

I
Wanna
Be
where
you
Are

KRISTINA FOREST



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For my mom and dad

Chapter 1

For the Greater Good

SATURDAY

Here's something you should know about me: I'm a terrible daughter.

"For the thousandth time, Chloe, you are *not* a terrible daughter," my best friend, Reina, groans on the other end of the phone. "We've talked about this, remember? What did we say?"

I lie back on my bed and stare at the poster of Avery Johnson on my ceiling. It's a still of him as Prince Siegfried in *Swan Lake*. He's wearing white tights and a white tunic with gold and silver trimming. His brown skin is shiny with sweat. His knees are bent and his arms are outstretched, waiting for Odette, the beautiful white swan, to waltz toward him. I've spent countless nights staring at this poster, dreaming that it was me he would twirl in his arms. And now that the opportunity to meet him is finally here, I'm lying on my bed, frozen, because I'm terrified to lie to my mom.

“Chloe,” Reina prods. “What did we say?”

I sigh. “We said that the plan is for the greater good.”

“Right, so put your mom on the phone. I’ll pretend to be my mom, and I’ll tell her you’re staying at my house for the week *like we planned*. You’ll go to your audition and she’ll never know the difference.”

I roll over and cover my face with my pillow. “But what if it doesn’t work?”

Reina gasps. “Are you seriously doubting my natural-born thespian talent?”

“I don’t mean that,” I say. Reina takes being an actress *very* seriously. She’s a chameleon who can be anything, anyone. I’ve witnessed her imitate her mom’s Dominican accent more times than I can count, so I have no doubt she’ll be convincing. “I mean, what if we’re lying to her for no reason? What if I get to the audition and I freeze up, or I get lost on the highway, or I forget to put on deodorant and my armpits stink every time I lift my arms, or—”

“CHLOE.” Reina’s voice cuts through my downward spiral. “Put your mom on the phone or you can kiss your dreams of being a professional ballerina good-bye.”

That makes me jerk out of bed. “Hold on.”

I walk to my mom’s room and take a deep breath before I open her door. I never lie to her. Ever. I’ve never had a reason to. I’m a girl who goes to school, goes to dance class, has only one best friend, and watches YouTube clips of ballet performances from the 1970s for fun. I don’t even have a curfew

because *I never go anywhere*. I especially never drive alone to another state for a dance audition without telling my mom.

This is a mistake. The worst idea I've ever had. In the dictionary, you will see my photograph right next to the word *idiotic* because—

“Hey, baby,” Mom says, opening her bedroom door. “Do you have Reina’s mom on the phone?”

“Yes.” My voice is high-pitched like I just sucked helium out of a balloon.

“Okay.” She looks at the phone in my hand, waiting. Quickly, before I can change my mind, I place it in her palm.

“Hello?” Mom says as she presses the phone to her ear. “Yes, hi, Camila. I’m doing well. How are you?”

I let out a shaky breath. Mom walks toward her bed, and I follow her, stepping around the open suitcase and clothes strewn across her floor. This morning she’s leaving for a week-long cruise with her boyfriend. This is nothing short of a miracle. The only time Mom ever leaves New Jersey is when she’s taking me to ballet class in Philadelphia.

I sit on the edge of her bed as she crouches down to throw more clothes in her suitcase. “I don’t want Chloe to be a burden to you,” she says to Mrs. Acosta/Reina. “I’m really grateful that you’re letting her stay with you while I’m away.” She reaches up and pushes her long braids out of her face. They’re so tight that if she moves her head too quickly, she winces in pain. She usually wears her hair in a short Afro. I walk over and tie her braids into a ponytail. She smiles at me gratefully.

I feel another pang of guilt, and I turn away because I'm afraid she'll know something is up just by looking at me.

It's April and this week is spring break. Mom thinks I'll be spending it around the corner at Reina's house. Reina is actually spending the week working at a kids' theater day camp, and today I'm really auditioning for a spot with Avery Johnson's ballet conservatory, a preprofessional dance school for teens. I'll spend the rest of the week at home, most likely replaying the audition over and over in my mind. Although the audition is in Washington, D.C., the conservatory is in New York City, a city that Mom would never let me live in by myself. To be honest, I don't think she'll ever let me live anywhere alone. No matter how old I get.

I don't want to lie to her, but I have to. Last month, Miss Dana, my ballet teacher at the Philadelphia Center for Dance, pulled me aside and showed me the conservatory audition schedule.

"You need to be there, Chloe," she said, pointing to the New York City audition date. She leaned forward and lowered her voice. "If you do well, there's a chance they'll offer you an apprenticeship with the company."

Me, Chloe Pierce, a seventeen-year-old Black girl living in the middle of nowhere, New Jersey, could spend all of senior year in New York City, learning from Avery Johnson, the youngest Black dancer to start his own ballet company, and now his own conservatory? And afterward, if I was offered an

apprenticeship with the company, I'd be one step closer to becoming a professional.

"And thanks to a few generous donors, the conservatory is offering scholarships to everyone accepted in its first year," Miss Dana continued. "Your mom won't have to pay a cent. You should take this chance, Chloe."

I looked down at the scar on my left ankle and felt doubtful.

"You've trained so hard these past few months," Miss Dana went on. "You've got to do it."

She was right. There was no way I would pass up auditioning for Avery Johnson.

It's too bad Mom wasn't on the same page. She wasn't excited about the audition. Instead, she tried her best to conceal a horrified expression when Miss Dana spoke to her after class.

"New York City isn't really in our plans," she said.

Miss Dana looked as disappointed as I felt. She'd trained me for this moment since I was thirteen. She tried to convince Mom that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The conservatory was only for high school students. I wouldn't be able to audition next spring, as a senior. But Mom wasn't swayed.

"I'd really appreciate it if you could help Chloe look into some college dance programs," she said. "Maybe at some of the colleges nearby."

College? Why would I want to go to college when I could

be a professional ballerina? Why would I waste all the time I spent working so hard? All the physical therapy and tears.

“But—Mom—” I stammered. My mouth opened and closed like a dying fish’s.

“No,” she said firmly. And that was that.

Miss Dana slipped the schedule into my hand as Mom and I left. “In case she changes her mind,” she whispered.

But I knew Mom wouldn’t change her mind. She has her reasons for wanting to keep me close. My dad died in a car accident when I was three years old, and I think she has this irrational fear that something just as terrible will happen to me. It doesn’t help that a year and a half ago, I nearly got hit by a car and ended up with a broken ankle. After my ankle healed, Mom almost didn’t let me come back to ballet because she thought I’d be under too much pressure. Her tendency to be cautious had never really bothered me until I realized she definitely wouldn’t let me move to New York City alone, even if it meant my dreams would be crushed.

