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### I the Boulder

“Did you get the part?” I heard my mother ask my older sister Audra as we settled in for dinner.

“I did,” Audra said with a bright smile. “The duke’s daughter. They made the selection pretty quickly, too.”

I groaned softly so that no one could hear. They were talking about the next ballet production that our dance school was putting on in a few months.

My older sister Audra, my older brother Aaron, my younger sister Aubrey, and I all attended Luna’s School of Dance just as we had since the time we each turned three. Dance was our lives. Mom and Dad had made it so starting by our flashy dancer names. Audra. Aaron. Allegra. Aubrey. I guess I was destined to be the odd ball from day one considering my name. My brother and sisters all had names that meant something along the lines of “strong, exalted ruler.” And then my Allegra. Joy. No strength and exaltation. Joy. “It goes well with dancing,” my mom had once told me. “Allegra. Like *allegro* but feminine.” As if that didn’t help enough, I also had the misfortune of sharing my name with an allergy medication. I was a joyful, sinusitis-carrying dancer.

The spring ballet was coming up in a few months. The others auditioned for parts, and I had been procrastinating about it. I wasn’t as enthusiastic about it like my brother and sisters because I wasn’t in love with dancing to begin with. My real passion was singing.

All I wanted to do was sing. I didn't even want to devote my life to it; I just wanted to be able to try it. I had seen a choir class one day at school, and I'd been fascinated ever since. The only way I could indulge in it now was by singing to myself in the shower. I danced because the entire family expected it of me. All of my siblings did it, so I also had to. There was no time for singing.

"Aaron?" my mother said to my brother, sitting on the other side of the table next to our dad. "What part did you get?"

Aaron smiled as he looked at Audra. "I got the part of the prince's best friend."

"That's great," Dad said as he put his hand on Aaron's shoulder and squeezed. "What about you, Allegra?"

"I haven't had my audition yet," I said, wanting to look down at the plate in front of me but knowing that that wouldn't help.

"What part are you going for?" Audra asked.

"You should go for the maid to the duke's daughter," Aubrey chimed in.

"Oh no," I said. "That's the lead. There's no way I would make that."

"But it would be perfect," Mom said as she looked at Dad. "Audra is playing the duke's daughter. Aaron's playing the prince's best friend. Aubrey already got the part as the duke's younger daughter. With you in that part, all of you guys would have a major role."

I took a deep breath. My intention was to audition for one of the extra maids. That would mean that I would still be in the production, but I wouldn't have a big part. I thought that would satisfy my parents.

"You would definitely get the part," Aaron said from across me. Never mind the absurdity of all four of us getting a major role in this one production. This was *the lead*.

I looked at Audra. “When are they auditioning for that part?”

“They already did, but they didn’t find anyone. They’re holding another round of auditions on Tuesday.” Today was Sunday. All the auditions had been after the Tuesday and Thursday classes, so I knew when exactly this audition would be.

“I don’t know,” I said, rearranging some of the food on my plate with my fork. “I was just thinking about trying out for one of the extra maids.”

“Allegra, you would make this family so proud,” Mom said. “Your brother and sisters have large roles, and there’s no reason why you couldn’t get the lead.”

When I glanced away from Mom, I happened to see the look on Aubrey’s face. All of us would be involved if I got the part. If only three of the four of us made large roles, it would seem like the family feel just short. Four out of four would be a coup at the school.

“I’ll be there after class,” I said, my eyes darting to everyone’s faces. They expected this of me.

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“You’re next, Allegra,” one of the instructors called out. Three of us were sitting in the front row of the school’s main auditorium; we had been the only three to get called back. The other two girls had already gone up and done the required solo part.

I made my way to the stage and took my place at the left side, striking the first pose before the music began playing. A shortened version of Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” came down from the speakers.

I hadn’t known what to expect before coming to the audition, so I had practiced many different moves the day before just to make sure I could do each one perfectly. It surprised me when I heard that this was the part being used for the audition. The character was supposed to

dance alone in one of the duke's gardens and then the prince would first find her.

The story was somewhat of a Cinderella story. Initially, the prince courted the daughter of a duke, not out of love but out of necessity. At one point, he would go to the duke's house and into this garden when he would see the daughter's maid, the part that I was trying out for. The ballet ended with the prince and the maid together.

The part that they used for the audition conveyed more emotion than actual skill. I could do emotion. Sad face here. Hand flutter there. A *grand jeté* before landing and leaning down on the leg stretched in front of me.

