



THE **M**USIC &  
THE **W**IRROR

L O L A K E E L E Y

## PROLOGUE

The audience's murmurs build to a crescendo as the last bell rings. Any moment there'll be the booming announcement, the weary words of an assistant stage manager who wishes that cell phones and anything wrapped in cellophane could be banished to another dimension. The orchestra hums in the pit, strings still reverberating with the strenuous warm-up scales, the echoes of notes—blown and plucked and struck—fading to ghosts as pages are flicked back to the overture.

Anna takes a deep breath.

She wriggles in her seat just a little, hearing the scrunch of her dress against the plush red velvet. Her feet are restlessly flexing inside her first pair of grown-up heels, a birthday present from her foster sister, Jess. The tickets themselves were a gift from Jess's mother, Marcia, for all of them. Anna hasn't asked to come to the ballet even once since she moved in with the Gales, because nights at the theater are something she's always associated with her mother.

Not even tragedy has diminished Anna's love of ballet, and when Marcia suggested it, Anna swallowed down the bitter taste of loss and gratefully accepted. Her mom would be whispering in Anna's ear right now, pointing out interesting facts in the dancers' biographies, and scouting surrounding patrons for potential troublemakers who might start snoring halfway through the first act.

Marcia pats Anna's hand instead, watching her in that quiet, careful way she has. Anna smiles, because some experiences don't have to be the same as before to be her very favorite thing.

Besides, tonight isn't some local ballet school sending sugar-plum toddlers out on stage. This is the Metropolitan Ballet, and their finest prima in two generations has been getting rave reviews season after season, every word of which Anna has meticulously collected, cut out, and pasted into her volumes of scrapbooks. She remembers so clearly how her mother did that religiously, steady hands smoothing pictures and letters into film-coated pages. When they were all lost in the fire, Anna started the tradition anew.

She's going to see Victoria Ford—the Queen of Ballet—dance, in the final preview before the biggest opening in Metropolitan history. That they even have tickets is a

miracle, and Anna tries to ignore the tug of guilt somewhere around her diaphragm, because Marcia probably cannot afford this.

The music swells as the curtain rises, and Anna grips the arms of her chair as though she might float away. It's really happening. She blinks back brimming tears, determined not to miss a second as the corps begin to leap and scurry across the stage. It's magic. Everywhere she looks something beautiful is happening. These aren't just dancers; these people are Anna's heroes and they can *fly*.

The wonder she feels for the company pales in comparison as the corps parts like water cleaved by the prow of a ship. It leaves a path through their midst, revelers lining the parade route for their queen to pass. Anna feels Jess clutch her forearm, holding her in place.

With a leap that seems to hang in the air for countless seconds, Victoria Ford enters the stage. The audience goes as wild as Anna's heartbeat, decorum thrown off for the night at the arrival of a bona fide star. As Victoria crosses the stage in a series of flawless turns, leading man trailing in her wake, the applause builds and builds.

Anna's on her feet with the rest of her section, even though she can hear the grumbles about an ovation coming too soon. Jess and Marcia join her in the fervent applause, thunderclaps between their palms adding to the brewing storm in the room. Anna doesn't take her eyes from Victoria's face, grateful that she can see every flicker of emotion.

At first Victoria seems proud, perhaps even a little humbled by the adulation. Then there's a twist of irritation to her features, in the scrunch of her nose, and the faintest roll of her eyes. She looks to the conductor, who stops the score from proceeding and repeats a few bars in a vamp instead.

Anna's watched the archive footage so many times, but nothing compares to seeing this all play out right in front of her. She can almost feel the heat of the lights beating down.

Then, with a flutter of her hands, Victoria silences the audience. The clapping stumbles to a halt, and everyone takes their seat as though thrown by those very hands. A nod, and the theater full of people understands. Their appreciation is noted, but this is Victoria Ford's show now. Time to sit back and be dazzled.

The conductor builds up again as Victoria sets her feet in position. When she launches into the choreography again, the audience is held in perfect, rapt silence. Anna doesn't remember if she breathes or not for the rest of the act, but every step and turn is seared into her memory.

“The reviews will be insane,” Anna predicts at the interval, grabbing for the ice cream Marcia provides. “I swear we just saw history being made, and it’s going to be a smash tomorrow night.”

“I’m sure we did,” Jess answers, mocking only a little. “So this doesn’t put you off ribbons and broken toes for the rest of your life, sis?”

“Are you kidding?” Anna says with a gasp. “How could I ever do anything else?”

# CHAPTER 1

The Metropolitan Performing Arts Center, squarely in the heart of New York, is everything Anna ever dreamed it would be. She stands on the sidewalk out front, trying to take in the scale of the glass and concrete. With her dance bag on her shoulder and her hair in the neatest bun she could wrangle, she's ready to make that all-important first impression.

"Newbie!" someone says, tapping her on the shoulder. A short guy with dark eyes and a kind smile is looking at her expectantly. He has his own dance bag over his shoulder, and his cardigan looks so lived-in, so comfortable, that Anna covets it immediately. "You're gonna be late," he says.

"I've still got, like, fifteen minutes," Anna says.

"Yeah, you really want to get a head start on the warm-up here. Which means fifteen early is basically late. Ethan Vaughn, by the way"

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Anna Gale," she explains as he takes her arm and steers her around the corner of the huge building to what looks suspiciously like a fire escape. "I didn't think I'd made the company. Richard told me they almost never take anyone from regional tryouts."

"Yeah, Victoria thinks not moving to New York in advance shows a lack of dedication. But this is the first year anyone other than her had a say in who dances. I'm just glad I'm still in."

