

Chapter One
Alyssa
October 5th

My auburn bangs feel like they've been stuck to my forehead with a hot glue gun, but--I hate to admit it--Mom was right. She always said there was nothing like the rush of performing a perfect final combination at the end of a grueling practice. My cheeks are flushed as I share a look with Dani, and she flashes a quick thumbs up.

The only thing I love more than acing a super hard ballet combo is pulling off the perfect prank. Every year during October, all the students at the Boston Institute of Dance have free reign to pull the best Halloween prank on anyone they want. Even older classes and Dance Mistresses and Masters! Halloween is my favorite holiday, but since starting at BID at the age of seven, I'm team tricks, not treats.

I love seeing the look on my classmate's and teacher's faces whenever they get bested by one of my pranks. My favorite one yet had been when I covered the teachers' office-including all of their supplies-in bubble wrap. It was AWESOME! The whole class cracked up and talked about it for *months* after. I'm going to have to come up with something seriously epic if I want to top it. Which I do. BFFs or not, I can't let Dani hold the Queen of Pranks title forever. This year, that crown, and all the delicious candy that goes with it, will be mine.

"And a one, two, demi-plie; assemblé, satuté, and balancé to the right, petit battement into a double pirouette, and finish in fifth." As Miss Cohen's metronome *tick, tick, ticks* out the tempo, she claps her hands on each down beat. She weaves in and out of our three by four rows, and I cringe at the *slap* of her palms in my ear, throwing me off balance on that last pirouette.

"Whoa!" A hand on my arm as I stumble into a clumsy fifth position is the only thing that keeps me from face planting in the middle of the studio. I glance at Dani, flashing her a grateful smile, which she returns. Then she sucks in a breath and snaps to attention.

Uh oh.

The music has stopped, and the studio is crazy silent. Every pair of eyes is on *us*. Including "Medusa's" AKA Miss Cohen's teacher's assistant and the strictest, most perfectionist Dance Mistress in training at BID. Scratch that, in Boston!

As her green eyes bore into me, I keep my gaze on my worn ballet slippers, wishing I could melt straight through the floorboards. That stare really can turn her students into stone.

"Alyssa," she barks, spitting my name like it's poison. If only getting rid of her was that simple.

"Yes, ma'am?" I ask, fighting back a smirk at the thought.

"What's the first rule of pirouettes?"

I bite my lip and clear my throat. "Um... always remember to spot?"

She arches a brow. "Are you asking, or telling me, Miss Thomas?"

My blood boils. Nothing against my dad's last name or anything, but I want nothing to do with his bi-I mean, *witch*, of a mother. Not after the way she treated my mom and Addie last year. "It's *Klarken*." I hiss through gritted teeth. "And I'm telling. The first rule of any spin is always keep your balance. That means never forgetting to spot."

"Mind your tongue, young lady," Miss Cohen reprimands.

I hang my head. "Sorry."

Medusa nods once, clasping her hands behind her back and tossing me one more glare. "Good to know you remember how to recite the rule, Miss *Klarken*. Next time, let's see if you can prove it without disturbing class, clear enough?"

I nod again, shrinking into my flower-patterned leotard. "Yes ma'am."

Miss Cohen steps forward and places a hand on Medusa's shoulder, offering me a much kinder smile. "I'm sure Alyssa knows she should have been spotting. And it's never fun to trip just before the end of a number, is it?"

I shake my head.

"So I bet you won't make that mistake again anytime soon, will you?"

"No ma'am," I say, clasping my hands together. *Especially not in front of Medusa.*

“Good.” She smiles, then claps. “Now, before you leave today, I have some exciting news.” Sparks skip up my spine. Miss Cohen’s grinning like a little kid on Christmas morning. I know what that look means!

“As you know, every year, BID picks one class to perform a Halloween showcase to benefit Boston Children’s Hospital. This year, it’s our turn.”

“YES!”

Medusa fixes me with another death stare, but I don’t care. I squeal and grab Dani’s hand.

She does a little jig, and her brown eyes gleam with excitement.

“Roles are posted at the back of the room. Sign your name by the ones you’d like and prepare a sixteen bar audition piece by Friday afternoon. Good luck, everyone!”

We stampede to the back of the room, elbowing each other out of the way to reach the board first.

Dani gets to the front of the crowd before I do and her jaw drops. “No way!”

“What?” I ask, shimmying around one of my other classmates to catch up to her.

Dani’s grin grows and she points at a role at the bottom of the list. “You’re gonna freak.”

Tingles of excitement skitter all over my body as I shove past a boy about three inches taller than me. “O.M.G, let me see already.” The boy grunts, but steps aside so I can finally get a clear view. In bold black lettering are the different ballets we’ll be performing a number from, and under those are the parts available in each song. I scan the names on the list: *The Red Shoes*, *The Rise of Spring*, *Giselle*... some good stuff. Miss Cohen even added *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.

“Is that a real show?” I ask Dani. “I thought it was just a Tim Burton movie.”

“Huh?” She blinks, then looks where I’m pointing and shrugs. “I don’t know. Maybe Miss Cohen made it up and she’s going to choreograph it herself.”

I grin. “Yeah! That would be cool!”

We turn back to the list, and I start counting parts in my head. There are six shows listed and between six and 12 cast members in each dance. And 12 students in my class.

“Maybe this means I’ll actually have a shot at getting a solo.” I say, nudging Dani’s shoulder. Even though Miss Cohen constantly compliments my dancing, my class’s age range is 11 through 14. To a lot of my classmates, I’m nothing more than a pesky younger sister. And of course, I never get solos. I’ve been with this age group since March and gotten exactly squat. Last year, I was lucky enough to have three.

“Hell yeah,” she chirps back. “And not just any solo either. Look!”

I follow her finger to the bottom of the list. Gasp. Blink twice. Rub my eyes and pinch myself to make sure I’m not dreaming. “Is that...?” I trail off. If I say it out loud, it might disappear.

“Yes!” Dani squeals, the sound so high and loud it almost shatters my eardrum. She shakes my shoulder and hops up and down on her toes. “Can you believe it?”

“No.” And I really can’t. BID hasn’t even touched *Swan Lake* for as long as I’ve been here, and now they bring it back for my class’s performance on my favorite holiday? What are the odds?