A few nights after the New York City audition came and went, I sat on my bed and stared at the Avery Johnson poster on my ceiling and wondered why I even bothered going to ballet class anymore. When I started to cry, something weird happened. The poster fell from the ceiling and drifted right into my lap. It looked like Avery was staring up at me, telling me it was going to be okay. The next morning, Mom’s boyfriend, Jean-Marc, surprised her with a vacation, and to everyone’s surprise, she actually agreed to go. I took it as a sign.

Avery Johnson and his team will be holding auditions in different cities this week. D.C., Raleigh, Atlanta, and all across the country. Once Mom and Jean-Marc leave today, I'm driving to the Washington, D.C., audition.

"Knock, knock." Jean-Marc pokes his head in the doorway just as Mom ends her phone call. He crosses the room in three strides and scoops Mom up in his big arms.

"Are you ready for vacation?"

"Yes." Mom giggles as he sets her down.

Like always, I'm struck by how much younger and care-free she seems whenever Jean-Marc is around. She's dated other people here and there since my dad died, but she's been with Jean-Marc the longest.

Jean-Marc turns his attention to me, and as he walks closer, I realize that his T-shirt is decorated with small coconut trees.

"Someone's feeling festive," I say.

"Don't be jealous." He plops down on the edge of the bed next to me, and it creaks under his weight. Jean-Marc is huge. Almost three times my size. I'm not even kidding. He was a bodybuilder when he lived in Haiti, but he stopped once he moved here. Like Mom, he's an emergency room nurse, and he's one of the gentlest people I've ever met. He's the type of person who gets excited when he enters contests to win a brand-new sports car or vacations to Tahiti. He's probably entered, and lost, thousands of contests. It's like a hobby. But that changed a couple weeks ago when he won two free tickets to a

cruise in the Caribbean. Part of me thinks this is the only reason Mom decided to go.

Right now, she's pacing around the room, muttering to herself. She pauses and bites her lip, something she does when she's nervous. Jean-Marc sighs and walks over to zip up her suitcase. "Carol, we need to go. If we don't leave now, we'll miss our flight. The meter is running."

And I'll be late to my audition because I can't leave until you're gone.

"Okay," Mom says. She grabs her Bible from her bedside table and drops it inside her suitcase.

Jean-Marc reaches for the suitcase, but Mom swats his hand away. "Just let me check one more time to make sure I have everything."

He reaches again, and this time he grabs it and lifts the suitcase high out of her reach.

"No, no, no," he says. "I'm not spending all of my vacation money on the taxi before he's even taken us to the airport. We have to actually make it to Florida in order to get on the cruise ship."

He leaves the room, and seconds later, his big feet pound down the stairs. Mom stares at her doorway, then looks at me. Her lips slowly shift into a frown.

"I don't know about this, baby," she says.

My stomach drops. "Know about what?"

"I can't leave you here alone. I'm not comfortable with it." She rubs a hand over her face and looks around her room.

“Maybe we can wait until summer, when I have enough money to bring you with us.” She stares at a spot on the wall, still frowning. “Yes, that’s what I’ll do. This is silly, leaving you here for a week.”

“No!” I jump up, and Mom startles. “You have to go. When’s the last time you went on vacation?”

She waves me off. “I can always plan another vacation.”

She heads for the stairs. I have to do something to stop her, to change her mind.

I grab her shoulders and turn her to face me. “If you don’t go, I’ll blame myself. Jean-Marc is so excited about this trip. You know he’s never won anything before. If you don’t go, you’ll break his heart, and I’ll have to live with the fact that it was because of me.”

She blinks. I’m definitely laying the dramatics on thick right now, but I have to do what I have to do.

“I’ll be fine,” I continue. “I’ve stayed at Reina’s plenty of times. Her parents will take care of me. Mrs. Acosta said so herself.”

Mom sighs. “I know, but I’ll still be worried about you. I know how you get with your nightmares. I don’t want you to have dreams about something bad happening to me every night.”

I hug her so she’ll stop talking, and I feel her tense shoulders relax.

When I pull away, she looks at me closely. People always comment on how similar we look. We’re the same height and

have the same brown eyes and medium-brown complexion. But I know that when she looks at me, she sees traces of my dad. I wonder what it must feel like to see the person you've lost and the person you could lose all at once. I lay my head on her shoulder so she can't see the guilt on my face.

"I'll be fine," I repeat.

Jean-Marc calls for her again. We break apart, and I follow her outside. Jean-Marc and the taxi driver are piling their suitcases into the trunk. The taxi driver says something to Jean-Marc in Creole, and they burst into laughter.

Mom abruptly freezes and sprints back toward the house, yelling that she forgot her makeup bag. Jean-Marc groans, and he and the taxi driver continue their conversation.

There's a sudden commotion at the house directly across the street. I watch as the screen door swings open, and Geezer, my neighbor's pit bull, gallops down the porch steps as fast as his old legs will allow. Then Eli Greene, AKA the worst person on the planet, steps outside, and he looks up and down the street. He pauses when his eyes land on me. I suck in a breath and wait for him to turn away like he usually does, but he lifts his hand . . . and waves.

Is he waving at *me*?

Not possible. We haven't spoken in over a year. I glance at Jean-Marc and the taxi driver. Neither is looking in Eli's direction. When I look back at Eli—as if I didn't see him the first time—he waves *again*.

Okay. This is weird. And suspicious. I'm so stunned that

without thinking, I actually lift my hand and wave back. Oh my God. Why did I just do that? I shouldn't be waving at Eli! He's public enemy number one and I don't want him thinking otherwise.

The sun is in my eyes, so I'm not exactly sure if this is true, but it looks like Eli is smiling. *Smiling.* What is happening? And why am I just becoming conscious of the fact that I stepped outside in my pink heart-print pajamas, still wearing a hair bonnet?

Flustered, I spin around and collide with Mom. She tosses her makeup bag into the back seat of the taxi.

"I'll try to find a way to call you from the cruise ship," she says, but we both know she probably won't be able to. Apparently, getting Wi-Fi on cruises is really expensive, and Mom and Jean-Marc don't plan on spending any unnecessary money during this free vacation.

She stands there, uncertainty clouding her features. For a moment, I'm afraid she's going to try to cancel the trip again. "And if anything goes wrong at the Acostas', Ms. Linda doesn't mind if you stay with her. Our flight lands Sunday evening, so we'll be back in time for Easter dinner."

She goes through all the emergency and safety protocols. If Ms. Linda doesn't answer, I should call her coworker, Eileen. Watch my surroundings. Always carry a little bit of cash, don't just rely on my debit card. If someone tries to rob me, throw my purse and run. I've heard this speech so many times I can recite it word for word.

“Don’t throw any wild parties while we’re gone,” Jean-Marc says, winking, giving me a hug good-bye.

I smile. “I promise I won’t. You guys go ahead. You’ll miss your flight.”

