

Chinonso Oguh

### To Dwell on Dreams

“Marie, get up,” Mom’s voice drifts down the hall. “Your lesson is in twenty minutes.”

I remember when lessons were something to look forward to. I would practically leap out of bed and fly down the stairs. My dance bag smacked against my legs, but I didn’t care. When I was younger, Mom would drive me. If she took too long, I would honk the horn to hurry her up. Because when I was younger, I had something to look forward to, a dance career to prepare for. Now I have nothing.

Now lessons mean ninety minutes of sitting at a piano and wanting to scream. It means thinking of any possible way to get out of them. Would Mom buy I was sick? No, not again. Not so soon.

My lower body can’t move, so I get stiff at night and have to stretch every morning. I lean forward and pull the wheelchair closer to heave myself, and a sigh, into the seat. After five months, I am getting used to what had once been a strange object in my room. I used to complain about it taking up too much space alongside everything else. Now it was one of the few things taking up space.

The only things in my room are the piano pressed into the corner, my bed right across from it, a dresser, and the wheelchair. However, I could still see the indentations on the floor where the balance barre once stood. Mom said I was imagining it, but I know what I saw.

“Marie,” Mom calls again. “Hurry up.”

I did *not* want to ‘hurry up’. I want to lie in my bed for the rest of the year until the knowledge I have nothing left reached the rest of me and I fade away. Of course, I couldn’t say any of that to my mom.

“I’m coming,” I call out. I peer down at my pajamas. I don’t want to get dressed, but Mom would send me back upstairs when she saw me.

I sigh again as I roll over to my closet; avoiding looking into the mirror. After the accident, Mom built a lower shelf into the bottom of my closet since I couldn’t reach up high. Many modifications happened after the accident. A wheelchair lift on the stairs and in the car, as well as a bath chair so I could take a shower. Like the wheelchair now taking residence in my room, it was weird to see those things where free space had once been.

I roll back to my bed to shift out of my oversized sweatpants and into a pair of leggings. I never wore jeans before because I always needed my clothes stretchy and loose for dance. Now, I don’t wear them because they were next to impossible to get on with the lack of feeling and movement in my legs.

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“Marie,” Mom’s voice is sharp, hard. I’m taking up too much time. I grab my sheet music off the piano rolling out of my room and to the stairs. I push the button labeled ‘descend’ once I’m positioned.

Mom’s arms are crossed over her chest, crinkling her grey workout tank. A concerned frown deepens the lines on her face as I reach the living room.

“I’m fine,” I interrupt her upcoming question. “I don’t fall anymore.”

“I know.” She tilts her head to the sides, eyes never leaving my face. “Let’s go.”

I roll myself out the door and to the car, swatting at my mom when she came to help. I can do it myself. I all but slam the door in her face. She loads the chair into the back as I fix myself in the seat.

Mom taps her hands against the steering wheel as she drives. I think it's a kind of nervous tick. I didn't remember it being there before, but it was always there now. I try not to focus on her hands.

"So, what are you working on in your lessons?" Her hands change so they beat along with each word.

I shrug. "Just, you know, chords and stuff." And a song that feels like a six-year-old wrote it. I guess starting lessons at seventeen instead of six would make basic music like that necessary for me. I wish no music was necessary. I wish my mom didn't force me out of the house by taking these lessons. I already leave twice a week to see my psychiatrist. That was more than enough for me. Why couldn't it be enough for her?

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My piano teacher, Nicholas Carpenter, is my age. He goes to the public high school a few blocks from my house. I never met him before signing up for lessons. When had I ever interacted with someone who wasn't a dancer before? I was homeschooled from the moment I started school; all other free time was spent practicing ballet. I practiced until my feet bled, so there was no time for people like Nicholas Carpenter.

I wonder if I would've had time if my life had been different. What if I hadn't been a dancer? What if I had gone to a real school? What if I didn't feel like my life was over at seventeen? Why am I sitting and staring at Nicholas' door?

“Hey, Marie,” Nicholas says when he answers the door. He smiles and gives no hint he knows I had sat on his porch for ten minutes wondering if I should call my mom and end her gym trip early.

“Sorry for being late,” I say, coming into the house.

Nicholas shrugs and runs his fingers through his dark hair. “It’s fine. You’re the only lesson I have today.”

I think the piano was moved downstairs after my mom signed me up for lessons. Because the sitting room it was in had a very specific feel: monochrome, minimalistic, and modern. I had only met Nicholas’ mom twice but she definitely feels like a person who lives off aesthetics. To say the ancient grand piano didn’t fit the aesthetic was an understatement. Nicholas sits on the piano chair and I roll up beside him.

“Do you want to go over what you learned last week?” Nicholas always said that. It was a demand hidden as a choice, but I follow his instruction anyway.

I place the music on the piano and flex my fingers. Not mandatory but I did it instinctively after so many years of stretching out before dance classes.

“Good, good,” Nicholas says encouragingly as I play the keys. I move at a snail’s pace, but he is unbothered as long as I hit the right notes. It’s weird to play with my right and left hand simultaneously, and I try practicing more with the left. Most days I don’t bother with the music and it sat on my piano all week until the following Tuesday.

“How often do you practice?”

I don’t meet his eyes. “Enough.”

Nicholas laughs softly. “Maybe you can try a little more than ‘enough’?”

I scoff. “Sure.”

He doesn't say anything. The silence becomes a tangible object between us. It presses in around me and becomes so unbearable I have to look at him. Nicholas isn't focused on my hands but rather on the sheet music sitting before me. His dark eyes dart over the sheet, seeing something I don't. I wonder what it is. Is it something only someone who had played as long as he had would see?

"You should move on from chords," he says like it's my choice to play the simple melodies each week. He smiles when I finally nod. "Good, then maybe you'll be able to perform for the spring recital."

I freeze and my blood turns to ice. I don't perform anymore. Doesn't he know that? I feel like someone should have told him that already. No, Nicholas knows exactly three things about me. My name is Marie: I am in a wheelchair and I play piano. Anything else is a mystery.

"No." I shake my head. "I don't think so."

He tilts his head to the side. "You don't want to move on?"

"I don't want to perform."

I split my life into before and after. Before: I would have leaped at a chance to perform, quite literally. After: my stomach curls at the thought. There are so many things reminding me of before. I can never go back to before. A performance is too hard with everything dancing just out of my grasp.

Nicholas nods and an effortless smile graces his lips. "If you don't want to it's fine. Several of my students never want to perform, too shy."

I frown. I'm not shy. This is something else entirely. I don't tell my psychiatrist these things, there is no way I am telling Nicholas. We had little connecting us, and there is no reason to change that.

“Yeah, shy,” I agree.

Nicholas doesn’t seem to notice my words as he leans closer to the piano. He pulls out the book of songs, one I barely glanced at, from under my book of chords. He flips and flips before coming to a page near the back.

“Are you sure I’m good enough for that?” I worry at my lip.

His lips turn up in amusement and his eyes shine. “Well, the whole point of these lessons is to learn, right?”

Right, my thoughts whisper dryly. My mind starts flipping through all my previous excuses trying to find a plausible reason to get out of there. It felt like as good a time as any to try and escape.

“I have to go,” I say. His eyes widen in surprise and I hurry to finish before he speaks up. “I think my mom scheduled a doctor’s appointment for me. Last minute.”

Nicholas stares at me for a long time. His dark eyes lock onto mine. I wonder if he knows I’m lying. I shake it off; it’s not like he can look into my mind. Our lessons started only two months ago, so we don’t know each other well. I am the first to break eye contact as I gather my books.

“Well,” Nicholas says finally. “Just make sure you work on that song for next week. Depending on how well you do we might add another, and you can leave the chord book at home.”

I nod absently as I pull out my phone and roll toward the door. My mom answers on the first ring. Her voice is high and startled. It takes a minute to calm her down before convincing her to come pick me up.

“What happened?” She says once I was adjusted in my seat. “Are you ok?”

“I’m fine,” I say. “Can we please go home?”

Mom springs into action at my words. The car engine revs and we head down the street and away from Nicholas Carpenter.

I long to be home. I want to wrap myself in a blanket and sleep. In my dreams, the accident never happens. I can still grand jeté and perform arabesque. In them, I was still The Sugar Plum Fairy. I can hear her song so clearly until it becomes the ambulance siren from the night of the accident.

I can hear the glass shattering all over again. I can see the piercing red and blue lights. I can feel the hot tears running down my face.

I tell myself not to think about it. I will never dance, and it won’t do well to waste my time on dreams.

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“How are you doing today, Marie?” Dr. Thompkins’s watery blue eyes focus on me as she spoke. Her eyes are deep pools. I would rather leap into them than continue this conversation.

“Never better,” I say in a tone that says the exact opposite. Instead, I try for a smile to convince her. She frowns and I lean forward in my wheelchair eager to change the subject.

“What about you? How are you doing?”

Dr. Thompkins shakes her head and ignores my question. “Have you been sleeping?”

