



"I absolutely loved WISH; it brought back such memories of high school, boys and ballet. What a gift this is to young dance students."

*-Lauren Jonas, Artistic Director,
Diablo Ballet*

Wish

Indigo Ballet Series

Grier
Cooper

WISH

Indigo Ballet Series, Book One

By Grier Cooper

CHAPTER ONE

When I hear the voice I have come to hate, I stop what I'm doing. It doesn't matter that I'm in the middle of abdominal crunch number thirty eight. This voice gets preference. Mom's yelling again. I roll on my side, and press my ear to the floor. It's hard to hear things through the carpet—more difficult to distinguish the subtle nuances I've learned to listen for—but I don't have a choice. My body tenses as I strain to hear, listening for important clues. Then I'll know what I need to do. Is her voice sharp and impatient? Or round and cloyingly sweet? These things matter. Each one dictates a different course of action from me.

One of my brothers responds--Brad, I think--and the yelling gets louder. I sit up, prepared to move quickly. The volume reaches a crescendo, and I jump to the doorway. Just in case. Loud words rise through the floor below my feet. I stop breathing. Something clatters to the floor with a loud, metallic clank.

I hear a scratching sound. I realize with a start that it's my nails digging into the wooden grooves of the door frame.

I hold my breath until things go quiet again. After I wait one full minute I lie down on the floor again. I know I should finish exercising, but it feels good to lie still for a moment. Truth be told, I hate abdominal crunches. I close my eyes and a fragment of memory surfaces: a favorite moment from a long time ago, back before my brothers were born, when I flew. I'm not kidding. I remember my body floating weightless, toes hovering several inches above the intricate paisley patterns in our front hall carpet; dust motes twinkled in the sunlight like tiny golden fairies swirling all around me.

It was over too soon. The good stuff always is. But in those few sparkly moments, I was free in a way I have never felt since. Except when I'm in the ballet studio.

When the memory fades, I force myself to do my last round of crunches. The overly bright pink carpet beneath me scratches the bare skin at the nape of my neck but I grit my teeth and continue. My abdominal muscles are on fire and I latch on to that fact. It's proof that something I'm doing is having an effect, somewhere.

Sometimes, when things get bad, I close my eyes and imagine that blissful flying feeling

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in my body again. My cells remember. That's how I know it must have happened. The closest I've gotten to that feeling again is during the final moments of ballet class, when I leap across the floor. Those few milliseconds of freedom, where I defy gravity – the chance to fly – that's what keeps me coming back to the ballet studio.

Lately, I don't ever want to leave.

I hope this is the year Miss Roberta takes me to audition for the New York School of Ballet, so I can finally start my real life. But the second I think this, the doubts slither in. Am I ready? Will my brothers be OK if I leave? Right now there are no answers, only questions and conflicting feelings.

A droplet of sweat rolls down my right temple and trickles into my ear. I shake it off and finish my last crunch, then flop back on the floor. I imagine what I look like from above: A cast-off rag doll, forgotten and tossed aside.

I stand and take one last look in the mirror. As usual, there are a few stray flyaway hairs. I scowl at them and glue them into place with a final spritz of hairspray. That's as close to perfect as my bun is going to get today.

The voice is back, muddled with irritation. She's calling me this time. A second passes and Mom yells again, just in case I didn't hear her the first time, although it's impossible not to, since she always yells because she doesn't believe in occupying the same room as the person she's talking to.

I grab my ballet bag and fly down the stairs. I know better than to keep her waiting.

Seven blocks before we reach the ballet studio Mom is screaming so loudly that I see her larynx. Wait. That's not the right word. What is the word -- you know, for that dangly thing you always see vibrating in cartoon characters' throats when they yell? The uvula. That's the word. Only this is no cartoon – it's my life.

I see all the signs that a blowup is coming: tight jaw, white knuckles on the steering wheel, growling about every little thing that's bothering her. I've learned to read her moods. I

try to jump in and smooth things over before she really loses it, but I wasn't quick enough this time. I keep trying to make sure things at home are just the way she wants but the blowups have been happening more and more. It's exhausting.

"I'm sick to death of picking up after a houseful of pigs! I'm so goddamned tired all the time because of you!" Mom yells.