“Please take care of yourself,” Mom says.

She hugs me again and climbs into the back seat. Jean-Marc slides in next to her. They lean out of the window and wave as they drive away. Mom still looks worried. I wave back until they turn the corner and I can’t see them anymore.

Against my better judgment, I glance across the street. Eli is still there, pacing back and forth with his phone pressed to his ear.

I don’t have time to wonder why he smiled at me. Or to wonder about him at all. I turn around and race back into the house. D.C. is three hours away, and I have to be there by two p.m. It’s only ten a.m. now, but I hate the highway—and driving, in general—so I want to give myself extra time.

I tear up the stairs to my room and drag the duffel bag with all my dance gear from underneath my bed. I throw off my pajamas and slide on my pink tights and my new purple leotard. I put on my scuffed purple high-top Chucks to match. I quickly take off my bonnet and brush my hair into a topknot.

Before I leave my room, I stand on my bed and jump up to kiss my Avery Johnson poster for good luck. Then I go to my dresser and kiss my favorite photo of my dad standing in front of our house, cradling baby me in his arms. He’s

smiling at Mom, who's holding the camera. Mom always says that he was a good dancer, and that's where I get it from. She also says that he was clumsy, but I didn't get that gene. Sometimes I envy that she has so many memories of him when I don't have any. I'd like to think that if he were here, he'd give me a kiss for good luck, too.

I run downstairs, but when I grab the doorknob, I pause. Is it really worth going to D.C. and lying to Mom?

I imagine myself at the audition, in a room full of dancers who didn't spend seven months out of the studio to have surgery and then rehabilitate. Dancers who, unlike me, are in top-notch form. But then I imagine myself a year and a half from now, sitting in a college classroom, learning about things that have nothing at all to do with ballet. The kind of life I don't want.

With a new surge of energy, I open my front door and smack right into the person standing on the other side.

Chapter 2

A Favor for a Favor

“What’s up, Chloe?”

I don’t mean to shriek, but I do it anyway. I clamp my hand over my mouth and stumble backward. Eli Greene is standing there with his fist raised, ready to knock. He grins at me, and I think about the Big Bad Wolf when he came for the Three Little Pigs.

“Sorry!” Eli says, holding up his hands in apology. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

I stare at him, willing my pulse to return to normal. It’s just Eli. Not a killer. Not someone coming to abduct me. Not Mom or Jean-Marc returning for another forgotten item, about to catch me in the act.

“Shit,” Eli says. “That scream was *loud*.”

He grins from ear to ear, flashing his white teeth. I think of the Big Bad Wolf again. Eli always smiles like he knows something that you don’t. With that smile and his light-brown

complexion, he looks like the lead singer of an R & B group. Except I know he can't sing . . . or dance.

"What do you want?" I finally ask.

I step outside and lock the door behind me. Eli only moves back a few inches, so when I turn around, he's right there. I get a whiff of cigarette smoke and fresh laundry. He keeps getting taller. Right now, he towers over me. It's hard to believe we were once the same height.

He's wearing his usual getup: a T-shirt, basketball shorts, and Timberland boots. Today everything is black, aside from his bright blue Phillies baseball cap. He's a modern-day grim reaper.

"Where are you going?" he asks. His eyes shift to the duffel bag slung over my shoulder.

"I—" *Play it cool, Chloe.* "Nowhere. Mind your business."

The corner of his mouth twitches. "You're hiding something."

"No, I'm not." I push past him and walk toward my car, but he falls into step right beside me. His boots clomp annoyingly with each step. "Go away."

"Let me guess," he says. "You're running away. But the question is, *to where?* The circus? To be with some old dude your mom doesn't approve of? Nah, that's not like you." We reach my car and he leans against the driver's-side door, blocking me from grabbing the handle. "Ah, I know. You're

going to a convent. That's a great choice. You'd make an amazing nun."

I glare at him. He laughs.

"Move." I try to push him out of the way, but he doesn't budge.

"Where are you going? I promise I won't tell."

"Why do you want to know so badly?"

He shrugs. "You never go anywhere or do anything, so I'm intrigued."

"I do things all the time. I just don't tell *you* about them." *Relax. He's trying to bait you. Stick to the plan.* "I'm going to Reina's house, okay? That's it. Nothing special. Now go away."

"Interesting," Eli says. "Isn't Reina working at some camp over spring break?"

"What?" HOW COULD HE POSSIBLY KNOW THAT? "How . . ."

"I heard Reina talking about it at school. You know she's loud as hell." His ear-to-ear grin returns. "So you must really be running away if you had to lie. You know, when they report that you're missing, they're going to interview me because I'll be the last person who saw you before you left. They might even show the interview on *20/20*. You should watch if you have access to a TV in the convent."

"I'M NOT RUNNING AWAY."

So much for keeping my cool. But I don't care. I won't tell him anything. His mom, Ms. Linda, is Mom's best friend. And the last thing I need to do is slip up and tell him where

I'm really going so that he can tell Ms. Linda, and Ms. Linda will call Mom, and then Mom will call me, and she will be on the first flight back to New Jersey, and all my plans will be ruined. I'll never get to audition. I'll never be a professional ballerina. I'll never—

“Hey, did you hear me?” Eli snaps his fingers in my face.

“Don't do that. It's rude,” I grumble, pushing his hand away. “What do you *want*?”

“I just told you. I need a favor.”

The last time Eli asked me for a favor, I was eleven and he was twelve. He told me he dropped his house keys in the thornbush in front of his porch, and he asked me to grab them because my arms were skinnier. To prove I wasn't afraid, I dove my arm into the thornbush just for Eli to tell me he'd never actually dropped his keys. He was only joking, and he didn't really think I'd be brave enough to do it.

I glance down at the thin scar that trails up my right forearm. Eli follows my gaze. I know he remembers, because he looks at my arm and winces.

“Come on,” he says. “That happened when we were kids.”

“I have to go.” I throw my duffel bag in my back seat and reach for the driver's-side door.

“Wait,” he says, pressing his palm against the handle.

I sigh, frustrated. “How many times do I have to tell you to go away?”

“Listen, I know you hate me, but—”

“Is that what you think? That I hate you?”

He blinks. “Well . . . yeah.”

“I don’t hate you,” I say, because it’s true. *Hate* is a strong word that shouldn’t be used lightly. Do I dislike him? Yes.

Eli looks hopeful.

“But that doesn’t mean I want to help you. Even if I did, I can’t,” I say. “I’m already running late.”

“Cool. Whatever.” He turns on his heel and stomps down the driveway. He looks silly. Like a six-foot-tall child who is angry that he couldn’t get his way. “When my mom gets home, I’ll tell her you were packing up your car and refused to tell me where you were going. She’ll call the cops in two seconds.”

