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Chapter One

With a swish, her mother opened the curtains, letting the afternoon sun stream into the room.

Vanessa shielded her eyes. "Mom, *please*."

"There's nothing wrong with a little sunshine." Mrs. Adler pursed her lips as she stood back to observe. "Besides, it kills the germs. Who knows how properly this place has been cleaned." She dug inside her purse and withdrew a small bottle of Purell, squeezing a dollop into her palm. "Bacteria, be gone!"

Vanessa couldn't help but laugh, and then she let her eyes wander.

It was a simple dorm room, sparsely furnished with two beds, two desks, and two dressers. The walls were painted a pale yellow. A long mirror nailed to the back of the closet door reflected the unpacked boxes that littered the floor. The

other half of the room was already decorated in loud, bright colors: movie posters, patchwork pillows, shoes and clothes spilling from the closet, but Vanessa's roommate was nowhere to be found.

Outside the open door, the hallway was bustling with chatter—girls laughing and gossiping about their summers, parents arguing while they squeezed heavy trunks through the corridor, little sisters spinning like delirious ballerinas.

Vanessa had once been that little sister, though she could barely remember the last time dancing had made her smile. She blew a wisp of red hair from her face and glanced at her father, who gave her a sympathetic shrug.

"Something's missing." Her mother moved a small vase from one side of the nightstand to the other. "That's better," she said, though it looked the same to Vanessa.

Her father sighed, and when his wife wasn't watching, he rolled his eyes at Vanessa. She laughed.

"What's funny?" her mother asked sternly.

Vanessa bit her lip. "Just thinking about something from the past."

"The past is nothing," her mother said, a slight quiver in her voice. "Focus on the future." She ruffled the edge of the duvet and ran a hand across her forehead, as if trying to erase the fine lines of stress and worry that had formed there over the past few years. "Of course, being here doesn't help."

There was a knock on the door. A girl with an upbeat ponytail stood in the hall, holding a clipboard.

"Yes?" Vanessa's mother said.

"Hi. I'm looking for Vanessa Adler?"

Vanessa took a step toward the door, but her mother didn't budge.

"I'm her mother, Mrs. Adler. And you are?"

"Oh, I'm Kate, the resident adviser." The girl tried to peer into the room. "I wanted to welcome Vanessa to the New York Ballet Academy."

"Resident *adviser?* There's only one of you?"

"There are two of us, actually," Kate said cheerfully. Her eyes were bright and blue, her hair light brown with blond highlights. "I'm in charge of the freshman girls, and Ben is in charge of the boys."

Mrs. Adler frowned. "I think I misunderstood you. You're trying to tell me that *you* are the only person watching over the freshman girls?"

Vanessa winced, and Kate flashed her an understanding look before giving Mrs. Adler a reassuring smile. "I am. But I promise you—"

Mrs. Adler cut her off. "Do you realize that there are only twenty dancers Vanessa's age admitted each year to the New York Ballet Academy?"

"I do—" Kate said.

"And that fifteen is a very impressionable age?"

Vanessa felt her face grow hot.

"I know. I was fifteen not that long ago—" Kate began to say.

"That's exactly my point!" Mrs. Adler raised her hands in the air. "You're barely older than Vanessa. How can you always know

where she is and whom she's spending time with? That she's doing her schoolwork and practicing her dance routines, when there are dozens of distractions surrounding her? Manhattan preys on naive young girls."

The entire room seemed to take a breath, including Mrs. Adler, who clutched the side of the dresser, fanning her neck. For a moment, Vanessa wished that her father would step in and tell her mother that she was out of line—but that wasn't how things were with her parents. Her mother was the one who gave the instructions; her dad merely followed them.

"I'm sorry," her mother said, composing herself. "I'm just worried about her." She turned to Vanessa. "I understand the need to dance. Really, I do; I was the same way. But are you absolutely sure you want to be here? Because there are other things out there, an entire world—"

"Mom, I'll be fine. Stop worrying."

They had already had this conversation—many, many times. Her mother wanted her to stay home, to go to public school back in Massachusetts. But Vanessa wanted . . . well, it wasn't so much about what she wanted to do. It was about what she *needed* to do.

And that was to be here. At the New York Ballet Academy. The same school that Margaret had gone to.

It had taken months of fighting and persuading her mom to say yes once the acceptance letter had arrived. The fact that Vanessa had been offered a full-tuition scholarship hadn't hurt. "The most talented dancer we had audition," the admissions officer had said. "Must run in the family."