"You're in your second season?"

"Third, actually," Ethan tells her as they climb the staircase to where the fire exit is propped open with a couple of bricks. They're a few floors up and Anna knows she'll get dizzy if she looks down. "I'm really hoping to make principal this season."

"I bet you will," Anna says with gusto.

He laughs at her, but it's not completely unkind. "You haven't even seen me dance."

"I don't need to," Anna assures him. "I have a good feeling about it."

"Well, Tuesday mornings kick that out of you soon enough," he says. "Ladies' changing room in there." He gestures to a door on the right. "You want Studio C, that's four along, when you're done."

“Why are you being so nice to me?” Anna asks, remembering her foster mother’s warnings about the pranks of competitive dancers that could sabotage a career in one move.

“I don’t know,” he says with a shrug. “I guess because nobody ever was to me.”



Changing at record speed, Anna is stripped to her leotard and tights in less than a minute. She blasts her hair with one last cloud of hairspray and shoves her things in the first empty locker she comes across. Then she heads right back out to the studio, and freezes for a moment in the doorway. It’s just like so many other studios she’s danced in, the smell of Deep Heat and Tiger Balm mingling with stale sweat, not quite drowned out by the morning rush of fresh deodorant, perfume, or cologne. There’s dust high up in the rafters, but the light is sharp and uncompromising, the ceiling of glass making the battered floor a stage with the broadest of spotlights. In here there will be nowhere to hide.

At the moveable barre in the center of the room stands Delphine Wade, the company’s prima ballerina. Anna knew their paths would cross, but didn’t realize they’d be taking classes together. Delphine is bending and stretching to her own routine, shorter in real life than she seems on stage. Like Anna, she’s in leotard and tights, a wrap around her shoulders for warmth.

Conscious of time ebbing away, Anna finds a space at the back of the room when Ethan shimmies along to leave enough of a gap. He’s firing through a series of stretches as Anna pulls out her pointe shoes, and the ribbons she at least had the foresight to cut ahead of time. She sits on the floor to make her quick stitches and, despite taking a hammer to them last night, she smacks the toes of her shoes against the floor a few more times to ready them.

She has to be perfect.

It’s not hard to work out that people are talking about her. In the changing room she may have tried a sunny introduction, but this room is far too intimidating. Gabriel Bishop, probably the most exciting male principal Anna has ever seen dance, is warming up with Delphine. Tall and broad-shouldered, he shoots Anna a look and she smiles weakly. When she raises her hand in a wave, she actually gets a blinding smile in return.

Ethan interrupts then.

“I’ll introduce you around once Victoria has had her way with us,” he says. “We’ve got David afterward, much less scary.”

“David Jackson?” Anna can’t believe she’s really here, dancing alongside these people whose names litter her programs and magazine clippings, the box left behind under her bed at Marcia’s, sacrificed as a collection of childish things.

“Try not to look too star-struck,” he leans in to mutter. “They really hate that.”

“Good note,” Anna says, working her arms up, out, and over in repetition. She’s barely gotten up on her toes for the first time, her muscles slow to wake, when the door flies open with a bang. She lets herself fall into a forward *port de bras*, clearing her head and getting her blood rushing in one.

It’s what distracts her from the moment she’s been desperately trying not to fixate on. Victoria Ford is a legend for a reason, and Anna’s been trying to concentrate on almost anything about her new job that will keep her from thinking about working with maybe the greatest ballerina in modern history.

“Good morning, *mes danseurs*,” Victoria greets them, striding to the front of the room and receiving the rapt attention of every person without so much as raising her voice.

Anna is holding her breath, scared that somehow she’ll shatter the moment she’s given up almost every morning, evening, and weekend for over these past few years.

“Welcome to our new season.”

A polite round of applause ripples through the room. Anna joins enthusiastically, clapping a second too long and blushing at her own exuberance.

“Despite certain changes to the selection of our dancers this year, I believe this will be our most dazzling season yet. I’m putting together a program that will be spellbinding, brilliant, and most importantly? *Hot*.”

Some of the more established dancers cheer. Anna doesn’t dare, the sound dying in her throat. Victoria fusses with her necklace, a dark metal with a knot as its focal point. It brings her collarbones into sharp relief above the flat neckline of her Bardot-style black top.

“But for now, it’s Tuesday morning and you are all at my mercy.”

The laughter is a little more nervous this time. Anna’s already convinced this woman means it. Rolling her ankle, which is still just a little crunchy from the past two days of travel and limited rehearsal, Anna lets her gaze flicker from person to person as they straighten up even more, clearly waiting for instruction.

“Teresa, if you please.”

The dark-haired pianist Anna hadn’t noticed until that moment strikes up with the theme from *Jaws*.

There's a burst of laughter, and Victoria fixes her with an indulgent glare. "Something more appropriate, perhaps?"

The music changes to something classical. Anna is too jittery to pluck out its correct name.

"Let's begin," Victoria says.

Anna follows the rest of the class and turns, placing her left hand lightly on the barre. As Victoria strolls past her, she thinks she might snap the wood with how hard she grips in panic, but the barre is still attached when Victoria finishes her circuit of the studio and calls out the first routine.

"*Pliés*. In first, *demi, demi, full, port de bras* front and back. Repeat in second, fourth, fifth. Then reverse."

Anna processes the barked command quickly—it's a fairly standard request. She touches her heels together, feet turned out, and bends her knees in first one *demi-plié* and then a second. Her knees groan a little as she deepens into the full, but it feels good. She can feel the sneaky glances coming her way, the other women scoping out the competition. It's not bitchy, per se, but Anna's felt those same searching glances every time she's started over in some new school or studio.

