



## 4

# May

Two hours into Saturday rehearsal, Lucas lifts me and whispers, “I’m begging you, stop farting in my face. You’re killing me.” He puts his hands on my waist, guiding me in a *pirouette*. “My eyes are watering. What did you even eat last night?”

I snort with laughter, which earns us both the evil eye from Levkova.

Lucas says, “Oh great, see what you did? Now she’ll be all over us like cops on a doughnut.”

He’s right. If we don’t pull it together, we’ll be cleaning the stage floor on our hands and knees.

Ever since last month, when Levkova announced that we’d be doing the second act of *Swan Lake* for the Winter Gala next March, class and rehearsals have been even tougher than usual. We spent the first three weeks learning the steps, doing them over and over again so they’d become muscle memory, so much a part

of our bodies that we don't have to think about them. Now we're working on interpretation.

It's hard. Nothing prepares you for how much strength and stamina it requires. The swan arms are hard to keep going, and my shoulders ache all the time. The balances are tricky. Everything has to be crisp and clean and pure, at the same time conveying the most complicated human emotions. Love. Loss. Betrayal. Fear.

Today, for the first time, Lucas and I are doing the entire White Swan *pas de deux* from the beginning, no stopping for corrections. I'm wearing pink tights, a black camisole leotard, and a rehearsal tutu. These always take some getting used to, because now the only way I can see my feet and legs is in the mirrors that wrap around three sides of the enormous studio. Lucas wears his usual gray fitted shirt and black tights and slippers.

The twenty-four girls in the *corps de ballet*, the cursed swans who share my fate, are taking a break while Lucas and I dance the *pas de deux*. They bend to pull on leg warmers and stretch tired muscles in front of the windows that reach from floor to ceiling. Even sweating and exhausted, they look beautiful in their white tutus and pointe shoes, like a Degas painting. Behind them, the distant mountains are hazy and blue.

Lucas and I begin, standing in a pool of sunlight that falls from the clerestory windows high on the mirrored wall in front of us. The warm light on my shoulders feels like a blessing. The music fills me up, carrying the sun's warmth into my blood and bones. As soon as it starts, my spine straightens. I pull up, holding myself as though someone is pulling a string through my body and out the top of my head, elongating my legs, my torso, my neck.

Madame Levkova can't help herself. We aren't supposed to stop, but that doesn't mean she'll be quiet. "No, Lucas! Sparrow,

make sure you have pointe shoe on center, please. Lucas, if you are not one step ahead, you are late, and you are making her late. Other leg, Lucas! Back, Sparrow, back! Abby, begin again, please.”

Abby Samuels, Lucas’s next-door neighbor, is our rehearsal pianist. She’s the only one who’s been able to tame the huge Bösendorfer Imperial grand piano, a gift from a wealthy donor. In the hands of some musicians, it can sound harsh and tinny, but Abby makes it sing. She plays like she’s one of us, deep inside the music, feeling it in her heart.

At the end, we’re breathless and sweating. I know it was ragged. Lucas has tutu rash all over his face and arms. He bends and puts his hands on his knees, breathing hard. I shake out my arms, which are aching and trembling.

Levkova is not pleased. She paces in front of us, her long chiffon dance skirt swirling around her legs. At nearly sixty, she is still every inch the Bolshoi ballerina she was forty years ago.

Finally she stops pacing, and my entire body freezes. I tense up, shoulders rigid, jaw clenched. I clasp my hands together and tap my finger. Nine times. Nine times more. I can see Levkova thinking. Watching. Planning our evisceration.

“You are dancing like good friends.”

We sigh with relief. If she weren’t right in front of us, we’d high-five each other.

“This is not a compliment, *mes enfants*.”

A murmur rises behind us. Even the girls in the *corps* are nervous. I can hear Delaney whispering, the rustle of their tutus, the sound of their pointe shoes on the wood floor as they stretch out their legs and feet. After you’ve been dancing for hours and hours, it hurts to stand still.

“Lucas, who are you?” When Levkova gets passionate in her coaching, her smoky Russian accent grows thicker. The whispering

in the *corps* grows louder. Levkova's face flushes, and she turns to fuss at them. "Ladies, silence, please. Watch and learn."

Under his breath, Lucas says, "Is it me, or is she starting to sound like Chekov in the *Star Trek* movies?" I elbow him in the side. If we laugh, or even smile right now, we are dead.

Levkova repeats her question. "Lucas. Who are you?"

"Ummm, Siegfried? I'm a prince?"

"Your lack of conviction disappoints me."

His shoulders droop, and he stares at his feet.

"Sparrow, who are you?"

"I am Odette, a princess, under the spell of an evil wizard who preys on young women. I'm a swan in the daytime and human at night. My heart is broken."