Her hands pound the steering wheel, and my stomach twists with a sick, fluttery feeling. It's like the world has suddenly spun out of control and there's no solid ground under my feet. I should be used to this by now – I've had almost sixteen years of practice.

My head droops like a wilted flower, and I stare at my lap. I shut my eyes. It's so hot in the car that my thighs are sticking to the blue leather seats. I hate that.

I have to escape. My mother is driving me crazy.

I ask myself why this keeps happening, why she's constantly angry. I know she hates driving. Plus today, her lead-footed determination fell short by a few seconds, and she missed the light at that one intersection on Post Road where you have to wait an eternity before the light turns green again. Charlie left his towel on the bathroom floor this morning; that kind of stuff always pisses her off. Maybe she's just having a bad hair day. It's Saturday, and she's not due back at the hairdresser's until Wednesday morning. All of these things add up, heat her inner coil until it boils over and spills out ugly words.

On the outside my mother looks like an old-school movie star – polished blonde perfection, hair always in a flawless twist – but lately she's wound like a tightly coiled snake on the inside, ready to strike at any moment. I used to love my mother but when I think of her these days, competing emotions swirl around my ribcage: Disappointment, anger, fear and something else – longing. For the person she used to be, a person who now makes occasional cameo appearances in my life. Sometimes I feel sorry for her, but watching her now, her contorted screaming face, (uvula shimmying back and forth like a bobble-headed hula dancer on crack) all sympathy evaporates.

I need to get out of this car to focus on my body, to feel the cool metal ballet *barre* in my hand. If Mom doesn't stop yelling soon, I'll be late for class and Miss Roberta will have my head. I'm tuning it out for now, like watching a movie without sound. Watching without

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listening almost makes it comical. Like noticing the uvula thing.

She jabs a well-manicured, red-lacquered finger in the air (religiously re-manicured every Tuesday morning), and Charlie cries louder. Poor kid gets blamed for just about everything since he was the mistake, the unplanned child. He's too small to stick up for himself, so I try to protect him as often as I can. I squeeze his little hand three times, our secret sign. I love you and it'll be OK. He scoots in closer to my side.

Brad rolls his eyes at me from the front seat, and smirks. I ignore him and stare at my reflection in the window, hating my strawberry blonde hair and pale skin, all the parts of me that look like Mom.

Here's another tactic: listen only to every third word she says. Using this filter, the dialogue goes something like, "Christ ... goddamn ... ever-loving ... useless ... godforsaken ... dirty ... you ... tired ... enough." I've edited out most of the obscenities. Seriously, half of what my mother says would be censored by mainstream media. Pretty ironic, since she went to Catholic school from kindergarten through senior year. The woman was practically raised by nuns.

She'll eventually exhaust herself, and tell my dad what crappy kids we are the second she gets home. Dad will do what he usually does, which is nothing. Or he'll go work in the yard so he doesn't have to deal with it. Until next time. Lather. Rinse. Repeat.

Charlie's scream pulls me out of thoughts. I watch in horror as my mother grips his arm and shakes him, hard. "Another goddamn mess to clean up. Like I don't have enough already." Charlie's cries turn to sobs. It's only then I notice scuff marks from his shoes on the back of Mom's seat.

"Great, just great," she growls.

Not right, not right, not right, says a little voice inside me as my heart races frantically. I can't let her hurt him.

"Mom, you can't..."

"Shut. Up." She whips her head towards me, eyes blazing. "Do not start with me or I swear to God I will make you regret it. Just try me, and you will find yourself out of ballet classes so fast your head will spin."

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The words hover in the air, followed by a sudden blistering silence. A door slams shut in the center of my chest. I fight back the leaden weight of anger and panic with slow, steady breaths. I wish I could make her stop freaking out all the time. But how? I clench my fists, digging the nails into my palms to stifle any urge to respond.

At last she guns the accelerator and drives the final few blocks to the ballet studio. The car rolls to a stop and she eyes each of us in turn. Slowly she turns back toward me. “All right,” she says. “Get out.”

I feel weird and shaky as I climb out of the car. I close the door and lean against it with my head bowed. I take a deep breath. I have to pull it together before I go to class. Not easy to do when you have liquid hate pulsing through your veins.