Eventually Mrs. Adler had succumbed to the pressure.

Vanessa gave Kate an apologetic shrug, hoping her mother's diatribe hadn't already destroyed her reputation. Being an outcast in a class with only ten boys and ten girls wasn't exactly the fresh start that she wanted. But to Vanessa's surprise, Kate gave her a wink and turned toward her mother.

"Manhattan *is* an exciting place," Kate said, a cacophony of honking cars in the street below emphasizing her point. "And while I can't promise to know what Vanessa is doing all of the time, I *can* say that we do everything in our power to make sure our students are safe and happy. There are curfews and lockdowns, and for the most part, everyone here is so busy that there's barely any time to experience the city at all."

Mrs. Adler seemed to relax. "Good."

"Great." Kate tucked her clipboard under one arm. "Well, I'll leave you to your unpacking. Vanessa, I'll see you during orientation, which is in the main studio at Juilliard, on the third floor, in two hours. If you have any other questions, I'll be floating around."

Mrs. Adler glanced at Vanessa, then stepped into the hall. "I do have a few more questions," she said to Kate, following her down the hallway.

Once they were out of earshot, Vanessa shook her head, letting her wild red hair flail about her face. "Well, that was insane."

Her father smiled and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He was a handsome man, with strong, startling features that Vanessa had inherited, along with his height and fiery hair, though his had ripened to a distinguished auburn. She wasn't a

delicate flower like her mother or her sister, Margaret, and that was partially why she was such an astonishing dancer. No one expected her to be weightless, but when she leaped into a grand jeté, she seemed to float with an ethereal lightness, her feet tiptoeing across the stage as she transformed herself into a white swan, a sleeping princess, or a Sugar Plum Fairy, her shock of red hair flashing beneath the lights like electricity.

He rolled up his shirtsleeves and reached for one of the ballet slippers on her dresser, letting its ribbons slip through his fingers. It looked impossibly small in his palm. "Ness, you know if you aren't happy here, you can tell me."

A group of girls walked past the doorway, chatting and giggling. Vanessa bit her lip, wishing she wanted to be here as much they did. The New York Ballet Academy was the premier dance school in the country. She *should* want to be here, but her heart had never been in it, at least not until recently. It was her older sister, Margaret, who loved ballet, who counted steps in her sleep and dreamed of being onstage. Vanessa was just following in her footsteps.

Yet somehow, all through middle school, she had found herself spending more time practicing barre exercises than seeing her friends. A part of her wanted nothing more than to go to a public high school, eat a cheeseburger with her friends without feeling guilty, and date a guy who didn't own tights or spandex. There was a time when she thought that might be possible, but it had quickly slipped away after things fell apart with Margaret.

Vanessa sighed. "You know I can't leave." She glanced at the

door. "I know it's hard for her, but she isn't the only one who lost somebody."

"She's scared for you. She doesn't like this place." Her father put the shoe back on the dresser with care.

"Don't worry, Dad. It's just a school," Vanessa said.

"I know that. But your mother, she believes . . . well, you know what she thinks. She'd rather you be anywhere else. I support your being here if you think that's what is best for you. But if things get too much for you to handle, you can always come home. Choose a different path."

Dad gave a lopsided smile and patted Vanessa on the shoulder. She understood what he was saying, but what other path was there? Her grandmother had been a principal ballerina, her mother had been a principal ballerina, and Margaret had been one of the most promising students the school had ever seen.

Until she'd disappeared three years ago.

Vanessa could still remember when they got the phone call. It was February, and snow was falling over Massachusetts, floating past their kitchen window while she and her parents ate dinner. Her sister had run away, the program adviser had told her mother. "She fell in with the wrong crowd," he'd added. "The pressures of ballet sometimes lead girls in the wrong direction, no matter how hard we try to prevent it."

Her parents dropped Vanessa off with her grandparents that night and drove to New York to search for Margaret. By day, they worked with the police; by night, they wandered the city, combing its darkest and most desolate corners. After a

few weeks, her father returned to work, joining his wife on weekends.

Six months later, her parents gave up the search and moved back home to take care of their remaining daughter. Margaret's belongings were stored in the garage.

Vanessa wanted to believe that Margaret was still out there somewhere, laughing with friends, living a fantasy life as a normal teenager.

Then they got a final package in the mail from the New York Ballet Academy: Margaret's school ID, a leotard that still gave off her faint floral scent, and a battered pair of pointe shoes, all of which had been in her studio locker when they packed the rest of her things. Vanessa's mother cried when she opened the box and saw Margaret's initials scratched into the soles, an old pair that Margaret had kept because they'd been a gift from her teacher back in Massachusetts. "What if she's dead?" her mother whispered, uttering the thought that had been haunting all of them.