My stomach drops, but I try to hide my panic. “It doesn’t matter if you tell your mom, because my mom already knows where I’m going!” I call to him as he walks away, but he just glances over his shoulder and shrugs.

“If that’s true, then it won’t be a big deal when my mom finds out.”

When he’s almost across the street, my panic gets the best of me.

“Fine!” I shout. “I’m going to a dance audition, okay?”

He turns around and raises an eyebrow. He slowly makes his way back across the street, and my blood boils as I watch him take each step.

“Where at?” he asks once he’s in front of me.

“Don’t worry about it. Just know I’m going to an audition and I’m coming right home afterward.”

“I’m afraid that’s not enough information. I’m still going to have to tell my mom just in case something bad happens to you.”

“The audition is in D.C.,” I hear myself snap.

Slowly, his whole face lights up. “D.C.? For real?”

No, no, no. WHY DID I JUST TELL HIM WHERE I’M GOING?

I try to keep my voice calm. “Yeah, so don’t tell your mom.”

“This is perfect,” he says. “I have to go to North Carolina to see my dad this week, and I was gonna ask you to give me a ride to the train station, but I can catch the train from D.C. and cut the trip in half.”

“Wait . . . what?”

“You can drop me off at the train station on the way to your audition thing.”

“No.” My mind is reeling. “No. No. No.”

“No?” He looks genuinely surprised.

“No! Why can’t you drive yourself?”

He gestures across the street to his empty driveway. “My mom’s car is in the shop, so she borrowed mine.”

“No.” It’s fascinating how my vocabulary has been reduced to one word.

“Come on,” he says, clasping his hands together in prayer. “Do this solid for me. I hate the train ride from Jersey to North Carolina. I’ll be stuck on that shit all day.”

“Why can’t you call your mom and ask her to take you?”

He glances back at his house and scowls. “I did call her, but she’s not answering. She was supposed to be back in the morning to drop me off at the station, but she’s still out with her new boyfriend, I guess.”

“Oh.”

Great. Now I feel bad for him.

“Come on.” He turns to face me again. A grin replaces his scowl. “If you take me, I promise not to tell my mom where you’re going.” When I start to speak, he holds up his hand. “And I know your mom has no idea what you plan to do because there’s no way she’d let you drive to D.C. by yourself.”

I shake my head. “I seriously can’t believe you’re blackmailing me right now.”

“‘Blackmail’ is a bit much, don’t you think? Think of it more like, ‘I won’t scratch your back if you don’t scratch mine.’”

He smiles. I guess his intent is to charm me. Girls at school swoon over him and his clichéd bad-boy mojo whatever-you-call-it. Eli is handsome and he can be charismatic when he wants. I’ve always known this about him. But what a lot of people don’t know is that Eli might be nice to look at, but underneath he’s rough and calloused. Like a pair of battered feet hidden inside pretty pointe shoes.

I don’t want to drive anywhere with him. *Walking* to D.C. would actually be preferable. And it’s already stressful enough to drive on the highway by myself. Having him there would only make things worse.

But I can't risk him telling his mom. If he does, everything will be over for me.

I can't believe he's stooping this low.

And I *really* can't believe I'm about to say this.

I gulp. "Fine . . . I'll give you a ride."

"Cool." Eli grins and claps his hands together. "Just let me grab my bag, and Geezer, and—"

"*Geezer?*" At the sound of his name, Geezer sits up on Eli's porch and perks his ears. "No way."

Eli pauses. "What's the problem?"

"Geezer can't get in my car! He stinks and he'll get hair all over my back seat. And I don't even think he likes me." He barks at me whenever I walk by their house, which is proof enough.

Eli narrows his eyes. "Geezer does *not* stink. I bathe him weekly."

"No." I shake my head. "And how are you going to put him on the train with you, anyway? That's probably not allowed."

He doesn't look fazed. "Don't worry about it."

How did my morning come to this? I'm being punished for lying to my mom. It's the only explanation.

"He's old, Chloe," Eli says. "I just want to take him to the beach by my dad's house so he can run in the sand one last time before he dies."

I roll my eyes. "He's not *that* old."

"I won't speak a word to my mom if you take me *and*

Geezer.” He drums his fingers against the hood of my car. “A favor for a favor.”

I squeeze my eyes closed. “Okay. Geezer can come, but you have to hurry up, because I have to be in D.C. by—”

Eli sprints across the street before I can finish my sentence and, presumably, before I can change my mind. He comes back with Geezer on a leash, a large duffel bag slung over his shoulder, and a sketchbook in his other hand.

“I really appreciate this,” he says.

“I don’t,” I mutter.

I glance down at Geezer and crouch so we’re at eye level. He’s pretty small for a pit bull. His blue eyes shift from my face to the car keys dangling in my hand. Instead of smelling musty like I expected, he smells like cherries. Maybe Eli does wash him weekly.

I reach out a hand to pet him, because if we’re going to be stuck together, we might as well try to be friends. But Geezer only grumbles as my fingers graze the short gray fur on his head.

Okay. Maybe not friends.

“Give him some time,” Eli says. “He needs to warm up to you.”

“He sees me every day,” I point out. “He should *already* be warmed up to me.”

Ignoring me, Eli helps Geezer get settled in the back seat, and then we both climb in the front. I’m still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that this is really happening.

“Road trip.” Eli grins. The dimple in his cheek is so deep it looks like someone scooped it out with a spoon. “This’ll be fun.”

I ignore him as I start the car and back out of the driveway.

We drive in complete silence. I’m still fuming, and Eli is busy texting. Once we’re on the highway, he says, “Just so you know, I was never really gonna tell my mom. Do I look like a snitch to you?” He snorts like that idea is unimaginable.

I grip the steering wheel. “I can’t believe you.”

If I turned around to take him back home, I’d lose time. We’re too far from our neighborhood. And who knows if he really would tell his mom after that. I’m stuck with him.

I take back what I said earlier. Maybe I do hate him.

Chapter 3

Road Trip

I try to approach driving the same way that I approach ballet. With precision, grace, and absolute concentration. At ballet, I succeed. At driving, I fail. Miserably. I don't feel comfortable behind the wheel. The reasons are obvious: my dad died in a car accident, and I almost got hit by a car.

"Why are you driving so slow?" Eli asks. "The speed limit is sixty-five."

I'm driving in the slow lane and only doing 50 miles per hour. To be fair, if I drive too fast, my car starts to shake. It's a 2005 Honda Civic: not ancient, but old enough. I don't want to push it too hard, but I speed up to 60 miles per hour when I realize every car is going around me. One lady gives me the stink eye as she passes. I want to be mad, but I can only admire her ability to give the stink eye, accelerate, *and* switch lanes at the same time.

"Sorry," I mumble, even though I know she can't hear me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Eli bouncing his

knee and tapping his fingers against his thighs. He is, and always has been, someone who fidgets. He reaches up and touches the ballet-shoe key chain that hangs behind my rear-view mirror. Then he turns around and scratches Geezer's head.