When Levkova turns to me, Lucas sticks out his tongue and mouths, *Suck-up!* behind her back.

"Yes, but I am not seeing your broken heart. I do not feel it. You are dancing the steps, but you are not dancing the role."

She takes both of us by the wrist and turns us to face each other.

"Lucas. Your mother has told you that you must marry. It is your twenty-first birthday, and you must choose a bride at the ball tonight. You are a prince, but you have lost your way. You are searching for something, but you do not know what it is. You are in love with no one, and no one is in love with you. You have everything, yet you have nothing."

Levkova's sapphire-blue eyes are shining, and when she gestures, it looks as though she's dancing. A wave of love for her washes over me, warming me from the inside out.

"You are all alone on your birthday, in the middle of a dark forest, on the shores of a silver lake. And you see a creature so ravishing, so enchanting that you fall instantly in love with her. But *hélas!* She is cursed!

“You must show this longing, this love, in your whole being. In every gesture, every expression. You must show that you ache to be with her, body and soul. Can you do this?”

Lucas is blushing, but he looks straight into the blue eyes that always make me think of frozen rivers and glittering jewels and snow falling on onion-shaped domes.

He nods and says, “Yes, Madame. I can do this.”

“And, Sparrow,” Levkova says, turning to me. “You have lost all your hope. You spend your days and nights grieving near a lake that is filled with your mother’s tears. But when you see this prince, when he touches you, you dare to believe that your life could be another way. That you might be saved. And when you look at him, when you touch him, you must make the audience believe that you love him. That you have given him your heart. That you have trusted him with your life.”

You could hear a pin drop in the studio. We are all enchanted, mesmerized by her voice, by the story and our roles in it, overwhelmed and humbled by the responsibility to dance it well.

“Now, then. This is what I want to see. Love. Hope. Trust. But mostly love. Passionate, heartbreaking love. Again, from the beginning.”

She claps her hands and tosses her head, like a diva at a curtain call. Raising her hand to Abby, the signal to begin, she gives Lucas and me one curt nod. She is done indulging us. Back to work.

This time, it feels different. We aren’t just dancing roles. We become Siegfried and Odette, both cursed, each in our own way.

Lucas makes it look like he aches for me, as though when I dance away from him, the space where I’d been moments before has gone cold. With my entire body, with all my heart, I dance the panicked fear of never being human again, the agony of imprisonment, of having no power over my body’s form or shape.

I dance, my heart breaking open, filling with love. I let myself melt into Lucas, wishing that I could stay safe in his arms forever, hoping that he will shield me and save me from evil. When I look into his eyes, I see a prince. I let my arms linger around his neck, even as I pull away in fear.

This time, it's magic.

When we finish, staring at each other in embarrassment and exhilaration, there's a deep silence all around us. The last notes of the piano float up to the high ceiling, fading away in the afternoon light.

And then Delaney starts to clap. "You guys! You studmuffins! You slayed it!" Abby stands up and joins her. Soon the entire room is filled with the sound of applause, while Lucas and I stand dazed and panting. Caleb lets out an ear-piercing whistle and shouts, "Brava! Bravo!" We don't respond. We stand still, breathing hard, waiting for Levkova. Nothing is real, nothing is good, until she says so.

I tap my finger against the palm of my hand and count all the things I did wrong. My *arabesques* were wobbly. I was off at the end, almost two beats behind. I felt shaky on the lifts. I'm afraid of what Levkova's going to say. I need her approval, her blessing, like I need air and food and water.

She comes gliding over to us. Her cheeks are flushed, and she is smiling, something as rare as an eclipse. Wordlessly, she puts her hands on my shoulders, kisses me on both cheeks, and tucks a sweaty strand of hair behind my ear. She rests the palm of her hand on my face for a long moment, gazing into my eyes like she wants to tell me something, then turns abruptly and kisses Lucas, who has to bend down so she can reach his scruffy face. She smells like lilacs and snow.

"Better. There is much work yet to be done, but today you

have come a little closer to perfection.” Then she says the words I live for: “I am proud of you.”

Overcome with relief and joy and the sweet ache of tired muscles, I throw my arms around Lucas and hug him close. He lifts me off my feet, burying his face in my neck, spinning me in slow circles. His arms tighten around me.

“Oh my God, Lucas, that was amazing. You were amazing!”

“Sparrow,” he whispers, so quietly I can barely hear him. “I wasn’t pretending.”

Before I can react or think about what to say or feel, I see Tristan’s face at the door over Lucas’s shoulder.