Vanessa sat down and rested her head on her mother's shoulder. "Maybe she just doesn't need these anymore." She refused to believe her sister was gone.

After that, while Vanessa and her father tried to resume their lives, her mother barely left her bed for an entire month. She stopped showering and dressing; she left her food untouched; she even refused to listen to classical music. That's when Vanessa knew it was bad.

So one dreary Friday, she slipped her ballet shoes out of the closet and tiptoed into the master bedroom, where her mother

was curled, unmoving, beneath the sheets. And as the rain trickled down the windowpanes, Vanessa performed, letting all of the grief pour out of her until she could feel nothing but the raw thumping of her heart.

Slowly, her mother sat up.

Soon, she was driving Vanessa to ballet lessons the way she'd always done, until one day Vanessa announced she was applying to the New York Ballet Academy. Her mother was shocked. She loved watching Vanessa dance, but never thought Vanessa loved it enough to follow in Margaret's footsteps. They had closed that chapter of their lives, she'd said.

But Vanessa hadn't. With her father's help, she applied to the same school Margaret had disappeared from, because she was determined not only to dance but to find her sister. She had to be here—in this school, in this life that had once belonged to her mother and to Margaret.

Now her father pulled over a box and sat down next to Vanessa. "I'm serious," he said. "I know you're a talented dancer. I just want to make sure you're happy too."

"I *am* happy," Vanessa said. *Sort of,* she told herself. Happiness was always complicated.

"Who's happy?" her mother asked, startling them both as she slipped through the door, dabbing her eyes with a linen hankie. She was always doing that, sneaking up on people, an omnipresent force in Vanessa's life.

"I am," Vanessa said. "I'm happy to be here."

"Of course you are," her mother said sadly. "It's the most elite ballet school in the world." She forced a smile. "I just

visited Margaret's old room." Her voice cracked, and Vanessa's father wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "Promise me you won't ever take any drugs. Not even aspirin. I don't care how much your feet hurt."

"You don't have to worry about that," Vanessa said. Other girls, she knew, used painkillers, but her feet were so numb and calloused that she could probably drive a nail through her toe and not feel it.

A short while later, after a final cleanup of empty boxes, her father gave her a long, tight hug. "Call me if you need anything. *Anything*," he whispered. "Even if it's just to chat."

Caught off guard by the softness in her father's voice, Vanessa relaxed into his arms. This was it, she realized, breathing in the scent of his aftershave. Only now had it sunk in that she wasn't going home with them. Vanessa pressed her cheek against his lapel. "I will."

"All right," her mother said. "It's my turn." And before Vanessa knew what was happening, her mother pulled her to her chest and squeezed, burying her face in Vanessa's hair. "Oh, I'm going to miss you," her mother said, rocking slightly as she held her. "You're going to be wonderful. I just know you are."

Vanessa allowed her arms to slip around her mother's slender body. "Thanks, Mom."

And suddenly, as if she had realized what she was doing, her mother released her and stepped back, smoothing her skirt and wiping her eyes with a tissue. "We should be off," she said briskly.

Vanessa watched as her parents disappeared into the hallway. *Now what?* She picked up a small box resting by her bed.

Nestled inside were Margaret's pointe shoes, their ribbons coiled around the worn pink satin. Gently, she traced the rough lines of her sister's initials on the soles. Just as she tucked them into her closet, a girl burst through her door.

"Was that your mom? Crazy lady who busted into my room without knocking? Who kept talking about someone named Margaret?" She was tall and lean, with dark-brown skin, sharp green eyes, and a hint of a smile.

"I'm sorry," Vanessa apologized. "If it makes you feel any better, she's been doing that to me for years."

"Damn. And I thought *my* mom was bad."

Vanessa bit her lip. "She didn't touch any of your stuff, did she?"

The girl pulled back her thick hair with a clip. "No, she just stood there and, like, vibrated. For a minute I thought she was going to sit on my bed, but I told her what's what before she got the chance. I might've made her cry."

"No, that wasn't you," Vanessa said, shaking her head. "She cries a lot these days." She paused. "I'm Vanessa, by the way."

"Vanessa? So who's Margaret?"

"My older sister. She used to go here . . . but now she doesn't."

The girl's eyes twinkled. "I'm Steffie."