She keeps her neck straight and her eyes fixed on a point on the window wall, making each bend as deep as possible. This needs to be a good first impression. Victoria moves among the company, starting with Delphine and Gabriel, offering muttered criticisms to each dancer she passes. On this sweep she doesn't bother with the back row, and Ethan and Anna allow themselves a joint sigh of relief when Victoria returns to the front of the room without making a full circuit.

"Teresa!" Victoria calls, and the music changes up.

The next sequence is rattled off, but Anna grabs each detail like her life depends on it. She's never been more grateful to have an ear for detail. This time around, when Victoria passes, she offers only "lift as you descend" to Anna, but poor Ethan gets a sharp tut and "lazy, lazy." Anna thinks she would burst into tears if that happened to her.

The repetitive sets are a fantastic warm-up, and they're all sweating by the time they finish a set of *rond de jambe à terre*. The room's earlier tension seems to be settling, and Victoria actually lets a little hint of a smile play across her mouth as she watches them all in the front wall mirrors. Hard work pleases her, it would seem.

"Let's move the barres," Victoria announces, clapping her hands twice. "Then I want you all to come to center. *Allez*."



Four of the male dancers move the barres from the center of the room in a practiced move. Anna wonders how these little duties are decided, if she'll be expected to divine what she has to help with, and what she should stay the hell away from. Being helpful is usually how she makes a good impression. Here, she doesn't have the first clue.

"*Adagio*," Victoria says to Teresa, who strikes up again.

Anna is watching the dancers around her—they make quite a crowd as she hovers at the back. She has a clear sightline on Victoria, who promptly turns her back on them once more.

Oh God. She's demonstrating. After so many years of dreaming about seeing this live once more, Anna is watching Victoria Ford dance.

"*Chassé* on one, to first *arabesque*, lift the leg, hold."

Well, it's pretty minimalist, just an indication of each move rather than anything like the fluid movements Anna has studied for hours at the Westin Center archives. She marathoned those recordings the way other people her age spent the weekend watching back-to-back episodes of *Friends*.

"*Penché* on five, six, come up seven, *pas de bourée* eight." Anna holds in a happy sigh at the grace of Victoria's movement. "*Pas de basque* on one, *attitude* two, *chassé*, *fouetté*. *Tombé*, *pas de bourée* to fourth and many, many turns."

Oh, this is a real set this time. Anna concentrates maybe as hard as she ever has in her life.

"Let's finish fourth, *tendu*, and find your fifth."

There's a murmur around the room, some feet moving as they mime the movements.

Victoria turns to face them, arms now firmly back at her sides. "Groups of five. Let's go!"

Delphine and Gabriel are the first to step forward; the other three in their group are all featured soloists. They start the routine with confidence, exchanging glances as they make those first few steps, but the focus of the room is shattered by the shrill ringing of a cell phone. In a room full of ballet dancers, anyone could have the ironic choice of *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy*. Judging by the groans of disgust and the way the dancing grinds to a halt, Anna knows there's only one person to blame.

She freezes.

"Am I hearing things?" Victoria spits her disapproving question at them. "Did one of you have an aneurysm on your way here and decide cell phones were suddenly allowed in my studio?"

People start to look around. Still the notes blare out. Anna can't believe someone would call her the one morning she was too distracted to flick the damn thing to Silent. When a second chorus begins, she has no choice but to scramble for her bag, muttering "sorry" as though repeating the word will somehow make her invisible.

"Sorry," she blurts again when she finally jams the damn thing to "Off". The silence is crackling, and Anna knows that what comes next won't be pretty. She turns to face her fate, ready to apologize to Victoria Ford, and all her worst fears come bubbling to life in an instant.

"The charity case," Victoria snaps. "Of course. Just another millennial who thinks the centuries-long history of ballet owes them any career they bother to pick for themselves. This is what happens when people fawn over your first tutu and tell you that you're special, Anya."

Anna opens her mouth to protest the wrong name, wounded that the only thing her hero knows about her is how she came to join the company, but not even her *name*. She feels the pity radiating from Ethan, and she's almost pathetically grateful that nobody else knows yet that she's been slighted.

"You're not," Victoria finishes with a relish that makes Anna feel bruised.

It might have hurt less to be slapped across the face. She can feel her chance to recover any ground at all slipping away by the second. "Ms. Ford—"

"Members of the company call me Victoria." She straightens even further, which Anna didn't know was possible. "But you are no longer a member of this company. Tell Rick this is the last time he'll be indulged."

That sends a gasp around the room, not to mention a few unkind giggles.

"I'm so sorry," Anna manages to say, grabbing her bag and shoving her phone into it. The stares from every corner of the room feel like lasers bearing down on her, but she'd rather endure all of them than the disgust on Victoria's face.

"Wait!" Victoria calls just as Anna reaches the door.

*Great, further humiliation.* Last time Anna had a dream this mortifying, she was back in high school and naked in the cafeteria. This feels a thousand times worse.

"Since your lack of consideration has knocked the sequence from everyone else's memory, why don't you take a stab at it. Show us what we should be doing now, if not for your selfish interruption."

The curl of Victoria's lip is cruel, and it's clear that Anna is already beneath her contempt. This is intended as a final embarrassment, to make sure the only memory anyone may retain of Anna Gale is of stupidity. It's every gym class that the new foster

kid was laughed out of, every party she showed up to only to realize the invite had been a prank designed to make her the entertainment.

