



TERI WILSON

The  
Ballerina's  
Secret

MILLS & BOON  
*True Love*

**Teri Wilson**  
**The Ballerina's Secret**

**Аннотация**

Can he play the music of her heart? Finally landing her dream role, Ballerina Tess Wilde had just got used to hiding her deafness from the world. Determined not to let anything get in the way of success, she can't help but wish the brooding piano accompanist Julian Shine would leave her alone... Or that she could leave him alone...

Tessa Wilde had a glittering career in front of her...

And then the accident happened.

Ballerina Tessa Wilde had gotten used to hiding her deafness from the world—in fact, she had just landed a role of a lifetime.

If only Julian Shine, brooding piano accompanist, would leave her alone. Or if she could leave him alone.

When he played, she could hear...every note. So was it real? Or was it the music of her heart?

TERI WILSON is a novelist for Mills & Boon. She is the author of *Unleashing Mr. Darcy*, now a Hallmark Channel Original Movie. Teri is also a contributing writer at [www.HelloGiggles.com](http://www.HelloGiggles.com), a lifestyle and entertainment website founded by Zoey Deschanel that is now part of the People magazine, TIME magazine and Entertainment Weekly family. Teri loves books, travel, animals and dancing every day. Visit Teri at [www.teriwilson.net](http://www.teriwilson.net) or on Twitter, [@teriwilsonauthr](https://twitter.com/teriwilsonauthr).

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The Ballerina's Secret

Teri Wilson

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THE BALLERINA'S SECRET

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For Julia, Karen, Holly and Laird Joanna Macpherson, the lady laird of Attadale and Attadale Gardens in the Scottish Highlands, where I wrote the first four chapters of this book.

I can't wait to go back.

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[Chapter One](#)

The 66th Street station hummed with music on Monday afternoon. Tessa couldn't hear it, but she could feel the notes vibrating beneath her feet, ever so softly, like a whispered invitation to dance.

It had been a long time since Tessa had actually heard music, or anything else. Over a year. She no longer missed the bustle of crowds, the whoosh of trains or the collective rustling of the morning *Times* in the underground, but thirteen months hadn't

been long enough to shake the memory of music echoing off the tile mosaics. Sometimes she still dropped a dollar or two in the occasional violin or guitar case propped open on the gritty concrete floor. The street musician would usually smile in gratitude, and Tessa would smile back. Then she'd stand and watch the bow slide quietly over the violin strings until the silence grew painful.

Today, the music found her before she even spotted the elderly man wearing a bow tie and fedora, playing the trumpet beside one of the rust-colored pillars on the platform. Before she felt the hum beneath the soles of her shoes. It reached her first by sight. Specifically, by way of the twitch of her dog's ears.

Mr. B loved music. As a hearing-assistance dog, he'd been trained to alert her to specific sounds—the telephone, the alarm clock, people calling her name—but recognizing music wasn't part of his repertoire. Not intentionally, anyway. As best she could tell, he just enjoyed it.

Oh, the irony.

The ground rumbled underfoot as Tessa followed the little dog down the steps and into the station. She'd missed the uptown 1 train by mere minutes, if the near-empty platform was any indication. Other than the trumpet player, she and Mr. B were alone. Tessa gave him a little more slack on his leash, and he trotted straight toward the musician. A jazz player, if she had to venture a guess. He just had that look about him. Maybe it was the bow tie. Or possibly his black-and-white spectator shoes.

She'd worn shoes just like them once—last year, when the Wilde School of Dance had performed a Gershwin tribute. The curtain had gone up on an opening number to *Rhapsody in Blue*, with sultry movements, which were more reminiscent of Bob Fosse than classical ballet. It had been a novelty, wearing something other than pointe shoes. Tessa's feet had been grateful for the respite, even though she was back *en pointe* before the third interlude. Not that she'd minded, really.

Tessa loved pointe shoes. She always had. Some of her earliest memories were made up of watching dancers' pointed feet in the mirrored walls of her mother's dance school while she played in the corner. Dance was in her blood. There had never been any question of whether or not she would take ballet class. Ballet was her destiny, and she'd loved it since the beginning. The moment her hand touched a ballet barre for the first time, she'd been hooked.

She fell for dance. Fast. Hard. As abhorrent as she now found that analogy, it fitted.

Then thirteen months ago, she'd fallen again. For real, this time. In a way, she was still falling. Day after day. And night after night, in her dreams.

She swallowed and blinked hard against the memories. She shouldn't be thinking about her accident. Not now, over a year later, when she'd finally mustered enough courage to put herself out there and go after what she wanted.

When she opened her eyes, she found the trumpet player

watching her as he blew into his horn. His eyes were kind, like a grandfather's. This close, she could see the frayed edges of his bow tie and the threadbare spots on the elbows of his suit jacket. She wondered what song he was playing as she reached into her purse for a dollar bill.

She bent down and tossed it into the bucket at his feet, and when she stood up, she realized a small crowd had gathered. Commuters. Businessmen carrying briefcases. Women in sleek suits. And off to the side, a man with soulful blue eyes and the bone structure of a Michelangelo sculpture. A bit on the intense side. He looked angry, actually. Like a character from a Brontë novel. Heathcliff with a big, fat chip on his shoulder.

And he had an interesting scar next to the corner of his mouth, which enhanced his chiseled features in a way. It made him look less perfect, more human.

An artist of some sort. Tessa would have bet money on it.

But what was she doing staring at a total stranger? Especially one who looked as though he wanted to snatch the trumpet right out of the trumpet player's hands and break it in two over his knee?

The poor old man. She reached into her bag for another dollar and couldn't help noticing Heathcliff's exaggerated eyeroll as she dropped it into the bucket. He shook his head and glared at her.

*What a jerk.*

Mr. B's leash suddenly went taut in her hands, and Tessa looked down to find the dog standing at attention, staring in the

direction of the platform. *The subway car is coming.*

After a year, she could read the dog's body language better than she could read most humans' lips. At home, one nudge of a paw meant a knock on the front door. Two nudges indicated her cell phone had gone off. Repeated face licking first thing in the morning meant rise and shine.

In public, Mr. B's cues were more subtle. He hadn't actually been trained to alert to specific sounds out in the world. But his reactions—even the tiny ones, such as a swivel of his fox-like head or a twitch of his plumed ears—spoke volumes. With Mr. B at the end of his leash, Tessa felt more aware of her environment. Safer somehow.

Inasmuch as Tessa felt safe these days.

She boarded the train, managed to find a spot with a clear, unencumbered view of the digital display of the scheduled stops and tried not to dwell on the fact that the most significant relationship in her life was with a dog. No, that wasn't quite true. Dance had come first. Ballet was the love of her life. The source of her greatest joy, and as fate would have it, her most profound pain. In short, her feelings for dance were complicated.

Which was exactly how people with normal social lives labeled relationships with other actual humans on Facebook. Perfect.