I didn’t answer. It was a terrible mixture of yes and no. I sleep very little, and when I did sleep it is plagued with music and dancing and sirens so loud my head hurt when I wake up. It’s hard to tell if sleeping is helping or hurting. Dr. Thompkins would say it would do good and

Mom would leap to agree with her. Mom would try anything if she thought I am getting better and not sticking to my sad, new outlook on life.

“Marie-”

“I’m fine,” I cut her off. “There’s nothing wrong, ok?”

Dr. Thompkins cants her head, swiping hairs off her face to study me better. I don’t like her studying my face. She is trying to find out things about me I’m not interested in sharing. It is her job after all, but I’m still trying to convince Mom I didn’t need a psychiatrist at all.

“You do know I can only help you as much as you let me.” She purses her lips together. “You can’t keep avoiding talking about what happened. I know you are taking things out on me, but there are better ways. How are the piano lessons?”

I wrinkle my nose. “Fine... what else should they be?”

“They’re an outlet to help you express yourself since you don’t like talking.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. The accident happened, that was five months ago, and I shouldn’t have to talk about it anymore,” I insist. I am dying to get out of there. I glance at the clock on her desk, Mom should be here soon. I didn’t need anything. I want to go home, avoid writing an English essay, and spend ridiculously long hours on Netflix.

“I don’t need anything.”

“Oh, you always need something, whether or not you want it.” Dr. Thompkins rises from her seat, brushing down her skirt. “Marie... I’m going to ask again, are you sure you’re alright?”

I look her in the eyes as I nod. “Absolutely perfect.”

Soft knocking at the door draws our attention. Mom pops her head through the doorway.

“Hey, are you done?”



“Yep,” I say before Dr. Thompkins can argue. I roll the wheelchair to the door. My mom’s eyes never leave me, and I was sure Dr. Thompkins’ aren’t either. I stop and turn over my shoulder. “See you Monday.”

I roll out the door without waiting for a response.

Mom shoots me a dark look, she’ll have to scold me later. It’s not like I can go very far. I have to wait while she finishes her meeting with Dr. Thompkins. A meeting all about me.

“Marie, it was very rude of you to roll off earlier,” Mom hisses when she comes out of the office. “Dr. Thompkins is just trying to—”

“Help me, I know,” I snap back, frustration building inside. “I don’t need help, Mom. I’m fine. I keep telling you that.”

“I want it to be true, but you hardly leave the house. I know Leia has been trying to contact you, but you won’t respond to her. Everything has been so... different and hard these past months but you can’t give up.”

It’s not giving up if I don’t even have something in the first place. I didn’t give up on dance, it was taken away. There isn’t anything that could replace it. Mom might think piano lessons are helping, but I don’t feel anything other than annoyed about them. They are this pressing reminder, nothing else. If I could quit I would, and she knows that.

Mom presses her lips together and turns away from me. She presses the button for the elevator. “Nick can’t have your lesson next Tuesday. He asked to reschedule and I already agreed, so be ready.”

Just like that, I am put on a futile path once again. What is my life becoming?

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A girl answers the door when I show up for my piano lesson on Saturday. She stands with the door covering most of her body and stares at me for what feels like an eternity. It takes a moment to realize she must be Nicholas' younger sister. He had mentioned her before. I don't remember anything other than her name begins with an 'a'.

"Um, is Nicholas here?" I pause. "I'm supposed to have a lesson."

The girl disappears out of view. She leaves the door open, so I can see into the house. There isn't much to look at. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do, so I sit outside. It doesn't feel right to go in or stay put, but I can't leave since Mom had already driven away. Nicholas swings the door open a second later, startling me.

The girl is standing next to him. When she turns her head, I see she has a blue hearing aid in her left ear. Her blonde hair is up in a perfect dancer's bun. My stomach rolls as I think of my years of dance. When I was young, I squirmed under my mom's hands as she tried to pull my thick curls into a neat bun. I don't do anything with my hair now, maybe I should cut it.

"Sorry," Nicholas says. He nudges his sister out of the way. "I didn't hear the doorbell ring and Anna saw you through the window. She isn't always good with new people."

"It's fine," I say, rolling into the house.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Nicholas turn Anna around to face him. I have only seen ASL in movies, so I have no idea what he's telling her. Anna leans her head to the side, and I see her eyes move to me before she nods. Once Anna walks off, Nicholas turns back to me sitting in front of the piano.

"You don't mind if Anna sits in on our lesson, right?"

I blink in surprise. What can she possibly get from attending our lesson? I don't know if she can hear that well. There are a few things she can make out, like how she knew to get

Nicholas for me. Did that also mean she can hear the piano, or did Nicholas just want to keep an eye on her?

I shake my head. “Doesn’t matter.”

“Cool,” Nicholas says taking a seat. “So, have you practiced what I gave you last time?”

I look at the music in front of me, the foreign notes skipping across the page, and lie.

“Some, it’s kind of hard though.”

Nicholas laughs and runs a hand through his hair. “Well, that *is* what I am here for.” He asks me to pull back and talks through some of the chord progressions as he plays the keys. All his movements are smooth and assured, it is his own kind of dance.

Scuffling alerts me when Anna comes back downstairs. I turn to look at her and wish I hadn’t. She’d changed into tights and a black leotard, while in her hands she holds ballet slippers. I snap back to look at the piano. I don’t notice, at first, that Nicholas is watching me with a quizzical expression.

“It doesn’t seem hard when you play,” I mutter. “Maybe, I’m just not any good at this.”

“Practice helps everyone, which is what Anna should be doing.”

Nicholas gets up and walks over to his sister. He helps her roll up the rug exposing the smooth wood floor. The bare floor is much better for spins than on the carpet. The friction would only slow her down and she might fall. If Anna really loved dance, she should take every opportunity she could to be careful because anything could happen.

“Anna likes to practice down here.” Nicholas sits down again. “I hope she won’t be too much of a distraction.”

I glance back at Anna who is doing all too familiar stretches my body aches to do again. There is nothing I can do about my immobility, and I don’t have a right to tell her she can’t

practice. I'm not going to shut someone down because of my accident. That was my experience, and there is nothing Anna can do to change that.

"It won't be a distraction." I swallow thickly at the sickness rising into my throat. "I'll be turned this way anyways."

"Alright, let's take it from the top."

I spread my fingers out on the keys. I fumble a lot more than Nicholas did, it didn't feel like I am improving. What did it matter to me anyway? I don't even like the piano. It is something to fill time, fill space. That's what my life is now; it was all about finding something to lead me into the next moment.

"I think you have a fan," Nicholas says with a laugh. Anna is sitting on the floor with her legs stretching out in front of her and her eyes closed.

"She can't hear most of what you're playing but she likes the vibration. It can make dancing hard, but she's pretty good at counting the beat," Nicholas says. He stamps twice on the ground and Anna's eyes flash open. She looks up at us expectantly. Nicholas signs as he speaks. "You like this song?"

Anna smiles and nods. Her hand movements are quick but Nicholas looks like he knows what she's saying. I feel like an outsider, intruding where I don't belong. Anna turns to me with a smile, an unabashed thing, and gives me a thumbs-up with both hands.

"She likes slower pieces," Nicholas informs me. "Anna thinks they're better than faster pieces. I don't agree. I think faster pieces are way more fun." Anna wrinkles her nose and waves her hands in front of her. Nicholas laughs as he signs back. "We can agree to disagree. Either way, you have to practice. Mom's going to ask you about it when she gets back."

"Your mom makes her practice a lot?"

Nicholas nods. “We both practice a lot. Before we were even born, Mom read this article talking about how kids’ brains develop faster if exposed to music and arts at a young age. She signed us up for our respective discipline as young as possible.”

Other people might think it strange, but I remember begging my mom to take me to ballet lessons when I was four. Classes were so simple back then. I was disappointed I didn’t look like the dancer in a movie I’d seen. She was graceful and beautiful, but four-year-olds are clumsy and not made for such things. I hadn’t given up. I practiced until I was perfect for roles like the Sugar Plum Fairy, but maybe I’m still not made for such things.

Anna stands up, sticking her tongue out at her brother, as she gets into first position. She perfectly executes pointed kicks to the front, side, and back in continuous movement. After she finishes five sequences, she turns and continues practicing. Something tears at me as I watch her and wish to dance along with her.

“How long did you say she’d been dancing for?”

Nicholas shrugs as he pauses to think. “Not sure, nine years?”

“That explains it.” I nod absently as I watch her go from kicks to pirouettes. She spots herself each time which even I forgot to do every once in a while. “Her technique is beautiful, but I’d tell her to straighten her back a little more.”

Nicholas stares at me. I hadn’t even realized what I said before it came out. No doubt, he was going to ask questions. If he tries to ask me a question, I think I might vomit. Then I really would have a reason to leave early. My fingers move to my phone as I think of calling my mom to get me out of there.