“You, you want me to—”

“Teresa!” Victoria shouts with a brisk clap of her hands. “*Adagio*, please.” The music starts up. “Well?”

Anna slowly lowers her bag back to the floor. If the attention was keen before, it’s blazing now, but she takes a deep breath and picks out the beats in the music. There isn’t time to dwell on anything but the given routine now, and not for the first time, Anna takes position knowing she’s dancing for her career, and that feels a whole lot like dancing for her life.

So she *chassés*, into that *arabesque* and the music lifts and carries her while she repeats the list in her mind. Anna has never been comfortable with an audience, able to dance for other people purely because she can shut them out with sheer force of will. These steps might not be her own creation, but she owns them from the very second she starts to move.

Her toes lift her, and her heels bring her back down. Hips tilt and shoulders twist and it’s barely an effort at all to make one flow into the next, as though she’s had ten secret rehearsals in her dreams. The music persists, mournful in its rippling way, and Anna lets the memory wash over her. Dancing for the first time, for her parents, seeing their smiles and their open arms at the side of the room, urging her on.

The music comes to a halt as she finishes in fifth, perfectly in sync. It’s just soon enough to stop the rest of the memory coming, the fragmented, flickering flames that still dog the edges of her dreams if she doesn’t tire herself out enough. The room is silent, a collective breath being held in their chests.

“Well.” Victoria flicks her wrist idly in Anna’s direction. “At least you *remembered* it.”

“Does that mean—”

“You get to stay.” Victoria claps, and the room exhales as one.

Teresa plays a jaunty imitation of Anna’s ringtone and laughter erupts from every corner.

Anna doesn’t dare, but she’s relieved when Victoria just rolls her eyes. “If you wanted to do stand-up, Teresa, there’s a club across the street. First group. Let’s go!”

Anna sinks gratefully back into the crowd, and when she repeats the sequence as part of a group including Ethan, she tries to pretend like she doesn’t notice how they all give her a wider berth than necessary.

The rest of the ninety minutes passes quickly enough. As the class starts to filter out, Anna feels a tap on her shoulder.

“Anya,” Victoria says as Anna turns, bag already on her shoulder. “Come and see me this afternoon. See Kelly about a time.”

The rest of the class moves faster on overhearing that.

## CHAPTER 2

God.

Her fucking *kingdom* for a handful of Advil and two fingers of Scotch to chase them. Failing that, a door on her office that actually closes, because the usual day-trippers have come pouring in after class to bitch and gossip and moan. Her underlings are dedicated and brilliant, she wouldn't have hired them otherwise, but sometimes having enough staff to handle a company this size means being surrounded by far more people than Victoria would prefer.

They don't even realize that Victoria is in the grip of inspiration. Pure, undiluted genius is coursing through her veins, and not one of these sycophants can see it.

"New girl won't forget her first class," Teresa crows as she enters.

"I mean really," Derek, her head of recruitment, chimes in. "Who has their phone on anything but Vibrate these days? And by the looks of her, she could use some good vibrations."

"She can dance, though." Kelly is back at her desk, ever the competent assistant. "Can't she, Victoria?"

"What?" Victoria affects not to have been listening so keenly. A certain aloof brilliance is expected at all times, and as her idea takes shape she knows she'll need maximum theatrics to whip up their enthusiasm. "Oh, the new girl. Anya."

"I haven't seen lines like that since...well, since you."

Kelly is getting bold as she grows into the role of personal secretary and gatekeeper. The first few months were rough on her, everyone else in the building treating anyone above a size two as a curiosity, something to be stared at and whispered about. Kelly has brushed it all off magnificently, and when the younger girls in the company get out of line, she pointedly eats cupcakes in front of them until they run off in fear or disgust.

"Can you get me some time with our esteemed benefactor?" Victoria asks, tone as breezy as a spring morning.

"You actually *want* to see Rick Westin?" Derek is either stunned or scandalized. Either way the word will be around the entire company before the hour is out.

"Hmm," Victoria confirms, the very picture of nonchalance. "You see, I'm changing our program. *Giselle*? That old chestnut has been done to death. If even one of you

speaks up now to suggest *Swan Lake* instead, that person is fired. I did not make my name by regurgitating clichés, and my company will not be doing that, either. That girl in there is a disruption, and by the looks of her she's some kind of corn-fed hick who thinks sophistication is a shade of eyeshadow you can buy in Sephora. But luckily for her...she just met me."

The sideways glances and murmurs come right on cue.

"That is my new star. Or I'll make her one, at least."

"But what about—"

"Derek, has asking a question that began with 'but what about' ever worked out well for you?"

He shakes his head, suitably chastised.

"Let me know when Delphine and Gabriel are done with David's class. Have them meet me in the executive dining room for an early lunch."

"What should I tell them?" Kelly asks, the frown on her face suggesting she's already dealing with someone at Rick's office about Victoria's meeting request.

"Tell them we're rethinking *Giselle*."



Gabriel holds the door open for Delphine when they enter the dining room, and Victoria allows herself a momentary smile at what a gorgeous couple they make, in publicity shots and otherwise. It certainly made for a solid, if not spectacular, season last time around.

"I won't annoy you by offering food," Victoria begins, playing the *I'm one of you* card right up front. "But there's no reason we shouldn't have a drink together."

Delphine's eyes are sharp, and there's a flicker of movement at her elbow as she nudges Gabriel. Clearly she read the room almost as well as Victoria did, while their primo remains oblivious. It's an age-old problem, but the dearth of appropriately talented male dancers makes their competition nowhere near as fierce. Women, on the other hand, conditioned by a lifetime of seeing ballerinas as the ultimate feminine grace, find a threat in every new set of pointe shoes in the chorus.