“Indigo, is that you?” a voice says out of nowhere.

Crap. It’s Mrs. Davis. Her blonde wavy hair is shellacked into place, her perfectly shaped eyebrows arched in excitement. My heart sinks even further. I swear she and Mom have a secret arranged marriage planned for me and Ryan Davis, the maniac perverted son I was forced to play with all through grade school. He spent every one of our play dates either beating me up, or trying to look under my dress.

She eyes me up and down like I’m the main course for supper. “I’m so happy to run into you. I have a favor to ask.”

I’m rooted in place by dread and paralysis. I tell myself that I must escape before it’s too late. Behind me, I hear the car window glide down. I turn to see Mom leaning across the front seat to angle herself into the discussion.

“Why, Pam, how nice to see you.” My mother’s voice oozes with syrupy sweetness. She’s talking in that nice phony voice she only uses when we’re in public. We call it her Christmas voice. It’s as fake as the rat poison disguised as sweetener that all the skinny moms in town stir into their morning lattes. No one would ever guess that only moments ago she was screaming her head off at us in the car.

“Likewise, Elizabeth. How are your boys doing?”

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“Busy with hockey, as always. And yours?” Mom’s voice now has a slight Southern twang, as it does when she’s laying it on extra thick.

“Same. But you know, I was just about to ask Indigo if she’s free to babysit Friday night. We have to take the boys to an away game but there’s no reason to drag Lila along. Besides, Lila just adores Indigo. I think spending time with older girl she looks up to would do Lila a world of good.”

Before I can stop her, Mom says, “Well, of course, she’d love to help out. Wouldn’t you, Indigo?”

No reason to ask me what I think.

They look at me expectantly. Mom’s lips are pressed together in a tight line, a sure sign that she expects no argument from me.

“Uh, sure, Mrs. Davis,” I say.

“Oh, fantastic, honey. Thank you so much. Lila will be thrilled!”

I can’t believe how easily I just got roped into babysitting Lila. That’s the thing about this town: it’s impossible to go anywhere without running into someone you know, and usually it’s the person you were hoping to avoid.

The Christmas voice echoes in my head as I climb the stairs to Miss Roberta’s ballet studio. It’s only when I reach the top that I realize my hands are gripped into tight fists and my jaw is sore from gnashing my teeth. I unclench my fingers and shake out my hands, imagining I’m flinging off the bad juju.

The smooth leather texture of my ballet slippers is comforting as I slip into them. I throw on leg warmers and look for a spot at the *barre*. There’s one last spot, right next to Marlene James, ex-fourth grade best friend, now turned horrible person. Lovely.

Monique shoots a questioning look from her spot three places down at the *barre*, but I shake my head and look away. I hate that I can’t tell my best friend about my manic mother, but now is not the time. I’m still too upset. While I mechanically prepare for class, I don’t talk to anyone. I throw my right leg up on the *barre* and fold my body over it, then switch to

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the left. A thorough full-body stretch is a must before every class, but thanks to my mother that's all I have time for today.

"All right, girls, let's get started," Miss Roberta says, clapping her hands loudly.

I hold the *barre* lightly with my left hand and move when the music starts. It's the same music I've heard in every ballet class I've taken for the past ten years. We always start with bent kneed *pliés*.

My knees bend in time to the music: *demi plié, demi plié, grand plié*. My body moves through the positions while my mind replays the scene in the car. The image of my mother's uvula is stuck in my brain.

"Indigo, where is your focus this morning?" Miss Roberta's voice brings me into the present. I glance in front at Marlene's feet and realize I'm in the wrong position. I shake my head to clear it. Go away, Mom. This is the one place where I get away from you – even if it's only for an hour and a half.

Compared to the rest of my life, ballet classes are refreshingly orderly and predictable. *Barre* exercises always follow the same routine: work the right leg, then turn and repeat with the left.

We move through the *barre* exercises. Each beat of music demands that the body answer precisely. Already my muscles are beginning to feel warm and stretchy.

"Monique, your leg does not end at your ankle. Point those toes! Jeanine, you're sagging. Stand up straight!" Miss Roberta's voice carries through the room. Today she's all in pinks with a floral chiffon headscarf. She's the classic tiny dancer: Dark-haired with pert features. Her eyes flicker across the class, constantly appraising technique and posture. Even though she's tiny, she commands the room. If she sees imperfections or lack of good effort, she will call you out.

