eyes flitted around the room, begging someone to please recognize the anxiety electrifying the room. No one did. Everything was fine. The guy next to me was still sleeping. The guy and girl to my right were whispering about late night plans. Someone was clicking a pen.

"Hey, Em? Did you copy down that last equation? He erased the board too fast." A girl sitting behind me whispered, tapping me on the shoulder. The physical contact jolted me. I was a livewire hovering just above a puddle.

I snatched my bag and stood up, inadvertently knocking my chair over. Now everyone did notice—not the sparks of anxiety that hovered above my head—but me. The professor stopped talking and glared at me. I stood immobilized. It was probably only a second, but it seemed much longer in my mind. Then I bent down and picked up my phone, grabbed the shoulder strap of my backpack and ran for the door. I jogged blindly into the warm sun on the quad, anxious to place distance between me and the scene I caused, when I plowed into someone walking in the opposite direction.

I nearly lost my balance when an outstretched arm steadied me. I glanced up and, recognizing Aubrey, let out a long exhale. The cage around my lungs tightened.

“Hey gorgeous, I...” Aubrey’s eyes narrowed as he took in my face. I must have looked as badly as I felt, and I felt like shit. “Emily, what the hell is going on with you?”

Hadn’t I been asking myself the same thing? “It’s...” My voice cracked. I cleared my throat and tried again. “I’m feeling dizzy and I don’t know what the hell is going on. It’s like I’m forgetting to spot.” That didn’t make any sense. I didn’t have to spot in statistics class. But it was an analogy I knew Aubrey would understand.

“You’re dizzy?” Aubrey’s brows drew together. So maybe he didn’t understand. He was probably imagining that I was PMS-ing, or suffering from some other hormonal issue mysterious to men.

“It’s more than that. It’s like nerves. Not nerves . . . I don’t know!” I shouted. Students skirted around us. I lowered my voice. “It’s like I’m choking on nerves—in the studio, in statistics class. Instead of using it as adrenaline, I’m forgetting my form. Like I’m forgetting to spot. I feel dizzy and, I don’t know. I don’t know what the hell is going

on.” I pushed my hands roughly on either side of my temples, gripping firmly at the roots of my hair. I felt my eyes widen but I stared, unfocused, at Aubrey’s chin.

Aubrey whispered, uncertain. “Do you mean panic attacks? Because of dance? Statistics? What?” He leaned back to take in my face. “This isn’t like you, Emily.”

I shrugged my shoulders and stepped back from the shelter of Aubrey’s arms. I was grateful I’d run into him and not a total stranger. He carefully led me to the side of the path, out of the way of traffic. I reached into my bag for my Parliaments. I lit one and inhaled deeply, trying to keep the smoke in my lungs, hoping the toxins I was inhaling would suffocate the anxiety. I exhaled steadily. Dancers had discipline. Discipline doesn’t come without control. I wanted that control back. One thing at a time. I focused on inhaling the smoke and controlling my breathing

“Not really sure. I think I need a Xanax,” I said, finally managing a small laugh. It seemed to release the tension in the air between us. I glanced dramatically from right to left and then loudly whispered, “Got any connections for a drug hook up?” I laughed again, a deeper laugh this time. Relief. I felt the foreigner drift away.

Aubrey chuckled. “If I had a drug hook up, Jez would be highly medicated by now.”

I cocked one delicate eyebrow and gave a knowing nod. “So, so true.” I inhaled deeply again, using the cigarette smoke to steady my breathing. “Listen,” I finally said, “I gotta go. I have a doctor’s appointment before dance. Good timing, don’t you think?”

Aubrey let out a long, loud breath. “Yeah. Good idea.” He sounded relieved. “Let me drive you.”

I flicked my cigarette and nodded, not really wanting to drive and happy to be in the company of a friend. Aubrey grabbed my bag and looped his arm through one strap. He swung his other arm lazily over my shoulders and steered me toward the Ocean View parking garage on the west side of the school. Ironically, the parking garage had a cemetery view instead of an ocean view. Yes, I thought, suddenly guilty about the unanswered texts, it feels good to let go and be in the company of a friend

Minutes later, I was sitting in the doctor's office with Aubrey waiting outside. I sat on the examination bed, with my back held straight and my neck lengthened. My body naturally fell into the pose. I'd been a ballet dancer since before I could read a full sentence. It wasn't something I *did* but something I *was*. Body, mind, soul.

"Miss Banners. I'm Dr. Taylor, nice to meet you." I jumped slightly. I had been staring at the clock and using the second hand to mark beats in my head. Not the most exciting way to pass time but the compulsion came from having to count beats my whole life. The doctor's round face was disproportional in relation to his thin neck and protruding Adam's apple.

