

Favored Five

Sweet.

Mariah keeps still, fingers digging into her waist.

Sugar.

She feels this tingling in her body, nervous excitement waiting to be let loose. She takes a deep breath.

Candyman.

Right on cue, Mariah lifts her head from its previous bowed position, and straightens her spine with a dancer's pop. The jazz tune of Christina Aguilera's *Candyman* continues to play, and Mariah flows through the steps of the choreography, a number she's rehearsed thousands of times, and a number she's performed every Friday night at *Victoria's*. She thinks of nothing and feels everything. Soon she completes her portion of the number, and whisks herself off of the stage, away from the crowd of businessmen hooting, hollering and raising their beer glasses in the air, cheering for the ladies dazzling them on the stage.

The bright lights illuminate the stage, and Mariah watches the favored dancers complete *Candyman*. She admires each and every one of the Favored Five, and imagines what it would be like to be one of them, stealing the show, being the one to make the crowd go wild. One of the five, Jada Armstrong turns her head to the left side wing of the stage, and catches Mariah's eye. Jada winks, and Mariah rolls her eyes, playfully. This is what keeps her dreaming. Seeing Jada on the stage, beating the odds, being the only color in a sea of white, Mariah, too, thinks it's possible for her. Being a part of the Favored Five is no easy task. Every year there is an audition of sorts. Every dancer can participate, and in order to do so, they must pick and perform a dance number that they choreograph on their own. The five performances that receive the best audience

reception earn a spot in the Favored Five, until the next year. Jada inspires Mariah, as she was the most recent addition to the Five, gaining her spot a year ago. Mariah remembers watching Jada audition like it was yesterday. Jada had this stage presence that exuded confidence. You couldn't help but watch her. It was the way she moved her body that put all the white collared finance brothers in a trance. Even they couldn't deny a talent like Jada. When she finished, they all stood up, clapping, whistling; it was almost like a domino effect, except instead of falling, they all rose. Mariah clapped along with them, and knew then that that's what she wanted. She didn't want to be Jada, necessarily, but she wanted what Jada received. She wanted the crowd to scream her name, and cheer for her. That would mean she succeeded. That would mean she belonged there. All she wanted was to belong there. Watching Jada now, Mariah knows it's possible. All she has to do is dance.

The Favored Five completes *Candyman*, blowing kisses to the audience. They all curtsy in unison, signifying the last dance number, and their exit. Walking off stage, their heels click, and the curtains close. Mariah and Jada instantly share an embrace. They are the only dancers that are as close as they are. The other girls are friendly, and hang out, casually, but Mariah and Jada were closer because they shared something deeper than anyone of the dancers would understand. After a couple of minutes of nonsensical chatter, Meredith appears in the wings. Meredith's the boss. She owns *Victoria's*, and has been running it successfully for God knows how long. Meredith is fair, so fair she leaves many of the dancing decisions up to the dancers and the audience. She's the one who created the Favored Five and the audition process. That was how Mariah got her job as a dancer at *Victoria's*. After weeks of deciding if she could handle dance classes at Julliard and a job at *Victoria's*, Mariah decided to take the dance. It couldn't hurt to audition. She showed up, with her number ready to go. She was set to perform last, and though

she was nervous, she was ready. She stepped onto the stage, and did what she does best. She danced. When it was over, she tried her best to not let anyone see how much breath it took from her. She stood up straight in her finisher's pose, and the crowd loved it. They cheered, and Mariah smiled with relief. If the crowd was happy, Meredith was happy, and that's when Mariah knew she was going to be a dancer at *Victoria's*.

Meredith stands in front of the twelve dancers, and immediately, they all stop their conversations. Meredith smooths back her hair with her hand, and when she does, Mariah notices a streak of gray. Meredith wasn't that old of a woman, but Mariah can see that she wasn't very young either.

"Great show tonight, ladies. You really knocked it out of the park." Meredith says. A compliment from Meredith was enough. They performed well. All was right in the world. The dancers all smiled, and waited for what was next.

"As you all know, it's time to see if there are any new stars who were developed in the last year. Auditions are tomorrow night. *Everyone* auditions. It's Saturday night, we'll have a full house. Impress me, people." She doesn't even wait for questions. She simply walks away, leaving the dancers to chat amongst themselves.

Mariah leaves the wings of the stage, heading backstage, gathering her belongings ready to leave. Before she can, she feels a presence behind her. Turning around, she finds Margot.

Mariah takes a breath. "What's up, Margot?"

Margot shrugs. "Not much, just wanted to see how you were." Instantly, Mariah squints. Margot and Mariah weren't exactly friends. They were nice and exchanged pleasantries, as one does, especially if you worked together. But Margot always has an ulterior motive. She was also gunning for a Favored Five spot, which made Mariah her competition.

“ I’m okay, just leaving.” Mariah picks up her bag, signaling her exit.