"You know, his name used to be Albert," he says to me. "That's what they called him at the shelter."

I ignore him. My intention is to speak to him as little as possible. The moment I drop him off at the train station will be the most relieving moment of my life.

"I thought Albert was a dumbass name for a dog," he continues. "So I changed it to Geezer, since he's so old."

What if Geezer actually preferred being called Albert? It's sad that pets never get a say in anything that happens to them. I'm not a pet, but that's how I feel sometimes when it comes to Mom.

"This silence is killing me," Eli says. He fiddles with the radio, but gets frustrated when every station is playing commercials.

If driving on the highway weren't so stressful, I'd have yelled at him for touching my radio without permission. But I'm hoping that some music will help me relax. I make playlists for everything: dancing, cleaning, when I'm deep-conditioning my hair. A few months ago, Jean-Marc installed a new radio in my car so that I could hook up my phone and play music. I've been so thrown off by Eli's presence that I forgot about the playlist I made for the drive. It

has all my favorites. Beyoncé, SZA, Drake, and some Jhené Aiko, too.

“I have an aux cord in my glove compartment,” I tell him. “Hook my phone up to it and choose the playlist called *D.C.*”

Eli follows my directions, and “Drew Barrymore” by SZA begins to play. I feel calmer once I hear her voice. I’m even doing a good job at humming and focusing on the road at the same time. If only Reina could see me now. I always make her drive. All the merging and guardrails and other cars make me so nervous, but right now I feel fine!

“What *is* this?” Eli says.

I glance at him. His eyes are widened in horror.

“What is what?” I say, confused.

“This song.” He holds his hands over his ears. “It’s making my ears bleed.”

“What are you talking about? This is a great song.”

He snorts. “You and I have different ideas of the word *great.*” Without asking, he unplugs my phone and plugs in his instead.

“What are you doing?” I say. “You can’t go around touching my stuff! You’re a guest in this car!”

He waves me off. “I’m enlightening you.” He turns the volume knob all the way up. Then a beat blares so loudly through the speakers that I feel the bass vibrate throughout my entire body. Geezer wakes up and starts to bark, and I swerve a little into the lane beside me. A passing driver beeps his horn and shakes his fist. My heart feels like it’s in my throat.

“THE WU-TANG CLAN,” Eli shouts above the music.
 “THIS IS WHAT YOU CALL GREAT.”

I want to throttle him.

Instead, I channel my anger into yanking out the aux cord and throwing his phone into his lap.

Very slowly, he says, “I can’t believe you just did that.” He slides his phone into his pocket. “Have it your way.”

I try to ignore him and stay focused on the road, but I’m distracted again when I hear the sound of a lighter being flicked. It doesn’t register that Eli is actually smoking until he’s already taken a puff and the smell of tobacco fills the car. I find myself shrieking for the second time today.

“YOU CAN’T SMOKE IN HERE.”

“*Sheesh.*” He flicks his cigarette out of the window without any regard to the other cars on the highway. “Sorry. Chill out.”

Chill out?!

I roll each window completely down to get rid of the tobacco smell. I’m so mad that I’m gripping the steering wheel with all my might. There’s a chance I’ll kill him before we make it out of New Jersey.

“You still do that weird thing with your nose when you get mad,” he says.

“What weird thing?” I cover my nose with my hand, suddenly self-conscious. “What weird nose thing?”

He twitches his nose like a rabbit. “Like that.”

“And you still . . . you still . . .” I’m trying to think of a

snarky comeback. Eli waits, looking amused. “You still have crooked teeth on the bottom row.” The minute I say it, I regret it. Weak. So weak. I could have done better than that.

“Wow, Chlo. That really hurt my feelings.” I don’t have to look at him to know that he’s grinning.

“I don’t want you to talk to me for the rest of the drive,” I snap. “Just be quiet.”

“Fine with me.” He turns his attention to his phone and doesn’t say anything else.

Eli’s always had a way of getting under my skin. Like at my eighth birthday party when he kept threatening to stick his hand in my cake before we sang “Happy Birthday.” Or my first day of freshman year when he tricked me into believing that underclassmen had a separate cafeteria and I spent all of my lunch period looking for it. And then, of course, there was the fight we had last year before Homecoming. Each time always resulted in me screaming at him like a maniac, and each time I felt stupid afterward for letting him make me so upset.

The most we ever got along was during middle school when our friend Trey Mason lived around the corner. Too sweet and unwilling to argue about whether we’d ride bikes or go to the community pool, Trey was great at steering us toward a middle ground. Then he moved to Delaware the summer before he and Eli started high school. I haven’t seen him since.

People are driving a lot faster once I merge onto the

turnpike. I can hear the wind as they fly past me in the slow lane. A guy zips by on a motorcycle and my stomach clenches.

How do people drive on this every day?

“So what’s up with not telling your mom about this trip?”

Eli asks.

I give him a look to remind him that he shouldn’t be talking to me, but I’m sure it’s less intimidating than I mean for it to be. You can’t look threatening while also looking freaked out about driving.

“What?” He throws his arms up. “You won’t let me play any music. The least you can do is talk to me.” He sighs when I don’t answer. “I’m sorry about smoking in your car, okay?”

I wait. Is that all he’s sorry about?

It must be, because he doesn’t say anything else.

“My audition is for a dance conservatory in New York City. She doesn’t want me to live there.”

“Why not?”

“Probably because she doesn’t think it’s safe.”

I don’t have to explain much else. Eli knows how Mom is. When he was twelve, she discovered him trying to climb the cherry tree in our backyard. He was so startled when she caught him, he almost lost his grip on the bark and fell. Then she lectured him for an hour on the different bones he could have broken and how long they would’ve taken to heal.

Eli asks where she and Jean-Marc were going this morning, and I tell him about the free cruise tickets. Before he can

ask another Mom-related question, I remind him that I made a no-talking rule.

He's quiet for all of four seconds before he says, "Larissa's coming home for Easter this year."

"Really?" I break my own rule, because this intrigues me. Ms. Linda invited Mom and me to Easter dinner, too, but I had no idea Larissa would be there. I haven't seen Eli's older sister in years. We text every now and then, but she goes to college all the way in Virginia and she never comes home. She spends her summers doing internships near her college and she's at their dad's house during the holidays. When I was younger, I wanted to be just like her. It's funny how once people are out of sight, they become out of mind, too.

"Yeah. My mom threw a fit and said Riss never comes home to see her. Blah, blah. She guilt-tripped her." He shrugs. "After my dad forces me to tour UNC on Saturday, I'm gonna catch the train home so I can see her."

"Oh, right," I say, remembering Ms. Linda told Mom and me that Eli will be a freshman at the University of North Carolina in the fall. "Pre-law, right?"