The exam room smelled like antiseptic soap. Small jars of cotton, tongue depressors, and sterile swabs were lined up neatly on the counter. Orderly—I liked that—like dancers standing on their mark, waiting for their cue.

"What happened to Doc Johns?" I asked, missing the jovial, elderly doctor I'd been accustomed to seeing since I was a little girl. I expected to hear that he was on vacation, or maybe even out sick. I wasn't expecting what came next.

"He actually retired last month." The man in the white coat walked towards her with his hand outstretched. "I'm Dr. Taylor."

Reluctantly, I accepted his hand, puzzled. He read my expression easily.

“His wife was having health issues and he wanted to retire and move closer to their kids. I’ve taken over the practice.” Dr. Taylor juttled out his chest. His buttons on his white coat struggled against the fabric with the movement. “Now what’s going on today?” He nudged his thick-rimmed glasses further up his freckled nose.

“Well, I was actually wondering if I could get some Xanax.” Maybe that was too straight to the point but why dance around the issue? Get things under control and get back to the studio.

Pensive, the doctor studied me for a moment. Then he glanced at my chart before answering. “Here’s the deal. You’ve never taken any kind of antianxiety and with your size and body weight, I’m reluctant to prescribe Xanax before trying a non-controlled medication. I’d like to do a physical and get a family history before putting you on something like Xanax. We can talk about something like Buspirone after I review your history. Sound good?” It wasn’t really a question.

“I’m having panic attacks. My body hasn’t felt right. I’m under a lot of pressure, and I need something that is actually going to *work*.” Agitated, I pressed my knuckles against the table, forcing each one to pop and crack. I repeated the movement on the other hand.

He sighed and checked his watch, his mind already made up. “Well, let’s do the family history now and I’ll be back to do the physical.” I hated the false cheeriness to his voice. He held my eyes.

I stared back. There was no changing his mind. Damn him. He must be in his early to mid- thirties, not long out of med school, and probably trying to err on the side of caution. “Fine,” I said tightly. It wasn’t fine, but what else could I say?

“Just fill out these papers,” he said, placing them on the counter. I’m going to check on another patient and be back to go over the history with you.” Dr. Taylor clicked a pen and left it next to the paperwork on the counter before he turned to leave.

“Pain in the ass newbie,” I muttered. My body was perfect for dance. Outside the studio? Not so much. I knew how it must look to those outside the dance world. My delicate frame appeared emaciated. Porcelain skin that was perfect for stage wasn’t so normal in sun-drenched South Florida. Pointe blisters looked like careless injuries, or worse. I examined the family history sheet he’d left me and immediately drew a vertical line down the “Father” side. At least that was easy. I’d never known my father. My mother barely knew him and I wasn’t curious enough to ask. I had just finished checking the appropriate boxes for my maternal history when Dr. Taylor whisked back into the room.

“Okay, let’s see what we have,” he said, taking the papers from me. He scanned the first page. “You don’t know your paternal family history?”

“Evidently not,” I quipped. As far as I was concerned, Brielle had enough talent to spawn me on her own. The sperm donor hadn’t stuck around with Brielle and neither of us felt he was important enough to think about. Dr. Taylor glanced up at me and then returned to the paperwork. Dr. Taylor didn’t seem to appreciate sarcasm. Time to use more honey than vinegar. I smiled.

“Okay, I’m going to do a full panel and just check for some genetic markers since your dad’s history is missing. It can’t hurt and it won’t take much longer. Make an appointment for next Monday for a follow up. Do you have RLS too?”

“I’m sorry, what?” He had thrown in that last question so quickly, I didn’t catch what he was saying.

“Restless Leg Syndrome? Your leg jerked twice.”

“Oh, no, I don’t,” I said too quickly. “I’m a ballet dancer. I just had a muscle spasm.” I hoped that by throwing in that detail I had also cleared up any suspicions about eating disorders. Truth was, anorexia was common among ballet dancers, but that wasn’t me. I enjoyed pasta way too much.

Maybe he’s right. Not about the eating disorder, but about RLS, though I didn’t want to admit it. Just focus on getting the anxiety medicine, first, I decided. I checked my watch. I had to get to the studio in an hour. How the hell was I going to have enough time to get the blood work done? Damn.

“Shooting up again?” Aubrey asked when he caught sight of a bruise forming at my inner elbow. I had just walked into the studio. Aubrey knew full well how I got the bruise. He also knew I didn’t want people to know about my anxiety.

I examined my arm. The nurse kept talking to distract me from the fact that she was sticking my veins for the third time in an attempt to draw blood. An hour later, the nasty bruise had already formed.

“And that’s how rumors start. Thanks, jerk.” I said, good-naturedly. Aubrey and Sascha were the only ones in the studio. I felt more like myself already, more in control,

just knowing that I had seen the doctor. The shot of tequila I took before arriving at class couldn't have hurt. One little shot, just to take the edge off. Those travel bottles we kept at my dorm finally came in handy.