"Vodka tonic," Delphine snaps at the waiter, and Gabriel opts for mineral water.

"I know we made plans before the break," Victoria begins. "But *Giselle* is out."

"Fine by me," Delphine comes right back at her, poised as ever. "Though I think we would have killed it."

“You would,” Victoria says, although the idea is so tarnished now, so yesterday that she can barely stand to think about it. “I’m going in a different direction for this season. You’ll still have *La Bayadère*, of course.”

“Wait...” Gabriel has spotted the blood in the water first. “That’s just the fall show.”

“True,” Victoria says “But for spring I’ll be going another way. I’ll still need you, Gabriel. Delphine, you’re still our prima, but I need the spring showcase for someone else.”

“You’re bringing Irina back up from the corps?” Delphine is gripping the edge of the table.

Victoria wants to laugh at the suggestion. They all know this is Irina’s last season, as long as her prescriptions keep getting renewed. Physio, painkillers, and sheer determination are giving Irina this last hurrah. Victoria is not going to be the one to take it from her.

“No.” Victoria waits for the drinks to be set down, stirring her martini with the olives on their toothpick. This is early even for her. She has choreography churning in her brain with unexpected vividness, and too long in this state of inspiration will get painful before long. A dulling of the edges, and she can do everything she intends before the day is through. “I have someone else in mind. Someone new.”

“The only new person is that idiot with the phone,” Delphine points out, folding her arms over her chest. “You can’t possibly... Victoria?”

“I’m going to take an older, obscure ballet and give it my own spin. I know I haven’t done much original work in the past few seasons, but let’s just say I have something brewing and she will be the perfect fit.”

“And I won’t?” Delphine reaches for her glass, and for a brief, shining moment Victoria thinks she might have the balls to throw it at her. It’s exactly what she would have done if someone tried to usurp her as prima.

“I know the right fit when I see it.” Victoria dismisses them both as she swallows the rest of her martini, standing with minimal jolts from her knee. “You’ll make this work, and we’ll have a triumphant year together. Won’t we?”

“Yes, Victoria,” they mutter, eyes cast down.

She doesn’t have time to dwell on whether they’ve truly accepted this. There’s so much more still to be done.



The prospect of Rick is so thoroughly unpleasant that Victoria has a Xanax chased with a slug of Grey Goose from the dainty silver flask stashed in her oversized purse.

She can't even get a goddamned break from New York traffic, because she's outside his pathetic little *club* all too soon. There's no need to remove her sunglasses when the *maitre d'* fumbles her name while frantically searching the list; she knows Rick will have left it off on purpose. At least Kelly's call has added her to the reservation.

"Mr. Westin will see you in his private room," a perky young hostess announces.

Victoria smooths down her black blazer and avoids the temptation to tousle her hair as she walks through the club behind the girl. There's something in the swing of her ponytail and farm-fresh complexion that sets Victoria's thoughts of Anna bubbling again, and she knows she has to seal this deal to get her way.

"Victoria!" He greets her with the usual smarm, standing from where he's been sprawled on a leather bunkette. "A sight for sore eyes."

"Darling." Victoria lets a little warmth into her voice. "You never come by the center."

"You have things well in hand. And I did my part by finding you some new blood. How is she?"

"Are you sleeping with her?" Victoria asks, despite her best intentions. "I can still use her, but if this is some fling, I won't disrupt the balance of my company."

"*Our* company," Rick says, exactly as expected. She can hear him gritting his teeth. "At least, I'm the one paying for it."

"And it wouldn't make a damn cent if I wasn't the one bringing it up to standard." Victoria takes a seat, leaving him standing. "I have plans for your girl. So long as she's not just for you to use once and discard."

"She's a talented ballerina, Victoria. Not a Kleenex."

"Tell me when that's ever stopped you before."

Rick shrugs, conceding her point. "I hear you're done with *Giselle*. These whims of yours, Victoria. They cost money."

"Lucky you have so much of it," Victoria fires right back. "I thought you wanted to save ballet from itself. Make it as exciting as when we danced together."

Rick wags a finger at her, in a way he no doubt finds charming. "Flattery will get you most places, you know that."

"I've never denied we were great together, Rick." Victoria accepts her drink, presumably ordered before her arrival, and the hostess scurries out. They must know



it's a bad sign when Rick is forced to talk to any woman over thirty. "But I know talent. I know how to get the best out of someone's dancing."

"Nobody does it better, and that's why you're my artistic director. But if you screw this up, you're out. You know I can't carry you forever."

"Carry me?" Victoria rocks back in her chair at that. She's heard the whispers of course. But never—*never*—from Rick himself. "I thought I was the crown jewel in your dazzling assortment?"

"When I hired you, yes," Rick says. "But it's been four years and you haven't blown anyone out of the water yet. How do I know there's a truly original Victoria Ford production in you? If you couldn't do it with Delphine, one of the most technically gifted—"

"Technique doesn't count for shit on its own, and you know it." Victoria throws back the rest of her drink and stands. "But if you need me to bet the house on this idea, then consider it gambled."

"Careful, Victoria. I might think you still give a damn."

"I've always given a damn," she corrects him, turning toward the door. "But I'm not sure you do, anymore."

"Oh, I give plenty." Rick strides across the room to open the door for her.

Victoria blinks a fraction too long and twelve years evaporate. They're in the studio, he's sporting that ridiculous goatee, and she's six weeks away from the end of her career.