Tessa sighed. She didn't want to think about her relationships, or lack thereof, at the moment. If things had been different, she'd be married to Owen right now. She'd be a wife. Possibly even a

mother. Maybe someday she still would.

Then again, maybe not.

There would be time for such things later, when her energy wasn't one hundred percent devoted to rebuilding her career. Love, even friendship. Those things could wait. Couldn't they?

Besides, she wasn't technically a hermit or anything. She taught six classes a week at her mother's dance school. Granted, most of her students were four-, five- and six-year-olds. But they were living, breathing people, with whom she interacted on a daily basis.

Plus she had dancer friends. Sort of. Violet was her friend at least. The two of them had been auditioning alongside one another for years. Long enough to give up any notions of one day becoming primas, or even making it as far as soloist. Which was fine, really. Tessa just wanted to dance. She just had to find someone who would give her a chance.

Keeping up was difficult enough when she could no longer hear the music. She would be grateful for even the smallest moment onstage, even if that moment was spent in the shadows of other dancers. *Better* dancers.

She knew that was a difficult thing for other people, hearing-people especially, to understand. Which was why she didn't bother trying to explain it to anyone. Even her own family didn't seem to get it.

She gave her dog a little squeeze. "It's better this way, right, Mr. B? Just you and me."

Mr. B craned his neck and gave her a dainty lick on her cheek. “Right,” she whispered, but couldn’t seem to shake her air of melancholy.

She shouldn’t have stopped to watch the trumpet player in the station. Being unable to hear a melody she could so clearly see in the movement of a musician’s nimble fingers, in the creased concentration of his brow, had a way of making her more acutely aware of all she’d lost. And she didn’t like to dwell on everything that had slipped through her fingers. Her mother spent enough time doing that on her behalf.

She unzipped her dance tote and pulled out a canvas drawstring bag from Freed of London. She normally didn’t splurge on such extravagant pointe shoes. Her shoes didn’t matter much when she was teaching little girls how to *plié* all day long. Sometimes she went as long as a week without even dancing *en pointe*.

Then again, this was no ordinary week. The Manhattan Ballet was holding auditions for the next three days, in preparation for a brand-new ballet. Not just any ballet, but an original piece, choreographed by the legendary dancer-turned-choreographer Alexei Ivanov, the biggest dance star to come out of Russia since Mikhail Baryshnikov. He’d only been choreographing for two years, and already critics were comparing him to George Balanchine.

And he was coming here. To Manhattan. Just a few subway stops away from the very studio where Tessa had been dancing

since she was three years old.

Ivanov was the reason for the new shoes. Tessa knew her chances of being selected for one of his ballets were slim to none. But she couldn't give up. What kind of dancer would she be if she didn't even try?

*The kind of dancer who no longer performed, but only taught classes. That's what kind.*

She didn't want to be that kind of dancer. Not anymore. The odds were stacked against her, but she couldn't give up.

Not yet.

She pulled her sewing kit out of the side pocket of her dance bag and managed to get the needle properly threaded on the first try, despite the jostling of the subway car. She'd sewn ribbons on so many pointe shoes that she could probably do it in her sleep. She might have even done just that a few times during *Nutcracker* season, when back-to-back performances at the Wilde School left the dancers so exhausted, they could barely hold their heads up.

Playing seamstress on a moving train, before the car lurched into her station, would be no problem. With the chore behind her, once she got home, she could ice her feet, take an Epsom-salt bath and head straight to bed.

*Because, again, who needs social interaction?*

Enough with the self-pity. Tomorrow was important enough that the company dancers at the Manhattan Ballet were probably all planning to get to bed early, too. Even Chance Gabel.

Granted, the bed he planned on climbing into likely wasn't his. But still.

Needle threaded, she anchored it into the cuff of her sweater while she untied the drawstring of the slender bag containing her new shoes. She pulled one out, along with a carefully spooled coil of pale pink ribbon. As she positioned the edge of the ribbon alongside the outer seam of the shoes, Mr. B pawed at her hand.

The shoe fell into her lap. Tessa looked up but didn't notice anything out of the ordinary.

"What is it?" she mouthed.

The little dog cocked his head and swiveled his russet ears forward. If she hadn't known better, she would have thought he was trying to alert her to a sound. Some unheard melody that was calling her name.

She glanced at the pregnant woman, who was sitting opposite her, and the pair of Wall Street types, who were standing near the door. No one seemed alarmed, which meant the fire alarm hadn't gone off or anything.

Tessa ran a soothing hand over Mr. B's narrow back. Maybe he was tired. She'd leave him at home tomorrow. She obviously wouldn't be able to drag him along on her audition. The last thing she wanted was to draw more attention to her hearing loss.

But that was okay. She could handle a day in the city without him. She'd have to. It wasn't as though she had a choice in the matter.

She'd be just fine on her own. In her quiet little world. Alone.

Wasn't she always?

\* \* \*

Before he even set foot in the subway station, Julian had been less than thrilled by his present circumstances—those circumstances being his growing need for a source of income, despite his fervent lack of interest in leaving his uptown apartment. He'd also just suffered the humiliation of his first job interview in a decade.

Not an interview, technically. Worse. An audition.

For a gig he didn't even want.

The job started tomorrow, and he still didn't know if he'd gotten it. But he would. Chance would see to it that he did, and then, as much as he dreaded the idea, Julian would have no choice but to give it a shot.

Not that he had anything against working. He preferred it, actually, to the nothingness that had slowly taken over his days. He'd just thought that when he finally reached the point where the money from his glory days ran dry, he'd do something else. Anything other than music.

Stumbling upon the trumpet player had nudged Julian's irritation firmly into *pissed* territory. It was a territory he knew, like a favorite song. He spent a lot of time being pissed lately. A couple of years, in fact. But it was better than the alternative. Julian much preferred being thought of as a bitter, cranky prick than as an object of pity. And if no one ever thought of him at all anymore, all the better.

He cursed himself for letting the trumpet player get to him as he climbed on the 1 train. The guy was just an old man. A nobody.

*A nobody who can still play the horn.*

Right.

He sank into the last open seat in the subway car, which happened to be directly behind the woman who'd dropped a dollar in the old man's bucket. No, not one dollar. Two. And unless Julian had been imagining things, she'd only pulled out the second dollar bill after she'd noticed his disapproval of the musician's performance.

"He wasn't that good, you know." Julian aimed his comment at the back of her head.

Hers was a quite lovely head, actually. Piled with waves of strawberry blond hair, pinned up to expose the curve of her graceful neck. She was pretty. There was something poetic about the way she moved. Lyrical, almost. He'd noticed it straightaway on the train platform. And Julian wasn't prone to noticing such things lately.

His gaze lingered for a moment on a silky, wayward curl winding its way down her back, and he suppressed the urge to twirl it around one of his fingers.

God, what was wrong with him? Had he been shut up in his penthouse for so long that he'd forgotten the rules of simple social interaction? Yeah. He supposed he had.

He cleared his throat and spoke to her again. "I mean, it was

nice of you to tip the man. Very nice. All the same, his sense of rhythm was severely lacking.”