I danced my part and ended in the final pose after the *grand jeté* – a jump where my right leg stretched out in front of me while my left leg was behind me at the exact same 180 degrees so that I was doing the splits perfectly.

After the audition, there was no mention of who got what part from the day's auditions. The final cast list would be posted tomorrow in the front lobby of the school.

I hadn't yet seen the cast list on Thursday when we all went to the school for our lessons. Aubrey ran up to me and hugged me as I walked out of the changing area. "I'm happy for you," she said with all the happiness her twelve year old self could convey. "Now we're all in it."

I smiled at her and agreed, but when I started walking toward the studio where my lessons were, I grimaced. Now that I had made the part, I also had to perform well. There could be no mistakes.

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They wanted me to do an aerial move. The instructors leading the production wanted me to flip through the air without using my hands and then land safely.

This was a new addition. When I had auditioned for the part, I hadn't even dreamed that

the instructors would have me do something like this. I wasn't studying typical ballet – it was mostly ballet but with some other elements thrown in – so it wasn't a shock in itself that they wanted me to do a strange move. I just couldn't believe that they expected me to do this. They wanted to see me do such a difficult move, one that was common in gymnastics but never in ballet, and I had to be proficient at it.

It was ironic to me. I remembered thinking about how easy the audition piece had been, and then the instructors decided to stick this move in that section of the production. Specifically, this was a front aerial walkover. I was supposed to jump, my feet would trail me in the flip as if walking, and then I would land on one foot before the other. I was supposed to perform this when the prince walked on stage and noticed me. It was a climactic moment, which meant that it had to be perfect.

“Impossible,” I said under my breath as I walked into one of the practice studios near the back of the school.

I knew that it wasn't really impossible, but doing this move was far beyond my reach at this point. I didn't even want to think about the rest of the moves that went along with the same sequence as the flip. Those would have to come later, after I was good enough at this one move. If I didn't get this down, the whole family would be disappointed.

Today was Monday, and the next rehearsal for the production was on Wednesday. I had to have this move down by then. I had gotten away clean from today's practice because we ran out of time. I almost knelt down and worshipped the ground the instructor walked on because he didn't make me at least attempt the move before rehearsal let out.

I set my things down on one of the benches and stretched out. I walked onto the dance floor and did a few spins. I did a few easy jumps, ones that were somewhere in the complete

dance. The sound of my point shoes rubbing against the floor at each turn was all I could hear. On impulse, I tried the aerial move. Years of dancing enabled me to get a good jump, but I wasn't used to turning my body in mid-air in this position, so I landed on my back.

I lay on the ground in a daze as I tried to breathe. I looked over to the mirrors lining the wall to my right and saw my pathetic self on the powdered floor. Round One: Allegra, zero; floor, one.

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I stood on one end of the practice studio and took a deep breath.

I had barely managed the move after more than three hours of practice the day before. I know Aubrey, my younger sister, saw the bruises on my back last night when she saw me walking out of the bathroom before going to bed. We were used to getting beat up by this frilly thing called ballet, so it didn't seem to alarm her too much. She asked me how I was this morning. I smiled at her and responded that practice was rough.

But after countless falls, I managed to get the aerial move down three times in a row. That was enough. Today, I had to focus on getting the entire sequence down. Rehearsal was tomorrow. The last sequence before the prince saw me consisted of a series of spins, a jump, more spins, and then the aerial move. It was one thing to get the move down on its own, but it was quite another to get it perfect at the end of a sequence that took me across the entire stage.

I started the sequence. A few spins *en pointe*, arms in a circle around me – a *fouetté rond de jambe en tournant*. I jumped, my right leg stretching out in front of me while my left leg was behind me at the exact same 180 degrees so that I was doing the splits perfectly in this jump – a *grand jeté*. I landed and immediately launched into a spin that took me around exactly three times.

This is where the aerial move came in. I was supposed to get out of the spin, smoothly do the front aerial walkover, and end with a graceful, awe-inspiring landing. One of the instructors had mentioned the possibility of landing, going *en pointe*, and then staying on my right foot as my left leg moved back until it was fully extended behind me and parallel to the floor. I was going to attempt to do that.

I came out of the last spin with too much momentum and stumbled when I should have jumped. I tried to keep myself from falling forward by taking a small hop, but I ended up falling nearly on my face.

I sat up in the middle of the room where I stumbled and hugged my knees to my chest.

I hate dancing. Moreso, I hate the fact that so much practicing goes into it when I could be doing something that I actually like instead.