Lucas’s words are lost in the roaring that fills my ears. All I can see is Tristan. Only then do I think to check the clock on the wall. It’s three o’clock. Rehearsal has gone on for half an hour past the time he always picks me up.

“Lucas,” I say. “Put me down.”

He sets me gently on the floor, but keeps his hands on my waist.

I check the window set high in the studio door. Tristan is gone.

“Birdy,” he says softly. “What is it? Did I upset you? What’s wrong?”

He looks hurt, and I know I should stay and at least acknowledge what he said. But I can’t. “I’m sorry, Lucas, I have to go, like, right now. I’ll text you later.”

I run to grab my dance bag, piled with the others in a corner near the window. Fumbling with the hooks in my tutu, I step out of it, pin it to a skirt hanger, and hang it crookedly on the metal wardrobe rack.

Lucas is still where I left him, frozen in place, watching me.

I forget the customary *révérence* to Levkova and Abby. Levkova calls out, “Savannah Rose, how dare you leave this studio so rudely! Have you forgotten your manners?” I know I’ll lie awake tonight kicking myself, that no apology will ever fix what I’m doing right now, but I keep going. All I can think about is getting to the changing room, taking off my pointe shoes, and meeting Tristan in the parking lot. But the girls in the *corps* surround me, smiling, patting my shoulders, giving me one-armed hugs.

“You were wonderful!” Ainsley squeals.

One of the younger girls, Emma, says, “You looked just like Gillian Murphy! Oh my God, your arms are amazing!”

“Thanks, guys, thanks,” I say, trying to smile and not be a jerk. “I’m sorry, but I really need to get out of here. Y’all were great! See you Monday!”

Caleb tries to high-five me as I make my way to the door, but I push past him and run down the hall.

“Aw, man, come on!” he calls after me. “Don’t leave a brother hanging!”

In the changing room, I pick at the stubborn knots in the ribbons on my shoes, cursing under my breath. The clock keeps ticking.

I hear the door open and the sound of pointe shoes on tile coming in my direction. Delaney plops down beside me, half of her tutu in my lap. She tightens her bun and leans close to me, examining my face like a detective looking for spatter patterns.

“What’s going on? No one leaves without Levkova’s permission. No one leaves without the *révérence*. Something’s up, and you need to tell me. Like, right now.”

“It’s nothing,” I say, finally loosening the knots and wrapping the ribbons around my shoes. I turn away and shove them into

my dance bag. “I just need to get out of here. Tristan’s been waiting for more than half an hour. I hate making him wait.”

She shakes her head. “Nope. That’s not it. You’ve never, ever rushed out of the studio like that. In fact, you always stay late, because you are a masochist.”

“Yeah, but that was before I had a boyfriend. Is it so hard to believe that I want to leave on time so I can be with him?”

“Bird Girl, to be honest, you seem a little wiggled-out.” She points at my face. “Your mouth is saying one thing, but it doesn’t square up with the rest of you.”

“Jesus, Laney, you’re worse than my dad! Stop with the third degree! I’m not wiggled-out, okay? It’s just that I don’t like to keep anybody waiting. Especially Tristan.”

“So what if he’s waiting? You’re doing something that’s important to you, and it’s his choice to pick you up. It’s not like he’s out there bleeding to death. By the way, why does he always drive you to and from ballet now? Like, every single freaking day? Isn’t that, I don’t know, a bit much? What if you and I wanted to go have coffee at Nora’s, like we used to before you were in love?”

“If we wanted to have coffee, he’d be fine with it. And actually, no, it isn’t a bit much. It’s sweet. He says this way he can see me for a few minutes before I disappear into the studio for three hours after school and five hours on Saturday. You’re making it seem like some huge thing, and it’s not!”

“Right. If you say so, Swan Queen,” she says, standing up and adjusting her tutu. “I’m going back now. Levkova gave us five minutes to ‘stop acting like hysterical children and behave properly.’ You want me to tell her you’re sick?”

“Would you? Tell her I felt faint. Or I threw up. I owe you, Laney.”

“Oh, you’ll pay, trust me,” she says, walking to the mirrors.

She leans in and licks her finger, dabbing at the mascara that's smudged under her eyes. She leaves in a rustle of net and tulle.

As soon as she's gone, I pull a short black denim skirt over my tights, shove my feet into the worn Uggs I've had since ninth grade, and shrug on the bolero jacket I wore on my first date with Tristan.

Delaney's right. I need to chill out. I smile to myself, imagining how Tristan's arms will be around me in minutes, how he'll kiss me before he pulls out of the parking lot, just like he always does.

I say Sophie's words, the ones that make me feel instantly calm. "All will be well, all will be well, and all manner of things shall be well." He loves me. Everything is fine.

I run down the hall. Tristan is waiting.