



# pirouette

ROBYN BAVATI



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# one

Simone Stark flung open the door to the nearest cubicle and dropped to her knees, head poised over the toilet bowl. Afraid she'd throw up again, she tried to focus on her breathing

—in for two counts, out for four—but it was hard to get an even rhythm when her whole body was trembling.

The bathroom door crashed open and Simone held her breath.

“Simone! Are you in here?” That was Jess, Simone's best friend.

Simone heaved herself up and opened the stall door.

Jess was already in costume and fully made up. “You missed your call,” she said. “Mr. Dixon is fuming. Hey, are you okay?”

Simone shook her head as she crept toward the bathroom sink, catching sight of her own reflection—face flushed, eyes bloodshot and puffy, strands of lank, untidy hair plastered to her sweating forehead.

“I'll tell Miss Sabto.”

“No.” Simone turned on the tap and scooped handfuls of water into her mouth and over her eyes. “It's too late for me to back out now.”

“But—”

“My mum will freak out if she doesn't see me on that stage. How long have I got?”

“About twenty-five minutes.”

“I can't go into the dressing room like this. Can you bring me my costume and makeup?”

Jess looked doubtful.

“Please, Jess.”

“Yeah, okay.”

---

Fifteen minutes later, Simone looked every bit the calm and elegant ballerina in her golden tutu and flesh-colored tights. Her makeup was heavily and artfully applied, and artificial flowers were threaded through hair that was slicked back tightly into a bun.

Eyeing the stranger in the mirror, Simone wondered at the irony of it—the great chasm between who she really was and who she seemed.

“There,” said Jess, giving Simone’s hair one final spray.

They hurried backstage, where dancers were flexing and stretching their muscles to keep them warm.

Luckily, Mr. Dixon was nowhere in sight, but Miss Sabto was frantic. “Simone, I’d just about given up on you. Where on earth have you been?”

“I had an upset stomach.”

“Hmm! Probably nerves. Don’t worry. They’ll fall away the moment you step onstage.”

*Wrong*, thought Simone. That used to happen. Not anymore.

If only she didn’t have to perform today—or any day. If only she could make it all go away. But the orchestra had started playing to a packed and eager audience, and she was on any minute with a classical solo.

“Knock ’em dead,” said Jess.

Sick with dread, but smiling out into the darkened theater as she’d been trained, Simone slowly revealed one pointed foot after another as she made her entrance, trying to comfort herself with the thought that the show would soon be over.

She had four dances to get through—ballet, contemporary, jazz, and tap—and each performance was just as stressful as the one before.

When she took her final bows, the applause rolled over her. Her head ached and she wished the audience would stop making such a racket. She wanted to lie down and close her eyes. She wanted to snap her fingers and find herself in bed, asleep. She wanted to sleep for a long, long time.

At last, the curtain came down and the ordeal was over. It would be months before she had to go through it again.

On the car ride home, Harriet Stark kept up a running critique of the evening’s performance—and all the dancers. “You were the best, of course,” she told her daughter. “Matthew Holden’s turned into a fine young dancer. Jess wasn’t bad.

Didn't think much of Alison Boyd—I honestly don't know how that girl got into the school.”

Simone stared out the window, trying to block out the sound of her mother's voice. She wished she had the strength to tell her not to be so harsh and judgmental, but she was too tired to speak.

---

The digital clock read 12:05. It was the first day of the summer holidays. For the first time in months, Simone had been able to sleep as late as she liked. Still, she woke feeling numb and out of sorts. She lay in bed a while longer, her limbs heavy from sleep. It wasn't until she tried to move that she became aware of her aching muscles. The dull pain brought back the memory of the night before, and the months of hard work leading up to it. Thank God the year had finally ended, and she'd have six whole weeks without a single dance class.

She got up and made her way slowly into the kitchen. Harriet was out and Simone was alone. She poured herself a glass of juice and sat down to drink it. It was only then that her eye fell upon the cream-colored envelope at the edge of the table, and her heart sank at the sight of the familiar letterhead.