Why, oh, why was he explaining himself to a woman he didn't even know? A woman who didn't care to know him, apparently.

She didn't budge. She just sat, staring down at something in her lap, while her dog fixed its gaze at Julian over her shoulder. Cute little dog. Copper and white, with plumed ears that seemed almost comically large in proportion to its dainty head. The dog blinked at Julian, cocked its head and swiveled its huge ears forward so they looked even bigger.

“Anyway.” Julian sighed. “Like I said, it was nice of you to help the guy out.”

He waited a beat, and when she didn't respond—*again*—he turned back around. The two of them spent the rest of their journey back-to-back, mere inches apart.

In silence.

## Chapter Two

The sound erupted at rehearsal the next day, and it was nothing like Tessa remembered.

She remembered soft, lilting melodies. The winsome whisper of violins. She remembered the patter of balletic feet and the rhythm of her own labored breath during allegro work at center. In, out. In, out. In, out.

She remembered what the swish of a velvet curtain sounded like on recital night, the deafening roar of a standing ovation and the way roses being tossed onto a stage floor sounded so much

like heavy snowfall against a windowpane.

And she remembered music. Of course she did. Even now, she could still hum every theatrical flourish of the *Swan Lake* score from memory. Sometimes she thought she heard songs in her sleep—adagio dreams on good nights and jarring Stravinsky nightmares more often than she cared to admit.

Why shouldn't her subconscious cling to the songs of her youth? Why wouldn't her dreams be set to music? Since the moment she'd slipped on her first pair of ballet slippers, Tessa's life had become a dance. It still was, long after she'd stopped hearing the music.

She could hear it now, though. She didn't know how or why, but she could. Music like nothing that had touched her ears before. Jarring. Bigger than a symphony. Bigger than sound itself. She *felt* it, too, much like she always did, but without an ounce of the concentration it normally took. The notes rose up from the wooden planks of the rehearsal room floor, hummed through the soles of her pointe shoes and into her body like an electrical current. She felt alive with it, almost manic.

Maybe she was crazy. Maybe she'd pulled a Natalie Portman and gone full-on *Black Swan* nuts. God, she hoped not. She'd lost enough since the accident, without adding her sanity to the list.

What in the world was happening, though? Could she be cured? Was it possible for an injury like hers to reverse itself?

Possibly.

The doctors had told her this could happen. But so much time

had passed that she'd given up on ever hearing again. She'd made peace with the silence.

The noise in her head was anything but peaceful. She couldn't focus on what her body was doing. She could barely hear herself think.

Tessa felt a tap on her shoulder as she fell out of a turn. Her legs were moving far too quickly. She could see the other dancers out of the corner of her eye, each with a number pinned to the back of her leotard, just like Tessa. *Unlike* Tessa, they moved in perfect unison. It was mortifying. Tessa spent extra hours in the classroom at the Wilde School of Dance every night to guard against this very thing. She squeezed in extra practice whenever she could. Perfection would never be within her reach. Other girls might have higher arabesques or nicer feet, but Tessa was determined to keep time with the music as well as, or better than, all of them.

It was just so hard to concentrate with the sudden commotion in her head. She'd wished for her hearing to come back for thirteen long months, but she'd never imagined how overwhelming it would be. Or frightening. She wasn't even sure it was real.

Why did it have to happen now, in the middle of her audition? Why was she losing her mind today of all days? She stumbled to a stop and found the company ballet mistress, Madame Daria, standing directly in front of her. Frowning.

"Number twenty-eight?" She stared at Tessa.

Tessa nodded. The number twenty-eight had indeed been assigned to her when she'd shown up bright and early for auditions. It was to be her number for the full three days of tryouts.

If she lasted that long.

"You're off. Count." Madame Daria ticked off her fingers. "Five, six, seven, eight."

Beyond her gesturing hands, her mouth moved. A fuzzy, indecipherable sound came out of it. Tessa had to read the woman's lips, just she as always did.

She nodded and wiped the sweat from her brow. "Yes, ma'am. I've got it."

This was getting weirder by the minute. She could hear, but nothing sounded right. Everything was too loud, too confusing. Too much.

She wanted to clamp her hands over her ears. Instead, she readied herself to begin again at the next eight count, but Madame Daria's hands abruptly clapped together, and suddenly the music stopped. Tessa's ears rang with melodic echoes.

Thank God. She needed a minute to regroup. She tried inhaling a few deep yoga breaths, and thankfully, everything grew quiet once again. With any luck, it would stay that way.

Still. Silent. Normal.

The other dancers paced or bent over with their hands on their knees, catching their breath, eyes flitting to the studio door in anticipation. Tessa's heart skittered, and she pressed the heel of

her hand against her breastbone. This was it. The moment they'd all been waiting for. The arrival of the great Ivanov, the man who could—and often did—make or break a dancer's career on a whim.

And Tessa had just fallen out of a simple *piqué* turn.

Plus, she was suddenly hearing things. Marvelous.

The dancers rearranged themselves—company members near the front, and those who were auditioning crammed in the back of the room. It was less than ideal for Tessa, more difficult to read lips from a distance. She could have asked to move closer to the front, but she didn't dare. She'd never once asked for special treatment, and she certainly wasn't going to start now.

She fell in line with the others and leaned against the barre beside Violet.

“Are you okay?” Violet pinned back a wisp of hair that had escaped from her ballerina bun.

Tessa shrugged and did her best to feign nonchalance. “Just a little off today. I'll get it together.”

“Good.” Violet gave her a firm nod, designed, no doubt, to remind her of the importance of the occasion. As if Tessa could forget.

For a moment, she thought about confiding in Violet. But what could she possibly say? She wasn't even sure what was happening herself.

Besides, there was no time. If things didn't go back to normal, she could always talk to Violet after the audition. Then she would

make a beeline to her doctor's office.

For now, Tessa scanned the mirrored walls, searching for the best possible angle. She'd become an expert at using the mirrors to her advantage. Out of necessity, of course.

She'd learned to rely almost solely on her sight. As her gaze swept the room, she tried to remember every detail about the space. Until her gaze snagged on the vaguely familiar, scowling man sitting at the piano in the corner.

*Him.*

She blinked a few times, just in case she'd started seeing things in addition to hearing them. But it was most definitely him—the rude man from the subway station—and he was sitting at the company piano.

Tessa frowned. How had she failed to notice the rehearsal pianist? Particularly *this* rehearsal pianist?

*Maybe because you were distracted by the full-scale orchestra in your head?*

She stared at the piano player and wondered if he could possibly have something to do with what was happening to her. It was an absurd notion. She was experiencing some kind of medical phenomenon, and the pianist was nothing to her. No one.

He was handsome, though. Quite handsome, actually, with that strong chiseled jaw and those piercing blue eyes that seemed bluer than ever in contrast to his dark hair. And then there was the rather intriguing scar that she'd noticed before by the corner of his lips...it drew her gaze straight to his mouth. His perfectly

shaped, perfectly scowling mouth. Why did he seem so annoyed all the time?