"Oh, that's nice. All buddy-buddy with those two, but you don't pick up my calls?" Jez started talking as soon as she walked through the studio's double doors, her flip-flops making a sharp clap with each step on the hardwood floor. Jez, too, was prone to dramatics. Aubrey enjoyed inflaming them.

"Yes, she ignored your phone calls. You're just too annoying to talk to sometimes." Aubrey said, nonchalantly, as if he were just giving the weather report. "It's okay, Jez, let me console you." Aubrey grabbed Jez and shoved her head to his chest, purposely messing up her hair.

"Ugh! You're such a pain in the ass!" Jez shrieked.

I couldn't help but giggle, out of joy or tequila—who the hell cared. "Jez, you look like Gene Wilder." I watched Jez's pained expression in the mirror as she tried to smooth her hair back into place. "Sorry I didn't answer," I said earnestly. "I was in class and then had to see my doctor, and, you know, time got away."

"Yeah, no biggie." She turned back to Aubrey. "I hate you. Anyways, Sascha and I were thinking we should maybe go out this weekend. Maybe de-stress?"

"We can go back to that club we went to last time," Sascha quipped.

"Oh great, so we can all be molested by *Wayne* this time?" Aubrey said. "You know men have a hard time controlling themselves around me," Aubrey said, pretending to scratch an itch on his chest so that his shirt lifted, revealing his six-pack abs.

What a weird mash-up of personalities were we. We met—found each other is more like it—the same day freshman year. The friendships weren't always smooth, but they had lasted.

Every year on the Saturday before classes start, PBA offers a slew of activities, one of which was the milk chugging challenge: one gallon of *whole* milk, with fifteen minutes to chug. I had just stepped outside my dorm hall when I saw the contestants lined up on the sidewalk. Through his megaphone, the upper classman identified each of the chuggers, getting the crowd revved up. I slowed my walk. Six contestants. All males. Without even thinking, I walked up and tapped megaphone guy on the shoulder.

“Got room for one more?” I jutted my jaw in the direction of the six guys holding milk jugs.

“Uh, sure. Why not?” He tucked his megaphone under his left arm and reached his right hand into a cooler of ice to pull out a gallon container. “You’re okay to do this in those clothes?”

I looked down at my ripped jeans and baby blue Hollister t-shirt. I didn't buy my jeans ripped but nobody could tell they hadn't come right off the rack. Both were comfy, well-worn favorites of mine. I shrugged and reached for the milk jug. By the time I walked the five feet to line up next to the guys, the crowd was cheering wildly. Based on his reaction, I sensed it was a big deal for a girl to sign up for the contest.

“My money is on the gorgeous blonde!” I turned my head to see who made the comment. Tall, dark, and handsome. Well, tall and handsome, with dark hair. He flashed me a smile. I stared back. Then he winked and blew me a kiss. I laughed, and turned my attention back to the announcer. Chug time.

After finishing half the gallon in five minutes, I started to slow down. The milk was ice cold. A sharp pain in my throat from the frigid liquid had me grabbing my neck. The thickness of the milk wasn't helping. I looked to my right and noticed that everyone else had also slowed down. My competitive streak must have kicked in, because I lifted that jug back up to my lips and kept chugging. I won. Finally, the announcer rushed over to hold up my hand and the guy who winked at me sauntered over.

"Pretty impressive, especially for someone as small as you," the guy said, holding out his hand. "My name is..." His eyes widened as he looked down at his shoes, and at my vomit that suddenly spewed. "Aubrey," he said, stepping back.

I guess the body isn't really equipped to ingest so much lactose that quickly. Maybe that's why more girls don't volunteer for these challenges. A little embarrassed, I grabbed a rag that had been provided to help hold the milk cartons and wiped the corners of my mouth.

"Nice to meet you, Aubrey. I think I'm going to vomit again, so probably not a good time to get acquainted." I turned to walk away, trying to act nonchalant, and bumped into a brick wall. I wish that was a euphemism but it was truly just a brick wall. So much for saving face. I adjusted my path and kept walking, trying to ignore the handsome guy laughing behind me.

Later that day, having recovered from my lactose overdose, I walked over to the "smokers' wall" to take a break. The campus was smoke- and alcohol-free, but a small portion of property located near the center of campus was owned by a third party and not governed by university rules. A short mustard-colored wall and stone bench were situated on the sidewalk. Step off the sidewalk, you were back on campus. This was the

designated smoking area. When I got there, I realized I didn't have my lighter, which I usually tucked it into my cigarette box. I realized I must have taken it out to singe my pointe shoe ribbons and never put it back. "Damn it," I whispered.