“Tell me you’re gonna put your name down?” Her pitch goes up at the end, but I can’t tell if it’s a question or an encouragement.

I laugh, though my throat tightens as my stomach churns and my limbs turn to jelly. “I mean, yeah, I guess, but...” Could I do that? I’ve always wanted to play Odette, but I never thought I’d get the chance, let alone at eleven! If I really signed that paper, what was I going to get myself into?

“You guess?” Dani shrieks, causing me and several of our classmates to slap our hands over our ears. “*You guess?*”

“Shhh!” I hiss, taking my friend by the shoulders. “Dani, inside voice!”

She blushes and glances around. “Oh, right. Sorry.” Quick as a super duper bouncy ball, she shakes off any embarrassment the incident might have caused and picks up the pen next to the sign up sheet, holding it out to me.

“Come on,” she tempts in a singsong voice. “You know you want to.”

I stretch my hand out toward the pen. She's right. I do. I really, really do. Someone clears their throat and behind me, a ballet slipper starts tap, tap, tapping on the polished wood. I close my eyes. Half the class is still waiting. I'm holding up the line. It's now or never.

I reach forward and slip it from her grip, filling out the easier, no-brainer roles before finally shuffling back to the bottom of the list and pressing the tip to one end of the last open line under Odette's name. Before I complete the last a in my first name, the hair on the back of my neck stands up. Someone towers over me, and when they scoff and give a little, snooty laugh, I know exactly who it is. Her name is written right above mine, in perfect, loopy handwriting. Just looking at it makes me want to puke.

"Oh, Lyssa," she drawls, voice light as a warm spring breeze, but dripping with false sweetness. "You're not gonna sign up, are you?"

Kylie Hearst. AKA my arch enemy. I've gone to school with her since we were in kindergarten but she's been attending BID since before she could walk. She's actually a pretty cool girl. Or she used to be. Until... well, never mind. Whatever happened between us two years ago probably has nothing to do with her need for special treatment. Just because her daddies are big wigs on the board, she always thinks she's going to be the front runner for every solo. Unfortunately, none of the recent audition results have proven her wrong.

Maybe this time I can give her a run for her money.

Dani's fists curl in the corner of my vision and I ground my teeth, pressing the pen so hard into the paper that I punch a hole through it as I finish my signature.

"Yeah," I say, turning to face her once I put the pen down. "Why not?"

"Oh, Lyssa." She smirks, then squeezes my shoulder and giggles as if I've just said the cutest thing ever. "You crack me up. Everyone knows Odette is mine."

Ugh. Barf. I don't know what happened to my friend Kylie, but I'd much prefer her over this sweet-talking robot. With a scoff of my own, I level our gazes and place a hand on my hip. "Oh really? Cuz, last time I checked, this was a free country. Miss Cohen never said there were any rules about who could and couldn't audition."

Some of our classmates snicker, and Kylie frowns. "But--"

"I, for one," I cut her off, "am looking forward to seeing your routine on Friday." My slippered feet are quaking, but my words are smooth and steady. *Phew*. Looks like Addie's acting lessons are working. Puffing my chest, I stick my hand out for her to shake. "May the best dancer win."

Her scowl deepens but she takes it, cutting off my blood supply in the process. "I intend to."

When Dad dropped me off at home, I found Mom and Addie, her girlfriend, digging through old boxes. My parents have been divorced since I was a baby. In fact I don't even know if they were ever married. She always says her and dad are just friends. Mom's been open about the fact that she's bi since last year when I found her old high school yearbooks, but Addie is the first person I've seen her with. She was nice enough to let us move in with her last December after we took a family trip to NYC.

"I thought we were setting up for pumpkin carving." The living room had turned into a maze of pictures, and I couldn't take five steps without an embarrassing memory crunching under my feet.

"Hey!" Addie smiles. "We're supposed to be, but *somebody* got a bit distracted." She smirks at Mom and I laugh.

"Look who's talking," Mom pouts as her head pops up from being buried in a box and gestures to the still folded up card table and forgotten pumpkin carving supplies on the other side of the room. Her eyes brighten when she sees me. "Lyssa, you're home!" She pushes up from her spot kneeling between the couch and a teetering stack of boxes. I laugh as she smothers my cheeks with kisses, but swat her away. "*Mom*," I moan, "You just saw me this morning!"

"I know," she says, giving a sympathetic smile. "But I missed you! How did practice go today?" Her blue eyes are wide and her smile is larger and giddier than usual.

I raise my eyebrow at Addie, drop my dance bag on the floor and sink into a nearby chair across from the couch. "Okay, what did I do?"

She tries to hide a snicker behind her hand, but she's not quick enough.. “ Nothing, kiddo. “Miss Cohen sent an email to all the parents about the upcoming auditions and --”

“And we saw *Swan Lake* was on the list!” Mom finishes.

I wince, thinking about the bett I made with Kylie at the end of class. What if I couldn't hold up my end of the deal? What if I really did lose Odette to her? “Oh,” I slump against the cushions. “That.”

Mom’s brows furrow. “Lys? What’s wrong? Aren’t you excited?”

“I would be.”

“*But?*” Addie prompts, leaning forward on the coach.

I sigh, twisting my hands in my lap. “Come on, you guys. There's no way I'm going to get it. I'm 10 in a class of 13 year olds!”

“So?” Mom says. “If they're smart, they'll cast the best dancer, no matter how old they are.”

“And unfortunately for me, that's--”

“Kylie,” Addie interjects. She signed up too, didn't she?”

I nod.

Mom and Addie exchange looks before she pushes up off the couch and comes to squat in front of me, placing a hand on my knee. “Well then, we're just going to have to show her what Alyssa Klarkin is made of.”

“Do you really think I have a shot?”

“Kid, you've got just as good a chance as anyone else in there, probably better considering your mom and Megan are professionals.”

“That's right. I'll call Megan right now and we'll help you practice everyday. You're gonna nail this audition!”

Wrapping my arms around her in a quick hug, I smile. “ Thanks, Mom!”

“Anytime, baby.”

The doorbell rings and I spring out of the embrace. “Oh no, my friends are here! And nothing’s ready.”

“Don’t worry, kiddo,” Addie says, striding over to open the door. “If all of your friends help us out, this place will be fit for pumpkin carving in no time.”