Tessa forced her gaze away from his mouth and found him watching her. He lifted a single, accusatory brow, which probably meant he recognized her as the horrible ballerina who'd dared to dance off beat with his playing. Tessa promptly looked away.

She needed to pay attention to the ballet mistress, not the rehearsal pianist.

"Dancers, your attention, please." Madam Daria clasped her hands in front of her as her gaze swept the room. The *front* of the room, technically. The ones who mattered most.

Even the company members were being forced to audition for Ivanov, though. Technically, no one was safe. The auditioning dancers weren't stars, though. Not like the company members. But that was fine. Tessa was lucky she could still dance at all. And maybe, just maybe, since she was a nobody, the ballet mistress had already forgotten she'd fallen out of her turn.

There were advantages to being invisible.

Daria gestured to the man standing beside her. "Please join me in welcoming Alexei Ivanov. As all of you know, we're honored to have him as the guest choreographer for the Manhattan Ballet's opening program this season. He's agreed to make a new ballet especially for us, which you will begin learning today. Three days from now, twenty of you will be cast in this ballet...if you're lucky."

Tessa clapped along with the rest of the dancers. She didn't

realize her gaze had drifted back to the rehearsal pianist until she found him glaring at her. Again. Maybe she wasn't so invisible after all.

Her face grew hot.

*Pay attention.*

Could this day get any worse? Or more strange, for that matter?

“Everyone take a break. Get a drink of water, but stay warmed up. Be back in your places, ready to go, in exactly ten minutes.”

So the great Ivanov didn't plan on deigning to speak a word to them? Fine. Tessa actually preferred it that way. The less talking, the better.

“Auditioning dancers will be up first.” Daria's gaze zeroed in on Tessa. Great. Her mistake hadn't been forgotten after all. “The new ballet begins with a large group number, and it's very intricate. You all need to be on your A-game. Let's not waste Mr. Ivanov's time.”

Tessa swallowed around the lump in her throat, and like clockwork, her mother's voice echoed in her consciousness.

*You're a great teacher, Tessa. The children love you, and the Wilde School of Dance is your home. There will always be a place for you here. It's easier this way.*

Tessa didn't want to take the easy way out. She didn't want to be a ballet teacher for the rest of her life. Teaching would mean giving up. Teaching would mean the accident had stolen the one thing she'd loved most. Ballet.

She wanted to dance. Not teach.

Dance.

Dance was all she had left. It was all she'd ever wanted, and she'd worked too hard, for too long, to mess everything up now.

She'd do better. She just had to figure out a way to ignore the racket in her head.

She sneaked another glance at the piano player, and sure enough, the noise she heard matched the movement of his elegant hands as they moved across the keys in a series of warm-up scales. He had such lovely hands. They danced across the piano keys with a grace that made her chest ache.

Or maybe that ache was just the realization that this strange man's music had been the first thing she'd heard in over a year.

\* \* \*

*Don't ogle the dancers.*

It had been the main rule Julian had been given when Chance passed along the job offer. The only rule, in fact. And therefore, the most important.

"No problem," he'd said.

And he'd meant it. Julian had known Chance long enough to lose any romantic notions he might have had about the ballet world. In the ten years they'd been friends, Julian could count on one hand the number of times Chance hadn't been a foul, sweaty mess. Ballet wasn't art. It was work. Messy, fanatic work.

Besides, Julian had no interest in a roomful of underfed women who considered him invisible. He had no interest in being

here at all, frankly.

He should have saved his money. He should have planned or invested. Something. Anything. He'd had a good run. A stellar run, actually. How could he have possibly known it wouldn't last?

He wasn't even a piano player, for crying out loud. He'd told Chance as much. What was it that Chance had said in response? *We don't need Mozart. We need a body. You're good enough.*

Good enough.

Oh, how the mighty had fallen.

He sighed, crossed his arms and waited for *Madame Daria* to finish her big speech. She'd actually asked him to call her that. Madame. Like they were in nineteenth-century France or something. Not happening.

She droned on about the new choreographer, some Russian hotshot. Julian glanced at his watch. He'd been on the job for less than an hour, and already he was bored out of his mind. This whole thing had been a mistake. If he managed to get through the day without falling asleep and knocking his head on the piano keys, it would be a miracle.

Five more hours. That's all.

He could last five hours. Then when it was over, he'd quit. Chance would understand. Probably. If he didn't, too damn bad.

Julian sighed. Then he looked up and found one of the dancers staring at him. The only one who'd managed to capture his attention in the entire hour and a half he'd been banging away on the Steinway. The dancer who'd made the mistake.

The girl from the train.

Truth be told, he'd noticed her even before she'd wobbled out of her turn. Before he'd even recognized her. He couldn't help it. Until his hands had touched the keys, she'd been just another whisper-thin girl in a wraparound leotard and tights.

But then he'd begun to play, and she'd transformed right before his eyes. One note. That's all it had taken. Her eyes had grown wide, and she'd flung herself into the dance. If Julian hadn't known better, he would have thought she'd never heard music before. Maybe because there was something different about the way she moved. Desperate. Like she was running from a demon.

*Madame* had been right, though. The girl had been dancing off beat, which should have annoyed him. It didn't. Much to his irritation, he found her intriguing. Probably because Julian was no stranger to demons himself.

The ballerina's gaze lingered on his lips. Or more probably, his scar.

Of course.

Every muscle in Julian's body tensed as his fascination with her morphed into something closer to disdain. Not that he was surprised. Or even disappointed. He was grateful, actually. He'd learned a long time ago not to mix business with pleasure.

Of course he had no intention of sticking to this gig, but still. Knowing Chance, he'd probably already bedded the ballerina since he seemed to make it his mission to sleep his way through

every ballet school and company in Manhattan. Which made his advice all the more ridiculous.

*Don't ogle the dancers.*

Right.

Julian wasn't ogling. He absolutely wasn't. If anything, the pretty ballerina was ogling *him*.

Her gaze drifted upward, and their eyes locked. When she realized she'd been caught staring at his scar, her cheeks went pinker than her ballet shoes.

Julian lifted a brow. *Go ahead, sweetheart. Look your fill.*

She looked away, her deepening flush the only evidence of their nonverbal exchange.

Julian sank onto the piano bench and flipped through the sheet music Madame had thrust at him upon his arrival. The score for the audition was Debussy. He was to open with *Rêverie*, which he rather liked. It was a vast improvement over the repetitive chords he'd had to play for the morning barre exercises. Debussy's *Rêverie* had also been the inspiration for the melody of "My Reverie," a favorite of Julian's. He owned recordings of both Sarah Vaughan's and Ella Fitzgerald's renditions. On vinyl.

He let his hands hover over the keys and played the melody silently, in his head, if only to keep from seeking out the interesting ballerina at the back of the room again. Even so, he found himself watching her more often than he cared to admit. It came as a relief when Daria rapped her hand on the piano and ordered him to play. Not asked, ordered.