He shrugs again. "Maybe, maybe not."

"What are your other options?"

With a sigh, he says, "I'm still pissed my parents didn't take my clown school dreams seriously."

I roll my eyes. I will gladly go back to ignoring him now.

But then Geezer sits up in the back seat and starts pacing. He whines when he realizes he has no way out of the car.

“What’s wrong with him?” I ask. His restlessness makes me nervous.

Eli turns around and rubs Geezer’s head. His deep voice turns soft. “What’s wrong, boy? You okay?” To me, he says, “He has a weak bladder. He probably needs to pee.”

In the distance, I see an exit for a rest stop. We’re not even out of New Jersey and I already have to pull over.

“No, this will put me behind schedule,” I argue.

“It’s either that or he goes all over your back seat,” Eli says. *Why* did I let him and his dog come with me? I can’t believe I was stupid enough to fall for his blackmailing trick.

Quickly—or as quickly as a driver like me can go—I take the rest stop exit and pray that Geezer can keep it together until he’s out of my car. When I pull into a parking spot, I turn to Eli and he’s already looking at me.

“There you go again with the nose twitching,” he says.



Eli and Geezer take off toward the woods by the picnic area. I check my phone and see that I have two texts. One is from Ms. Linda asking if I’ve seen Eli. I’m not going to answer her. There’s no way I’m lying to someone else’s mom, too. Eli will have to deal with that on his own.

The other text is from Reina, sent two minutes ago. It's a picture of a soggy-looking sandwich and a small bag of potato chips.

This is what they're feeding us at camp. Save me ☹

I FaceTime her and pray that she's still on a lunch break.

"Hello!" she sings when she answers. She's sitting on a bench, wearing a bright orange T-shirt that says CAMP CENTER STAGE and her favorite cat-eye sunglasses that make her look like a movie star. Her dark curls are piled into a bun. "How is my professional-ballerina-to-be? Are you in D.C. yet?"

"No." A few yards away I can see Eli and Geezer standing in between two trees. Eli leans against a tree and lights a cigarette. So gross.

Reina lifts her sunglasses and brings the phone closer to her face. "You look absolutely miserable, Chlo. What's wrong?"

"You will not believe who I'm with right now."

"Wait . . . this isn't an SOS call, is it? Is a creep lurking around, trying to kidnap you?"

"What? No!" Sometimes her level of dramatics still surprises me. "I'm with Eli Greene."

She blinks and shakes her head. "I'm sorry. Do you mean Eli Greene . . . as in neighbor-who-we-no-longer-speak-to-under-any-circumstances Eli Greene?"

"Yes," I say. "That one."

"*What?* How in the world did that happen?"

“I don’t know,” I groan, sliding a hand over my face. I tell her how he threatened to blackmail me.

Reina sucks her teeth. “What an asshole.”

“I know.” I watch as Eli and Geezer make their way back toward me. Geezer trots happily now that his bladder is empty, and Eli swings his lanky arms like he has not a care in the world. Like being around me doesn’t make him feel awkward or sorry for what he’s done in the past.

I swallow thickly. “I’m starting to get nauseous. I think feeling nervous about my audition, and the stress of him being here is getting to me.”

“I can’t believe you used to have a crush on him,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“Can we *please* pretend that never happened?”

“I am more than happy to do that.” She lowers her voice. “Did he bring up . . . ?”

“No,” I say quickly. “And I doubt he ever will.”

Eli is closer now. Close enough to hear what I’m saying. “I have to go,” I tell Reina. “I’m about to start driving again.”

“Call me when you get to D.C.,” she says. “And listen, don’t be afraid to kick him out of your car and leave him on the side of the highway. You’re being nicer to him than you should be.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I say. Though we both know I would never do something like that.

I hang up as Eli approaches. I tell him that his mom texted, and he sighs.

“I’ll call her,” he says. He lets Geezer in the back seat and sticks his head in the passenger-side window, peering at me. “Are you okay? Your face looks weird.”

I roll my eyes. “Wow, thanks.”

“I’m serious. You look like you’re about to throw up.”

“I’m fine,” I say, annoyed. “Hurry up and get in the car. I have an audition to get to, in case you forgot.”

“I’m just gonna grab some stuff from the convenience store really quick.” When I groan, he says, “Relax. It’ll take two seconds.”

He walks away and Geezer whines, clearly unhappy to be left with me. I wait for him to stop, but he doesn’t. I’ll never understand the bond dogs have with their owners. Mom never let me have a dog. She read an article once about a Rottweiler that bit a toddler in the face, and that was that.

When Eli comes back outside, he’s carrying a plastic bag full of snacks. He sits in the passenger seat and pulls out a pack of Starbursts. When he was younger, he used to take the wrappers and fold them into different shapes: cranes, cubes, stars.

I’m surprised when he tosses a bottle of ginger ale into my lap.

“For your stomach,” he says.

He looks a little unsure, like he’s afraid I might throw the bottle back in his face. For the first time today, I think that maybe Eli wants to tell me he’s sorry, but he doesn’t know how.

“Thank you,” I say.

“You’re welcome.” He clears his throat. “So, listen. Why don’t you let me drive the rest of the way? We’ll get there faster.”

I almost choke on my sip of soda. “Absolutely not.”

“You want to be rid of us, don’t you?” he says. “If I drive, we’ll be in D.C. and out of your car in no time. Plus, you don’t have to worry about driving with a messed-up stomach.”

The last time I depended on Eli to drive me somewhere, things ended badly. I don’t trust him. But I *do* want to be rid of them, he does drive faster, and I want my nausea to go away. If letting him drive means that I won’t be late to my audition, then I guess I can stand him sitting behind my wheel for the next two hours.

Hesitantly, I open my door so we can switch seats, but I pause before getting out all the way.

“You can’t play your music,” I warn.

He flashes his wolfish grin. “I didn’t expect to.”

When we pass each other in front of the car, I find myself agreeing with Reina. I can’t believe I used to have a crush on him, either.

Chapter 4

The World's Smallest Circus

As we drive over the Delaware Memorial Bridge, I look down at the greenish, murky water below us and realize my nausea is getting worse. The ridiculous decision I've made to go to this audition is finally starting to sink in. I don't know if I'm ready.

I can't stop thinking about the night I broke my ankle right before the Homecoming dance last year. While walking to the school in heels, I ran to get out of the way of a car that was trying to run a red light, and I lost my footing and tripped once I reached the curb. My ankle bent as I fell, and I heard the crack before I actually felt any pain. But then I did feel the pain, and it was excruciating. Later, at the hospital, they told me that my ankle was fractured. A fractured ankle meant no ballet. It meant I would no longer be the Snow Queen in our upcoming production of *The Nutcracker*. It meant all my hard work was going right down the drain.