The envelope was addressed to her. She tore it open and skimmed it briefly.

*Dear Simone,*

*We are pleased to confirm your place at Candance ...*

*Enclosed, please find your receipt for ...*

*Should you have any special requests or requirements, don't hesitate to ...*

Simone felt anger rise within her. Had her mother really booked her into Candance again when she'd specifically said she did not want to go?

It was bad enough attending the VSD—the Victorian School of Dance—during the year, where full-time dance training was combined with regular academic studies. But the thought of full-time dancing in the holidays was just too much to bear.

Curbing a sudden urge to shred the letter into tiny pieces, Simone opened her hand and watched it fall. It landed face-up on the table, and she stared at it until her vision blurred and the black print swam before her eyes.

Harriet came home an hour later. “What is it, Simone?”

“You booked me into Candance.” Simone was on the verge of tears. “I told you I didn’t want to go.”

Harriet kept her voice light as she said, “What’s so terrible about Candance?”

“I’m supposed to be on holiday. I need a break.”

“Of course you do,” said Harriet, “and you’ll have one. Candance doesn’t start for another three weeks.”

*“I don’t want to go.”*

“Nonsense, Simone. You always enjoy it. And it’ll give you an advantage over the other students when you start Year Ten. Besides, it’s been booked and paid for.”

## two

As she stood in the wings, heart pounding, pulse racing, Hannah Segal felt as if she might explode. The final minutes before a performance were always sheer agony, and tonight was no exception. The younger students were always on first, so Hannah had been waiting for over half an hour. She wished she could fast-forward time.

Then wonderfully, magically, the music for her dance began, and finally she burst onto the stage and into the spotlight.

Nothing was quite as exhilarating as dancing in front of a large audience—at no other time did she feel so intensely alive. As she leaped across the stage in her sleeveless red and yellow unitard, she looked like a streak of fire or a bolt of lightning.

In a flash, the dance was over, and Hannah left the stage to a roar of applause.

After three more dances—each as dreamlike and wonderful as the one before—Hannah found herself taking her final bows along with the rest of the students from her dance school. Minutes later, after changing back into her street clothes, she floated through a sea of people in the foyer.

Straight away she spotted her dad, who towered over everyone else.

“Hannah, my love! What a tremendous performance,” he said as he embraced her.

“You were wonderful, darling,” said her mother, kissing her cheek.

“That was cool, sis,” said thirteen-year-old Adam, her younger brother.

Within seconds, Hannah was surrounded by more relatives, along with several friends from Carmel College.

“Way to go, Hannah,” called her best friend Dani, pushing a path toward her through the noisy crowd.

Hannah couldn’t stop grinning.

The only feeling that could equal dancing onstage was the buzz that came after—all the excitement and none of the tension.

If only it could last forever!

---

Hannah woke up smiling, remembering the night before.

She loved performing, loved that sense of losing herself inside the dance and bringing pleasure to an audience who'd become so engrossed in what was happening onstage that, for a while at least, they forgot their problems.

She lay in bed, relaxed and happy, recalling the almost unbearable excitement that preceded the show, the concentration of energy that enabled her to perform at her very best, and the warmth of applause.

She wished she could repeat the whole experience sometime soon ...

But Armadale Dance was just a local dance school. She'd have to wait an entire year for the next annual production.

Hannah felt something sink inside her. She didn't want to wait so long. Nor did she want to face the prospect of a whole summer without a single dance class.

If only she were able to attend Candance—the famous summer intensive. For years she'd wanted to fly to Canberra for the popular summer school, but every year her parents had said she was too young to spend three weeks alone. This year, she'd finally convinced them that at fifteen and a half she was old enough, but by the time they'd agreed, there were no places left. Though her name had been put on a waiting list, she didn't hold out much hope of being able to go.

Hannah sighed. She loved her parents. They were warm, wonderful people, and she often thought of herself as having won the lottery. But Manfred and Vanessa Segal had one failing

—they'd never really understood her need to dance. That was the real reason they hadn't allowed her to go to Candance the previous year, or the year before that. The truth was, they thought that too much dancing would interfere with her education, and though they let her dance three times a week, they didn't want her “getting unrealistic ideas about becoming a dancer.”