Once all my friends are inside, we get to work moving the boxes of family photo albums out of the way, the corner of one of the pictures sticking out of a box catches my eye. I bend down and pull it out, a wicked smile dancing on my lips.

“Dani,” I hiss out of the side of my mouth. “Come look at this.”

She turns, stacking the box she's holding on top of the kitchen table and walking next to me. “What?”

In the photo, Kylie and I are standing side-by-side in front of two jack-o'-lanterns on Grandpa and Grandma’s porch. I’m wearing a gap-toothed grin and posing with my arms in the air, proudly showing off my creation. Kylie, on the other hand, is up to her elbows in pumpkin goo. Some of it even got smeared on her face. She's grinning like a kid in a candy store and the carving tools lay forgotten on the side of the table. If I didn't know any better, I would say she was having more fun messing around in the pumpkin guts than she was actually carving a pumpkin.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” I whisper, winking.

Dani’s eyes sparkle. “Prank wars?”

“Prank wars!” I confirm, then put my box away and tap my mom on the shoulder. “Hey, Mom?” I hold the picture out for her to inspect. “Can I keep this?”

She takes it, and her brows knit together as she gives it back to me. “Uh, sure, honey. But what for?”

I swallow a laugh. “Oh, nothing. Just a project Dani and I are working on at BID for Halloween.” Addie arches an eyebrow and her gaze darts between Dani and I. “Hold on. Isn't it, like, prank season over there or something?”

I clasp my hands behind my back and rock back and forth on my heels. “*Maybe.*”

Mom narrows her eyes, but I can tell she's trying to hide a smile. "Have *fun*, okay?" she says. "And bring the picture back."

Translation: *Nothing too crazy, got it? Be good.*

Smothering a grin, I cross my fingers behind my back. "I promise." And it's not a lie; not really. Standing up to a bully is one of the *best* things I can do.

A few days later, I convince one of our neighbors to walk me to the bus stop extra early. My cheeks ache from the wads of stolen gum I've been chomping on since the moment she was out of earshot. Let's just say Mom's "secret" stash of Halloween candy isn't so secret anymore. As I climb out of the bus, street lamps from the night still glow faintly in the sunrise, making my shadow scatter like spiders in all directions. The chill in the air is so wet and crisp that my feet are soaked even beneath wool socks, and my breath comes out in tiny, rapid puffs of air. Still, I have to bite my lip to keep from smiling every time my dance bag *clunk, clunk, clunks* against my hip. It's heavier than normal, but I won't have to worry about that much longer.

Leaves crunch underfoot as I meander along the pathway to the school and somewhere above me, a robin chirps. Once, twice, then a high-pitched screech that could be mistaken for a car alarm. I slap my palms over my ears. I've never heard a robin call like that before. Do they sound different when the seasons change? I hope so. Images of a raven squawking near the old man from Edgar Allan Poe's story resonates in my mind's eye. For a moment, my feet are frozen to the sidewalk. I spin around and look back in the direction of the bus, but it's already peeled away. The gulp of oxygen I swallow stings my throat. No turning back now.

Get a grip, Alyssa. Robins aren't like ravens or crows. They don't stand for death or impending doom. Against my better judgment, I keep walking. When I reach BID's heavy, dark oak doors, I spin around one more time, shielding my eyes from the sunrise with one hand and glancing up in the trees for any sign of the bird. It's nowhere to be seen.

A whoosh of warm air from the building stings like needle pricks as I pull open the door, shifting all of my weight into my left foot. Cold air sinks into my lungs, making my chest burn as I slip between the cracks and step inside. I don't think before letting go, and the door shuts behind me with a sharp bang, sending my heart rocketing into my throat. My pulse thuds in my ears. Something wheezes, like all of the air is being sucked out of the room through a tiny straw. It takes me longer than I'd like to admit to realize that sound is only my breathing. I tip toe forward, wincing as the clap of the rubber soles of my tennis shoes squick, squawk, squeak, along the extra waxy floor. Oh man. There might as well be a marching band following me! If I don't do something soon, I'm definitely going to get caught.

A cool breeze stirs behind me, tickling the hair on the back of my neck. The phantom wind stirs the garland hanging from the bulletin board where the morning announcements are posted. If the bubble gum hadn't gone hard, I'd scream, but I can barely open my mouth. Drool dribbles onto my coat. My eyes dart left, then right, but the only light in the building streams through the stained glass windows. The colored shapes cast unfamiliar patterns on the murals lining the entry hall. None of the doors are open, and there's no leering silhouette waiting to expose me. But... If the janitors or Miss Cohen didn't hear me come in then who... or what, did?

Everyone in BID knows the legend of Madame Eunea. She was a lonely widow who used to be a teacher here back when the school first opened 40 years ago. Right before her class's debut showcase, she mysteriously disappeared. No one knows what happened to her for sure, but Maisie, one of the older girls in my class, said when she was younger, she swore she saw the old teacher's ghost roaming the halls. Thanks to my dad's passion for the supernatural, I know enough about ghosts to know Masie's story isn't true. As far as anyone has said, Madame Eunea didn't have any unfinished business that would tie her to the school. Still... I'd better pick up the pace, just in case.

With hurried, but muffled footsteps, I weave through the hallways to the girls locker room and, after turning on my flashlight, make a beeline for Kylie's. We don't have full lockers, they're more like cubbies. Kylie's is the fourth from the middle in the second row from the top. She's had the same one ever since she started at BID. Back when we were best friends, we shared everything. Even our locker

combinations. Let's hope she hasn't changed it since then. As I step forward and reach for the dial, the lockers vibrate beneath my hand. First just Kylie's, then the one to either side, then the whole row. It shakes the windows, making my insides rattle like a train just whizzed behind me. Sucking in a breath, I whirl around. What the heck was that?

"Whgo's dhggre?" Spit spews everywhere and my voice trembles as I garble the question around the wad of gum inflating my jaw. The corridor is dead silent. I turn back toward the locker and reach for the knob. A peal of... laughter? echoes through the hall. I glance around again, but I'm the only one here. My hand quakes so much that I misenter the combination four times before I finally get it. The door opens with a metallic clang and I jump.