“That’s what her teacher always says.”

My head snaps up. “What?”

“I go with her to her classes sometimes. Anna can hear a little and read lips, but if her teacher isn’t facing her then she tends to have trouble. That’s why I had to reschedule. Her class was moved to Tuesday this week.”

My mind swirls with thoughts. It is really... overwhelming to see Anna and remember my dance past. Dr. Thompkins would say I need to channel my emotions into something productive. Right now, that something was piano. If I play then I won’t think of Anna and it will be better. I will be better.

Focusing on playing the piano can keep all other thoughts out of my head. There isn’t room for anything else. Dr. Thompkins likes to say there is something else going on, but I can’t think of anything. I have to be alright. Mom worries too much, but there isn’t anything she can do about me. I know she will say it isn’t a big deal, and we can work through anything together. There was no “together” it is just me.

“Hey, we’re pretty much done if you want to call your mom and leave.”

With a start, I realize this may be one of the few times I had stayed for a full lesson. It’s strange I stayed. I almost wish I hadn’t, but what else would I do? There is still an essay I need to finish, but I’m not going to bother with it anytime soon.

Anna came to my side. Nicholas stands as if to walk off but watches as Anna signs. She is smiling as she signs, excitement bubbling underneath the surface. I wonder what she is trying to convey.

Nicholas’ eyes flash to me before he translates. “She wants to know if you know more about dance and if you’ll come back.”

“I have another piano lesson at some point.”

“She means for her.”

I chew at my lip. “I don’t know...”

“She has a ballet recital in two weeks,” Nicholas says before I can finish. He is still talking with his hands. “You could come, and bring your mom too if you want.”

A ballet recital? It would be insane to go to a ballet recital. Not after months of turning Leia away and not even going to our studio’s production of *The Nutcracker*. I couldn’t watch after what happened. Just the thought of the music made me feel small and trapped, like how I was crushed the night of the accident. Trapped inside my car.

Anna clasps her hands together and speaks for the first time. “Please.”

“Wow.” Nicholas smiles. “She must really want you to come.”

“I-I’ll think about it.” It almost doesn’t feel like a lie as the words pass my lips. I roll out of the room, and out of the house. I take a deep breath before calling my mom, not wanting my voice to shake.

Mom is smiling when she picks me up and helps me load my wheelchair into the back. “How was your lesson? Have fun? Learn anything new?”

“I was fine.” I tap my fingers against the door handle. “I met Nicholas’ sister.”

“That’s nice. What’s she like?”

She settles into her seat and puts the car in gear.

“Marie?”

I stare out at the road and close my eyes before speaking. “She’s a dancer.”

My mom says nothing, but when I look at her again her mouth has formed into an ‘o’, but I don’t ask why. I know why and I know what thoughts are going through her head. There is so much to think about these days. We can’t do things the same way as before, and that was because of me. Still, my mind remains occupied with thoughts of Anna Carpenter.

That night, a young girl dances through my dreams. She has blonde hair and a blue hearing aid with a smile as big as the moon.

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There is a knock at the door as I eat a late breakfast. Normally, I would ignore it and my mom would answer. Today she is working. She left specific instructions I should work on my classwork before my appointment with Dr. Thompkins later. I have been putting my work off for a while and Mom was done with it no matter how little interest I have in my classwork. Which leaves me to wheel myself over to the door and open it.

Standing on the front step was one of the last people I want to see: Leia Wang. She had been my best friend since I was seven. She is also a dancer.

“Oh... Hi.” I stare up at her.

Leia is wearing a dress with a short skirt. Her legs stretch out below. I frown. Leia chews at her lip, dark eyes moving around not able to gaze at anything longer than a few seconds. Her fingers twist at the bottom of her skirt, wrapping the fabric around them again and again.

Finally, she takes a breath releasing the skirt from her grip. “How have you been? It’s been so long and... well, I missed you. You haven’t been answering any of my texts. I didn’t know if you would be here, but I had to test my luck and see. Your mom... she said I was welcome anytime and I wasn’t busy today, so here I am.”

“Here you are.” I slowly back out of the doorway. “Do you want to come in?”

Leia drifts past me into the living room. Her moves are as graceful as ever. It was with the sort of easy grace which got her dancing roles as delicate princesses in our studio’s productions. I winced. That was no longer my school. I did not attend lessons there anymore. I did not go to productions there anymore. I did not want to think about the school anymore.



A part of me wants to go back to the kitchen, so I could grab my cereal. Instead, I follow Leia. She perches on the couch, straightening her back as if afraid someone would come in to tell her to sit up.

“How have you been?” Leia repeats, smoothing out her already straightened skirt.

“I’m fine. It’s been quiet around here... Mom’s working today.” I don’t like small talk. I don’t think there is a single person on this entire planet that did. Leia is my best friend; it should not be this hard to talk to her. “Is there... like a reason you came?”

Leia deflates for a moment before righting herself again. “I used to come over all the time. What’s so different now?”

I have to hold myself back from snorting. We both know the answer to the question. She can avoid it all she wants, but there is not a second that went by I am not reminded of how different my life was a few months ago. Back then things were easy. We would laugh and talk about anything that came to mind. Now, I just stare at Leia.

“I really don’t want to do anything today, so if you’re-”

Leia leans forward in her seat, eyes brightening. “It doesn’t have to be anything wild or big, you know? We could just go out and talk. That coffee shop over by the library is still doing live jazz on the weekends. It could be really fun.”

I shake my head. “I don’t think so.”

“You used to love going to that coffee shop,” Leia says.

“Yeah... used to.”

Leia tucks her hair behind her ears, taking *forever* to speak again. “So... what do you so then.”

There isn't much I do anymore; I lay in bed most days. I may have found enjoyment in sleeping if it wasn't for the dreams. They are bad enough when they are just about me, but Anna danced her way into them lately. She would be in the middle of the road and I would be driving. No matter what I did, I couldn't her attention or turn the car and then... something was taken from both of us.

I shrug. "Whatever I feel like."

Leia twists at strands of her hair; she is back to not being able to focus on anything. I feel bad. I didn't know if I should do anything about it or not. I did not want to go out and do anything, no matter how much my mom tells to get out more. I just couldn't do it. Especially not with Leia, not yet at least.

"Right now, I actually have a lot of classwork I need to focus on," my voice sounds far away as if someone else is speaking. I can feel Leia looking at me, but I can't meet her gaze. "Today isn't a good time to hang out anyway."

"Oh, alright." Leia stands and walks towards the door. "You know, Marie, you can always call or text even if all you need is someone to talk to."

"I'll be fine."

Leia pauses by the door and then moves so quickly that I almost don't process it. She leans down and hugs me. Her arms wrap around my shoulders, and her hair falls forward like a curtain separating us. She straightens up and blinks back what looks like tears. Her voice is soft and small as she rushes to say goodbye and hurry out the door.

I stare out the door. "Goodbye."

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I got to Dr. Thompkins' office almost fifteen minutes late for my therapy session on Monday. It had not been on purpose. The morning had slipped away like water between my fingers. Slow but steady, I almost hadn't noticed. Mom had been in a meeting and had not been there to keep me on schedule.

Dr. Thompkins is sitting at her desk typing at her computer when I roll in. She doesn't look up or acknowledge me as I roll over to the couch. The space she normally took up. My fingers tap lazily against my armrest.

"How are you today?" She says without her gaze lifting from her computer.

"Same as always."

Dr. Thompkins looks up at that. "So, it's 'fine' again?"

I met her gaze. Her eyes were the greyish blue of the sky before a storm. A storm trying to rip me apart to expose my inner thoughts on multiple occasions. I did not back down from the look she gives me. Buzzing with lightning waiting to crack and split me open, but I had built myself to weather what she sends my way.

No, I did not feel fine. Dr. Thompkins knows that and wasn't going to let it go until I finally admit to it; but why should I? If I wasn't fine then my mom would start worrying about me, more than she already did. The crash made her suffocating. She didn't understand what I feel no matter how hard she tries.

"What else am I supposed to be?" I stop tapping my fingers. "Since I'm late, does that mean I don't have to stay a whole hour?"

"Unfortunately, our time will be cut short today," Dr. Thompkins says. "I have another patient after you. Since we are already talking about sessions, I want you to know that your mom and I have been talking about dropping your Thursday session."

“Really?” Surprise ripples through me. “Why is that?”

Dr. Thompson stands from her desk and crosses over to the couch so she can take her usual seat. “We don’t feel as if two sessions are as beneficial as they could be. Once a week should work fine unless you have any complaints.”

I shake my head. “No complaints. That is perfectly fine. It means I’ll get to spend more time at home.”

“You spend a lot of time alone, Marie. Don’t you think that is a bit unhealthy?” Dr. Thompson’s gaze settles onto me, weighing me down to chip into my thoughts. “I would advise you to get out more and I’ll tell your mom too. Is there no one you could spend time with and find a way out of the house?”