"Have Kelly send me the details when it's pulled together," he continues. "I'll want a preview before I sign off on this. Make time."

"It's only a week until the print run?" Victoria says before lowering her shoulders and accepting her fate. "Hard work doesn't scare me, you know that."

"Then work very hard," Rick says, the threat clear. "Goodbye, Victoria. Let's not make this the start of your farewell, hmm?"

That she makes it out of the room without flipping him off is one of the greater victories for Victoria's limited self-restraint. She knocks a vase of ugly flowers from the table in the corridor just to turn the rage back down to simmering. The ridiculous carpet denies her even the satisfaction of a good smash.

Back in the car, she summons Kelly with a press of her Bluetooth. Scanning downtown traffic through her tinted window, Victoria rubs absentmindedly at her knee. Stiff again this morning, and these heels to intimidate Rick both didn't work and have cost her at least one extra physio session. For all the good that does. Through

the fabric of her pants she runs a fingertip over the valley of her scar, flicking a cursory glance to make sure the new driver isn't watching in the rearview mirror.

"I squeezed Anna in at three," Kelly greets her on the phone, not bothering with small talk. "That gives you time to stop off before coming back."

For her prescription, Victoria realizes. Kelly's been collecting them for her for so long that the doctor had the cheek to actually demand Victoria show up in person before writing another refill. The chaos of today has already blown the appointment from her mind, and she had spent most of last night working out perfectly good reasons to cancel. As though hearing her scheme, the ligament in her knee tightens enough to make her grit her teeth. She ends her call without bothering to sign off; Kelly is more than used to it by now.

"Park and Seventy-Third," Victoria barks at the driver, who's used to the brevity already. He nods in acknowledgment.

Victoria leans back against the leather of the seat and closes her eyes. As soon as she does, the first steps start to materialize, the scuff of leather against a wooden floor already forming beats only she can hear.

This girl had better show up ready to impress at three. Victoria's just bet her future on a straightforward routine and a stuttering desire to please. But there's something about this Anna, something Victoria hasn't felt stirring in her gut for well over a decade. She's immodest enough to know how exceptional she herself was, that no one since has come close to outshining her career.

But there's something in the way that girl moves that makes Victoria's own limbs stir once more, like a low voltage running just under her skin. There might never be another Victoria Ford, and she wouldn't want there to be. She just might settle for unearthing the next best thing.

## CHAPTER 3

At three sharp, Anna knocks on the outer door of Victoria's office.

The redheaded woman who came to find her earlier is sitting at a desk covered in piles of paper, her head barely visible over the miniature mountains.

"I'm Anna?"

"Of course you are," the woman replies. "Did I tell you my name earlier? Well, it's Kelly."

"Got it," Anna answers with her first grin in hours, hoisting her kit bag back on her shoulder. "Do you know if Ms. Ford—"

"Victoria," Kelly corrects, pursing her lips.

"Right. Victoria." Anna stifles a sigh. She isn't going to get a single thing right today. Maybe it's not too late to catch a bus back to Dubuque, Iowa. "Do you know if this is just to yell at me for earlier? Because I am really worried I might cry if she does, and that is not the impression I was going for."

"Oh, there's no crying in ballet," Kelly scolds, but her smile is still kind. "I'd offer you one of these donuts to cheer you up, but—"

"I eat donuts!" Anna interrupts, because it's the first actual food she's seen all day. Everyone who bothered to eat between classes had some kind of smoothie or a handful of nuts. "Although maybe not right before my meeting," she says, realizing it's a terrible idea just as a door swings open.

"An-ya!" comes the yell a moment later.

Anna winces, and Kelly shoots one last sympathetic look.

"Any—"

"I'm here!" Anna says, slipping into the inner office and slamming the door behind her. "Also, and this is not a big deal or anything, but it's actually, um, Anna?"

Victoria shoots her a baleful look from where she's pacing behind the desk. "How utterly provincial. You don't think in this world a nice Russian twist might be better? It certainly sounds better than those dreadful Midwestern vowels you just assaulted me with."

"It's my *name*," Anna protests.

“How did you find the late-morning session?” Victoria changes tack. She sits in her oversized leather chair and kicks one foot up on the desk, while Anna fumbles for an answer. “Did you manage to keep your phone off for the entire session? Or should I expect David Jackson to be cursing your name?”

Anna taps the phone in the pocket of her warm-down hoodie, having checked six times on the way there that it was still both silenced and powered down.

“He was good. Great, actually. We tried some interesting exercises.”

“Did you prefer it to my class?”

“W-what?” Anna is caught off guard by the bluntness. “Of course not! You’re... The only reason I applied for the company was the glimmer of a chance of working with you.” A hint of a smile. Finally, Anna has done something right.

Victoria gestures for her to sit in the visitor’s chair in front of her desk, and Anna gets off tired her legs gratefully.

“How old are you? Older than most of my newbies, I’d bet.”

“Twenty-one. But I wasn’t injured or anything, I just got started late.”

“Oh, I’m in very little doubt about your ability,” Victoria said, her smile unmistakable this time, brief and radiant.

But there’s still something about the steeliness of her gaze that has Anna on edge. Twelve years have passed since she saw Victoria dance, and it’s difficult to reconcile this more severe woman with the glowing ballerina on stage. Here, Victoria wears barely a trace of makeup, and instead of the white silks and satin, she’s wrapped in skintight black clothing, like bandages, only her shoulders bared.

“I can do better.”

“I certainly hope so,” Victoria agrees, fussing with some glossy photos stacked on her desk. “This season’s program goes to print next week.” She flashes a picture of Gabriel Bishop at Anna briefly. “So I have a handful of days left to make any final changes.”