"*Great* story." Another girl popped her head in. "And I'm TJ," the new girl said with a grin. "Your roommate."

She had big doe eyes and freckles. A tangled nest of curly brown hair was pinned on top of her head, a few stray ringlets bouncing around her face. "It's short for Tammy Jessica, but I think that's too girly. TJ's better, don't you think?"

Vanessa nodded. "I guess so."

"Define 'better,'" said Steffie.

"Nice to meet you too." TJ sat on her bright-blue bedspread. For a dancer, she had a generous frame. "I'm reinventing myself now that I'm here. Like I said: TJ. The T can stand for, like, tough as nails. And the J for . . . jazz. Or whatever. But that's who I am now. Going forward."

Vanessa smiled. The idea of a new beginning certainly was nice. TJ's name matched her image: she wore no makeup, not even eyeliner. Her features seemed expressive enough already.

"I'm from the city," TJ said, as if there were only one. "The Upper East Side. I could have just lived at home, but I wanted to get away from my parents. They're lawyers. Prillar & Prillar, so that's what our house is like. Always talking, talking, talking." She rolled her eyes. "It's going to be nice to be away from that."

Vanessa had to hide her smile. Talking, talking, talking. "Prillar?" she said. "Like the Prillar who's on the board of directors of NYBA?"

Steffie turned her head. "You didn't tell me that, TJ."

TJ replied, "Why would I? That didn't have anything to do with me getting in."

"Of course not," said Steffie. "I didn't mean to imply—"

But TJ just laughed. "I know. So where are you from, Vanessa? No, wait. Let me guess. California. No, Vermont."

"Close," Vanessa said. "Massachusetts."

Catching Vanessa eyeing the pile of clothes by her bed, TJ said, "Don't worry. I'm not this messy all the time."

Vanessa laughed. "Neither am I."

"Enough about your messy clothes," Steffie said. "I can't believe we get to go to school in Manhattan. How cool is that?"

"The city that never sleeps," TJ said.

"Where the sidewalks are paved with gold!" Steffie said. "Or is that Hollywood?"

"Doesn't matter," Vanessa said. "The point is, we're lucky."

"First thing I'm doing tomorrow morning is going to Times Square," Steffie said, pushing TJ aside and flopping down on the bed beside her.

"Ugh," TJ said. "The first thing I'm doing tomorrow is *not* going to Times Square."

"What's wrong with Times Square?" Steffie asked.

"Nothing, if you're a tourist."

"Well, I'm a tourist. I didn't live here my whole life like some people with big hair."

All three of them looked out the window to where Lincoln Center glittered in the late afternoon light. The central plaza fountain sprayed jets of water high into the air, and on every side was a grand building that Vanessa already knew by heart: the one with the dramatic glass windows was the New York City Ballet; the high arched windows was the Metropolitan Opera House; and the yellow marble-walled building was Avery Fisher Hall, home to the New York Philharmonic. Their new school, New York Ballet Academy, was tucked just behind Avery Fisher Hall, next to the Juilliard School: two modest buildings that were now Vanessa's home. The setting sun cast a brassy

sheen on everything they saw—from the fountain to the buildings on the plaza, from the wooden water towers that speckled the rooftops of the many apartment buildings to the glassy skyscrapers in the distance whose windows looked like molten gold.

"It's really beautiful," Steffie said, her snark gone for the moment. "Hard to believe this is home for the next four years. We're at, like, the center of the universe."

"We're *almost* at the center of the universe," TJ said. "There's a whole lot to New York City that we'll probably never get to see. Lincoln Center is a safe little bubble."

Not that safe, Vanessa thought, but to her new friends she said, "It feels unreal, doesn't it? Like tomorrow I'm going to wake up at home and realize it was all a dream."

"Just wait till classes," TJ said. She smiled and flashed a set of bright, white teeth. "It'll feel real when our feet are blistered and bleeding."

Instinctively, Vanessa flexed her toes inside her canvas sneakers. Unable to stop herself, she stared at Steffie's muscular thighs and TJ's straight back, and wondered if they were better dancers than she was. She wasn't used to being surrounded by so many serious dancers; at home, Vanessa had always been the best by far.

But her thoughts were interrupted when two others drifted in: a tiny girl named Elly, Steffie's roommate, who had wavy blond hair and was carrying a laptop under one arm, and an Asian boy who followed on her heels.

"We heard voices and thought we would stop in and say

hello," the boy said, "because we're both *wonderful* and so obviously you need to know who we are. I go by Blaine." He held out his hand to no one in particular, as though waiting for it to be kissed.