I tense thinking of Leia. I can barely imagine hanging out with her again. Too much time has passed, and too many things have happened since we were close. There is no way she wants to spend time with me. She came by the house to be nice. She came by to appease her conscience.

I chew at my lip. Was it even something I should bring up to Dr. Thompson? In all of our sessions, I had never mentioned Leia before. This was a whole new layer to dig into.

“My friend, Leia, came by yesterday,” my voice is slow but even. “She asked if I wanted to go out with her.”

“And I’m assuming you said no.”

I don’t bother with a response as I stare at Dr. Thompson. The answer should be obvious. She narrows her eyes, the way she always does when trying to come up with an answer for something. She grabs a pen and scribbles something down on a notepad. I don’t know what she got out of my lack of response.

“Why don’t you want to hang out with Leia?”

“I don’t know,” I lie. Or at least it feels like a lie. Although I can’t put my finger on the right answer. “We’re just... too different. I mean I don’t dance anymore which was like the main thing we did together. What’s even the point?”

“Is there nothing for you to talk about other than dancing?”

*Yes.*

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Maybe isn’t a no,” Dr. Thompkins very unhelpfully pointed out. “Here’s a suggestion, don’t isolate the people around you. Try to stay connected with Leia, it seems as if she wants to remain your friend.”

I frowned. “No, she doesn’t. And... and I don’t want to hang out with her, alright? Nothing is there anymore. That whole part of my life needs to be left behind. I... I can’t be friends with her.” Something wraps around my throat as I struggle to get words out. “All those dancers wouldn’t want to hang out with me. I don’t fit their world anymore.”

“Just because you aren’t a dancer doesn’t mean you can’t be their friend.”

Why can’t Dr. Thompkins see that is exactly what it means? They have their own lives and didn’t want to be around the girl in a wheelchair. And I don’t want to be around them either. God, why couldn’t anyone understand that isn’t for me? Leia was trying so hard to grasp at something I don’t think I will ever be ready for. If my mom and Dr. Thompkins would stop pressuring me, that would be great.

I don’t realize I’m crying until Dr. Thompkins hands me a tissue. Her face is soft and her eyes are no longer on the brink of a storm. I wipe my eyes, feeling more annoyed than ever before. I don’t want to be there. But Dr. Thompkins isn’t going to let me leave.

“Do you want to talk about what just happened?”

“Not really,” I mumble and crumple up the tissue in my hand. “I’ll take your ‘suggestions’ into consideration but I don’t make any promises.”

“That’s all I ask.”

Really, is that all she wanted? I’m so glad we pay all this money and drive to her office in Chicago twice a week for suggestions. Mom insists this is helping me. She believes Dr. Thompkins can fix me, believes one day I’ll turn into the person who smiled and laughed and slept through the night without issue.

None of them understand. That person didn’t make it out of the car that night. That person hadn’t been a part of me in a long time.

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“I don’t see why I have to go.”

“I’m driving.” A half-smile pulls at my mom’s face. “You go wherever I take you.”

I watch as we pull into the parking lot of the store. After my therapy sessions, we normally go straight home. I don’t know why Mom didn’t drop me off at home before going on her shopping spree. Mom gets out of the car and goes around the back to get my wheelchair. Warm sun pours in past the door as she opens it. It is a fool’s dream to think she would let me wait out here for her.

I lift myself into the wheelchair. “I meant, why do I have to go inside?”

Mom did not answer. She walks away humming which forces me to roll after her. The store isn’t that full which was nice. I never realized how much I hate a crowded store until I was in a wheelchair.

“Pick up some popcorn for movie night tomorrow,” Mom says. “And whatever else you want. Have you decided what to watch?”

“No.”

“Well, there’s still plenty of time... do you want to invite Leia?” My mom did not look at me, but rather studies different types of red pasta sauce on the shelf next to her. Her eyes flash over the labels even though I know she isn’t going to get any of them; it’s Alfredo or nothing with her. “I know she stopped by the house.”

“She did but...” I trail off before shaking my head. Hair brushing at the back of my neck making it itch. “But movie night isn’t a good idea.”

“Why not?”

I roll away from my mom and toward another aisle. “I don’t want her around right now.”

The snack aisle is not far away. There I can get popcorn and other treats without having to listen to my mom ask questions about Leia. Mom started movie night as a way to get me out of my room after the accident first happened. It turned out to be better than I originally thought, but I try not to let my mom know how I enjoy it.

Although what I didn’t enjoy was knocking over a nearby display with my wheelchair. I struggle to pick up everything. I can’t shift myself forward as I wanted to which left me grasping at something out of reach and hoping no one notices me.

“Hey, do you need help?”

I lift my head and wish I hadn’t when I see Nicholas Carpenter walking toward me. Anna trails along behind him, wearing a pale pink leotard and sweatpants. Her blonde hair is in a dancer’s bun. She studies every shelf she passes, but her attention turns to me as they get closer and a smile blooms across her face.

“Hi,” she says with a wave.

I nod in greeting before reluctantly turning to Nicholas. “I guess I need assistance.”

Assistance is what I always need it seems. If it was my mom, she would move me out of the way and clean it up herself without stopping to ask. At least Nicholas is a little more respectful, although that isn’t the world’s biggest accomplishment.

“Anna has been asking if you were coming to her recital,” Nicholas says once the display is righted. “I think it would crush her if you didn’t come.”

I look to Anna who is checking out bags of candy. “She talks to you... about me?”

“In her way. She doesn’t always talk, especially not if she can’t hear herself. Even with the hearing aid, there is a lot Anna can’t make out. But that’s why I’m here. What else are big brothers for?” Nicholas chuckles, but if it’s a joke I don’t get it.

“Marie I-” Mom cuts herself off with a laugh of surprise. “Hi, Nick.” She stops behind me, blocking my escape from the aisle. We were not going to leave soon. My mom is going to find a way to talk to Nicholas about everything even when it’s not necessary to bring it up. “I don’t know if I’ve ever seen you outside of Marie’s lessons before.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” Nicholas says. He easily returns my mom’s smile before turning to sign something to his sister. She sighs, setting down the bag of peanut M&M’S in her hand to walk up behind him. “This is my sister, Anna. I don’t believe you met her.”

Anna looks small, like a porcelain doll or baby animal, from where she peaks out behind her brother. Her blue eyes were large as she leaned forward to look up at my mom. Nicholas wraps an arm around her shoulders, forcing her to step forward to stand at his side. She shuffles her shoes, attention dropping to the ground.

“She’s wearing a leotard.”



Mom's words are not a question, but Nicholas nods anyway.

"We just got out of Anna's lesson," Nicholas explains. He pulls away from Anna so he can use his hands. "She was complaining about being hungry, and insisted we come here because she wanted Jolly Ranchers."

Mom laughs. "I like Jolly Ranchers too. What's your favorite flavor?"

Anna pauses, her head tilts to the side. "Cherry," she says after a while. Her voice is slow and even as if testing the way it sounds.

"Technically she's not supposed to eat candy," Nicholas informs us. "Mom doesn't like us having sweets."

"If she's going to eat it anyway, she might as well get the best flavor," Mom says.

I try not to roll my eyes. I do not care whether Anna likes cherry or green apple or watermelon. I do not want to be a part of this conversation. I want to escape, roll out of the aisle and out of sight where no one forces me into a meaningless conversation. Mom has me trapped. I can't wheel away without a word unless I want her to lecture me on how rude it was to leave while she is talking to Nicholas.

"Did you know about this?" Mom draws my attention from the display of similar-looking chips in different-looking bags.

"Know about what?"

I squint at her and Nicholas, Anna is nowhere in sight.

"Anna's dance recital," Mom clarifies. "It's next Friday, and Nick says Anna would be excited if you would go. I think it'd be nice. You must miss your own performances, so it might be nice for you to go."

I lower my voice not wanting to be overheard by Nicholas. “Mom, I don’t feel like going. It’s not a good idea.”

Mom sighs but says nothing else.

Anna reappears behind Nicholas gripping one of the largest bags of Jolly Ranchers I have seen. She holds it out to her brother who shakes his head but takes it from her anyway tucking it under one arm. She looks triumphant and shoots me a conspiratorial smile as if I am in on a joke. It was a sweet smile on her round features as she hid out of Nicholas’s line of view.

“It was nice to see you, Nick, but we have to finish shopping.”

“Bye.” Anna waves as we leave.

I roll away faster than necessary tossing a hasty goodbye over my shoulder. Mom follows me with I look I know means we have not reached the end of our conversation. Why can’t she realize there are things I did not feel like talking about with her?

“I don’t know why you won’t go to Anna’s recital. She’s so sweet, and I don’t see any reason you can’t go.”

“Mom, please,” I say. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“No, I think we should talk about it, or at least think about it. Come on, Marie, you haven’t been to a dance performance in so long. I think it would be good for you. Anna seems to really like you, maybe you could try to be nice to her. She doesn’t have to be your friend but you could at least support her.”