“Of course.” Anna’s heart sinks. This is just a more elaborate firing. One Victoria can really savor after giving Anna a short reprieve. “And my name won’t be listed in the corps, is that it?”

“Mmm,” Victoria considers the photos a moment longer before glancing toward the corner.

Anna follows her gaze and sees a shiny black cane propped against the coat rack.

“Oh, no. Not in the corps, darling. It just wasn’t meant to be.”

“Great,” Anna says through gritted teeth, starting to rise from her chair. “Well, I won’t waste any more of your day.” She starts to get up.

“Principals aren’t listed there, of course.”

Anna sits. Heavily.

“They get their own billing.”

“Who’s a principal?” she whispers. This is teen-movie nonsense. It cannot be happening.

“You. Or at least you could be. Your dear benefactor Rick will want to sign off, of course. But it’s my call.”

“Mr. Westin was very kind to me at the auditions. I saw you dance with him, you know. The *pas de deux*—”

“Oh.” Victoria sighs. “Another fangirl. How thoroughly original.”

Clearly with flattery, the less-is-more approach is the way to go.

“If you’re going to tell me how I changed your life, I’ll need to schedule a little extra time to throw up.”

Anna keeps her mouth firmly shut. She’s gone from thinking she’s fired to being offered the one thing she hardly dares to dream about in the space of a few minutes. It’s not even entirely clear yet *what* Victoria is offering, and Anna hasn’t felt this dizzy since she last went for eight pirouettes in a row.

“Anyway,” Victoria continues, looking at a notepad on her desk, “raw talent is one thing. To be ready for spring, you’ll have to be exceptional in every way. I’ll teach you privately, on top of your usual company commitments. My time, and I hope I don’t have to break this down for you, is extremely valuable.”

“Private lessons?” Anna repeats. “With you.”

“The demands will be considerable.” This time she looks Anna square in the eye. “Assuming you have it in you.”

Anna holds the stare and nods solemnly. She doesn’t even know exactly what Victoria wants, but she wants to be the one to do it. “Principal” is echoing in Anna’s brain like a damn Greek chorus.

“When do we start?” Anna hopes that’s the right response.

“Tomorrow morning,” Victoria says, standing while leaning heavily on her desk for leverage.

Anna pretends not to notice, keeping her eyes on Victoria’s face the whole time.

“First session is at ten, same as today, but you’ll be here for eight. I assume that won’t be a problem?”

“Of course not.” Anna stands and extends her hand. “I’m so grateful for the opportunity, Victoria.”

Victoria stares at her hand in something between confusion and disgust, until Anna drops it back to her side.

"I don't want gratitude," Victoria says. "Just a lot of hard work."

"You got it. Should I meet you here, or...?"

"The de Valois studio. Is that the only leotard you have?"

"It's my newest." Anna looks down at her pale pink leotard, barely visible above the zip in her hoodie. "But I thought my shoes were the better investment. At least until we start getting paid."

"Leave your measurements with Kelly. If we're going to work in close quarters, I don't need my eyes assaulted. Since it's your first day, I won't get started on your hair, but you will need to discover a little something called conditioner if I'm putting you on my stage."

"Right." Anna's elation at the sudden promotion is buffeted somewhat by the fresh storm of Victoria's disapproval, but she manages to make it out of the room intact. She makes her way around Kelly's desk to mention the measurements, but Kelly looks her up and down before Anna can open her mouth.

"I know sizes at a glance, don't worry. You're broad compared to some of the girls, but still in standard range. I know what she likes, leave it with me."

"You know what—"

"Tell me your shoes are up to standard at least?"

"They are," Anna says proudly. "Although how many do you think I'll get through each week?"

"Go see the wardrobe mistress in the morning," Kelly says with a sigh. "If you have to ask, you don't have enough. And all the footwear you can trash is one of the very few side perks, Anya."

"It really is 'Anna.' Do you think you could mention that to her?"

Kelly snorts. "Good luck with that. Want that donut now?"

Anna accepts a chocolate one with sprinkles and takes off for the day.



Waiting outside the theater her sister works at, Anna ignores the glances from passing people as she drinks the last of her Frappuccino. She checks her phone with a little impatience, noting the reply of "*coming down*" landed at least eight minutes ago. Just as Anna shoves the phone back in her pocket, Jess finally barrels out of the heavy metal door, pulling her headset off and shoving it into her leather backpack.

“Well, if it isn’t my sugar-plum sister,” Jess teases, pulling Anna into a hug.

Anna hugs back with more enthusiasm than she meant to, genuinely relieved to see a friendly face.

“You survived the dungeons of Metropolitan, then?”

“They’re not dungeons,” Anna says, before realizing she’s being baited. “The studios are up on a high floor and very well lit, thank you.”

“So they should be, with the money Victoria Ford and Richard Westin plowed into the place. Speaking of, did you see your heroes in the flesh? Or does the company just cash in on having their names attached?”

Anna isn’t sure she’s ready to talk about it, not out here on the street. “I’ll tell you over food,” she says. “You must need some protein, surely?”

“I can finally show you the city for real,” Jess says with a grin. “And look at you, out in the Theater District all by yourself. Was the couch okay last night?”

“You know me,” Anna says, linking arms with Jess as they head down the street. “I can sleep on a bed of nails if I have to.”

“It was secondhand, but it’s not that bad. Dim sum?”

“God, yes,” Anna groans.

“Okay, this place is my first gift to you in your new city, sis. You’re gonna love it.”