Breathe, Lyssa. Much easier said than done with a wad of bubble gum in my mouth. I practically spew it across the room as I yank it out and jam it just above the latch. The large gulp of air I'm able to take afterward is like ambrosia to my lungs. I reach into my bag again and pull out the rest of the supplies: an envelope, some string, some duct tape, a pie pan, a small wooden plank I stole from the garage, and two Ziploc bags; one full of glitter and the other teeming with leftover pumpkin guts from our carving session. The last item in the bottom of the bag is the final touch: the old picture of Kylie and I. Looking at it sends a small but unexpected pang of nostalgia through me; for half an instant, I wish I was here pulling a prank with her instead of on her. But as quickly as the doubt comes, it fades. *She deserves this.* I'm far from the only person she's bullied in this school, it's past time she tasted her own medicine.

I set the flashlight on top of the locker and get to work. As I assemble the prank, the eerie silence and bone chilling cold melts away. Soon enough, the launch pad, and its sloppy ammo, is ready. Now for the hard part. I carefully fill the envelope from Addie's desk with the contents of the Ziploc full of glitter, then roll up another piece of duct tape so it's sticky on either side. Some of the glitter spills onto the floor as I finish taping the envelope to one side of the locker ceiling, leaving my hand inside for as long as possible to press the other side of the tape to the door and make sure everything is steady. My hand goes numb, and I almost smash it between the door and the edge of the locker, but finally it's done. I pull my arm away and shake it a few times until feeling returns, then gather up my leftover supplies and glance around the hallway to make sure there's no evidence.

The flashlight is the last thing I pick up, fumbling for a good grip. It rolls off of the top of the locker onto the floor. Something clicks, and the light goes out, plunging me into darkness.

"Fudge!" I hiss, a shot of adrenaline pumps through me as I drop to my hands and knees and grope around the floor. I crawl in the direction I think it rolled, stopping when I reach the end of the row of lockers. There's a click, and then a tiny laugh followed by a clatter.

Shoot! Something, or.... Someone... kicked the flashlight away. Scrambling forward, I trap it in the corner and grab it with both hands. Shaking, I struggle to regain my footing and flick on the light, shining it toward the wall. Dead, hollow eyes, a gleaming white skull, and two rows of sharp, grinning teeth stare back at me. This time, I can't quell the scream as I stumble back, realizing too late that it's only one of the skeleton decorations Miss Cohen took out of storage for the holiday.

Nice going, scaredy cat! Way to scare yourself over nothing.

The flashlight probably just knocked into its foot and that's what "kicked" it away. I mean, it had to be, right? After all, there's no such thing as ghosts. At least, not at BID.

As I spin on my heel to head toward the front doors and wait for the next bus to school, something rustles. I suck in a breath. The distinctive tap of shoes against the hardwood halls drums in my ears. A whiff of old lady perfume coats the air, sending a zip of electricity up my spine. I whip the flashlight right and left, sweeping the beam of light over the room, but it's still empty. Maybe Madame Eunea is more than just a story after all. Soon enough though, the strange scent melts into the familiar but equally choking smell of ammonia, thick and bitter, mixed with the stench of wax floor polish, and just a hint of lemon. I've been around BID long enough to know what the cleaning supplies smell like and my shoulders drop. It must have been the janitor.

Phew. To close! I should get out of here, like, now!

It takes me longer than usual to reach the front of the building again. I can barely get five feet without footsteps resounding in my ears, making me backtrack or duck behind a pillar, trash can, or

trophy case. I end up winding my way through almost the entire school. As I approach the mid-level studios, where Kylie, Dani and I take classes, my left foot skids out from under me.

“Wah!” I throw my arms out to the side and shuffle my feet in an effort to regain my balance, but my sturdy tennis shoes feel like they've been replaced with unbroken ice skates. I end up sliding straight into our classroom, and landing with a thud face-first onto the floor.

For a second, I just lay there, blinking the stars from my vision and sucking in a few deep breaths, finally pushing up to my knees to rub my aching chest.

“Ouch,” I moan. What the heck was that? I push into a stand and whirl around only to see a sudsy white trail of bubbles following me all the way into the studio--complete with my fresh skid tracks. Huh. It's not like the janitors to leave a floor soapy like this. Scanning the room, I'm not shocked that once again I'm alone. The only thing out of place is a tiny, yellow sticky note stuck to the mirror. Squinting, at the handwriting, I carefully walk over and pick it up.

Have another slip, tenderfoot? HA! Looks like the janitor missed a few spots. I'm sure your body made a great mop! Break a leg at the audition tomorrow ;)

Oh, I'd break a leg alright. Snorting, I crumple the Post It in my hand, tossing it to the ground. There was a signature, but I didn't need it. Only one person ever called me that. “Kylie,” I growl. “I should've known!”

Of course Jenny would rat me out after she overheard Dani and I talking about the prank last night. And of course, Kylie would try to get me back by scaring me out of the school. Well, two can play at that game. Just wait until she opens her locker this afternoon!

In the meantime though, as long as I'm here... I check the time on my phone and march over to the iPod dock in the back of the room. It's only 8:15. I still have 15 minutes before the next bus. Enough time for at least another run through. Or ten.

Chapter Two
Nadia
October 9th

Whoa! I brace my palm against something to my right as the world tilts sideways. The wall gives under the weight and I realize it's not brick or cement at all but something flimsy, like paper or... Cardboard, maybe?

"Ay, mama!" I'm tousled from my cross-legged position. A mini avalanche of sequins, fabric, and tulle tumbles around me. The rough texture of a double-pleated underskirt smacks my cheek.

"Pluh! Pah! Ew!" I spit and sputter, pushing the fabric away from my face and tossing it to the side. *Que estúpido?* Why would I have climbed into a box last night? Squinting, I try to make out the contents of my surroundings, but all I see is darkness. Someone grunts and everything jerks again. My head smacks into the top of the box, but the flaps don't come open. The rhythmic beat of footsteps against the tile floor thrums in my ears, and I bounce in time with them. *Ahora que?* Why am I moving?

Craning my neck and feeling around until my fingers brush the seam of the lid, I press against it. Once. Twice. The cardboard gives away a little each time, but won't spring open. *Mierda.* I wonder if someone taped it up.