A familiar pounding forms in my head. I want to get up and run away. There is nothing I could do except pretend to listen to her as we move down the aisles.

“I’m tired,” I interrupt. “Can I go back to the car?”

“Have you been having trouble sleeping?” Her eyes dart over my face looking for something to ease her concerns. She pulls out the keys dangling them in front of me like a prize. “Go back to the car. Maybe you should take a nap later. You’ll appreciate it.”

I doubt that. When I sleep, I heard music. The music fills me with the choking dread nothing else in the world can replicate. I hate it, I hate it more than I can ever admit. It used to be a calming presence, accompanying me as I danced across the stage. These days I couldn’t think about it without wanting to cry.

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I stare up at the popcorn ceiling of my bedroom. It is so quiet I swear I can hear the blood rushing in my ears. The curtains are closed so no light casts slants across the floor. I take slow deep breaths like Dr. Thompkins taught me when I first started seeing her. She said it would help me relax.

A car door slams somewhere in the neighborhood.

My shoulders tense. My hands twist the blanket.

Sleep still skips out of reach.

I lift myself into my wheelchair and roll over to the piano. I slide one hand over the keys without pressing them down. The daunting piano music stares back at me. I have not played it once since my last lesson with Nicholas. I can’t glide over the piano keys like I did when I glided across the stage. This is not a dance I could master.

I press down on the starting notes. The chord rings in the air. I play through the first line like a snail inching across a blade of grass. It does not sound like music.

If Nicholas thinks I can get any better at this, he’s wrong.

I try and I try, but nothing changes. I don't understand the piano the way I understand ballet. Its twists and turns are unfamiliar. My fingers stumble and hurry to catch up with each. The slow and methodical movements bear little resemblance to what the music should sound like. I squint at the music when I miss a note.

There has to be a better way to do this.

I drop my head into my hands. Fingers dig into the tangled mess that was once curly hair. I can't believe I've let it become so wild. It's always been hard to manage. When I still danced, I at least tried to make it look nice. I could do a sleek dancer's bun in under six minutes. I wonder if I still can, it had been several months since I tried.

Anna's hair is perfect every time I see her. It probably takes seconds to brush and twist and pin her fine blonde hair into place.

I can't believe my mom wants me to go to her recital. I have been to dozens, maybe even hundreds, of recitals before. Ones I performed in and ones for other students at my old ballet school. Mom thinks one more can't hurt, but my stomach twists at the idea of watching other people dance. Their lithe but athletic bodies travel across a stage.

Had I been like that once? Had I begged everyone I met to come to my dance recitals? I remember Mom asking her friends and coworkers to come. When I was little, I preened like a peacock taking all of their compliments in. No one is ever going to compliment me on my piano playing skills.

I shake out my hands and my thoughts. A clear mind is what I need. A clear mind will make this piece easier to play.

My hands shake as I place them down on the piano. Ignoring them, I stare at the sheet music. Someday these notes will all make sense. Someday I'll figure it out.

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Mom hums as she pours the freshly popped popcorn into a bowl. The buttery scent spreads throughout the house. Some people might think Wednesdays are a weird day to have movie nights. Wednesdays were when all of the senior dancers came together. We paired off boys with girls and danced a pas de deux under the watchful eye of our instructor. If I wasn't sitting on the couch with my mom, I would be in my room absorbed in my memories.

The couch bounces as my mom drops onto the cushion next to me. She shifts and it takes a second to realize she had nudged my leg. No senses burst alive in my brain.

I glance up at her.

"It's your turn to pick a movie."

I bite into the chocolate bar Mom picked up for me at the store. My eyes flash over the list of movies. Nothing jumps out to me. I eventually pick a movie about competitive dogsledding. It looks miserably cold, but at least the dogs are cute.

"They must put so much work into training them," Mom says.

I nod and scoop a handful of popcorn from Mom's bowl. I'm only half-watching the story. There's a very slim chance I could name the main character.

"You're not paying attention? Is something wrong?" Mom leans closer to me. Her bowl threatens to tip over and spill its contents across the couch. "Do you not like it? We can watch something else."

"This is fine."

Mom's lips press into a thin line as she stares at me. "Are you thinking about your ballet lessons again?"

I almost forgot about them until Mom brought it up. I don't say anything. It will only make her feel bad and lead to endless apologies.

"Just because you don't dance doesn't mean you have to miss out on interacting with ballet." Mom gives me a meaningful look.

"If this is your way of convincing me to go to Anna's dance recital, it's not working. We already talked about this." And then we talked about it again because Mom did not listen to me the first time. I tire of arguing with her. "I'm not going. End of story."

"Fine," Mom huffs. She cradles the popcorn bowl in her arms. "You don't have to go to the recital. But you should get out of the house."

"Why?"

"Since your therapy sessions have been cut down to once a week you're not going to get out as much. You might say you're fine staying home all day, but I think you're not." Mom tosses some popcorn in her mouth. "You don't have to see Leia or anything, but you should try to get out of the house. It'll be good for you."

I frown. Why does everyone keep insisting they know what's good for me? Why can't Mom ever lay off?

I guess it's her job as a mom or whatever, but that doesn't mean I have to like it.

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On Thursday morning, I wake up early, get dressed, and am halfway down the stairs before I remember my session with Dr. Thompkins was canceled. Without my therapy session, there is not much to do. I could back to my room, but I am already dressed. I push the button to continue my descent.

I roll into the kitchen to find it empty. The movement of my wheelchair was the only noise in the silent house. I force myself out the front door before I can stop myself.

A cool breeze pushed my hair off my face. Sunlight filters down past the trees. The magnolia tree at the end of the street is blooming. I remember climbing it to steal the fresh, unpicked blossoms. Leia and I would wear them in our hair and pretend we were princesses.

Leia doesn't have a dance lesson on Thursday mornings. Like me, she is also homeschooled. Unlike me, she stays on top of her work allowing her more free time.

I roll further down the street, passing the magnolia tree. There's a park across the street. A series of interconnected bike trails and walking trails disappear into the surrounding woods. A woman jogs past and I can hear the upbeat hip-hop playing from her phone. A duck and her three ducklings waddle across my path as they head to the small pond.

Mom would cry if she saw me out here. She would say we needed to celebrate. There was nothing to celebrate, I am going through with the request she gave me.

The sound of my text notification startles me.

I tap the screen to see a text from Leia. It simply read *out for a walk*. Below is a picture. She is squatting next to her dog, a fluffy Pomeranian named Atlas.

My lips twitch into a small smile.

*I'm at the park by my house.*

I stare down at my phone as I watch the message send. Did I type that? Did I send that? Is Leia going to come here?

A few seconds later she sends a thumbs-up.

I stare at the ducks gliding across the pond. They were at peace. They could completely ignore everything going on around them. All they need is some fish and things would perfectly slide into place.

My grip tightens around the phone as the sound of a dog barking gets closer.

“Marie!”

I turn to see Leia and Atlas. The active Pomeranian pulls at the end of his leash forcing Leia forward. He stops at my side and sniffs my wheelchair.

I had not seen Atlas since before the accident.

“I’m surprised you texted me.” Leia leans down to let Atlas off his leash. “I’m glad you did though. How have you been lately?”

Atlas prances through the tall grass. I watch as he rolls around and snaps at a butterfly that comes close to his face. I don’t respond to Leia’s question. I don’t look at her, although I can feel her eyes on me.

“I’m only out here because of my mom,” I say. “She keeps telling me I need to get out more. I texted you because... because I wanted to see Atlas.” It’s easier to lie than I think it should be. “Besides, it’s either this or have my mom harass me about Anna again. Hopefully, now Mom will leave me alone.”

“Who’s Anna?” Leia’s eyes are still on me. “A new friend?”

“Not exactly,” I mutter.

I didn’t know if I should explain things to Leia. I didn’t expect she would understand. Once, we could talk about almost everything. In another life, another universe it wouldn’t bother me to bring this up with her. I force myself to look up at Leia and meet her gaze.



“Anna is this girl I met recently,” my voice sounds far away as if echoing against the walls of a cave. It did not feel as if I am actually speaking with Leia. “She’s a dancer, a ballet dancer. She invited me to her recital, and Mom thinks I should go but... I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to go to one again.”

Leia blinks, her eyes are shiny with unshed tears. “I’m sorry.”

I have to look away from her, or else she’ll see my tears as well. “It’s fine. It’s just not the place for me.”

“Because you can’t dance anymore?”

Yes is the immediate answer that leaps into my brain. I refuse to go to any form of recitals because they were reminders of something I lost. I chalk up the recitals as bad memories and lock them away in my dreams. I fear Mom and Leia will look at me with sad eyes if I tell them the truth. Dr. Thompkins’ voice pushes into my head reminding me to breathe.

“It’s a bit more complicated than that.”

Leia’s hand flashes out and grabs onto my arm. It’s supposed to be a comforting squeeze. She opens and closes her mouth struggling to say something.