Steffie made a face and sat on the windowsill, crossing her long dark legs and scrutinizing the newcomers.

"But it's not his real name," Elly teased in a sweet, southern drawl. Everything about her was sugary and bite-sized: her yellow bob, her button nose, her pouty lips. Even her clothes were a lacy baby pink. She elbowed Blaine. "Go ahead. Tell them!"

Blaine shook his head and gave her a semiserious look. "Don't you dare."

TJ pushed her curly hair off her neck. "So what's your real name?"

Blaine swatted her question away. "I'll never tell."

"Why not?" TJ asked, looking from Blaine to Elly. "You already told her."

"That's because we're both from the South. She understands."

"Understands what?" Steffie asked.

"That people are weirder down there," Blaine said, as if it should have been obvious.

"And wider," TJ added.

Blaine shrugged. "It's true. But look, I'm half Japanese and half Mexican. How many people do y'all know who wash their margaritas down with a shot of sake?"

"What's sake?" TJ whispered to Vanessa.

"Not to mention that I'm a guy who likes to wear tights and slippers," Blaine continued, "and doesn't eat red meat. It's not easy growing up like that in Texas. Do you know how hard it is to find a decent salad down there?"

The room erupted in a chorus of giggles. "It's not that bad," Elly said, folding herself onto the bed next to TJ. "And the South *does* have one thing that the rest of the country doesn't."

"An excess of Mountain Dew?" TJ joked.

Elly smiled, her lips forming a pink crescent. "Southern gentlemen, preferably from Alabama."

Blaine rolled his eyes. "They're all farmers to me. Farmers with big fat hoes."

Vanessa let out a laugh. "I'd take collared shirts and chinos over coattails and bow ties any day," she said. "But I'm from Massachusetts. I like prep."

"See, that's what I'm talking about," Blaine said. "Or I could settle for a Russian dancer. They're so severe. I love it. I wouldn't even care if he spoke no English whatsoever. As long as he made sweet, sweet love to me while feeding me caviar, and then helped me play with my set of Matryoshka dolls." He paused. "Not that I have any Matryoshka dolls."

Vanessa and the girls continued staring at him. "Then how would you communicate?" Elly asked quizzically.

"Darling," Blaine said, leaning forward and batting his eyelashes. "The language of love requires no words. Haven't you seen *The Little Mermaid*?"

That made even Steffie laugh. "Enough about Russian men and little dolls and Disney movies. We're here to dance."

Elly opened her laptop, which had a pink case and an enormous heart on the lid, and showed them photos of famous dancers who had graduated from their school: Anastasia Petrova in her leading role in *Giselle*, Alexander Garrel as the sinewy Rat King from *The Nutcracker*, and Juliana Faraday as an ethereal Princess Aurora from *Sleeping Beauty*.

"Those are the ones who made it out," Blaine said. "What about the ones who didn't?"

Vanessa grew rigid. "What do you mean?"

Elly cut in. "I heard a girl broke her leg last year during a rehearsal. One of the guys dropped her mid-jump. An upperclassman told me he could hear her bone snap."

Vanessa cringed.

"Twenty are called," TJ intoned, "but few survive long enough to graduate."

"I'm *serious*," Blaine said. "There are all these students who get hurt."

"Not to mention the broken toes," Steffie chimed in. "I almost broke one of mine last year," she added, a thin silver anklet jingling as she rolled her foot.

"Or the broken hearts," Elly added, giving Blaine a coy look. He threw a pillow at her.

"Or the girls sent home because of weight problems or drugs," Vanessa added.

"When you guys dance, do you ever feel different?" Steffie said suddenly. "Like you're—"

"Delirious?" Vanessa said, startling herself.

"Um—no, I was actually going to say weightless," Steffie said.

"Delirious?" TJ said with an amused smile. "Like dizzy? Maybe you're not spotting right."

Vanessa laughed sheepishly. "Just kidding," she said, embarrassed.

It only happened once in a while—the strange, delirious feeling. When Vanessa danced so perfectly the music was like a part of her heartbeat, the world around her spun into oblivion, and she felt like she was losing herself. But maybe it was just dehydration. That's what her mother told her every time she tried to raise the subject. When Vanessa looked up, she realized Steffie was studying her. She felt herself blush, but Steffie only gave her an understanding smile, as if to say, *Whatever your secret is, it's safe with me*.

"Orientation!" Elly said suddenly. Outside, the hall was strangely quiet. She glanced at her watch. "Crap. We're already late!"