I thought about the time five years ago when I first had to learn the *grand jeté*. “You move like a boulder,” my instructor told me. She looked down at me for a moment before continuing. “You’re a skinny little thing, and I can hear you jump and land from the back of the auditorium. Watch Jacquie when she jumps.” I was scared to death of what the instructor might say next, but when I think about it now, I smile. I was and am a boulder. A boulder trying to do ballet. A boulder trying to flip through the air.

A boulder who could now throw a perfect *grand jeté*. It had taken almost two weeks of practice, but I can perform one of the quietest *grand jetés* you’ll ever hear. I basically had to learn how to levitate to do that. If I could levitate, then I could surely do this.

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I asked Aaron to come and practice with me the next Tuesday after our individual lessons. We had lessons on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and the ballet production had rehearsals on

Wednesdays and Fridays. I wanted him to help me with the final *pas de deux* sequence where I danced with the prince. Aaron wasn't playing the prince, but he knew the moves, so he could help me.

I sat in the practice studio after my lesson waiting for him to get out of his, and I looked around me as I stretched.

For all its majesty, this place is nothing more than a set of light brown walls with a dark gray floor. At first glance, the mirrors aren't even that noticeable. They're just there, lining one wall and showing an empty room in the afternoon sun. Things changed the moment I walked out into the main floor.

I'd practiced here many times, and I initially thought of the mirrors as something like a person just sitting on one of the side benches laughing at me while I worked at something I didn't even like. They might have made me feel this way since I never failed to look up at myself right as I was crashing to the ground from a magnificent spin. There were a few times when I made it a point to glance at them as I got up to try again. It was my turn to laugh when I got that very same move down to perfection. I suppose I still feel that way. The studio never fails to show me my faults, and I never cease to be happy when I show those mirrors what I can do.

The dark gray floor has also seen its share of me, and it always manages to demonstrate its importance. It is no longer just something below my feet. It has transformed into a surface that I must land on and move across without ever touching with any part of my body that isn't required. It has become a thing to fear as I am balancing on the point of one foot trying to ease into another move. And the floor knows. It is always there and ready to receive me in my graceless moments.

The mirrors are worse for me. When the floor cradles me in its coldness and strength, the mirrors never fail to make sure that I have seen what happened.

Sometimes I think of the irony in how the mirrors work. When I fall or stumble out of a spin, there is no missing the action in the mirrors. But when I perform a move correctly, I am moving too fast to have a chance to look at the mirrors. When I laugh in triumph at finally mastering a move that has taken me days of work, the mirrors are silent and show me nothing. They do not show instant replay. Some days they decide to mock me for feeling triumphant and satisfied, and I feel like, given the opportunity, they would say, *Why are you happy when you hate dancing to begin with?* Because of the family. I couldn't fall short.

I was startled out of my thoughts as Aaron walked into the studio. After setting his stuff down, we walked over to a set of ballet bars and helped each other stretch, and he started making small talk.

"I didn't realize you were so flexible," he said as he helped me with my quads and hamstrings.

"I could say the same thing about you," I said with a smile.

"I'm nothing but resistance compared to you," he said. "You're a contortionist."

Without replying, I got up and walked to the middle of the dance floor.

"Don't you need to practice the solo?" he asked after we had been practicing for a little over a half an hour. I gave him A Look.

He threw back his head and laughed. "Let me see the whole thing," he said. "Gotta practice that too."

I hid my reluctance as I walked in front of him and to the left side of the room. We hadn't gotten to this point in practice, so I had been saved for one more day. But not in front of

Aaron. I got *en pointe* and raised my arms in an arch above me. My left ankle hurt from a bad landing in practice, but I blocked out the pain as best as I could. I leaned forward, my left leg coming up more than ninety degrees so that I was in *arabesque penchée* before I came back up. I took a few steps and began the sequence. Some spins. A jump. More spins. The front aerial walkover and into the extension with my hands stretched out behind me at an angle and my face tilted up.

“That was perfect,” he said in astonishment.

Of course it was, I thought with a touch of sarcasm before turning around to face him. Of course it damned well was. It had to be so for them. That was why I did it. I couldn’t let the family down.

There was no way I would be allowed to sing. I had to devote my time to this. If I failed, the whole family would be disappointed. They were so happy because all four of us had made it. Not only with this one production but with dancing in general.

When I thought of Aubrey and her bright smile when she told me I got the part, I couldn’t help but feel bad. I had to do this. We all danced. If I never did it for myself, then at least I could do it for them. Singing would have to come later.