SPLASH.

The sound of Atlas throwing himself into the duck pond halts our conversation. Leia squeals and runs over. She has to step into the water to fish him out. The duck quacks angrily at her as they swim away. Atlas fights to get out of her arms, darkening her t-shirt with pond water.

“I have to go.” Leia attempts to wave while still gripping Atlas. “I need to take Atlas home. It was nice seeing you. Text me whenever you want.”

I didn’t say anything as she heads off with Atlas. I watch as the walking trails make her disappear from sight. It was nice seeing her too.

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“I’ve been trying the breathing exercises you showed me,” I say instead of a greeting when I roll into Dr. Thompkins’s office on Monday. “I don’t think they’re working.”

Dr. Thompkins cocks her head to the side and squints at me as she crosses the room to her usual seat. “Are you looking for other ways to deal with anxiety? The breathing exercises are to simply settle yourself, but you might need something more. What has been causing you to stress lately?”

My hand grips tightly onto the arm of my wheelchair.

Was there an easy way to say everything? It felt like there is something new for me to feel stressed about every day. My heartbeat picks up as I try to form a list.

“I don’t think I told you about Anna,” I say after a while. My mom might have brought it up in their meetings about me, but I had yet to bring up the situation to my psychiatrist. Dr. Thompkins does not interrupt as I piece together my feelings on the situation. More specifically my feelings about Mom begging me to go to her recital.

Once I finish talking about Anna, I move to talking about Leia. I can’t get myself to stop as I tell Dr. Thompkins about seeing her again. I had only texted her once since Thursday, but Leia occasionally sends me updates on whatever she’s doing. Although there is a notable lack of content from her ballet classes. I know she’s trying to protect me from the pain of seeing it, but it makes me feel like I’m being handled with kid gloves.

Then there are the dreams. The dark reminder lingers at the back of my mind. The flashing lights and music twist together in a nauseating dance. I don’t always remember them, but I can’t forget the feeling of waking up soaked in sweat.

“My heart feels like it’s leaping out of my chest and I can’t breathe. Do you know what that’s like?” My voice grows steadily in volume. “People treat me like I’m some broken thing that needs fixing or protecting, and they’re the ones who know what’s good for me. No one understands how frustrating that is.”

“You don’t want people to protect you, but you choose to avoid painful situations to protect yourself?”

I flinch. That’s different. This is my life and I know what I’m capable of. No one else does. Not my mom or Leia or even Dr. Thompson with her fancy degree.

Dr. Thompson steeples her fingers together and leans forward in her seat. “Let me ask you something, Marie. How do you want to move through the world? What do you feel is your next step forward?”

“I don’t want to feel trapped anymore. If that makes any sense.” I tried to run a hand through my hair and got tangled in the knots. I resist the urge to rip my hair out. Frustration curled into a knot at the base of my stomach. “I want everyone to stop worrying about me all of the time. I want.... I want to not be lying when I say I’m fine.”

I lean my head back and squeeze my eyes shut so I don’t have to look at Dr. Thompson. She says nothing for a long time. A long silence stretches between us. After a second, I hear the scratching sound of a pen being drawn across paper. I look up to see Dr. Thompson writing down something in her notebook. She stops when she notices I’m watching her.

“Are you ready to hear what I have to say?” She speaks in the same blunt tone I’ve come to expect from her, and her eyes are thankfully free from the tears I’d get if I had said the same things to my mom. I nod and her gaze drops back to her notebook. “I know you’ve dealt with a lot of changes in a short amount of time. You are struggling to figure out where you belong after

years of thinking you had everything planned out. It doesn't help that everyone is pushing you for answers without even knowing the question."

"What is the question?"

Dr. Thompkins stormy grey eyes met mine. "What is it you want to do now? This question can be as complicated or uncomplicated as you want it to be. It does not have to be lofty life goals; it could simply be an interest in a hobby. Like the piano."

Playing piano wasn't a real hobby. Not for me anyway. It is just something to keep my mom bothering me about spending too much time in my room.

"Is having a goal going to stop me from feeling so stressed?"

"As I said, this is a step in the right direction," Dr. Thompkins says. "It will not fix everything, but it can help. I can also prescribe you an anxiety medication if I determine that will be beneficial."

I took a slow deep breath. Small steps in the right direction. I didn't even know what that direction was. Everything in my life revolved around ballet until one day it didn't. There had not been a time I stopped to think about something else. Now I have to reach for something to keep myself busy, something new to dedicate a part of myself to.

This is not going to be easy.

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I shake out my hands before pressing down on the piano. It is slow work to finish the piece and with Nicholas's eyes on me, it feels even slower. At least this time it resembles an actual song compared to the last time I played it. My fingers stumble near the end as they stretch to reach the final notes, but I pull it together to hit the cord.

Nicholas nods approvingly. "I can tell you've been practicing."

“Really?”

Pieces of the past week slip into my mind and I realize I had practiced more than I usually did. However, I barely notice any improvements. Nicholas is just being nice.

“It’s not bad for your first time seeing it,” Nicholas says. “Especially since you just moved away from chords. When you really sit down and practice consistently, you’ll start to see improvements you’ve never noticed before.”

I glance over at Nicholas. He is not looking at me, but rather staring at the sheet music. There is a small crinkle in his brow.

“How often do you practice?”

Nicholas blinks in surprise. “Um, I’m not sure. My mom says I should practice whenever I have time to spare. I think I play around two to three hours a day when I actually listen to her advice.”

I stare at Nicholas. Two to three hours? I never touch my piano for more than thirty or forty minutes at a time. With that amount of practice, it is no wonder he is so much better at this than me. When I danced, I would practice for hours on end too. When you love something, it makes it easy to get lost in the movements.

“You must really like it,” I say.

Nicholas shrugs, reaching out to take my music book. “I like music. Playing piano helps me explore that more. It’s simple.” He places the music book back in front of me open to a page I have never seen. “I think you should try these pieces next. They are short and simple building off what you already know.”

Just because it looks familiar did not mean it would be easy. I get lost in the finger positioning, always trying to remember which fingers to place in which keys. It’s one of many

reasons I spend little time practicing. If Dr. Thompkins wants this to be the hobby that changes everything, she's going to be disappointed. Still, it is nice to learn something new.

I frown at the music in front of me. Piano lessons are never going to be dance lessons so I don't know why I'm worrying about it.

"I don't know if this is right for me."

"You haven't even tried it yet," Nicholas says. He smiles and holds out a hand to the music. "Play it first and then form an opinion."

I sigh but follow his instruction. Nicholas says nothing as I play, but I can feel his gaze intently on me watching my every move. His leg bounces, and he taps a hand on the side of the piano chair. I want to ask him what he thinks, but don't know how to phrase it without sounding weird. Instead, I focus on the music and my hand motions and try to pretend he's not even there.

Nicholas is silent for a moment when I finish the two pieces. A wave of unease settles over me. He stops moving like he's frozen in place.

He tilts his head to the side and looks at me. "You're right. These aren't the right pieces for you." I bristle at his comment and open my mouth to respond. "You can do something more complicated. If you keep practicing, I'm sure you'll be great at it."

Surprise fills me at his comment. My improvements are so sudden it looks like I have not been trying at all until this point. I study Nicholas's face, realizing that if he can see signs of my practicing now, he knew I lied before. I never put energy into playing the piano before.

"Nicholas," I say and wait for his attention to turn to me. "Did you know this whole time I wasn't practicing?"

He scratches the back of his neck. "Yeah. It was pretty easy to tell you weren't interested. I didn't say anything because... well, you kept showing up. I know so many people who get

frustrated and quit after a week, but even though you seemed to hate it you kept showing up. That counts for something right.”

My phone rings cutting through anything I might say. It’s my mom, wondering why I’m taking so long. I realize then my lesson is over. It’s been over for a few minutes. I quickly apologize to Nicholas for taking up his time as I gather my music together. This talk with Nicholas is not what I expect when I arrive for my piano lessons.

I used to expect nothing, but I’m not sure about that anymore.

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I am still adjusting to having nothing to do on Thursdays. I get out of bed at the same time I’m used to so I can take a shower. The long strands of my hair tangling around my fingers I wash it. My hair is still wet and dripping around my shoulders as I go downstairs. Mom is standing at the kitchen counter sipping from a giant cup of coffee. She smiles when I enter.

“I want to cut my hair.”

Mom’s eyes widen comically large as she stares at me. “Why would you want that? Your hair is lovely.”

I twisted a wet curl around my finger. “I’m not doing anything with it. It’s tiring and I want to cut it off. Mom, it will not be the end of the world, and if I hate it then I can grow it back out. You know that’s how hair works, right?”

My mom sighs. “At least you’re not doing it yourself.”

“Who said that?”

“Please, Marie, don’t even joke about that. I know I’ve given you trims before but if you think about cutting your hair yourself, you’ll ruin it.” Mom sets down her coffee cup. “That’s not trying to insult your ability, you just will.”