Julian banged out the opening melody over and over again, in half time, as the dancers learned their parts. After the first fifteen rounds, he could have played the score in his sleep, so he let his gaze wander to the action in the center of the room, while his hands moved by rote. The Russian demonstrated the steps, and the dancers mimicked him. Sometimes he grabbed a foot or an arm and physically moved it where he wanted it to go. He did this a lot, actually. There was only one dancer he never touched. Her.

Julian wondered if this was good or bad. Then he wondered why he cared.

On and on, he played, until the sunshine streaming through the windows grew dim and blue shadows stretched across the studio floor. The dancers peeled away leg warmers and layers of clothing, and the air in the room felt heavy and damp. The combination they'd been working on began to take shape. Chance and a few others had long since gone home, but the remaining ballerinas with numbers pinned to their black leotards moved in perfect sync, arms slanted at elegant angles, heads tilted just so.

Except her. Number twenty-eight.

Tessa.

He'd learned her name after all the corrections Daria had barked at her over the course of the day. She wasn't off beat anymore, but she couldn't seem to rein herself in. That was the difference. She danced bigger than everyone else. Bigger than was acceptable, if the dour expression on Daria's face was any indication. But when the Russian watched her, he smiled.

Again, why Julian noticed any of this was a mystery. At any rate, he wasn't ogling. He was simply observing. What was he supposed to do all day? Stare at the black-and-white keys?

He reached the end of the piece, and Daria clapped her hands. "That will be all for today. Tomorrow morning we'll have barre exercises and run through the combination a final time. Then we'll begin the selection process. Good work, everyone." She glanced up and down the row of dancers and nodded, never once letting her gaze rest on Tessa. "You're dismissed."

Julian rearranged the sheet music for whoever took his place tomorrow and situated it on the rack of the Steinway. His hands ached. His back ached. He cursed under his breath, remembering a time when he could play his trumpet for hours, days, weeks at a time without so much as a sore pinky finger. Quite the opposite, in fact. He'd felt loose then. Liquid. Smooth. Like Coltrane.

And now here he was. Broken down after a few hours on a piano bench.

At least he felt something, though. He'd been numb for a while. A long while. He wasn't altogether sure which was worse—the numbness or this new dull ache.

"Mr. Shine." He looked up and found Daria staring down at him, hands planted on her slim hips. Behind her, he could see Tessa sitting alone beneath the barre, untying the ribbons of her pointe shoes. She'd loosened her hair from its ballerina bun, and it fell about her shoulders in lush copper waves. The ache in his hands intensified, and he had the sudden urge to find out what

that beautiful hair would feel like sliding through his fingers.

He cleared his throat and damned the reawakening of his senses. "Daria."

She stared daggers at him. "It's *Madame*."

He smiled and said nothing. He was only half paying attention, anyway. Tessa had removed her shoes, revealing her gracefully arched feet. They were flushed. Cherry red. She looked as though she'd been walking barefoot through a field of poppies.

"You were satisfactory today," Daria said primly.

Satisfactory.

Julian suppressed an eyeroll. Other than his short audition the day before, today marked the first time he'd played any sort of music in two years. Two years, one month and sixteen days, to be exact. Not that he was counting. The days somehow counted themselves, no matter how hard he tried to stop keeping track.

Two years. He supposed *satisfactory* wasn't the worst assessment in the world. What had he expected?

He didn't even know, other than he'd thought it would be somewhere besides a ballet studio, where the only people who knew his name were Chance and a taskmistress who barely cleared five feet tall. A taskmistress who clearly expected him to show up again tomorrow.

"I'll expect you at nine o'clock in the morning," she said. "Sharp."

*Thanks, but no, thanks.*

"Fine." He turned on his heel, telling himself it wasn't too late.

He could still get out of this.

*Say it. Just say it. I'm not coming back.*

But the words stuck in this throat as his footsteps echoed past the empty space where Tessa had been.

### Chapter Three

“New pointe shoes?” Tessa’s mother, Emily Wilde, eyed the Freed of London bag sticking out of her dance bag.

Ugh, why hadn’t she zipped it properly? Never mind, though. She’d done nothing wrong. She didn’t have anything to hide.

Other than the weird sounds she’d heard yesterday, obviously. That was a different story, and much more serious than an audition for a part she probably wouldn’t even get.

“I’m auditioning for the Manhattan Ballet.” Tessa unclipped Mr. B’s leash and let him loose in the dance school. He trotted to the dog bed in the corner of the main classroom, spun three circles and then collapsed in a furry little heap.

When Tessa looked up, her mother had already begun signing. Her hands moved through the air in an alphabetic flurry. “Again? Oh, Tessa.”

“Yes, again.” She wondered what her mother’s voice sounded like now. Emily never talked when she signed, so Tessa couldn’t tell if she sounded the same.

Probably not. Nothing sounded like it should. She felt as though she’d woken up a day ago at the bottom of the ocean. Everything sounded muffled. Distorted. Not at all like she remembered.

“I need you to look after Mr. B today, okay?” He’d expressed his displeasure about being left behind the day before by disemboweling a throw pillow. There’d been more feathers on her living room floor than in the first three acts of *Swan Lake*. “And possibly tomorrow.”

Her mother’s eyebrows shot up. “Tomorrow, too?”

*If I last that long.* “The cast list goes up tomorrow afternoon.”

“I see.” Her mom nodded. “And will you be back today in time for the preschool tap class?”

Preschool tap. What on earth would that sound like? Tessa didn’t want to know. God help her. “Sorry, I have a doctor’s appointment late today. Can we get Chloe to cover it?”

Her sister, Chloe, *should* be the one teaching tap, anyway. She was a Rockette. She lived in tap shoes. But she always had something more pressing to do. More important. It was getting kind of old, truth be told.

“I’ll check.” Her mother’s eyes narrowed. “I didn’t realize you’d scheduled a doctor’s appointment. Is everything okay?”

Tessa had no idea how to answer that question. Things were *not* okay, which was why she’d made the appointment to begin with.

But if she was truly getting her hearing back, wouldn’t it get better? It had to. She couldn’t live like this. She’d rather be deaf.

“Everything’s fine.” She pasted on a smile.

She’d tell her mom what was going on once she had a handle on things. She couldn’t deal with any additional drama. Not when

she still had two more days of auditions to get through.

“Good. I’ll see you later, then. Don’t worry about Mr. B. He loves it here.”

*As should you.*

Emily didn’t say so. She didn’t have to. Tessa got the message loud and clear.

She wanted too much. She should be happy teaching dance. Which was probably why her mom hadn’t even wished her good luck at her audition. She probably hadn’t thought to wish her well. She’d just assumed Tessa wouldn’t make it. Just like all the other times she’d auditioned in the past year.

Tessa glanced at the clock on the wall above the record player that had been a fixture at the studio since she’d been too little to reach the barre. It was late. She wouldn’t have to worry about her audition if she didn’t hurry to make the train. She waved goodbye to Mr. B, and left.