Moments later we are kicking our working legs high above our heads in *grands battements*. I feel my hip joints loosening as droplets of sweat roll down my back and the sides of my face. Still, my extensions suck today; my leg just won't go as high as usual. I'm straining to get it up near my shoulder when it's usually as high as my head. Everything feels heavy.

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“What is going on with your extensions today, Indigo?” Miss Roberta looks disturbed. She addresses the room. “All of you are operating at half speed. Can anyone tell me why?”

“Must be how hard they’re working us in PE at school,” Monique pipes in.

“Great, just great. Those people have no idea what havoc they are wreaking on my dancers. Do you girls have to kill yourselves in gym class?” Her lips curl like she sucked a lemon. Miss Roberta is extremely cautious about this stuff. In her world, dancers shouldn’t do half the stuff that other normal people enjoy. Skiing, for instance. She has forbidden me to ski because I could break a leg. The list of things I’m not allowed to do gets longer all the time.

“The human body is naturally lazy, girls. You have to make it work for you,” Miss Roberta reminds us. This is the first of the “Rules of Ballet According to Miss Roberta.” The complete manifesto goes something like this:

Humans are naturally lazy and dancers have to work hard to overcome this tendency.

There is always room for improvement. If you think you are a good enough dancer, you’re wrong!

There will always be someone who is a better dancer than you.

It takes hard work and discipline to get ahead.

If you can’t take constructive criticism, you are in the wrong place.

If you are too tall, too fat or too lazy, pick a different career.

The love of dance brought you here and it will carry you through your career.

Ballet is equal parts dedication, inspiration, and perspiration.

The human body is a dancer’s most important tool and our biggest challenge (see Rule #1).

Ballet involves sacrifice (of certain dangerous activities...including and most especially boys).

“Girls, get the lead out. Let’s see some energy in those leg extensions. Make your bodies obey!” Miss Roberta is not known for her subtlety. Also, she is perfectly comfortable discussing touchy subjects, such as personal hygiene. Three years ago, she alerted us about the need for deodorant by making a loud public statement in the middle of class that went

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something like, “Many of you girls are old enough now that you need to wear deodorant. Some of you are beginning to smell.”

We put on *pointe* shoes and practice more *relevés* and turns at the *barre*, this time balancing on the tips of our toes. Everything feels different once we put on *pointe* shoes, especially turning. Turns are all about balance and spotting. I spot the back of Marlene’s head each time I turn. It’s a dance secret; the key to spinning without getting dizzy. Keep your eyes on a single spot as you start to spin, then whip your head around quickly and find the same spot again.

Marlene is an amazing turner. Today I want to hate her, but it doesn’t matter anyway, since she probably won’t get much further in ballet with those D-cups of hers.

I yank my attention back to turns. It’s nerve-wracking, spinning around multiple times on the tip of a *pointe* shoe. You’re balancing on, maybe, three square inches of surface space—it’s like dancing on the head of a pin. It doesn’t help that I’m tall; there’s more to control.

Finally it’s time to move to the center of the room. I’m always glad to be done with the *barre* even though it’s where the foundation is built. The steps we repeat become words in our dance vocabulary, and once we are in the center we flow into fluid dialogue.

We do more stretchy *tendus* and then a body controlling *adagio*. My body blooms and stretches as I raise one leg to the ceiling. Everything remains still as my lower foot rotates and I revolve like a jewelry-box ballerina. The music is painfully slow today. We have to make it look easy, but it isn’t.

Miss Roberta demonstrates quick footwork with the lightness of a flitting sparrow. I watch and wonder what her career was like. I know she was with the American Ballet Theater in New York City – photos and newspaper clippings posted around the studio show this.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Miss Roberta patrolling the edges of the room, watching while we work. Sometimes I swear I feel her eyes burning into the back of my skull. “Feet together in the *sous-sous*, Indigo! Imagine you are being sucked up into a straw.”