"Need a light?" I jumped. I hadn't seen anyone there but apparently someone was sitting on the floor behind the bench. "Sorry," he said quietly. "I didn't mean to startle you. There's shade on this side."

I walked around the bench to join him. "Yeah, I must have taken my lighter out," I said, holding out the box. I sat down and folded my legs beneath me. "Thanks." I eyed him as he sparked his lighter for me. He was striking, but I couldn't put my finger on why exactly. He had short black hair dark eyes. Clear, mocha skin. Wide mouth with a heavy top lip. Nice features to be sure but that wasn't quite it. He was quiet and gentle, with graceful hand movements. But his posture said something. His straight back and chest commanded attention.

"You're a dancer." I stated this as a fact, with a note of wonder in my voice as if I had found a hidden image in a famous painting. Male dancers were rare.

He looked at me and then glanced at my toes peeking out of my sandals. "So are you." He held out his hand and gripped mine tightly in a little shake. "Sashca."

Sascha's cousin, I soon learned, had apparently attended PBA so he had some insider's knowledge on where to eat, how to get around paying for printing, and how to get inside the dance studio after hours. Valuable information. After half an hour or so, my back started aching from leaning against the stone bench. I rose to allow my spine to lengthen, raising my arms above my head. Legs outstretched, Sascha extended his fingers to reach his toes.

“Before you go, I met another dancer and we are meeting at the Caf in about twenty minutes for dinner. You should come.” Sascha spoke while leaning over and touching his toes, his words slightly muffled by his knees. I hadn’t actually been about to leave but his offer to scope out the competition wasn’t something I was going to pass up.

Thirty minutes later, I was pushing broccoli and carrots around on my plate. Gone was the delicious food they served for orientation, goading parents to buy meal plans. The food was passable but not palatable. I was busy making a broccoli forest when someone plopped down next to Sascha.

“Oh my gosh, I had, like, the hardest time finding this place. Did they move it?” A girl with ink-black hair in heels and a short button down dress hugged Sascha. She aimed her hazel eyes at me and blinked. I had changed my shirt but was still in ripped jeans and I suddenly felt like David Copperfield. I glared back. She tilted her head and smirked. I cocked a brow. The ballet version of a pissing competition had just been initiated.

Sascha cleared his throat. “Emily, this is Jez. Jez, Emily is another freshman in the ballet program.” We still hadn’t broken eye contact. Sascha let out a loud sigh. “So much for the food on campus, huh?”

“I guess it’s a good thing my mom didn’t buy me a meal plan then.” Jez finally broke eye contact and wrinkled her nose at Sascha’s plate. She was tiny, not just in weight but height. She definitely had stage presence, though, and a flair of the dramatic. Finally, someone to push me and keep me on my toes—pun intended.

Excitement fluttered inside of me at this thought. My soggy broccoli forest no longer held interest. I started to slide out of the booth when I saw the guy whose shoes I’d

vomited on a few hours earlier headed in our direction. “Oh, give me a break!” I muttered louder than I thought and caught the questioning looks of Sascha and Jez.

“There’s my boy!” Aubrey nodded his head at Sascha. Instead of continuing, he stopped to fist pump Sascha. I was staring at Sascha, hoping to avoid eye contact when I felt the seat dip. “Why if it isn’t the golden goddess? If I flirt with you, are you going to vomit again?”

“That’s disgusting!” Jez withdrew her hands from the table and crossed them. Great, now she thought I was infectious.

“I thought you said you hadn’t met any other dancers?” Sascha murmured. He looked between Aubrey and me with a hint of a smile on his face. His words didn’t register at first. I had already started to answer Aubrey’s question.

“It’s not your flirting, it’s just your presence that makes me queasy.” I jerked my shoulders, hoping to send a clear message to Aubrey who clapped his arm behind my neck. I looked at Sascha, “I didn’t meet any other...” I looked at Aubrey and sized him up this time. Lean, muscular body. Proud chest. Straight back, shoulders rolled. Shit. “*You* are a dancer?”

“It’s my stage presence. Gives me away every time. And all the groupies that follow me.” All three of us looked behind Aubrey’s shoulders. “Don’t bother looking, they’re hiding.” Aubrey said in a mock conspiratorial whisper. Jez gave a high pitched giggle. Sascha slowly shook his head. This would be my family for the next four years. Lucky me. I was soon to find out just how lucky.

My leg kept twitching. Of all times for my body to get antsy. Five more questions left and this statistics test would finally be behind me. If I get an “A,” then it would stay behind me. If I don’t, well, I couldn’t think about that. I pictured myself with leathery skin, coughing on cigarette smoke, scratching my gray hair and telling anyone who would listen that I was *almost* a dancer. I shuddered. Five more questions. Get an “A”, then slam the workshop and get a job at a company. I knew I would get a job. Years before I had been scouted, but Brielle convinced me to get my degree first. Some companies liked picking new talent from college workshops. This was the guaranteed job interview. And, either way, I’d have the degree.