Margot stops her. “ I just wanted to give you these,” She holds a silk pouch in her hand, and pushes it towards Mariah, who takes it with some reluctance. Feeling the pouch, her fingers feel tiny circular hardness, and she pours the contents into her palm. They’re marbles.

Mariah looks back at Margot, confused. “ I’m sorry... what is this?”

Margot chuckles. “ They’re marbles, from my Grandmother. She gave them to me when I was auditioning for a French ballet company, and she told me they were good luck. There’s a whole story behind them, but I won’t bore you with the details.” The thought seemed nice, but what was the motivation behind it?

“ I just thought you could use some good luck for tomorrow. You got here a couple months ago, and haven’t done a solo yet, so that must be nerve-racking for you. Plus, the Favored Five have been the same since, like, forever. Jada had to wait, like, a year and a half to make it, especially after her horrendous back injury some time ago. Anyways, I thought you could use the good luck.” Based on the way Margot continues to speak, Mariah can tell her facial expressions are very obvious. Margot leaves Mariah, and instead of dissecting all that was said, Mariah decides to focus on herself.

Walking out of *Victoria’s*, Mariah thinks about her number. She’s been practicing for her audition for weeks. She was lucky enough to already have a number handy, being that choreographing numbers was something she had to do often for her classes at Julliard. She felt prepared. She knew she was ready, and remembers it was the way she felt after she first stumbled at *Victoria’s*. One night after a tough class over at Julliard, Mariah’s phone had died, and she was desperate. It was raining, and it was one of those days where things kept going wrong. While walking down the sidewalk, attempting to find her way to a train station, she heard a low sound

of trumpets. She followed the sound, and was confronted with a diner. Walking in, she felt the vibrations under her feet, and knew she was at the right place. She was almost there, but just needed to get closer. Towards the back of the diner, she saw a man in a suit in front of a door. She made her way over to him, where he asked her for her ID. She gave it to him, and with a stiff nod, the man opened the door, and Mariah was met with a purple fluorescence, and a staircase. With each step, the music became louder and clearer. She saw the stage, and the tables with chairs in front of it. She saw the bar at the back with a light that read, *Victoria's*. In minutes, Mariah saw the dancers, and was enamored with them. This feeling grew stronger when she saw Jada amongst them. She wanted to be one of them. She wanted the lights, and the crowd's eyes on her. It took her some time to decide if she wanted to go for it, but eventually she did. She decided to chase the feeling. Heading home, Mariah feels excitement. She can't wait to sleep, because sleep means the next day is arriving, and Mariah couldn't wait for tomorrow.

She pulls up the hem of her sock over her right knee. Moving it into place, Mariah moves her fingers towards her ankle to fasten the strap of her heel. She stands up, walking closer towards the mirror. She takes a minute to move her body, slowly. She sways her hips back and forth, her arms following the motion of her body. She continues to move, elevating her movements to twirling and skipping. After prancing around the room, she gradually comes to a stop, and faces herself in the mirror, watching herself breath, in and out. Tucking strands of short hairs behind her ear, she scans her body in the mirror beginning with her heels to her black stockings, up to her black leotard, and her hair in a messy bun. She nods to herself through the mirror. It's time. She heads towards the wings of the stage to watch Margot completing her dance. Margot was decent. She was all about technique, and knew how to plaster a smile on her face. She does

everything right. But still, she misses something. The crowd gives her a good round of applause, and a couple people stand. That was the fifth best reception so far. Margot could actually make the Favored Five. Some hope leaves Mariah's body. Margot had a chance, and Jada still hadn't performed yet. Where would that leave her? The sound of clicking interrupts her thoughts.

Mariah turns to find Jada.

Mariah gives her a sad smile. "You're gonna kill it out there,"

Jada pats her friend's shoulder. "So are you, girl,"

Mariah shakes her head. "I don't know..." She trails off, looking at Margot's smile, and pretending to swoon.

Jada snorts. "Don't pay any mind to Margot. You're better than her, Mariah. You're better than all of them. You have soul. We both have it. We've worked twice as hard, and hard work is always rewarded. Trust me, girl."

Mariah nods, feeling confident once more. She almost let her surroundings get to her. Looking at the ground, looking at Margot, she saw the same kind of people, and almost lost hope. She almost thought she had no chance. This happens from time to time, even at Julliard. Once you beat the odds, you always wonder if you can do it again, and again, but you can. If you work, and become undeniably the best, no one could ever take away the work you put in. Jada helps Mariah remember that, and Mariah takes a breath, watching Margot click off the stage, and they exchange a look. Margot's says, *Beat that*, while Mariah's says, *Watch me*. Jada pats Mariah's side with her palm, giving Mariah the energy to march onto the stage, and assume her beginning position. It's clockwork. The lights come on, and Mariah can hear *Oohs* from the crowd. This gives her the confidence she needs. The jazz tune begins, and *Back to Black* plays in the background. Mariah begins, popping her hips to the beat. Then comes her arms swaying