I roll my eyes and make my way over to the fridge to pull out a yogurt. My phone rings and I check to see that it's a text from Leia. She details some misadventure of Atlas from the morning. A second later another text pops up. She asks if I am considering going out to get coffee like we used to. I don't respond.

"I'll take you to the salon I go to. They shouldn't be too busy today," Mom says. "I'm going to work later, but you'll be fine by yourself. Right?"

"Of course."

Once we finish eating and drinking, we get in the car and drive to a salon in the city nearly forty-five minutes away. The salon had frosted windows and wall sconces and a monochrome black exterior. Even if the place looked nice, I couldn't believe this is where my mom came every time she wanted something done with her hair. As we pass through the doors an almost overpowering scent of citrus wafted by.

"Milla will take care of you," a perky blonde woman says.

I'm forced to look at myself in the mirror. With my hair pulled back the dark circles under my eyes become the focal point of my face. I'm staring so hard at myself that I barely notice when Milla walks up. She has short curly hair, similar to mine, and is wearing massive hoop earrings.

Milla studies me with a sharp gaze. "What do you want me to do?"

"Just cut it off, all off, like into a pixie cut or something."

A thoughtful expression crosses Milla's face. "We'll see what I can do."

Milla pops her gum as she leads me over to the washing station. She huffs, but otherwise ignores me when I tell her I already washed my hair that morning. Her movements are quick and efficient. I can feel her nails digging into my scalp.



“Your hair is so thick,” Milla says. “You’re going to feel so much lighter after I cut it, trust me.”

“I just want it to be easier.”

Milla runs a hand through her own hair. “It will certainly be easier. Sit up for me.” She wraps a towel around my shoulders and glances over to the hair drying station. “Can you get into one of those, or will I have to do this by hand?”

I nod. “I can do it.”

Milla set up a hair dryer for me before walking off to deal with someone else. I never realized how boring sitting alone in a salon is. In movies, it looks so easy and the characters have wonders done in less than ten minutes.

The front door rang drawing my attention to who is walking in. To my surprise, it was Anna and her mom. Her mom had the same blonde hair and slim build as Anna, it is clear to anyone they’re related. As her mom taps on her phone, Anna looks around the salon. When she sees me, she waves and I can’t help but feel like I should wave back.

Another stylist greets them in a way that makes me think they’ve come here many times before. Anna sits in one of the salon chairs while her mom talks to the stylist. She spins around in the chair one way and then the other.

Anna’s mom grabs her by the shoulders forcing her to stop. She looks up at the stylist saying something I can’t hear and gesturing with one hand.

Anna ignored both her mom and the stylist, choosing instead to make a face at me. After a while, one of them got her attention. She takes out her hearing aid, holding it tightly as she follows the hair stylist to wash her hair. Sometimes I can barely make sense of my wheelchair, and I can’t even imagine what it feels like not to be able to hear anything.

“...over there.”

I glance up at the voice to see a confused Anna staring at the stylist. The stylist glances over to Anna’s mom is talking on her phone. Instead of trying to get her attention, she points in my direction. Anna comes up beside me, wet hair plastered to her neck before fanning out on the towel, and takes a seat on the open chair next to me.

Anna taps my arm to draw my attention.

She smiles and signs something I don’t understand. My knowledge of ASL is practically non-existent. I shake my head trying to look apologetic.

Anna chews at her lip before her blue eyes suddenly light up. She glances in her mom’s direction before pulling her phone from her pocket. She types something out before turning it to me so I can read it.

*Mom is insisting I do something with my hair because of my recital tomorrow.*

I nod, opening my mouth to say something before remembering Anna still did not have her hearing aid in. I held out my hand towards the phone, a silent question. Anna hands it over and leans as close as she can to walk as I type.

*Moms always think they know what’s best, without ever asking you. My mom didn’t want me to do anything with my hair today.*

Anna pulls the phone away, her fingers flashing across the screen. *But it’s your hair. Do whatever you want. Dye it pink.*

I hold back a laugh. *I don’t think I’ll look good with pink hair.*

*You won’t know unless you try.*

I tilt my head to look at Anna. Somehow it didn’t feel like we were discussing hair anymore. I don’t think Anna even realized what she is making me think about. How could I take

the first step, figurately speaking, to move on if I kept refusing to do things that scare me? This is exactly what Dr. Thompkins and my mom have been telling me to do for weeks.

I take the phone from Anna and take a deep breath before typing. The words slowly fill the screen. I force myself to turn the phone toward her.

*Where is your recital? I might try to go if I find the time.*

Anna lit up with one of the biggest smiles I have ever seen on a person. She didn't have the chance to type out the information before her mom came over.

"Annalise, don't bother her." She signs as she speaks, and holds out a hand to help Anna out of the chair. "Your hair should be done drying. Hurry up, we have places to be."

Anna nods and signs something which makes her mom frown.

"She's saying Nicholas will call you... do you know my son? Who are you?"

"I'm Marie... I take lessons with Nicholas."

She nods. "Yes, I do feel as if I've seen you before. Didn't you have a wheelchair?"

"It's over there." I gesture to the wheelchair sitting next to me at the end of the row of hair dryers. Her eyes widen before she presses her lips together again. She signs to Anna as she ushers her back to their stylist.

I lean back. I can't believe I told Anna I would go to her recital. Or at least I would try 'if I had the time', clearly, I have more time than I know what to do with. I have all of the time, but I did not want to say that. Mom will be beyond excited and probably hug me. Something that can be a bit awkward in the wheelchair if not careful.

I can't believe I am doing this. It did not seem real.

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I smooth out the skirt of my starchy grey dress. I haven't worn it in a while and the shoulders were a bit tight. I did not like looking at my bare legs and the dress only reached my knees. Unfortunately, I did not have another dress to change into. Mom says the dress looks fine, but I'm not sure I believe her.

"Mom," I call out. "Are you ready?"

The recital was in about an hour and the dance school was a half hour away in Chicago. Anna's dance school was one I remember from my days as a dancer. It was old and expensive and hard to get into without the right connections, but every few years someone from my old school would transfer over. From everything I know about the Carpenter family, the school makes perfect sense.

I roll myself over to the closet to look in the mirror. There are still shadows under my eyes. The change from long dark hair to short curls framed my face better than I hoped.

"The real question is if you're ready." Mom pokes her head into my room. She is struggling to put in pearl earrings. "I didn't think you would ever agree to this."

"I didn't think so either," I mumble and wheel myself out of the way so Mom can use the mirror.

Mom runs a hand through her hair. "I think it's going to be great."

"Great is a string word."

Mom frowns at me in the mirror, but I refuse to make eye contact with her. The faint ringing of her phone breaks her focus and she steps out of the room. She comes back not long after, gripping her phone. She squeezes her eyes shut, pinching the bridge of her nose. Mom sighs before turning to me.

"I can't take you to the recital."

“Oh?” My brow creases. “Why? What’s happening?”

“They called me into work. The project we’re working on isn’t going as planned and since I’m the team leader, I need to check on it.” She shakes her head as she types something into her phone. “I wanted to take you to the recital. Dr. Thompkins and I thought this would be good for you.”

I narrow my eyes. I hate any reminder Dr. Thompkins talks about me with my mom. She plays with the single pearl earring in her hand. Mom’s worries are growing and I’m the one who has to deal with them every day.

“It’s fine. It just wasn’t-”

“Wait.” Mom’s eyes lit up. A sudden thought comes to her as she whips around to face me. “What about Nick? He can take you. I’ll call him right now.”

I don’t have the chance to even open my mouth to argue. My mom calls Nicholas only acknowledging me again to announce he is coming. I can’t avoid it. I hardly know Nicholas and I can’t shake the feeling it’s going to be weird getting a ride from him.

“You’re going to be fine, right?” Mom says as she passes my room on her way out.

“Yeah,” I say. It has to be fine. There’s no other choice.

Mom frowns. It’s hard to tell what is going on behind her eyes. “I’ll try to pick you up after. We’ll talk later.”

I nod.

She disappears and I look back at the mirror. My lips press together as I study myself one last time. I readjust my skirt and tuck my hair behind my ears. When satisfied I roll out of the room and push the button on the wheelchair to take me downstairs.

Less than ten minutes pass before I hear a solid knock at the door. Nicholas stands with his hands shoved into his pockets. He's wearing dark dress pants and a button-down with the sleeves partially rolled up. His dark hair is brushed out of his eyes and his whole face lights up when he sees me like we're better friends than I think we are. I never noticed before, but he and Anna have the same kind of smile.

"I like your hair," he says. "It's a good length on you."

I brush a hand against my hair. "Thanks. Can we go now?"

Nicholas nods and whistles a tuneless melody as we go to his car. He manages to fit the wheelchair into the back of his car which was a lot bigger than I thought he'd owned. I realized I know as much about Nicholas as he knows about me. His name is Nicholas, he teaches piano, and his little sister dances ballet. What else is there?