The days just before the test went by in a blur. Rehearsals, classes, and studying, punctuated by cigarette breaks, food and the occasional shower, as well as more panic attacks. Aubrey and Sascha dragged Jez along with them whenever we met up. She helped explain formulas while Aubrey created sample tests for me. Sascha made me fresh coffee. If my life had a soundtrack, *Eye of the Tiger* would have been blaring. I was a lucky girl. My jangled nerves were bound to settle once I got past this major hump.

I bubbled in the last question with a sigh. No harm in going through all the questions again. I glanced at the clock: 12:10. Twenty minutes left. I breezed through, debating changing one question only to change it back. This was as good as it was going to get, I decided. Sending up a quick prayer, I turned in my test and walked out the door.

I spent the next hour people-watching in the cafeteria and eating a salad. If I don’t eat properly, I can easily dip to a dangerously low weight, or else pudge up. A salad would do for now. Anything more substantial would send my over-caffeinated stomach into shock.

“There’s my blonde bombshell.” Aubrey walked towards me wearing his Aviators even though it was cloudy. He took a seat on the bench next to me and tipped his sunglasses down on his nose. “How’d you do?”

“I’m pretty sure I got an ‘A’ and the professor knows that I need the grade ASAP for Ms. Cindy.” I glanced down at my phone and slapped Aubrey’s hand off my thigh. “He agreed to email her and cc me the grade.”

“Well now that you have that out of the way, want to blow off some steam? I have a few cardio ideas we can try together.” Aubrey half-smiled and winked devilishly. The only cardio Aubrey ever thought about usually involved tangled legs and bedsheets.

“Even if I hadn’t just mentally collapsed after that test, the answer would still be no. As it is, I’m going to need an energy drink before dance.” A chime sounded from my phone. I swiped my iPhone and opened up my emails. “Hell, yeah! 91%! Damn straight!” I stood up abruptly and threw both arms in the air with my head tipped back. Like Kerry Strug landing her ’96 vault at the Olympics. Aubrey clapped, and it was enough for me.

“Now we definitely have to celebrate. I’ll buy the first round as long as we don’t go to Blue Martini. That place reeks of old aftershave and sweat, and people trying to reclaim their mojo,” Aubrey said, wrinkling his nose as if he had just swallowed something rotten.

“I don’t care where we go so long as the drinks keep coming.” I shouldered my backpack and tossed the remains of my salad into the large garbage can. “I gotta change before dance but I can do it in the studio. You ready?” Judging from his workout pants and sandals, Aubrey probably had tights on underneath.

As we walked, I sent a group message to Jez, Sascha, and Brielle. They'd been patiently waiting to hear how things went. Congratulations were sent all around. It felt so good being on this side of statistics and standing at the door of my future. The door to the studio was propped open and I dropped my bag heavily at the front of the room. I sifted through a half dozen ballet slippers and pointe shoes until I found my favorite emerald leotard and pink tights. A lone protein bar was at the bottom of the bag. How long had that been there? I guess the salad wasn't enough. I ripped it open and chomped down on the thick cardboard texture.

By the time I wrestled my leotard and tights on—a torn strap on my leotard had me using some imaginative knots and bows—the studio was half full. A couple of underclassman had gathered around Jez, who was finishing up Fuetes. Ms. Cindy was nodding her head emphatically while speaking with the music director. When she spotted me, she waved me over. Now that the test grade was in, she finally announced that I would be dancing the part of Giselle. My heart sped up as I made my way over. It had to be the excitement. But as I was making my way toward her to receive her congratulations, I stumbled. The lights dimmed and my vision tunneled. The room shifted and I heard voices but they were muffled and I couldn't make sense of what they were saying. And then I didn't hear anything.

I felt someone place something cold on my forehead. What happened? I tried to push it off but my arms felt heavy. So did my eyelids. Had I dozed off? Who was talking so loudly? I started to move my jaw, but it made my head hurt. I tasted something metallic. Iron? I groaned and tried to sit up. Someone cooed softly and urged my

shoulders back down on the floor. My eyelids finally cooperated and I opened my eyes to see a half dozen faces looming over mine.

I focused on one face but it wasn't a girl I recognized so I looked to the one next to her. Then I found Aubrey. He had a tentative smile on his lips that didn't quite reach his eyes.

I licked my lips and tried to swallow the metallic taste. "What happened?"

"Well, you either finally fell for me, or you fainted." Aubrey pursed his lips and winked.

"Of course she fainted! She has been so stressed and hasn't had a decent meal in weeks." Jez's disembodied voice rose from somewhere to my right. "This, Ms. Cindy, is why they should lower the GPA requirement. Like we don't have enough pressure as it is?" The sound of a new pointe shoe striking the floor punctuated the last three words Jez said.