around her hips. Slowly, she begins prancing around the stage, turning on her tiptoes. Mariah can hear the crowd clapping to her beat, and she continues to electrify the room. Soon into the number, Mariah stops thinking. She no longer calculates her way through the steps. She just dances. She feels free, like no one can touch her, and she starts to smile. This is what dancing should feel like. It shouldn't matter what you look like, or who you are. It should always feel free. The ending of the song is near, and Mariah prepares to pose. Once she's in it, and music stops right on time. There's a second, maybe two where it is silent. Then, boom. Every person stands, and cheers. Mariah tries not to cry. She just got a standing ovation. After bowing, Mariah skips off of the stage. She covers her mouth, trying not to scream with joy. If that wasn't enough for the Favored Five, she didn't know what was.

She hears clicking, and turns towards the stage, and sees Jada in the center, preparing to perform. The music starts, and Jada outdoes herself. Mariah watches Jada's every move, and so does the crowd. Watching Jada turn on her toes, Mariah notices something shiny on the floor. It was circular and hard. Then she sees a foot dangerously close to it. Mariah jerks, ready to run on stage and save her friend, but her acts are in vain. Jada's foot is on top of the unfamiliar object, and the next thing anyone knows, Jada is on the ground, and she does not get back up. Running over to her friend, Mariah leans over Jada's body.

Jada grabs Mariah's shoulder, pulling her down to her mouth. Mariah hears Jada's words. "I can't feel my legs."

Alarm bells ring in Mariah's head. She remembers Margot saying Jada had a back injury. This was bad. Jada could be paralyzed. Too many thoughts consume Mariah's head. She didn't know what to do. The curtains suddenly swing closed, and Meredith stomps onto the stage.

"I called the ambulance. Jada's going to be okay."

Mariah can't hear any of it. How could such a beautiful night end like this?

Mariah sits backstage, unable to process the fall of her friend. She couldn't see, or talk to anyone. When it happened, all the dancers were huddled together, whispering. Mariah was the only one who really knew Jada. They were probably gossiping. How could it happen? Why would it happen? She notices the dancers all flock to the stage, and Mariah slowly stands up, making her way over.

Meredith stands in the middle. "She was one of our best dancers. It's sad, truly. I was sad, until I noticed something," She holds up a tiny object in between her index finger and her thumb. "These things were all around the stage after the paramedics came to pick Jada up. We all saw Jada slip. Now we know why. The question is, who?"

All the dancers look around at each other. Mariah didn't know who to look for. Her friend was at the hospital. All she knows is that she would never do anything to hurt her friend. Ever. Mariah crosses her arms, waiting to see who was going to confess. No one did. They all simply look towards Mariah.

Mariah squints. "Is there something wrong?"

Margot shrugs. "I mean, you did really want to make the Favored Five."

Mariah snorts, lightly. "We all did. That's what this night is for."

Another dancer, Lindsley, speaks up. "Yeah, but you *really* wanted to make it. It's been your dream. Like you would die without it."

Mariah shakes her head, confused. "I don't understand."

"It's okay, Mariah," Another dancer, Allison, says. "We get it. Just say what you did, and it'll be fine."

“ I didn’t do anything. What is wrong with you guys?” Mariah asks, backing away from the group of dancers.

Meredith sighs. “ You are very ambitious. Maybe you didn’t intend to hurt Jada that way.”

Mariah couldn’t believe what she was hearing. All of the dancers, including Meredith were ganging up on her. She didn’t do this. She needs to prove herself. Rolling her eyes, she walks backstage to pick up her bag. Heading back towards the stage, she holds it up in front of everyone, and pours the contents of her bag onto the stage.

“ I don’t know what is with everyone today, but I loved Jada. She was my best friend. I would never do anything to-” Looking down at the spilled items on stage, something catches her eye. She looks at that pouch, that damned velvet pouch. Mariah’s breath hitches. She realizes it all too late. It was a marble. Jada tripped over marbles. The same marbles Margot gave her. She looks at Margot, and now she understands what that look was for. It wasn’t because she thought she was better. It was because she knew she was going to win.

Mariah tracks down the pouch with her eyes, and sees it in Meredith’s hands. Then the marbles spill into Meredith’s palms. Mariah closes her eyes. She’s done for. She knows what will happen. No one yells at her, because they all expected it. They all knew except Mariah, and Mariah doesn’t know what to say. At the same time, there’s nothing to say, because there is nothing she could say that they will believe. She knows she didn’t do this, but they wouldn’t believe her even if she said a word. All she can do is turn around, and walk away. She doesn’t allow the tears to fall until she is outside in the night breeze. Her team, her dancers. They all betrayed her. All for a spot. Mariah should have known she was never going to be favored. People like her are never favored.