Hannah climbed out of bed feeling downhearted. Just moments before, the day had seemed so full of promise. Now, despite—or perhaps because of—the thrill

of the night before, she felt oddly flat. The six-week vacation loomed ahead of her—long and empty.

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts.

“Hannah, sweetie, I’ve made you pancakes. You must be hungry.”

“Thanks, Mum.” Hannah opened the door, and the smell of something sweet and doughy lured her downstairs.

She was swallowing her last mouthful when the phone rang.

“Could you get that?” called Vanessa, who was just leaving for Malvern Medical Center, where she worked as a GP four days a week.

Hannah picked up the phone absentmindedly, thinking it might be Dani or one of her other friends from Carmel College.

The voice on the line was unfamiliar. “Could I speak to Hannah Segal?”

“Speaking,” said Hannah.

“This is Jocelyn Jones from Candance Summer School. I’m calling to let you know that we’ve had a cancellation. You’re next on the waiting list, so if you’d like to join us at Candance—”

“I would,” said Hannah, before the woman could finish the sentence.

# three

The automatic doors opened as Simone approached Domestic Departures. She entered the cool interior of the terminal, then stopped abruptly. For a second, she thought she saw a girl who looked exactly like her—the same long chestnut hair, the same warm complexion, the same green eyes ...

Simone blinked and looked again, but the girl had gone.

A few steps ahead, Harriet stopped when she realized her daughter wasn't beside her. "Simone, what's wrong?"

Simone barely heard. She was scanning the faces of the people around her, hoping to spot the girl again, but she was nowhere in sight. How had she disappeared so quickly? Perhaps she'd gone back inside the terminal ...

Simone turned back for one last look through the automatic doors. They were glass, and so shiny they were almost invisible. *Like mirrors*, she thought. Of course! That was it. She must have seen her own reflection. In which case, she and the other girl would have been dressed identically. Had they been? She couldn't remember; it had all happened so quickly.

"Hurry up, Simone. You'll miss your plane."

Simone wished she had the courage to refuse to go.

---

As the plane flew higher in the sky and Melbourne grew smaller before her eyes, Simone became more and more miserable. Now it really was too late to turn back. She leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes. The three-week break from dancing had done little to alleviate her exhaustion, and all she really wanted to do with her summer was relax. Now there was no chance of that. Once again she was on her way to Candance, where she'd have a busy schedule of ballet, jazz, and contemporary dance.

Simone let out a heavy sigh. She knew that everything her mother did was with her interests at heart, and she hated the thought of appearing ungrateful. But she felt crushed under the weight of her mother's ambition.

The worst thing about being adopted, Simone thought as the stewardess handed her a glass of juice, was that you felt so indebted—though perhaps children raised by their biological parents felt just as beholden and just as reluctant to upset them.

The plane rocked unsteadily as it hit a patch of turbulence, and the *Fasten Seat Belt* sign flashed on. For a second Simone thought she might throw up. She was reminded of the last time she *had* thrown up—less than half an hour before her last performance, three weeks earlier. She'd barely made it to the stage on time.

At one time, Simone had loved performing, had loved the limelight. But since starting at the VSD three years ago, she'd come to dread it. Instead of feeling more at home onstage as she'd grown older, she'd become increasingly tense and nervous with each performance—a fact that no one seemed to notice, as she'd learned to hide it. The worst of it was that it was ruining her love of dance. Once she had loved ballet with a passion; now she was starting to hate it.

*If we crash, she thought as the plane lurched sideways, and I die on the spot, all my problems will be solved.* Alarmed that such a drastic thought had even entered her head, Simone vowed to talk to her mother just as soon as she was back in Melbourne. Her mum just had to know that she couldn't continue living the life that was planned for her, no matter how disappointing that might be.

But first, she had three weeks of dance to contend with.