This time when I leaned up, no one pushed my shoulders back down. But just the effort of leaning on my elbows for support caused my vision to blacken around the edges. Sascha offered me a hand and I gladly accepted. When I finally stood up, I saw Jez standing off to the side with one hand on her hip and the other pressed against her mouth. Had I made that much of a scene?

"Emily, you've been under a lot of stress, I know. For your safety, and for the school's safety, you need to see a doctor and be cleared for today," she said in a low, firm voice. She stood so close to me I could see the face behind the makeup and heavy eyeliner. For the first time, I noticed how old she was. "I'll announce that you will be dancing the part of Giselle. Don't worry, just hurry back."

Ms. Cindy hadn't left me with a choice in the matter. Aubrey offered to drive me to my doctor. He wasn't much use in the studio with his Pas de Deux partner out of commission.

Lack of sleep, too few calories eaten. I wasn't exactly surprised or even worried about my fainting episode. But why did my tongue feel thick? I must have bitten it on the way down. My nerve endings vibrated and felt raw. I didn't have to be convinced. A visit to the doctor was a good idea.

The clock on the wall was ticking loudly. Skipping over the personal details, I explained the highlights of the last few stressful weeks to Dr. Taylor—the stress of dance and school, panic attacks, and fainting episode that sent me to his office. How long had I been talking?

“And that brought me here. It was barely a faint. I mean, they all said I basically went down and came to within five minutes. But they said my eyes were open the whole time, which is weird.” Dr. Taylor was still staring at me. My voice trailed off. I pressed my lips together.

Dr. Taylor shifted through his papers, and then he cleared his throat. “Emily, I'm glad you came in. We got your blood work back. The seizure you had—“

“Whoa, what seizure?” This guy definitely hadn't been listening to me.

“I'm sorry. Let me start over. The episode, together with the panic attacks and other symptoms you've described corroborate what the blood work shows.”

“Meaning what exactly?” I felt my body get cold. My voice sounded sharp as the room took on a sudden silence, as if it was holding its breath.

Dr. Taylor paused, and started again. He explained that my fainting spell was actually a minor seizure because my eyes remained open and I had bitten my tongue. The seizure, together with the anxiety, muscle spasms, and even my problems grasping statistics, confirmed his diagnosis. I had the genetic markers for Juvenile Huntington's Disease, likely inherited from my father. Only one in 10,000 people have this disease. One ten-thousandth of a point. The more he talked, though, the more he started to sound like Charlie Brown's teachers. His lips continued to move but the sounds were distorted.

“. . . aggressive . . . cure yet . . . treatment. I'm sorry.” His lips finally stopped moving. Dr. Taylor shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Folding and then unfolding his hands. “Emily? Do you understand what I am saying?”

“You said there is a cure? I'm sorry, I missed that.” My gaze had moved to his chin. I shook my head gently but my eyes wouldn't refocus. In the back of my consciousness I could tell that my voice came out softer than normal.

“No, there is no cure yet but we're hopeful and there is treatment. Huntington's Disease is degenerative. You . . .” He folded his hands again. “Eventually, there's loss of muscle control . . . but right now let's focus on a course of treatment—”

“And dance—what about dance?”

“Well, let's take one step at a time. Shall we? There are some drugs...”

At this point I tuned him out, vaguely watched as he shuffled through my file. He pulled out a small pamphlet and held it out to me. When I didn't take it, he placed it on the desk in front of him. “Here is some information about the disease and some helplines, local doctors, support groups.”

I saw a hand reach for the pamphlet. It looked like mine but seemed foreign at the same time. An incorporeal appendage. I stared at the hand and at the paper. How much time had passed? Seconds, minutes, hours? As through a tunnel, I heard the doctor excuse himself. Something about paperwork and prescriptions. I was alone in the room. When I looked back, the hand was mine again. I grabbed my bag and pushed the pamphlet inside of it. I slipped past the front desk, ignoring the receptionist's attempts to schedule a follow up and strode out of the office, and through the waiting room door. I had been walking several minutes before I realized Aubrey was walking beside me, trying to get my attention.

A variety of eyeliners was scattered across the vanity. Pencils, powders, and liquid liner—*Black*, *Serious Black*, *Midnight Black*, *Darkest Black*, *Black Magic*. The lipstick tubes were meticulously arranged according to shade, from taupe to fire truck red. Pink spools of thread, sewing needles, gauze tape, and lighters completed the make-up scene. Most everyone had finished getting ready. I lingered on my reflection in the mirror, searching for any flaws that needed covering up. Nope. Looks good. Any remaining defects had to be buried deep within my genetic code.