As I pull my feet into *sous-sous*, I watch my movements in the mirrors that line the front of the room. She’s right. My feet should be tighter, one foot right in front of the other. I

catch Marlene flashing me a haughty look in the mirror. I quickly look away and watch my feet closely, placing them with care.

“Better. Now apply that same diligence to every step you take.”

That’s a tall order for me today, but I know she’s right. I have to maintain that same level of care if I’m going to make it as a dancer. Each time I’m here, my job is to move one step closer to perfection. And if I get my wish, I won’t always have Miss Roberta around to remind me.

For now, she is part mentor, part mother and part tormentor. She embodies the strength and willpower I’ll need to get ahead, and she reminds me of this relentlessly.

While the second group does the exercise, I go to the side of the room and take off my *pointe* shoes – just for a moment. I’m starting to get bunions on the joints of my big toes. Some days my feet ache so badly I want to cry, but I have to work through the pain. *Pointe* shoes look beautiful on the outside, all pink and satin. But they are instruments of torture. I think of them as cement ball gowns. The music ends, so I quickly stuff my feet back inside my shoes and tie the ribbons. Just in time for turns.

“Long spine, Indigo!” Miss Roberta’s eyes find mine in the mirror. “Shoulders down, Elizabeth! Chin up!”

Another turn. I spot my eyes in the mirror, turn twice and land. I hate this floor; the linoleum is slippery and I worry about falling. Only think about turns. No fear. I imagine an iron spike going down through my supporting shoulder and into the ground. It works. I nail the landing perfectly.

“Good, Indigo. Try for three next time.”

When we switch groups again Marlene walks past me with her nose in the air. She takes her place in the center of the floor and the others back away to give her space. When our eyes meet in the mirror, she raises an eyebrow at me and smirks.

She whips off a flawless triple *pirouette*.

I stop watching.

Finally we move to the far corner of the room for jumps on the diagonal, the giant leaps that are my favorite. Doing them in *pointe* shoes is challenging because we’re supposed to

jump soundlessly. Not easy when you've got cement blocks on your feet.

We end class with a reverence, the same way dancers bow on stage at the end of a show. In class it's a show of respect for our teacher.

"Thank you for your hard work," Miss Roberta says. I take a deep breath and begin to relax, at last. The feeling I get at the end of class is always warm and yummy. I take a gulp from my water bottle to replace the fluids I lost from all the sweating.

"Indigo, I need to see you a moment," Miss Roberta says quietly.

The other dancers filter into the dressing area and I step into her "office," the corner where the music player lives. She shuts the divider, closing the studio off from the dressing room. Not a good sign.

Miss Roberta clears her throat. "I know you're working hard." I hold my breath, waiting for her to continue. "But your footwork was sloppy today. Your jumps have improved, but could be stronger and you're still a little loose through your core. You really need to step it up if you intend to audition this year."

I stand crouched over, trying to catch my breath as Miss Roberta's words rain down on my bowed head. Every one is like a punch to the gut. I can't meet her eyes. I know she's right.

I stare at the floor in quiet desperation as I hold back tears, nodding, unable to speak.

Her face softens. "Look, you have all the tools you need at your disposal. But what you do with them and how far you go – that's up to you."

CHAPTER TWO

Mom is all smiles when I get in the car after class. I don't feel like smiling at all; I'm still raw from Miss Roberta's critique. I eye Mom warily; I see her smile so rarely that I'm immediately suspicious. Then, I notice she's here without my brothers. Maybe that's why she's grinning.

That, and she probably wants something.

"How was class?" she asks, grin intact.

I mumble something unintelligible and pretend I'm looking for something in my dance bag. I'm not in the mood to talk about anything with her. Especially not after this morning.

"That good, huh?" She glances at me appraisingly. "How about we go to Swirl and get a frozen yogurt. My treat. I'm in the mood for rainbow sprinkles." Her musical laugh fills the car.

If only she were like this more often.

After building ourselves ridiculously small cups of yogurt (mine topped with fruit and a few sprinkles, hers all-out sprinkles with whipped cream), we sit outside on brightly-colored, obscenely uncomfortable metal chairs. Even though Miss Roberta's words are still echoing in my mind, the rainbow sprinkles make me feel better, but I'm not about to admit this to Mom.