"I was dropping off Anna for her curtain call when your mom called. I'm glad you're going to be there for her." Nicholas taps his hands against the steering wheel. "It's nice to have someone there for her other than me. And I know she likes you."

"Are your parents not going to be there?"

Nicholas shakes his head. "Mom's working tonight and my parents have been divorced for years. I haven't spent more than twenty minutes with my dad since I was ten. He's not exactly the perfect family man or anything."

I wince at the sudden information. I feel as if I had no reason to learn anything about his family. It's weird to me that he feels like he can say these things. Nicholas doesn't sound as if he's sharing a secret, he's just stating facts. It is information he had moved on from and would probably share with anyone if it fits into the conversation.

"Nicholas," I say. "Does your mom always call Anna by her full name?"

“Annalise? Yeah, she does it for both of us. She doesn’t believe in nicknames because she gave us our names ‘for a reason’ and she’s going call us by them.” Nicholas playfully rolls his eyes as he turns the corner. “I think you’re the only other person who calls me Nicholas.”

“Oh... it’s just nicknames are usually for friends.”

Nicholas arches a brow at me. “I’m driving you to my little sister’s dance recital, I’d say we’re friends.”

*Friends?* That’s odd to me. I didn’t know if I want Nicholas to be my friend. He isn’t the type of person I might have ever been friends with before. We were from completely different ways of life. I am sure without my accident we probably would never have met.

I shift my hands around, messing with my skirt again. “How is Anna doing?”

“Anna has a small solo and is more excited than I have seen her in her entire life.” Nicholas laughs. “She’s doubly excited about you coming. She practically begged for me to come pick you up, and I couldn’t disappoint her.”

I felt my cheeks warm. Agreeing to go to the recital had been an impulse decision, but with each passing moment, it becomes much bigger than me.

It’s a struggle to get through the crowd of people in the lobby. A woman walks right into me and frowns like I’m the one not paying attention to where I’m going. I wish I could easily slip past people, but that’s not going to happen. Voices fill the air around me, the sound rising to suffocate me. I tense when Nicholas taps me on the shoulder.

“Let’s go to the side.” He gestures for me to follow him.

We move over to a corner where several large posters advertising past performances are hung. I end up underneath one for *Swan Lake*. I danced in *Swan Lake* at least half a dozen times.

It was a ballet my school had done every few years. It is the last ballet I ever performed in. I had been just a swan maiden then which was why *The Nutcracker* had been so important to me.

I was finally acknowledged as a featured dancer. I was the Sugar Plum Fairy. I squeeze my eyes shut as the faint strains of her iconic dance slip into my mind.

“Anna wants to dance in *Swan Lake*,” Nicholas says and my eyes flash open. I breathe a sigh of relief when I see he’s not looking at me but rather at the giant poster. “Odette is a role she would love to be able to dance at some point.”

“Yeah... Odette is an enviable role.” My voice sounds faint.

Blood rushes in my ears and I can feel each time my heart pounds against my ribcage. Sickness crawls its way up my throat. I swallow it back down and struggle to take a deep breath. I mumble something to Nicholas about going to the bathroom and move away as fast as I can.

I didn’t want to be here anymore. There is no way I can make it through an entire performance. Mom and Dr. Thompkins are wrong, this is not good for me.

I roll up to the sink to splash water on my face and run my fingers through my hair. Is it possible to sit here and not watch the performance? No, I can’t do that. I can’t disappoint Anna. Nicholas is probably standing out there in the lobby wondering what happened to me. Another wave of nausea comes over me, I have to do something.

“You good?” Nicholas says when I come out of the bathroom.

His voice echoes through the nearly empty lobby. I can hear music playing from in the theatre.

“I... I don’t know if I should do this.”

“Are you sure? Is something wrong?”



I didn't want to explain things to him. I shake my head and don't make eye contact. "I don't want to talk about it. You should go and watch Anna's performance and I'll wait here. It'll be better if I stay out here."

Nicholas frowns. "I don't get it. You came to see her, but now you won't?"

"It's more complicated than you think."

"You were a dancer before," Nicholas says. I grip the arms of my wheelchair. His voice is slow as he keeps speaking. "I started to wonder when you gave Anna advice on her dancing. But something happened... now you're in a wheelchair and you don't dance anymore. Sorry... that's too personal."

"You're right..." I turn away. "That's why I don't want to go in there. I'm not sure I can."

Nicholas glances at the theatre doors and then back to me. A crease forms on his forehead. He's thinking of something and I don't know him well enough to understand what that is. He tucks his hands into his pockets and leans back onto the wall as he looks over me.

"You should at least see Anna dance. If I tell you when she's dancing, will you go in just for a few minutes?" Nicholas says. "Please you have to, for her."

I worry at my lip but eventually nod.

Nicholas smiles and slips through the doors into the theatre. I feel almost like I'm floating. This feels like real than things I have dreamed up before. I'm going to wake up and realize I never went to the performance. Or maybe something bad is going to happen. I can usually dance in my dreams and that thought is the only thing letting me know this is real.

"Marie," Nicholas's voice draws my focus. "Come here."

I roll over to the open door. I have only seen Anna practice once before; I do not count the times she has appeared in my dreams. There is something completely different about the way she moves across the stage. She is structured, moving perfectly on time with precise movements. At the same time, there is a fluidity to her movements that comes from the combination of feeling the music and loving ballet with your very soul. The light strikes her hair and it glows making her look like a fairy or perhaps an angel.

“She’s great...” I whisper. Tears prickle at the back of my eyes and I try to blink them away. “I had the hardest time perfecting anything. And... and I didn’t have to deal with being deaf. She’s a natural. She-she’s just...”

I can’t get my last word out. The dance is beautiful. I hadn’t realized how much I missed it until that moment. Just being able to see it was amazing. Five months, I couldn’t have done this. Now I sat there completely awestruck.

“Anna went deaf when she was seven years old. About half her lifetime ago. She loved to dance so much and couldn’t give it up. You wouldn’t believe how much she practiced to make sure that she got everything right,” Nicholas says. “If there isn’t a path available, we have to make our own, right? Anna did that.”

I wipe at the escaping tears hoping Nicholas doesn’t notice. “Can you tell her something for me? Can you tell her she’s a really good dancer?”

“Why don’t you tell her yourself?” Nicholas says. “I’ll show you how.”

We go back into the hall and he shows me what to sign. Now I know exactly one thing in ASL. It’s only a few movements, but it’ll be entirely different than typing on a phone. Anna deserves for people to try to communicate with her.

“Thank you, Nick,” I try out his nickname for the first time.

“Don’t thank me,” he shrugs. “Why wouldn’t I show you? If you want to learn something and I know it I might as well help. It’s why I teach piano.”

I know things too; mostly revolving around how to dance. I’m not sure I had helped Anna in the way Nick thinks I did, but maybe I could. Mom thought piano would help, but I don’t think she ever anticipated any of this happening.

Anna comes running over to us with a duffel bag on her shoulder. She’s wearing a dark jacket over her leotard and tights. She waves to both of us and signs to Nick who rolls his eyes and signs something back. Anna smiles at me and I try out when Nick showed me. She lights up and turns to Nick with a delighted look.

He laughs. “She wanted to talk to you.”

“Thank you,” Anna says grabbing both of my hands in hers.

I never thought things would end up like this. That’d I’d be with two people I’d never have met without the accident. Anna is special to me now; I couldn’t do this without her. I never would have taken the chance to see something like this again. Mom says many things about needing a change, but that wasn’t all it is.

Dreams are hard to understand. I dream of a dancer who does as they pleased. Life in dreams is something the waking mind can’t begin to comprehend. I was a dancer and a girl in a wheelchair and something else entirely. Anna dances despite what anyone else might tell her after she lost her hearing. I couldn’t move but there is a new path I can make for myself.

And maybe I could find a new dream.

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Leia picks up on the first ring. I can practically hear her smile as she speaks. I had almost forgotten what her voice sounds like coming through the phone. She keeps repeating she’s thrilled when I tell her my plan.

“It’s going to be great,” Leia insists. “I can pick you up if you want. I think my car can fit your wheelchair in the back.”

“No, I already have a ride...” I pause, wetting my lips before speaking again. “That is if you are fine with someone else joining us.”

Leia laughs on the other end. “I’m always up for new friends. I’m glad you are too. It’s going to be so good to see you again, and I cannot wait to meet your new friend. See you later, ok?”

I assure her we would see each other and hang up.

My grip tightens on my phone. I have yet to tell my mom about this. She will be so proud and start gushing in the way which made me feel so small and childish. By calling Leia, I force myself to move forward. It’s those tiny steps Dr. Thompson mentioned. I am not bringing this up to my mom until my nerves settle and I am sure I can handle her questions.

At least I have friends now. For the first time in five months, I’ll have someone to talk to. I will never admit to Dr. Thompson she is right, that it feels better not to isolate people.

I have to try.