The door to the dressing room opened to the left of my reflection. Jez walked in, make-up artfully and thickly applied. Dressed in peasant's attire, she'd have to change during the second act as Myrtha, Queen of the Willis. She did well for the workshop, pushing herself at her audition so that even the most complex move looked effortless. She had impressed the workshop directors. I knew she would.

Behind her, Aubrey walked in with Sascha. Both were dressed in neutral colors to announce them as peasants, like Jez. Aubrey secured the role of Albrecht, the traitorous lover. He and Sascha were evenly matched in abilities but Aubrey's unabashed personality translated better to the stage. He had a presence that demanded attention. Dark pencil lined Aubrey and Sascha's eyes. Up close, they looked like 1980s rock stars. On stage, the make-up would barely be noticed. I watched them through the mirror, not bothering to turn around.

A month had passed since Dr. Taylor delivered the news of my father's parting gift to me. It still didn't feel real. I felt like I was reading a part I hadn't auditioned for. Now I was stuck performing it. When Aubrey found me wandering the cracked sidewalks outside Dr. Taylor's office, his face registered concern. He asked more than once on the ride home what the doctor had said to me. Although I trusted Aubrey more than most people, I couldn't speak. Maybe I feared that talking about what I'd just learned would make it real.

For days, my three friends had kept vigil, like family waiting outside a dying person's hospital room. They kept close without pressuring me to talk. Somehow, after meeting with Dr. Taylor, I made it back to my dorm, thankful my roommate wasn't already there, and buried myself in my comforter and sobbed.

Jez took notes for me because I couldn't bear to go to class. Sascha slept on my couch and made me chamomile tea. I remained in a robotic state until one night when Aubrey handed me a new bottle of conditioner while I was showering. I was freaked out by the phantom hand that popped through the shower curtain. When I finally broke my silence days later and told them about my disease, they stared at me, speechless, much

like I had stared at Dr. Taylor's professional face. They suspected bad news, but probably not that bad.

Brielle was out of town for an art expo. I should have told her first. But how could I possibly have done that on the phone? It would have killed her, and me. No, I couldn't bear it. Not yet. Besides, even though Brielle was the closest thing in the world to me, during those first days I needed my friends.

After waking up from my own version of the shower scene from *Psycho*, I texted Jez and asked her to stop by my dorm. Sascha was already there, boiling yet another pot of water. I didn't drink it, but the warmth of the cup in my hands made me feel alive and took some of the numbness away. Jez showed up in about ten minutes. Had she been lurking outside? My three friends lined up like the three fairies from *Sleeping Beauty* waiting for Aurora to awaken. I blurted out the news.

"So the doctor says I have Huntington's Disease." No preamble, no prologue. Just straight to the point. My hands shook and I brushed back tears.

"Disease means there's a cure? Or is that a virus?" Jez asked, her hazel eyes wide and alert.

"What is it exactly?" Sascha asked the question, his eyes gentle and sad, as if he already knew the answer. Although Aubrey didn't speak, I felt his unspoken questions bearing down on me.

Seconds ticked by. I checked my emotions, not wanting to break down sobbing. I backtracked, explaining the family history, the bloodwork, genetic factors, and the early signs of the disease: the mood swings, paranoia, body jerks. The eventual loss of motor

functions. The possibility of an early death was an unspoken blanket that hung just above the room. I didn't need to say it; I knew they would do their own research.

Each of their faces registered the news differently. Sascha's jaw went slack. Jez had a blank expression like she hadn't heard anything. Aubrey clenched his jaw, his pouty lips disappearing into a straight line. Then came their verbal reactions.

They had lots of questions, and in the days since my verdict was handed down by Dr. Taylor, I had researched the disease on my computer. I answered what I could and resorted to shrugs when I couldn't.

"It's not fair!" Jez said angrily.

"No," Aubrey said, shaking his head, "No, you don't deserve this!"

I didn't want to slip back into a comatose state, or collapse into racking sobs, and I was already dealing with my own anger. I didn't need to get angrier. Sadness was paralyzing but so was anger. When Sascha reached out to pat my hand, I clenched my fist as if to signal that I was ready to fight. I wasn't about to take this sitting down. I told them I was tired and needed to rest.

"No one would think any less of you if you don't do the workshop." Sascha said softly as they filed out my door. His comment hurt worse than Giselle's betrayal by Albrecht could ever hurt. The mere suggestion of quitting ballet was like giving up on hope of seeing a sunrise.

The tense weeks that followed came and went and didn't change my new stark reality. Now I was about to go on stage.

I shifted my gaze from my friends' reflections in the mirror and checked my costume. Even though Giselle was only a peasant, she was the main character. The

heroine and the victim. She had to stand out, so Ms. Cindy decided to go with hints of blue in the costume and corset. Since my skin tone looks yellow against too much brown, I didn't mind. The tulle of the skirt was sheer and delicate. The costume of Giselle fit me perfectly. Perfectly tragic. The costume fit, the role fit, the despair fit. I had become Giselle—sentenced to an untimely death because of a biological malformation. Well, I wasn't going to give in that easily. I had some fight in me.