"Hey!" I shout, banging against the flaps. *"Estoy aquí! In here!"*

The footsteps stop and so does my bouncing. *"Stay down, why don't you?"* says a man's voice. and I scowl at the top of the box when pressure pushes the flaps back into place. *"Damn tape's probably just worn from being down there for ten years. Hopefully, the costumes are okay, or, what is it the kids call her? Medusa?"* He chuckles. *"She'll have my head."*

Tonto say what? I'm in a box that has been stored somewhere for 10 years? No. That's impossible. Last night I was just--*Dios mío!* The showcase. I have to get to the showcase! I thwack my hand against the lid again. *"Hey, loco,"* I huff. *"Let me out of here!"* The flaps are pressed down again and the man resumes walking.

Ay! How can he just keep going like there's nothing wrong with this? I'm a 14-year-old girl. Can't he feel me in here? I try several more times, but with no success. Ultimately, I sag against the back and rest my hand on either "wall" to stay upright. I'm jostled one more time, swaying from side to side before everything goes still. I hold my breath as the footsteps recede. He must have put me down. But where?

The top of the box is still stuck and I'm out of options. I'm going to be late. I'm going to be so late. Miss Cohen will ban me from classes for a month if I don't get my butt to that theater! The hinges of a door creek, drawing me out of my panic. Footsteps clap into the room and I exhale. *Gracias a Dios!*

Someone snickers and I use all of my effort to rattle the box. Left, right, backward and forward, screaming at the top of my lungs, and hoping that whoever just walked in here might save me with enough time to make it back to the auditorium for curtain. Instead, I hear the distinctive *glug, glug, glug* of something being poured onto the floor.

"Let's see how graceful you are after this, huh, tenderfoot?" says a high-pitched, squeaky female voice with a haughty laugh. *Ugh!* I don't recognize her but I sure hope she isn't anyone from my class! Even though her nasal intonation sounds like nails on a chalkboard, she might be my only ticket to freedom.

"Hey, chica! Over here!" I throw all of my weight into the side of the box, rocking myself and the contents to the left until I land with a slap on the floor. The *glugging* stops and so does the girl's laughter. For a second, there's only silence.

"W...who's there?" the girl whispers.

I smack my hand against my forehead. By now it's pretty clear no one can hear me, so calling for her will be no use. I hit the side of the box again. *Come on, girl, sacame de aquí! Get me outta here. I have a show to finish!*

At first, nothing happens. Then, footsteps, soft and hesitant, but coming toward me. *Yes! Finally!*

"What's this?"

The box moves this way and that, but soon I hear the most satisfying sound of the night: the spine-tickling *rip* of the tape off the top of the “ceiling.”

Por fin! The flaps spring open, and I tumble onto the hardwood floor along with everything else. It takes my eyes a minute to adjust, as the ballet studio is pitch black; the only source of light coming from the open door out into the hallway. The girl yelps and leaps to the side to avoid the flood of costume fabric, but I don't have time to thank her, shaking off a stray tutu from my foot and sprinting for the hall.

I'm gonna make it! But just as I cross over the threshold, I'm yanked backward.

Huh? I step forward again, but something pulls against the fabric of my dress, and I land flat on my backside. *Que paso?*

I spin around and look in the direction of the girl. She's thin, with a lengthy frame, but I can tell from here that her legs and arms are well toned. She looks around my age, maybe a little younger. She's still bent down on the floor, sorting through the costumes that had spilled out of the box.

“Come on!” I shout to her. “We're going to be late!”

She doesn't even look up. Scowling, I stomp over and tap her on the shoulder. I don't know who this *mocosa* thinks she is, but she's not going to be responsible for me missing my solo! Once again though, I'm yanked backward when I try to step out of the room. I frown at the floor. The soapy trail I'd heard being poured earlier leads right out the door. My eyes follow it to the middle of the room, there are no shoe tracks despite me having just walked in it to get over here. As an experiment, I place my foot directly into the soapiest part of the trail, but when I pick it up, there's still no footprint. *Que demonios?!*

I look at the girl, and my mouth drops open when I realize she's holding one of the white costumes up to the mirrors that cover the right wall of the studio, admiring her reflection in it. And not just any costume either--the same one I'm wearing! How is that possible? I know we don't have two of them. Miss Cohen told everyone if anyone ruined my Odette costume, they'd be suspended from two weeks of lessons.

I'm about to stomp over and rip the dress from her grimy little hands, but my hearing pricks at the sound of another set of feet coming down the hall.

The girl gasps and drops the dress in a heap, hurrying to replace it and the rest of the costumes in the box. The footsteps creep closer. She springs to her feet and rushes to hide inside the storage cabinet in the far corner of the room. I follow, pressing myself against the side of the cabinet.

Tap, tap, tap... then the room is quiet again. Where did they go?

“Wah!” No sooner does the thought enter my mind than a scream pierces my eardrums. My eyes widen and I swallow a gasp as a girl skates, literally skates, straight into the classroom through the soapy path, landing with a smack face-first onto the floor.

Oof. That had to hurt. Slinking out of my hiding spot, I make my way over and offer my hand, but she doesn't take it. Maybe she can't see me either, but she pushes herself to her feet and brushes off with a moan. She flicks on the light and glances around the room. Her eyes settle on the mirror and I crane my neck over my shoulder to spot a small, yellow Post-It stuck to one of the panels. The girl, who I now notice has shoulder length, fiery red hair, stormy blue eyes, and pale skin, strides over and picks it up, squinting at the handwriting. I step up behind her and read the note over her shoulder.

Have another slip, tenderfoot? HA! Looks like the janitor missed a few spots. I'm sure your body made a great mop! Break a leg at the audition tomorrow ;)

The girl scowls and crumples the note in her hand. “Kylie! I should've known!”

Ah-ha! So that was the *bruja's* name. She knew this girl was here, and poured the soap in the hopes that she would slip and fall right before a big audition! “What a *pendeja!*” But wait, there's an audition soon? How long have I been in that box?

I don't have a lot of time to contemplate it though, as the girl stomps over to the iPod holder and places something inside it. She hits a few buttons and the “Coda” from *Swan Lake* echoes through the studio. With a stoic expression, she walks to the center of the room, facing the mirrors, and readies herself from second position.

I follow her moves as she wobbles to her next pose. *Venga, roja.* If only she could see me, I could show her how it's done. She steps into a *plié* and then an *assemblé*. I yawn. She then goes for a *grande*

jeté and nearly loses her footing. *Ay!* This girl needs to chill. She's thinking too hard. If she keeps going on like that, she'll wake up Tchaikovsky himself!