While she sat in the subway car, she mentally reviewed the combination Ivanov had taught them the day before. The train made a terrible noise, though. Much louder than the music from Heathcliff’s piano.

Heathcliff. She really should stop calling him that, even to herself. Surely the man had a name.

*Don’t you have more important things to be concerned about?*

She did. Namely, the time.

She flew into the Manhattan Ballet studio with only ten minutes to spare. Through the tiny window at the end of the hall,

she saw Chance Gabel standing just a little too close to Sabrina Cox, one of the other principal dancers. Neither of them was dancing, or paying the least bit of attention to anyone or anything, other than each other. Which meant rehearsal hadn't started.

Good. She wasn't late.

*Yet.*

She pushed the door open, intent on getting to her spot and slipping her shoes on as quickly as possible. But instead of darting inside, she crashed into something. *Someone*, technically. The shoes she carried in her arms tumbled to the floor, and she found herself face-to-face with the angry piano player.

Face to chest, actually, as he was a good six or seven inches taller than she was. But unlike the permanent scowl on his face, his chest was rather nice. Firm. Solid beneath her fingertips, which for some ridiculous reason, had lingered there. His T-shirt was even balled in her fists, which she could only assume was a result of her recent mental breakdown.

"I'm sorry." She swallowed. "So sorry."

He looked at her as though she'd materialized out of thin air, which she sort of had, since she'd flown right into the room. He started to say something, but she didn't catch it because her gaze dropped to her hands, still gripping his shirt like he was her own personal, perfectly muscular security blanket.

She ordered her balled fists to let go, and they flagrantly disobeyed. Then, to her even greater mortification, the piano man's musical fingers wrapped around hers and unfastened them

for her. As per usual, there was a scowl on his face. Tessa didn't know if it was due to the fact that she'd plowed straight into him, or because it seemed to be his default expression. Resting Heathcliff face.

*Oh, God.*

She scrambled to the floor to gather her shoes together. Rehearsal was mere seconds away, and she wasn't anywhere near her spot. She felt altogether vulnerable. Exposed. As if every pair of eyes in the room was bearing down on her, but when she glanced up, no one was watching.

Only him.

\* \* \*

The dancer, Tessa, was in a panic, and Julian only seemed to be making things worse.

"It's okay," he said. "Rehearsal can't start without the music, and I guess you could say that's me. I'm the music."

He waited for a laugh. Or a smile. Neither was forthcoming. Not even a hint of acknowledgment. Just like on the train.

*Okay, then.*

He sat back on his heels and watched her gather her things. She might not want to give him the time of day. Correction—not might. She *clearly* didn't. And while that realization didn't please him in the slightest, he had no desire to see her punished for being tardy. The Russian appeared so full of himself, he'd abhor such a violation. If for some reason he took it in stride—a possibility that seemed slim at best—Madame Daria would

never let it slide. Of that, Julian was certain.

Still.

He prickled at being slighted by Tessa. Again. Granted, this was her world, not his. He was in a dance studio, not some smoky blues club in the West Village, where, even now, he could have his pick of women.

Maybe.

Probably.

He had no interest in actually putting that theory to the test. Why he cared at all what the willowy creature who'd practically mowed him down thought of him was a mystery.

Except they'd had something of a moment, hadn't they? A moment when she'd held on to him a little too long, when his heart had beaten a little too hard. It had happened so fast, he would have thought he'd imagined it, if not for the memory of his shirt gathered in her clenched fists. For a second, he'd nearly remembered what it had felt like to belong to someone.

Then he'd come to his senses. He knew nothing about this girl, other than that she was a beautiful dancer. More important, she didn't know the first thing about him.

Now her head was bowed, and Julian couldn't help noticing the lovely curve of her shoulders, the grace of her willowy neck and how very pale and delicate her complexion looked set off by her jet-black leotard.

God, she was gorgeous. Too gorgeous to waste away in the corner of the room, with a number pinned to her back, while

Chance preened like a peacock less than three feet away from the mirrored walls. Not that Julian harbored any ill will toward his friend. Chance had gotten him this gig after all. Of course, it wasn't exactly the best gig in the world. Far from it.

But coming here had gotten him off the sofa and out of the house. As pathetic as that sounded, it was progress.

Somewhere in the very near vicinity, a throat cleared. Julian glanced over his shoulder to find Madame Daria looming over him. *Honestly, lady. Give it a rest.*

He rose to his feet as slowly as humanly possible and shot her a lazy grin. "Daria."

Her face grew red. Julian had anticipated an angry reaction, and Madame didn't disappoint. "Mr. Shine, our rehearsal time started three minutes ago. You're holding up the entire audition."

Julian clutched his heart in mock regret. "My sincerest apologies."

She rolled her eyes and waved toward the grand piano with a flourish. "Shall we begin?"

"Absolutely."

She turned on her pink-slippered heel and joined the Russian at the front of the room. Julian's gaze snagged briefly on Chance, who just shook his head in obvious disgust. Julian's only response was a slight shrug of his shoulders before Chance turned away and launched into a grand *tour en l'air*.

Message received. Madame wasn't the object of Chance's derision. Julian himself was.

*Don't ogle the dancers.*

Right.

He looked down at Tessa, still sitting at his feet, tying satin ribbons around her ankles with trembling fingers.

“Allow me,” he murmured and reached for Tessa’s elbow to help her up.

She promptly ignored him. Yet again.

He stood there, feeling like an idiot, while she rose gracefully to her feet—unassisted—and walked away from him without so much as a backward glance. He’d been agitated at being ignored the first time but was willing to overlook it. The second time, not so much. He’d basically put his job on the line to buy her a little time. Granted, it was a job he didn’t particularly care for. A crap job, really. But Tessa didn’t know that, did she?

He stalked toward the piano, all the while reminding himself he had no interest in romantic liaisons. He was a mess. Messed up enough to know better than to become involved with someone. *Anyone*, much less a woman who looked right through him.

He’d forgotten himself for a moment—that was all. He wasn’t the man he’d been two years ago. Inside or out. A glance in any direction in this mirrored room was all the reminder he needed.

Madame Daria clapped her hands, and Julian dutifully pounded out some Debussy. Row by row, the dancers spun around him until the studio was little more than a dizzying blur of lithe, lean bodies and spinning pink satin. Despite every effort to the contrary, Julian’s gaze found Tessa. Time and again. He told

himself it was only because Madame kept screaming corrections at her, sometimes quite literally in her face.

He almost believed it.

He wasn't coming back. This time, he meant it. At the end of rehearsal, he took painstaking care to make sure he left the sheet music in the exact right order. Anyone should be able to pick up right where he'd left off. He thought idly for a moment about who that person might be, and then decided he didn't care. What difference did it make?

*We don't need Mozart. We need a body.*

Right. Well, that body would no longer be his.

"What are you doing?" Chance leaned against the piano and crossed his arms. If Julian had any sentimental attachment to the baby grand, he would have chastised Chance for getting his sweat all over it. Maybe wiped the Steinway down with a towel.