"Delicious, huh?" Mom scrapes her spoon along the edge of her cup, scooping a last soupy bite of yogurt. "Anyway, now that we're out I thought we could swing by Grade A and pick up a few things."

Of course there had to be a catch. I glance at my phone; it's already mid-afternoon. I should be home right now doing extra sit-ups, finishing my homework, and planning my future. Once Mom starts running errands I'll be held hostage for who knows how long. I'd argue if I thought it would do any good.

The second we enter the Grade A store, I immediately break out in goose bumps, but the polar climate of the refrigerated aisle feels good after all of my exertion and sweating during ballet class. Mom goes one way with the shopping cart; I go the opposite way.

At a glance you'll notice that Darien, Connecticut, where the Grade A is located, is a lot like a J. Crew ad. You'll never find anyone wandering around in pajamas in this store. The women are all attired like they're at a cocktail party, rather than dressed to deal with more mundane matters such as the price of poultry. Our neighbor, Mrs. Benson, is a fine example. She's in a tight red halter and studded stiletto heels; one of those übermoms, sort of Martha Stewart meets Victoria's Secret.

It's not a coincidence that both versions of, *The Stepford Wives* were filmed here. Those creepy robot moms from the movie fit in perfectly. No joke. One more reason I want to get out of this town. There's even a shopping center called, Goodwives' Shopping Center down the road.

I'm browsing for shampoo when I hear the Christmas voice full blast in the next aisle. My mother is talking. I peek around the corner.

She sees me and beams. "Here she is. This is my daughter, the ballerina, the one I was talking about," she says, sweeping her arm in my direction. The stranger nods, looking at the floor. It's hard to say which one of us is more uncomfortable. Probably him; his feet are already turned away, preparing to make a hasty exit.

"Well, then," he says, with a confused smile, "it was nice to have met you both. Good luck in New York." He practically runs down the aisle until he's out of sight. Who knows how these conversations start, but it's always the same scenario: Mom ends up talking about my life.

"What a nice man," she murmurs.

The grocery store is one of her few social outlets and two minutes later she starts gabbing with Mrs. Benson. I decide to look in office supply for notebooks. I kneel to look at stack of cool, glittery notebooks on the bottom shelf when, out of the corner of my eye, I see someone stroll by. Actually, I see only the shoes. Black, steel-toed boots with buckles up the side. Jesse Sanders.

Last summer, we had a thing for about five minutes. There was this end-of-summer beach barbecue and we ended up talking all night. Since then, I catch only occasional glimpses of him in the halls at school.

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Luckily he doesn't notice me hunched on the floor, with my hands full of notebooks. I think that I have to get out before he sees me. I've already used up all of my unexpected encounters points today.

I stand quickly and, before I know it, my hair (still in a stupid bun), catches on a protruding metal hook displaying packing tape dispensers. They tumble to the floor with the notebooks from my hands, taking out packages of labels, tape, markers and pens. With the racket this makes, every head in the store turns to look at me standing in the middle of the mess, eyebrows raised to my hairline, face stuck in a horrified grimace. Yeah, that's me, the graceful ballerina.

Jesse Sanders rounds the corner the next second. This is one of what I call my "blonde moments" because really, there's no other explanation. This is "blonde moment number 4,327." Ironically, I have spent most of my life training to move with precision and grace, but every now and then, I do something incredibly clumsy and embarrassing, like this.

"Need a little help?" Jesse says. A smile tugs at the corner of his mouth as he bends to pick up the notebooks.

He has dimples. Oh God. I forgot he has dimples.

"You think?" I say, laughing nervously. God, I think, I sound like a hyena.

Jesse leans in to unhook my hair and I catch his scent, citrus and spice. My eyes fall on the necklace lying against the exposed skin of his chest. It's a giant tooth, or claw, set in a silver spiral. I imagine how warm it is from touching his skin and I feel my face flush.

No time for boys, Indigo, I remind myself. I turn away with a jerk, and sort the mess into neat piles.

The store manager shows up. "OK, move along," he says, scowling. "You've done enough here."

"Does this mean we're eighty-sixed from shopping here ever again?" I say as we scurry away.

Jesse looks over his shoulder. "That guy has a serious rod up his ..."