I spent seven months rehabilitating and watching the other dancers in my studio get cast for roles that should have

been mine, and nine more months of playing catch-up. I'll be the first to admit that I've never been the most confident person *offstage*. I don't raise my hand to answer questions in class or easily strike up conversations with strangers. In everyday life, I fold into myself and blend in with the crowd a little too well. But when it came to ballet, I always stood out. I moved with grace and strength. Since my injury, though, I spend so much time second-guessing myself, nervous that I'm not dancing as well as I used to, or that if I do something wrong I'll get hurt all over again. The uncertainty shows.

After my surgery, my doctor told me that I'd never be the dancer I once was. That haunts me. What if he's right? What if I go to this audition and completely embarrass myself?

What in the world was I thinking?

Eli smoothly weaves in and out of traffic. He's getting us to D.C. much faster than I would have, but the weaving rhythm makes my stomach churn.

"You really need more practice driving on the highway," he says. He switches into the middle lane to get around a bus and easily merges back into the fast lane. Other cars whiz past us, and I close my eyes to keep from feeling dizzy. "I know that everyone can't be as good a driver as me, but you can be *almost* as good if you try. When's the last time you even drove on the highway before today?"

I shrug and stay quiet. I can feel the bile at the top of my throat, threatening to rush out at any moment.

"When my dad gave me my Camaro last year, I drove

straight to the highway,” he says. “Camaros aren’t meant for suburban roads. They’re too fast. On the way home, I picked up Isiah. He was jealous as hell.”

I peek one eye open and glance at him at the mention of Isiah’s name. Isiah Brown is Eli’s idiotic best friend, who is mostly known for making stupid jokes, sleeping in class, and hitting on girls who have zero interest in him. Isiah used to tease Eli and Trey endlessly when we were younger, but somehow, he and Eli became friends after Eli quit the basketball team. Eli was already popular for being a good basketball player, but his popularity skyrocketed when he became friends with Isiah, the class clown. Last Halloween, they dressed as Kris Kross and won first place in the costume contest. They didn’t even do anything but hop around the stage, barely mouthing the lyrics to “jump,” but they still got more votes than Reina, who did an amazing rendition of Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy.

“I don’t know why I let my mom borrow my car,” he continues. “She always tells me I’m inconsiderate, and the moment I do something nice for her, *she’s* inconsiderate.”

I swallow and ignore the terrible taste, daring to open my mouth. “Eli—”

“Her boyfriend, or whatever guy she went out with, should have picked her up. Why the hell did she have to borrow my car to go see him?”

I squeeze my eyes closed again. *You’re fine, Chloe. You don’t need to stress out. So what if you fail? It won’t be the end*

of the world. At least Avery Johnson will finally know you exist.

I'm only making things worse. I grip the sides of the seat to hold myself in place. "Eli—"

"You know why he didn't pick her up? Because he's a bum. That's all she dates these days. Bums."

I turn to face him. "ELI."

"*What?*"

When he finally gives me his attention, it's too late. I'm already puking all over the front of my new leotard . . . and I get some on his arm.

"YOOOOO." His eyes grow as wide as golf balls.

He shoves the plastic bag that once held his snacks into my lap while cutting across the highway in a frantic attempt to pull over. Angry drivers honk at us, and the ruckus combined with Eli's breakneck speed wakes Geezer from his nap, and he starts barking again. I wonder what a sight we must be: Eli shouting *FUCK* and *HOLY SHIT* and *WHAT THE HELL, CHLOE*, over and over; Geezer running from window to window as if he's rabid; and me, vomiting into a plastic bag. We're the world's smallest circus.

Eli grips the steering wheel with new ferocity and presses on the brake as we merge into the slow lane. For one second he takes his eyes off the road to look at me. His gaze is hard and concerned. Then his expression turns grim as he glances at the throwup covering his arm.

We both turn our attention back to the road at the same

time. I notice that the old silver Impala in front of us has a license plate that reads HIP PIE before it comes to an abrupt stop and Eli slams into the back of it.

There's the loud *bang* of metal crashing against metal. Geezer goes nuts and starts barking at an all-time high. I wish everything would slow down so I can process what's happening. A minute ago, we were in motion, and now we aren't.

I see smoke rising from the hood of my car. I touch my face, my neck, my arms, my legs. Nothing is broken. I think of my dad, and how lucky I am to be alive.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." Eli's voice is low and panicked. He twists around to check on Geezer, who is curled up in a ball in the back seat, unharmed. Eli turns back around, presses his face into the steering wheel, and grips his head with his hands. Slowly, he leans back and looks at me. "I'm sorry, Chloe. *Fuck.*"

Then he lowers his hands from his head and I suck in a breath.

"What?" he says, running his hands over his face, checking for scars or bruises.

"You have a bald spot," I say, and it's ridiculous because we just got into an accident and my car could be totaled, but this is the only thing I can clearly focus on. Right in the middle of Eli's thick, dark curls is a big bald spot the shape of a jagged square. "Why do you have a *bald spot?*"

"Who gives a shit?!" He reaches up to cover his head, brushing his fingers over the exposed patch of skin. "I just crashed your car!"

The woman who drove the Impala is standing by the guardrail, surveying the accident with a perplexed expression. She's really tall and skinny. Like a human ostrich, with pale skin and long blond hair. She's wearing a flowy orange dress and worn sandals. I realize her license plate isn't referencing a weird type of pie, but that it says *hippie*. Oddly enough, her car hasn't been harmed at all. Just a tiny dent in her back bumper. She walks over to my window and leans down so that her face is level with mine. She has to hold her wavy hair back with her hands. This close I can see that she's youngish, probably in her early twenties.

"Are you guys all right?" she asks. Her voice is so soft, I have to lean forward to hear her. Her eyes shift from my face to the throwup on my leotard, and I reach for the napkins in my glove compartment in a hurried attempt to clean myself up. I hand some napkins to Eli so he can wipe off his arm.

"We're okay," I say. Although my shaky voice would indicate otherwise.

"You might want to get out and look at the damage," she says. "We'll have to call the police and report this."

My stomach sinks way down into my feet, out of my shoes, and goes running down the highway. *The police?*

Eli groans and mumbles something under his breath. The woman glances at him, and I wish for once he would just be quiet. We both open our doors, and I see how much traffic has gathered. People are driving by slowly to be nosy.

Eli makes sure Geezer is secure in the back seat and we

follow her to the front of my car. When I see the damage, I feel like I might be sick again.

My headlights are completely smashed and glass litters the ground. There's a huge dent in the front bumper, like it ran into the Incredible Hulk's fist. Everything looks sad and broken and hopeless. Exactly how I feel inside. Because now I know that there is absolutely no way I will make it to the audition.

And—oh my God. *Mom*. She's going to kill me when she sees what's happened!