But he didn't. "Packing up. What does it look like I'm doing?"

If Chance realized he'd meant permanently, he didn't bring it up. He grabbed a T-shirt out of the dance bag at his feet and pulled it on, as the last remaining dancers slipped out of the room. "I saw you looking at her, you know. We all did."

A pain shot through Julian's temple. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. The girl. Number twenty-eight." Chance's tone was altogether too dismissive for Julian's taste. She had a name after all.

"Am I to assume you're talking about Tessa?"

Chance raised a brow. “Ah, so you admit it.”

“I admit nothing. Can we not do this?” It was a moot point, anyway. This time tomorrow, he wouldn’t be here to stare at Tessa. Or anyone.

“Listen, I know I said not to ogle the dancers. It grates on Madame’s nerves. Just try and be a tad more subtle next time, would you?” He shook his head. “Besides, you can do better than a dancer who isn’t even part of the company. Two of the soloists asked about you yesterday. I think they know who you are.”

*Who I am.*

*Who am I?*

It was a question he’d been asking himself on a daily basis since he’d put down his trumpet for the final time. “What have you got against auditioning dancers? You were one yourself a while back.”

“Nothing.” Chance shrugged. “But if you’re going to pick one, at least pick a good one.”

Julian tossed the sheet music in a pile on top of the Steinway. “What are you talking about? Are you blind? She’s nothing like the other ballerinas.”

“Exactly. That’s the problem. She’s not supposed to stand out. You’re not supposed to notice her at all. She’s auditioning for the corps. The corps dancers all have one job. The same job. They move in perfect unison. They’re background.”

“That’s a rather harsh description, don’t you think?” Julian slung his messenger bag over his shoulder and headed toward

the door. He'd spent long enough on this conversation. Too long, actually.

Chance fell in step beside him. "Not harsh. Accurate. She's going to get cut. Mark my words. When your little Tessa stands out, it's because she's screwing up."

*His little Tessa. Hardly.* He didn't even know why he was having this conversation.

He stalked wordlessly down the hall, hoping against hope Chance would just drop it.

"There she is now," Chance said and pointed at a slender window in one of the smaller studio's doors.

*Don't do it. Don't look.*

He looked. Because apparently there was some truth to Chance's accusations. Maybe he'd stared. Maybe there'd even been some ogling.

He found her attractive. So what? He was only human. It didn't mean he wanted to pursue anything. It simply meant he was a normal, red-blooded male.

Of course he hadn't felt much like a normal, red-blooded male in a while. A long while. But what he saw when he looked through that window stirred an undeniably primal reaction in him. He had to suppress a groan.

Eyes closed, arms fluttering like a butterfly, Tessa moved across the floor on tiptoe. Like those times she'd been chastised in rehearsal, she moved with complete and utter abandon. Only now, alone in the semidarkened studio, there was no one there to

rein her back in. No Russian. No Madame. Just Tessa, dancing for no one but herself. It was one of the most beautiful sights Julian had ever set eyes on.

A strange, dull ache formed in the center of his chest. He felt as though he were witnessing something he shouldn't, some inherently private moment. Maybe it was the way she danced with her eyes closed. Or maybe it was the stillness of the lonely studio. Maybe both. He wasn't sure. All he knew was that every stretch of her arm, every lithe arabesque, seemed to impart a secret. A secret born in pain and longing. She moved with such melancholy grace that it almost hurt to watch.

"Why is she still here?" he asked and wondered if Chance noticed the sudden edge to his voice. God, he hoped not.

"It's something she does." Chance shrugged, seemingly oblivious. "She practices. Pretty much every chance she gets, not that it's doing much good. This is the fourth time she's auditioned."

She practices every chance she gets? After a full day in the studio?

"That doesn't sound like your typical dancer to me." As if Julian actually knew the first thing about ballet.

Chance shook his head. "She'd never work out."

"People improve. New dancers get chosen all the time." Julian lifted a brow. "You did."

"Now you're comparing her to me? I thought you'd barely noticed her." Chance let out a laugh. "She'll never get chosen."

She can't handle it. It would be too much work."

Julian watched as she traveled the entire length of the room on her toes, with the tiniest steps imaginable. She looked like she was floating on a cloud. Or through a dream. He swallowed. Hard. "She doesn't strike me as someone who's afraid of hard work."

Chance's eyes narrowed. "You don't know, do you?"

Julian tore his gaze from the window. Finally. "Don't know what?"

"Tessa can't hear. She's deaf."

It took Julian a minute to process what Chance was saying. Even then, it didn't make any sense. "What do you mean she can't hear?"

"She had an accident a year or so ago." *An accident.* Chance dropped his gaze. He knew full well that Julian was no stranger to accidents.

"What kind of accident?"

Chance cleared his throat. "A ballet accident. Her partner dropped her during a lift, and she hit her head. He wasn't just her dance partner either. He was also her fiancé."

Julian thought back to the moment she'd crashed into him before rehearsal, the utterly blank look on her downturned face when he'd told her not to worry and the brush-off she'd given him when he'd tried to help her up. He remembered the way her head hadn't moved at all when he'd spoken to her on the train. She hadn't been slighting him. She'd never heard a word he'd said.

He shook his head. No. It just wasn't possible. "How does she even do it? How does she know what's being said in class? How does she dance?"

"She reads lips, and she counts the beats."

*She reads lips.*

Without realizing what he was doing, Julian ran his fingertips across his own lower lip. Then he made contact with the scar tissue near the corner of his mouth, and his hand fell away.

He glanced at the window again, even though everything within him told him to turn around. Turn around and walk away. While he still could. None of this was his concern. In the silvery light of the mirrored room, Tessa's eyes fluttered open. Her gaze fixed with his, and Julian knew it was already too late.

#### Chapter Four

*Conductive hearing loss as a result of ossicular chain discontinuity due to head trauma.*

Tessa glanced at the words printed on the bright orange sticker on the tab of the file folder in the nurse's hands.

Her diagnosis.

It had taken her doctors—four of them in all, led by Dr. Meryl Spencer, an auditory specialist at Mount Sinai—ten days and a total of three different hearing tests to settle on one. It was really just a fancy way of saying what everyone suspected. When she'd fallen and hit her head, she'd sustained damage to the delicate bones in her middle ear. They were no longer connected properly, which prevented sound from being conducted to her brain. It was

impossible to tell the extent of the damage, or whether or not her hearing loss was permanent, until her body healed.

In the words of Dr. Spencer, it was “a waiting game.”

So Tessa waited.

And waited.

All in all, she'd been waiting for thirteen months. Thirteen months of adjusting to a life of silence—a life without the sound of laughter or the voices of the people she loved or the Manhattan street noises that Tessa hadn't realized were so ingrained in her consciousness until she no longer heard them. A life without music.

But she'd adjusted. She'd done it. Through it all, she'd never lost the one thing she loved most of all. She'd never lost dance.