I smile. "Hey, thanks for the help." My smile fades when I notice my mother looking for me. Must. Run. Away. Before she comes over and says something embarrassing. "OK, well,

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see ya!” I run off, and leave Jesse standing, still holding the stack of notebooks.

I'm breathing hard when I reach my mom. She looks at my empty hands quizzically. “I thought you were going to get some notebooks.”

“Yeah, I just couldn't decide.”

“All right, then. We're out of here.”

It's the best thing she's said to me all day.

After I help Mom put the groceries away, she busies herself in the kitchen arranging a bouquet of roses. Our garden is full of them, and she's out there every morning, faithfully feeding them leftover coffee grounds. The sink already holds a chaotic jumble of fallen leaves and petals, a rainbow of yellows, vibrant oranges and velvety reds. My mother has always been unapologetic in her use of color; it's one of the only times she is unrestrained.

She hums while she gathers the pile of prepared roses. Her tune seems mournful in contrast to the color blooming in her hands. Clipping, tucking, humming the dirge she's got looping through her brain, she sets them in the square glass vase and gives them a final sweep with her fingertips, before stepping back to admire her work.

Her arrangements are always perfect. While I admire her skill, the metaphor doesn't escape me. She is just like her roses: pretty and prickly.

“I thought you were upstairs,” she says, noticing me noticing her.

“I'm headed to the shower right now,” I reply. “Those look nice, by the way.”

The shower is always my friend. Warm water soothes my muscles and washes away the layer of dried sweat from class. My rebellious mind plays snapshots of Jesse's necklace on the smooth skin near his collarbone. His smile. Those green eyes.

I grab my shower brush and scrub away the thoughts.

After I dry off and moisturize I throw my hair up in a towel, genie-style, and get down to the grimy business of cleaning out my dance bag. I am shocked to see what's living at the very bottom of the bag: a half-eaten protein bar, a tangle of holey hairnets, handfuls of bobby pins and some unidentifiable brown, crumbly detritus. I am too disgusted to even try to identify the source.

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I return downstairs, braiding my hair while it's still wet. It's the only way I can get some wave in my stick-straight hair.

As I enter the kitchen I stop in my tracks. It looks like a floral bomb went off in here. The vase sits dejectedly by the sink. Two remaining flowers droop in mourning for the rest of their companions, which lie decimated in the sink. A confetti of scattered petals decorates the counter and sink, while a few lay randomly on the floor.

Then I notice the pile of naked stems, every petal torn away as if some rabid deer got hold of them. I stare uncomprehendingly at the mess. My heart thuds in my chest.

My first thought is to turn around and retreat. But I can't. Some invisible force has seized control of my feet sending me to find Mom, half out of morbid curiosity and the remote need to be a caring daughter.

I find her in the living room. She sits zombie-like in Dad's reading chair, staring straight ahead. One hand hangs limply in her lap, and the other is wrapped casually around the glass on the table beside her. Untamed flyaway strands of blonde hair frame her face, giving her a wild look. I don't know why, but I feel afraid.

"Mom?" My voice is a timid croak. Silent moments pass with no sign that she's registered my presence.

I clear my throat. "Mom," I say, more forcefully this time.

She startles like she's been pinched. Her glassy eyes swim languidly. "Indigo," she drawls slowly, like language is foreign on her lips. She absently swirls the drink beside her, ice tinkling in the glass.

I look at her hand wrapped around the frosty glass. I feel cold. "Is everything all right? Your flowers..."

She laughs mirthlessly. "No, Indigo. Everything is shit. Complete and utter shit." She glances down at her drink and takes a long pull, draining the liquid from the glass.

I don't know how to respond to this. I blather on. "But your flowers ..."

"Fuck the flowers. They are inconsequential when everything else is going down the toilet."

"Like what? I don't understand." I stare at her, wondering what else she isn't telling me.

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“You wouldn’t understand, Indigo. Maybe one day you will but I sincerely hope you never do.”

She walks woodenly to the kitchen. I hear the clink of more ice cubes and liquid gurgling as she pours herself another drink. She reappears in the doorway, leaning on it, stirring her drink with one finger. “Set the table, will you? For four. Your father has to work late tonight. Again.” She takes a long shuddery breath. “I’m going to take a bath.”