Eli takes a step closer to the car and bends down, tapping his knuckles against the destroyed bumper. He winces and then turns around to look at me. "It's not so bad."

"WHAT?" In seconds I'm standing right above him, pointing my finger inches from his nose. "What do you mean it's not so bad? This is TERRIBLE, and it's your fault! You're not in a *Fast & Furious* movie. News flash: my Honda is not your Camaro!"

"*My* fault?" He stands up straight, reminding me who the bigger person actually is. His nostrils flare. "*You're* the one who threw up all over me! I was trying to pull over!"

The Impala woman stands in between us before I can say anything else. "Arguing isn't going to solve anything," she says. Eli and I immediately stop talking. Maybe it's because of her peaceful hippie aura. "Can you tell me whose car this is?"

"Hers," Eli says at the same time that I say, "Mine."

"I'm Natalie," she says to me. "Do you have your

insurance and registration so that we can exchange information? We should take care of that before we contact the police.”

“I’m Chloe. And yes, I have it.” I bite my lip and hold back tears. Mom’s insurance will skyrocket after we report this accident. She’ll never trust me with anything again.

I start to walk to my car to get my information, but Eli grabs on to my arm, stopping me.

“Wait a second,” he whispers. “Let me try to handle this first.”

“What are you talking about?” I whisper back, glancing at Natalie. Her perplexed expression has returned.

“Just listen to me for once.”

He rolls his shoulders back and flashes a smile as if he’s getting ready to deliver a speech. I don’t understand why he’s doing this until he turns around and flashes this smile at Natalie. Right away, she blushes.

“I’m Eli,” he says, gently taking her hand in his. “It’s very nice to meet you, Natalie. I’m sorry it had to happen under these circumstances.” His smile grows, dimples deepen. Natalie smiles back shyly. It doesn’t surprise me that he has the same effect on her that he does on girls our age. “Natalie, you seem like an understanding person. Do you think it’s really necessary to get insurance companies involved? There’s barely any damage to your car.”

Natalie glances at the small dent in her bumper. “This

car is a tank. A '72 Impala. My grandfather gave it to me when I graduated from college.”

“Nice,” Eli says. “It’s a beauty.”

Natalie nods in agreement, but she still doesn’t look completely convinced. If Eli notices this, too, he doesn’t let on.

“Hey, can you check on Geezer?” he asks me.

“Huh?” I turn around and look at Geezer. He’s poking his head out of the back-seat window, watching cars drive by. “He’s fine.”

“He might need water.” Eli’s eyebrows are doing something funky. It takes me a second to realize he’s giving me a look that says he has a plan. And me standing here is not helping said plan. “I packed his water bowl in my bag.”

“Okay,” I say, walking away.

Geezer looks at me suspiciously as I open the back-seat door, but he starts to wag his tail when he sees me pull his water bowl from Eli’s bag. I place it flat on the back seat, and Geezer is already shoving his long tongue into the bowl before I’ve even poured all the water out of my water bottle.

I can’t hear what Eli is saying to Natalie, but I can see that he’s making her laugh. She glances at me in the car and frowns a little. What is he telling her?

Whatever he’s saying must be working. As he talks, Natalie nods her head like she’s hypnotized. Then Eli calls my name and waves me over.

“I think it would be easier if we just settled this ourselves,” Natalie says to me. *Sheesh*. Eli did a number on her.

And fast, too. This must be some sort of record for him. “There wasn’t much damage done to my car. But you’ll probably need to be towed.”

“I have AAA,” Eli says. “I’ll call them now.” He backs away to make the call.

“Are you okay?” Natalie asks me. She’s looking at the flakes of dried puke on my leotard.

“I’m okay,” I say quickly. “Just got a little carsick.”

She nods and smiles slightly. “My sister was the same way before she had my nephew.”

I blink. What do her sister and her nephew have to do with me being carsick?

Eli comes back over. “They’ll be here in about thirty minutes to take us to the closest mechanic.”

THIRTY MINUTES? I want to scream, but I force my mouth to stay closed. What did I think? That after everything I’d still be able to make it to my audition? No way. That ship has puked on itself and sailed.

Tears brim and a snuffle escapes. Eli glances at me, and I walk over to sit on the guardrail because I don’t want him to see me cry. The most important day of my life is ruined. This is worse than the night I broke my ankle. Worse than the day Mom told me she wouldn’t let me audition for the conservatory.

I wish I could call her now to hear her tell me everything will be okay, but I can’t ever tell her about this. I’m about to full-out cry, when Natalie walks over and wraps me in a tight

embrace. Her bony arms make the hug a little uncomfortable, but I appreciate it nonetheless.

“Good luck with your family,” she whispers before she lets me go.

I stare at her. “*Huh?*”

But she’s already walking away and climbing into her indestructible Impala.

Eli goes to put Geezer on his leash, and they both join me at the guardrail. Eli is uncharacteristically silent as he sits down beside me. His baseball cap is back.

“What did you tell Natalie?” I ask.

For a second, he looks sheepish. “I told her that you’re pregnant and that’s why you threw up.”

“WHAT?”

“Not done,” he says, holding up a hand. “*And* that you were my girlfriend, and I was taking you to D.C. to propose.”

“Eli!” I smack his arm.

“What?! Why else do you think she didn’t call the cops or why she isn’t going to say anything to her insurance company? It wasn’t my best lie, but she was swept up in our fake love story anyway. Now your mom will never find out.”

This brings me relief. But still. “I’ll miss my audition.”

“I know,” he says quietly. He reaches down and reties his loose shoestrings. Then he sits up and scratches the back of his neck. I think he’s having a hard time looking at me. “What . . . what kind of ballet audition was it? For like a group or something?”

I shake my head and then tell him about Avery Johnson and his conservatory.

“Sounds like you have a crush on this Avery guy,” he says. I roll my eyes, and then he gets serious. “For real, though, Chlo. After what happened with your ankle, I didn’t know you still took dance so seriously. I’m glad you do.”

For once he’s trying to be nice, but him bringing up my ankle only makes me angrier. “There are a lot of things you don’t know about me anymore,” I snap.

He frowns and starts to say something else, but the tow truck finally arrives to take us away.

Eli picks up Geezer and sets him down in the cab of the truck and then we both climb inside. I’m squished against the window, but that’s fine. I can turn my head as I cry instead of facing forward.

One of my favorite ballets is *The Dying Swan*, a solo piece that is only danced by the most esteemed ballerinas. As the title suggests, it tells the story of a swan that is dying. The choreography is made of upper-body and arm movements, with small and subtle footsteps. Although the piece is short, it’s both powerful and beautiful. It’s always been my dream to dance this. So it’s ironic that I feel like a dying swan, but there is no power or beauty in this moment.

“Are you okay?” Eli whispers to me.

I pretend not to hear him.