I checked myself. I can't think about this now, I thought. I can't cry. I had already applied my mascara. I sighed and turned around.

My friends, characters in a ballet drama and now characters in mine, looked like statues. They were standing so still against the other vanity. Rigid, the way most performers held themselves before the curtain came up. Aubrey opened his mouth to say something but nothing came out. He shut his mouth and rubbed his neck. Jez gave me a tentative smile but her eyes didn't quite reach mine. Sascha just stared at his feet.

“Are you guys here to talk me out of dancing again?” It was the elephant in the room and there was no point ignoring it. I didn't have time to ignore it. Curtain was up in thirty minutes. I had spent the last four weeks transitioning from waking coma, to non-stop crying, to anger. Obsessive research kept me going. I circled back through that cycle a second time, lingering on the anger. The fury helped fuel the passion in my Giselle. I didn't want to get imprisoned in the hot emotion but I needed it to get me through this performance.

It was Sascha who spoke up, his voice soothing and supportive. “When we suggested you not do the workshop, it was because we thought it might add to your

stress.” He glanced at Aubrey and Jez and then continued, “No one would have thought less of you if you didn’t want to go through with it. But we want what you want.”

“So your suggestion had *nothing* to do with, say, the fact that I won’t be able to dance much longer and I could be stealing another dancer’s potential spot?” To say I had hardened through my ordeal would be an understatement. Anger and cynicism had taken root.

“Emily . . .” Jez stepped forward tentatively. She glanced back at Aubrey for help. I saw her clench her tutu in her hands, crushing the dainty fabric. I stood up and reached for her hands.

“I may not be able to dance next year, or even next month. But today I can dance. Today I can dance and perform and so that’s what I’m going to do. Tomorrow, some other dancer can take my spot but I will be damned if I don’t *live* today. I don’t have time *not* to do the one thing I love to do. So I might be stealing someone’s spot today, but trust me, it will be open for that dancer soon enough.” The fabric of my costume rose and fell with my chest. My heart throbbed forcefully against my ribs. I blinked my eyes rapidly, willing the tears to stay put.

Aubrey studied my face intently. I looked away. It was hard enough to see the pity, but even harder to accept admiration. There was nothing admirable about being angry and selfish and not caring if I was leaving some other dancer jobless because I accepted a position at a company that I couldn’t keep. I had already made up my mind that no one would know of my disease, until they had to know, that is.

“You can’t steal something that was already yours, Emily.” Aubrey said firmly. “Anyways, we didn’t come in here to talk about that. Jez let me borrow her eyeliner but

everyone knows *softblack* just isn't my shade." He winked at me with the faintest trace of a smile.

"Can you never be serious?" Jez slapped Aubrey's arm and shook her head. All three of my friends smiled and the tension eased in my shoulders. It will never be the same, I thought, and the realization made me melancholic. I may never get to dance with them, or anyone, again. So little was known about tomorrow. I wanted so much to perform Giselle in the show. Now I won't just dance Giselle. I'll *be* Giselle.

We left the dressing rooms. It wasn't surreal—not the way it was when I left Dr. Taylor's office that day. But it was still like walking through gossamer tutus. A little hazy.

Brielle was waiting for me in the wings. I'd told her everything the day she returned from Chicago. She had kept calm but there was lightning in her eyes. She recounted all she had known about my biological father—snippets of one long night spent together years ago. His promise of a phone call that never came.

"You are MY daughter. You are MY blood. This doesn't make you any more connected to him than you were before." Her eyes had burned into mine and her words burrowed their way into my being. Until that moment, I hadn't realized how worried I was that I was now less her daughter than before.

"I decided I'm still going to audition," I had said firmly. I wanted to look away but forced myself to maintain eye contact with my mother.

Brielle's eyes softened. "Child, why wouldn't you? This is your dream. It may change and fluctuate, like mine, but it isn't over." Her unwavering support, her limitless

love, had washed over me like a soothing balm. I had Brielle. I had my dear friends. I had the things that counted. Maybe plan B wouldn't be quite so bad.

Now Brielle reached out to grasp my shoulders and to look at me. We stood like that for a moment before she was politely told to take her seat by a backstage hand. I watched her fade into the shadows, like a picture blurring one pixel at a time. The orchestra started warming up. The haze lifted and things were suddenly sharp. The music sounded clear and forceful. The tulle in my costume felt rough through my tights. I felt like I could see every minute seam in the satin of my pointe shoes. It seemed as if my eyes focused for the first time in weeks. *Life* was sharp. So sharp yet delicate as crystal glassware. Beautiful to behold and so easily broken.

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