Come on chica, with a little more attitude. I jump off the bar. "Like this," I say, even though she can't hear me. My hips sway side to side. "Gimme some swag, girl!" Then I bust into a saute, step, glissade, and grande jeté. A whiff of air blows through her hair as I land next to her. She looks at me and I hold my breath. She shrugs and turns back to the mirror, raising her arms to fifth position.

"That's it! You can do it, chica!" We dance in unison. I don't know if I'm affecting her decisions at all, but she's getting loads better. *Epa! You got this!* One last grande jeté and she wipes the sweat off her brow.

"*Maravilloso!*" I laugh. That was so much fun! I haven't danced like this since... I guess I don't know when. The girl turns the music off and grabs her bag to leave. Just then, the closet door creaks, and the bruja herself steps out into the light.

"Great job, Lyssa!" she sasses.

I scowl. If she could hear me, I'd tell her to take a hike.

"If you're forty!"

"Kylie?" Roja, no, Lyssa, spins around, clutching the towel in her hand. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Kylie rebuttals, then a smirk slithers onto her face. "Come on, you didn't think I'd let Jenny go to that kiddy pumpkin carving party at your house and not come back and give me all the dirt, did you? I know all about your little prank! And I'm not going to fall for it."

"Buzz off," Lyssa hisses through her teeth. "You don't know anything!"

"Don't I?" she challenges. "Just wait till I tell Miss Cohen and Medusa about the giant mess you made of the girls' locker room. They'll ban you from auditions for sure!"

My mouth drops open.

Lyssa scoffs "It's prank week, remember? The only rules are we can't do anything permanent and we can't damage anyone's property. I didn't do either of those. If you don't believe me, go look for yourself."

A tiny smirk curls at the corners of her lips and I can't help but grin. Roja seems like a girl after my own heart. Maybe once I figure out why nobody can see me and how to fix it, she and I can hang out.

Kylie growls and grounds her teeth. Unable to help myself, I flick my hand, causing a gust of wind to thrust the back of her dress up in the air. She shrieks and Lyssa giggles.

"What did you do, tenderfoot?" she hisses.

Lyssa bites her lip and shrugs. "Me? Nothing. I've been right here the whole time."

Kylie glares at me, but my smirk only grows. *You act like a pendeja, I'm gonna treat you like one.*

"Ugh! Fine!" She stomps for the door and shoots a death stare at Lyssa. "Just be ready for tomorrow, tenderfoot. 'Cause I'm going to crush you at that audition!"

Not if I have anything to say about it! I float toward the door and nudge her out. She trips and I muffle a snicker in my palm before the weird force tugs me back into the room.

"Let's just let the dancing do the talking, OK? Her voice doesn't waiver, but when I look at her, Lyssa's eyes are a little wider than normal and her face is a few shades lighter.

Kylie nods and stomps down the hallway. When I turn back to Lyssa, she's checking the time on the device in the holder, and then takes her starting position as the opening chords sweep over the room. I grin.

Si! Si se puede, chica. Don't let that pendeja get to you. She goes through the routine again, and I follow, wincing the whole way through at the stiffness of her movements and the tightness on her face. That girl really has something on her. If she's going to nail this audition, Lyssa needs to learn to relax.

That afternoon, everyone gathers in the changing rooms before rehearsal. Lucky for me, when one of the teachers saw the soapy mess Kylie made on the floor, he made the executive decision to move

the box of costumes to the locker room where they couldn't be damaged. That means I get to see all of the action up close and personal.

Kylie marches up to her locker and rips something off of it, tearing it in half in the process. As it flutters to the floor, I catch a glimpse of what looks like a younger version of Kylie with her hands stuck up to her elbows and something orange. On the opposite side of the room, Lyssa and her friend watch the whole thing, snickering into their palms. This must be the prank Kylie was talking about this morning. I can't wait to see what Alyssa did. That mocosa deserves a taste of her own medicine. Though, if Kylie knows what's going to happen, I wonder how she's gonna handle it.

"Wow," Lyssa's friend whispers. "That was quick."

"What?"

She shrugs. "I thought it would take more to make her mad. I mean, it's just a picture."

"An *embarrassing* picture," Lyssa corrects. "Trust me, Dani, Kylie *hates* people messing with her image."

I snort. It doesn't surprise me a bit that a bruja like her would be so vain.

Dani nods. "She's gonna lose it when she sees what's inside."

Laughter bubbles from my throat but I smother it. "I hope so!"

We turn back to the action as Kylie's lock clicks open. But then she steps aside and demands the girl next to her open the door.

I frown. *Coward*. The girl tries, but the locker doesn't budge at first. Dani and Lyssa exchange grins.

"Wha--" she huffs and puffs, but the door stays shut.

"What's going on?" One of the other dancers comes over.

"It's...stuck," she pants, yanking again. The girl steps up to help. Kylie's friend steps out of the way despite Kylie's menacing death glare just a few feet away, and the other dancer braces her feet on the locker instead.

"Why. Can't. I. Get this. Stupid. Thing. Open?" With one last, mighty heave, it finally lets go, knocking the girls into a crowd of onlookers. In an instant, everyone within spewing range is covered in confetti and globs of pumpkin goo. Despite standing to the side on purpose, I wave a hand to change the aim of the projectile so Kylie gets the worst of it. The tiny rainbow papers completely cover her leotard top, and some of them speckle her bare forearms. Orange guts streak through her white-blond hair like highlights gone wrong. A few lone strings even dangle from her ears, and her once perfect makeup is a goey mess.

There's a split second of silence, and Dani and Lyssa hold their breath and share a glance. A cold knot settles in my stomach.

Uh, oh, did I go too far? Before the thought can fully form, the locker room bursts into laughter. Then thunderous applause.

"Phew!" I exhale.

Dani and Lyssa collapse into each other, giving in to the contagious wave of belly laughter sweeping through the room.

"You did it!" Dani squeals, squeezing Lyssa's shoulder. "That was epic!"

Lyssa shakes her head, still gasping for breath. "No, *we* did it."

An ear-piercing scream slices through the room and it goes quiet. All eyes are on Kylie. If this were a cartoon, she'd have smoke coming out of her ears. As it is, her face is so red I wonder if she forgot how to breathe.