“Does that mean you’re paying?” They duck inside the narrow doorway into a loud and bustling restaurant. “Cause I don’t get paid until next week.”

“Fine, we’ll spend my stage-managing riches,” Jess says with a sigh. “Life on crew is just as glamorous as ever, by the way. Thanks for asking.”

“I was going to ask over food,” Anna says as a waiter waves them over to a little table in the far corner. “You know I can’t concentrate when I’m hungry.”

It just takes a glance at the menu for Anna to put in an order of pot stickers, and Jess orders a few more dishes for them to share, knowing her plate will be shamelessly raided whether she does or not.

Anna wields her chopsticks and smiles broadly at her sister. “It’s been one heck of a day. You’re not going to believe it, Jess.”

A pot of green tea and small cups are set in front of them, and Anna pours for them both.

“So spill,” Jess says.

“I don’t even know where to start. No, wait, I totally do. Thanks *so much* for calling me before noon for the first time since I’ve known you. My phone wasn’t on Silent. I almost got murdered on my first day.”

“How would that even work?” Jess sips at her tea and waves the waiter back to order a beer along with their food. “Strung up on your own ribbons? And excuse me for checking you got there okay.”

“I’m not a kid. I can read a map and get the subway just fine. And I was in plenty of time, thank you. In plenty of time for you to mortify me in front of Victoria.”

“Oh, Victoria is it? How chummy.”

“Everyone in the company calls her Victoria. It’s, like, a rule.”

“So your first class on your first day was with your own living legend?” Jess asks, reaching across the table to squeeze Anna’s hand. “I’m so happy for you. That’s all you’ve ever wanted, right?”

“That and house seats to anything that’s sold out for a year.”

“Yeah, don’t hold your breath on that. Now stop deflecting me, and tell me how she was. I admit, I’m a little curious.”

“Jess, she was... You remember when we saw her, right?”

“Hard not to, since you reenacted every scene of it for a solid year.”

“Dedication,” Anna says. “Anyway, it’s been a decade and then some, but she’s still... The whole room just hangs on her every word. She wasn’t exactly thrilled about the phone, but then I did the combination and she forgave me.”

“How gracious of her,” Jess replies, smile tight and eyes narrowed. “I’ve heard some horror stories, Anna. You got off lightly.”

“Did I ever!” Anna practically squeals. She can finally say it out loud to another person and make it real. “She was so impressed that she called me in this afternoon. She wants to make me a principal.”

“I’m sorry, what? Anna, sweetie, I think you misunderstood.”

“No, I didn’t.” Their food arrives, and Anna diverts her temper into popping a steaming pot sticker in her mouth. She doesn’t want to fight with Jess on her first day. There’s nothing that should be able to ruin this, not even the nerves in Anna’s stomach, roiling at the thought of dancing just for Victoria in the morning.

“Maybe she wants you to shadow a principal? I mean, maybe soloist at a push if you have some particular look she needs,” Jess suggests, picking at her own shrimp. “But I know what first days are like; it’s just total information overload. You can check in the morning what she meant.”

Anna sets down her chopsticks. “Jess, she called me into her office, all on my own. After letting me stay, after I did the routine perfectly. The one my phone interrupted. And she said the program isn’t finalized yet, and she has an idea.”



“But she wasn’t firing you?”

“I thought so at first, like some kind of cruel way of dragging it out. But I swear to God, Jess, she wants me to do some secret show she hasn’t told anyone about. And Rick has to sign off, but she’ll get me ready, I just know it.”

“Rick?” Jess mocks gently. “Wow, one day and you’re in there with the name-dropping. I kinda love it. But why didn’t she tell you which show it is?”

“I...don’t know? She’s really busy and sometimes it’s like she expects me to just read her mind, but she definitely has a plan.”

“This might just be a power play between her and Westin.” Jess swipes at a pot sticker, but Anna defends her pile deftly. “There’s always rumors that they hate each other, that they’re sleeping together. That they hate each other *and* they’re sleeping together. You said yourself that Rick tapped you for the last spot. Maybe this is her revenge or something.”

“Wow.” Anna swallows her food, tasteless in her mouth now. “I don’t expect you to care about it as much as I do, Jess. But this is my dream, and it’s finally coming true. Here you are, telling me I’m just some pawn in a game. Like I don’t deserve any better.”

“I’m trying to protect you!” Jess hisses, glancing at the people who’ve started looking their way. “You work so hard and you’re so talented, Anna. Of course you deserve good things.”

“But I shouldn’t get my hopes up?” Anna wants to argue her corner, but it’s not like Victoria has given her much to go on. “I mean, I was happy enough just to be in the company. Anything else is just some crazy bonus, right?”

“Just wait and see,” Jess cautions.

“Right.” Anna sighs. “That shrimp looks really good.”

“You’ll have to give up some of your horde there, keeper of the dumplings. Sharing means it goes both ways. Even if you are somehow a principal.”

“If I am, I want my own bathroom.” Anna sniffs. “When is my bed coming anyway?”

“Whenever you find one on Craigslist?” Jess pulls a face at her lack of organization. “Hey, I am offering up my living room to give you somewhere to live. I can’t be on top of it all.”

“I’ll find something. Thanks, Jess. I really hope I’m not cramping your style too much.”

“Just don’t come in my room without knocking and we should be fine. Now eat up. I have a seven-thirty curtain and I need to stretch this off.”

“If you quit stealing my food, I can stop defending it long enough to chew.” Anna gets in a cheap shot of her own, but Jess shrugs it off.

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# THE MUSIC AND THE MIRROR

BY LOLA KEELEY

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