Tessa wasn't waiting anymore. She hadn't been waiting for a while now. She was getting on with things. So thirteen months was probably an exaggeration. She wasn't sure when she'd given up the notion that she'd ever hear again, but she most definitely had. What kind of person would hold out hope after all this time?

“The doctor will be with you in just a moment.” The nurse offered Tessa a soothing smile and slid the file folder into a plastic chart holder on the door to the exam room.

“Thank you.” Tessa nodded.

Once the nurse was gone, Mr. B, who'd accompanied Tessa to the after-hours appointment, relaxed and settled into a comfortable ball. Seconds later, when Dr. Spencer opened the door, the little dog popped back up.

“Hello, Tessa. And hello to you, too, Mr. B. It’s good to see you both,” the doctor said.

“You, too.” Tessa exhaled a calming breath. *Everything’s going to be fine. There’s a simple explanation for all of this.*

Right. Because traumatic head injuries were so often classified as simple.

That was never the case. Literally never. Not even a year after the fact.

“Thank you for seeing me on such short notice.” Tessa shifted, and the paper on the exam table made a terrible, crunching sound. She winced.

Dr. Spencer’s brow furrowed, and she pulled an otoscope from the pocket of her white coat. “Your email said you’d been experiencing some auditory symptoms. Why don’t you tell me what’s going on, and I’ll take a look inside your ears?”

Auditory symptoms. What an innocuous way to describe the chaos in her head. “I can hear all of a sudden, but it’s not right. The noises are distorted. Too loud. Too...” Too much. Much too much.

The doctor asked her more questions and examined her ears using the otoscope. When she was finished, she slipped the instrument back inside her pocket and smiled. Tessa hadn’t seen Dr. Spencer smile much before, if ever. Her bedside manner was usually polite, efficient and a little on the brusque side. Then again, maybe there’d just never been anything about Tessa’s case to smile about. Until now.

“It seems as though there’s been a change in the connectivity between the bones of your right middle ear. That’s the most likely possibility. It’s good news, Tessa. Potentially very good news.”

Tessa swallowed and glanced down at Mr. B, who was wagging his tail. *Good news*. It didn’t feel so good. “But what does it mean, exactly?”

Dr. Spencer nodded, and her smile grew even wider. “It means that the hearing in your right ear is potentially on the road to being restored.”

Her right ear only. That explained why she’d felt so lopsided and out of balance. And why she’d fallen out of a *piqué* turn during her audition.

“You don’t seem nearly as happy about this development as I’d expected. This is what we’ve been waiting for, Tessa. To be honest with you, I’d nearly given up on any kind of natural healing of the connectivity in your middle ear. It’s been a year.”

As if Tessa didn’t know the exact date she’d fallen. September 14. She’d never forget.

“It’s just nothing like I expected.” A siren wailed somewhere outside the building—an ambulance most likely. A migraine began to blossom behind Tessa’s right eye. “Everything is so loud. Distorted. Something must be wrong.”

She blinked back tears. Mr. B pawed at her foot and gazed up at her, his soft brown eyes wide with worry.

Dr. Spencer scooped the dog into her arms and placed her in Tessa’s lap. “I understand your concern, and I promise

what you're experiencing is completely normal. Remember how difficult it was to adjust to your hearing loss? It took time and patience. You need to be gentle with yourself now, just as you were before. Hearing has a profound effect on a person's perspective on life. It's time to alter your perspective again."

Alter her perspective. She could do that. She'd done it before, hadn't she? "How so, exactly?"

"The only surefire answer is time. I'm going to give you the same advice I give patients right after they receive cochlear implants. Reduce your amount of external stimuli as much as possible. Take things slow. Stay home so you can get used to the common sounds of everyday life. Eventually, the sound won't be so disorienting for you."

"Stay home," Tessa echoed.

At least she'd already told her mother she couldn't teach tap tonight. If she went straight home after this appointment, she'd have a solid eleven or twelve hours before she had to leave for the final day of auditions in the morning.

She nodded. "Fine. How long are we talking about, exactly?"

Dr. Spencer shrugged. "It varies. It's different for everyone. Once you've gotten reacquainted with the surroundings in your own little world, you can start to venture out of your house. Sometimes it takes months. Most of the time, only a matter of weeks. You used to hear, so the process should go more smoothly for you. I'd say take two to three weeks to yourself before you venture out again."

Two to three *weeks*? Impossible. “But I can’t do that. I’m auditioning for the Manhattan Ballet. I have to be in the studio tomorrow.”

Dr. Spencer’s smile vanished altogether. “Now probably isn’t the best time to tackle something new, Tessa.”

“I can’t drop out midaudition. I might never get this chance again.” She shook her head. No. Just no. She couldn’t lose another year of her life. She wouldn’t. “Maybe it’s not as serious as you think it is. Could this be temporary? Remember the tinnitus I had just a few weeks after the accident? It went away. This could, too, right?”

She was grasping at straws. What’s more, she wasn’t making sense. What head injury patient with conductive hearing loss complained about her hearing potentially coming back?

Judging from the bewildered look on Dr. Spencer’s face, none of them did. Only Tessa. “The tinnitus was indeed temporary, thank goodness. Some patients go their entire lives with ringing in their ears. I was relieved beyond measure when it became clear you wouldn’t be one of them.”

Tessa swallowed around the lump in her throat. She should be grateful.

And she was. Truly.

She just wished her right ear had waited a day or two before deciding to heal itself, or whatever was going on in there.

Of course, what difference would a day or two have made if she got cast in the new ballet and earned a part in the company?

None. Although that possibility was looking less likely by the minute.

“To answer your question, yes. This could only be temporary, too. Head trauma is unpredictable.” The doctor reached around Mr. B to give Tessa’s hand a squeeze. “I hope it’s not. Deep down, I think you hope the same thing.”

The doctor was right.

Tessa nodded.

But since the day thirteen months ago, when her partner dropped her at ballet rehearsal, Tessa’s hope had taken a serious hit. She wasn’t sure how much she had left anymore.

\* \* \*

The solution seemed obvious—Tessa was going to have to withdraw from the auditions.

She waited until the next morning to decide, on the off chance that she’d wake up and find that everything had gone back to normal. Normal, meaning silent. She didn’t breathe a word about what happened at her doctor’s appointment to her mother, or anyone else, for that matter. How silly would it have been to have to go back and explain that she hadn’t gotten her hearing back after all?

She was in denial. Clearly. Because when she woke up and turned on the bathroom faucet to brush her teeth, it sounded as though she were standing on the edge of Niagara Falls.

*I can’t keep going like this and pretending nothing is happening.*

She was quitting.

Maybe someday she'd get to audition again, *if* they agreed to give her another chance. Tessa wasn't holding her breath.

She was going to explain to Madame Daria in person, though, just in case it might make a difference next year. Or the year after that. It would be her last trip outside for the next few weeks. Her swan song. Then she'd follow Dr. Spencer's advice and hole herself up until the world made sense again.

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