Serves you right!

She slams her locker shut. Her gaze darts around until it lands on Lyssa, and the crowd gasps in unison as she marches over, her left ballet slipper gliding back and forth through a trail of goo like a bull getting ready to charge.

"Alyssa Klarken!" she shrieks. I wince, but Lyssa gently untangles Dani from her vice grip on her arm and steps forward until she and Kylie are nose to nose.

"Yes?" She flashes her widest smile and brushes a stray strand of red hair behind her ear.

“What. Is. This?” Kylie’s nostrils flare as she flings her pumpkin and confetti covered arm toward me.

A few stray globs attach themselves to Lyssa’s blue top, but she doesn’t shrink away. “Just a reminder.”

She scoffs and rolls her eyes. “Of what? How insufferably immature you are?”

Lyssa shrugs. “No one is perfect all the time.” She flicks some pumpkin goo off of her shoulder with a smirk. “Even you.”

You go, girl! Lyssa doesn't wait for a response as she spins around and walks toward the studio, Dani close behind.

“You’ll pay for this, Klarken!” Kylie yells so loud her voice goes hoarse at the end, but my grin widens as Lyssa tosses her a look over her shoulder.

“Bring it, Hearst.”

There’s that sass! I knew she had it in her! If only we can find a way to get that into her dancing before tomorrow afternoon, she’ll be *perfecta*.

This is it. Friday, October 10th. Audition day. After that first session, I’ve only gotten to see bits and pieces of Roja’s routine whenever she practices a step or two in front of the full-length, free-standing mirrors scattered about the locker room. Last night, she didn’t leave the studio until close to 7:30 and I’d be willing to bet she practiced a few more hours at home too.

Just after three o’clock, all the girls from Lyssa’s class file inside. The once silent locker room is thrown into chaos. Doors clang open and shut, ten different conversations bubble up from various spots around the room, and the day’s school clothes are thrown haphazardly into each cubby or dance bag in favor of leotards, tights, pointe shoes, and other dancewear. The mayhem is familiar, calming almost. It reminds me so much of my own time here.

A ping of nostalgia resonates in my chest and I scan the crowd of dancers in search of a familiar face. I don’t recognize a single ballerina, and the realization sends a frigid current of fear vibrating through my body. I still don’t know what’s going on with me. A few guesses, maybe, but they’re all equally terrifying. The only things I’m sure of are: no one can see me or hear me, and I’m still 14 even though that guy who brought the box into the ballet studio last night says it’s been down there for 10 years. Also, as many times as I’ve tried to leave this locker room since the box of costumes was moved, I’ve had no luck. I wonder if that *cosa stupida* that kept yanking me backward last night has something to do with the fact that there are two Odette dresses- mine, and the one in the box. But what the heck does it mean?

“Please let this work,” says a new voice, jerking me out of my thoughts. My eyes settle on a girl-- she looks about fourteen-- in the far corner of the room. Her dark black hair has already been tied back into a tight, almost perfect ballerina bun. Her purple leotard is complemented by a set of light lavender ties, but instead of practicing routines or trading gossip like the other girls, she’s settled on her knees, piercing green eyes concentrating on something in front of her. It looks like a board game, but I can’t see the details.

When everything is set up, she reaches into her dance bag and takes out two candles, placing them on either side of the board before fishing a small lighter out of the outer pocket of her backpack which she had previously stowed in her still-open locker. I gasp and Kylie turns around just in time to spot her hovering the lighter over the wake of one of the candles, inches away from flicking it on.

“Maisie?” she squeaks, scurrying over to the girl and snatching the lighter from her hand.. “What are you doing?”

I let out a sigh. For once, I agree with the bruja. The teachers would probably kill her if they knew she brought a lighter into the school. Is this *loca* trying to catch the locker room on fire?

Give that back, Kylie!” she spits, reaching for the tool. “The ritual won’t work unless everything is perfect!”

“What are you talking about?” Kylie scoffs. Then she glances at the board and her confusion melts into that same mysterious smirk she wore in the studio with Alyssa yesterday. Uh oh. “An Ouija board? You still believe in that hoax?” She laughs.

“It's not a hoax!” Maisie protests. “I've used it plenty of times!”

“Oh, really? Tell me, has anyone you've ever tried to summon through this stupid thing done what you asked?”

Maisie's hands go limp and her eyes shift to Kylie's shoes. “Um... well...”

“Trust me, Maisie. No silly party game is going to help you beat me in this audition! You were held back for a reason.”

My hands ball at my sides. How did she become such a *mocosa*? I may not know this Maisie girl, but if Kylie is going to go around dishing out that kind of sass, she better be ready to take some of it back. I glance around, searching for the perfect comeback, but Lyssa beats me to it. She stalks across the room, inserting herself directly between Kylie and the spread-out Ouija board.

“Back off. Just because you don't need anyone's support doesn't give you the right to diss others who want it.”

Kylie rolls her eyes. “I don't think fake ghosts count as support systems.”

“First of all, ghosts aren't fake,” Lyssa counters. Hearing her say she believes sends a current of warmth through me; it also makes a lump rise in my throat. *Un fantasma*. I look at my hand again, shuddering at how translucent it is. I didn't notice it last night, but now, in broad daylight... It's just too weird.

Kylie scoffs. “How would you know, tenderfoot? Have you ever met one?”

“No,” Lyssa admits. “But my dad has. He has a good friend who's a medium, and she's done a bunch of readings for him.”

“Please! Those guys are even more hoaky than Ouija boards. They charge you gobs of money just to make stuff up.”

Lyssa shrugs. “Wanna know what I think? I think you're scared.”

Kylie stiffens but swallows thickly as her scowl returns and she places a hand on her hip. “Yeah right!” She shakes her head and holds up the lighter. “You guys should be thanking me. I stopped mousy here from burning down a locker room!”

“I wasn't going to--”

“Shut up!” Kylie spits. “You're just lucky I still have to warm up, otherwise I'd be going right to Medusa and giving her every juicy detail.”

“Do that and I'll be right behind you on your way to the office to tell Medusa and Miss Cohen all about the soap incident that happened last night.” Lyssa's hands are shaking and her feet won't stop thrumming out a tempo on the tile floor, but just like in the studio, her words are clear and steady.

Bien hecho, roja!

Kylie scowls and grounds her teeth, but drops the lighter and stalks back to her locker. “You're going to regret this, tenderfoot.”

“We'll see,” Lyssa replies. Her chest is rising and falling like a scared bluebird, but she's holding her composure surprisingly well.

When Kylie is gone, Lyssa turns to Masie, who smiles up at her. “That was amazing! I've never seen anyone stand up to her like that!”

Lyssa's cheeks color and she shrugs. “That? That was nothing. Besides, you should be able to do whatever you want to get ready for this audition. Although,” she bends down and picks up the lighter, “maybe no fire this time, OK?”

Maisie laughs. “OK, deal.”

Lyssa smiles, stows the lighter in her locker, then drops to her knees by the board. “So, how does this thing work?”

Masie sets up the board again, placing it atop her and Lyssa's knees, then instructing her to place two pointer fingers on the guitar-pick shaped chip in the middle of the board, which is called a planchette.

Then she pulls out a notepad and asks the board for only a positive experience and for the guidance of someone named The Fallen Ballerina. Something in my lower back tingles.

“Who's that?” Lyssa asks.

Maisie raises a brow. “You don't know?”

Lyssa shakes her head and so do I.

Maisie smiles and a glint of mischief sparkles in her eyes. “Legend has it, she's the real ghost at BID, not Madame Eunea.” Lyssa gasps. Maisie nods. “Ten years ago, the last time BID did *Swan Lake*, it was also during prank week. One of the dancers got jealous of the girl who played Odette. So jealous in fact that she tried to tie her pointe shoes to a rafter at the top of the stage so Odette couldn't perform.”

My breath catches. Something clears in the back of my mind, but I can't make it out.

“No way!”

“Way,” Maisie says. “The girl tried to climb up to get her slippers back, but she fell right through the rotting floorboards on the auditorium stage.”

“*Our* auditorium?” Lyssa repeats.

Maisie nods.

Eyes wide, my stomach drops.

“So now, before every performance, my friends and I all ask for her blessing so that she can keep us safe from her fate.”

Lyssa shivers. “That's...”

Terrifying, horrible, creepy?

“Intense.”

Maisie shrugs. “Well, I don't know about you, but I'm not taking any chances.” She turns back to the Ouija board and Lyssa places her hand on top of Maisie's.

“Neither am I.”

Maisie designates herself as the medium and begins questioning. At first, what she asks is simple. “Is it October?”

Yes.

“Did I forget my cell phone?”

No.

“Is John going to ask me out soon?”

Maybe. I don't know how I know these answers, considering I don't even know who most of these people are. But with each question, I'm pulled closer and closer; it's like a magnet I can't resist. By the time Maisie preps herself for what she calls, “the big one,” I'm hovering over Alyssa's right shoulder, peering curiously at the board.

“OK, Maisie says. “This is it.”

They both inhale, closing their eyes for a beat before letting it out, and then Maisie asks, “Are Alyssa or I going to win the role of Odette this afternoon?”

A strong force punches me in the gut, and I watch with bated breath as the planchette roams over the board. It hovers between yes, maybe, and no a few times. I shut my eyes, and when I open them, my jaw drops. The planchette has landed squarely in the middle of the word no.

Macy's shoulders slump. “I guess Kylie was right after all.”

Not if I have anything to say about it. A pendeja like her does *not* deserve the lead.

Lyssa swallows and blinks a few times.

My throat goes dry. I hover over and place a hand on her shoulder. “Don't give up, *roja*. Recuerdate; si, se puede,” I whisper aloud.

Lyssa turns and brushes her hair behind her ear, right where my hand is, but smiles a tiny bit before clearing her throat and standing up, pulling Maisie with her. “The only way she'll be right for sure as if we don't both give this our best shot.” She squeezes Maisie's hand. What do you say? Are you ready?”

“I am if you are.”

Lyssa's eyes sparkle. “Let's crush this thing.”

As the clock on the far wall ticks closer to 4 p.m., also known as the beginning of auditions, all the girls rush out of the room. I try to follow, but the stupid invisible string yanks me back toward the costume box. I finally surrender and let it call me toward my dress, but when I try to pick it up, my hand goes right through the fabric. Well then, that settles it. Between the Ouija board and my transparent skin and now this, there's only one answer. I really am *un fantasma*. A ghost girl. Which also means... the room spins.

Santa Maria! The only way I can be a ghost is if I'm also... dead. And if I'm dead, and yet my spirit recognized the name The Fallen Ballerina... Am I... her? Did I die 10 years ago, all because I couldn't reach a pair of slippers?

I shake my head. No. That's not right. But *something* happened to me. And the only way I'm going to figure out what is if I learn more about who this fallen ballerina is. Since Lyssa already believes in ghosts, maybe she'll help me. If only she could see me. How am I going to get her to do that?

I glance down at my dress again, then my eyes dart to the identical one laying in the costume box. I wonder... If I'm attached to the dress, does that mean if someone puts it on, they'll be able to see me? A buzz of electricity zips through my body. If that's true, and it's Alyssa's help I want, then that means....

“I've got to find a way to get to that audition!”

The locker room is the safest place in the school for something like this, at least, excluding the basement, why would the teachers ever want to move the costumes again until they need to? My eyes flick between Alyssa's locker and the sprinkler system. Of course! If BID hasn't done *Swan Lake* in 10 years, these are probably the only set of costumes in the building. There's no way anyone would want them to get soaked by water damage. Shaking, I float by her locker and stick out my hand, inching it toward the metal. *You are light*, I tell myself. *Pure, solid light, nothing else*. I gasp as my hand slips right through the door. Wow! I can't believe that worked!

I grope around the bottom of the locker floor until my fingers brush something tiny and smooth. It feels like a portable lighter all right. It takes all my concentration, but I will my hand to become corporal, then clasp my fingers around the lighter and imagine it becoming translucent along with my hand. I pull it back out of the door, and to my shock, the lighter is still intact, and solid, when I open my palm.

“YES!” A wave of inexplicable dizziness rushes over me, and I sink to the floor. I guess going corporal costs. But as long as I get to that audition on time, it'll be worth it. I take a ten-minute break, and then float up to the sprinklers and make just my thumb and forefinger corporal long enough to flick the button on the lighter, hovering it over one of the sprinkler heads until a spray of water coats the locker room.