---

Hannah fled the airport, biting back tears. Now she would miss the first, the most important, day of Candance, and there wasn't a thing she could do about it. The plane she was scheduled to fly out on had developed engine trouble, and though there were two more flights to Canberra that day, both were full, and she'd been informed at the check-in that even if there were any last-minute cancellations, priority would be given to those passengers who had arrived before her and were already on stand-by. She would just have to come back again the following day.

As Hannah waited stoically for the bus that would take her back to the city, a part of her wanted to commiserate with family or friends. Her phone was in her

bag, but she didn't trust herself to use it, suspecting that at the first sound of a friendly voice, the tears she was struggling to keep at bay would finally burst into full-blown sobs.

Besides, who would she call? Her mum would be busy at the clinic, her phone switched off. There was always her dad, who'd driven her to the airport earlier and wanted to wait till she'd boarded the plane, but Hannah had insisted he leave. If she called him now, he'd drop whatever he was doing and rush straight back. But right now she wasn't sure she wanted to be around his good-natured effusiveness.

She needed time to nurse her disappointment on her own.

Only half an hour earlier, she'd been so excited, so full of enthusiasm. Everything around her had looked rich and vibrant. Now the world seemed drab and leached of color.

She was still trying not to cry as the bus pulled up and she hoisted her suitcase into the baggage compartment. But her eyes were watery and her vision blurred as she climbed on board and took a seat toward the back. She couldn't remember ever feeling quite so frustrated.

As the bus made its way along the City Link, Hannah stared out the window, unseeing. It seemed absurd that she was heading away from the airport, when all she wanted to do was board that plane.

---

Except for Kimmy, the Segals' faithful hound, the house was deserted when Hannah came home. The Labrador, as always sensing when something was wrong, rubbed against her, his mournful-dog eyes oozing compassion. Hannah knelt down beside him and buried her face in his golden fur, her damp eyes turning it a muddy brown.

By the time Vanessa came home from work, Hannah was standing in the kitchen quietly gazing out of the window. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her mother give a little jump.

"Hannah! What are you doing here? I thought I'd seen a ghost. You should have been in Canberra hours ago."

Dry-eyed now but still subdued, Hannah struggled to maintain her composure. "The flight was cancelled. They said I have to go back tomorrow."

“Oh, sweetie!” Vanessa threw her arms around her daughter. “Are you sure you can’t get on a plane tonight?”

Hannah shook her head, her voice breaking as she answered. “They said that all the flights are full. There’s a shortage of planes.”

The kindness in her mother’s face almost made Hannah start weeping all over again, but she pulled herself together when Adam sauntered in. His iPod peeped out of one pocket and he was singing along to “What’s Eatin’ You.” Hannah grimaced. More ironic than the song’s name was the fact that it was by a band called Airborne.

Noticing his sister, Adam stopped mid-song. “Hey, I thought you’d gone.”

“Nope.” She tried to turn it into a joke. “You’re stuck with me for one more night.”

“Cool,” said Adam.

Hannah followed him into the living room. Hanging out with her brother had to be better than moping in her room. But as she sat beside him on the couch, staring at the large TV, she had no idea what was on the screen.

Manfred walked in just as the show was finishing. Having clearly been briefed by Vanessa, he showed no sign of surprise. “Hannah, my love! I can’t tell you how happy it makes me to have you with us another day. I was missing you already.” He leaned down to kiss her.

Hannah pulled a face at him and pretended to stick her fingers down her throat. Deep down, though, she was glad she had such loving parents. It was good to be wanted.

Later that night, as she lay in bed, she forced herself to look on the bright side. Tomorrow, come what may, she’d be on that plane.

She conjured up an image of a bright, airy studio, a group of passionate students and even more passionate teachers. She saw herself perfecting every step.

Finally, listening to “My Love” on her iPod and thinking of a moving contemporary performance she’d seen on *So You Think You Can Dance*, she fell asleep to visions of herself as the female dancer, flinging herself headlong into the powerful arms of her love-struck partner.

# four

“I forgot to give you this,” said Manfred the following morning, slipping his Kindle into his daughter’s overnight bag. “I’ve downloaded a few more new releases.”

Hannah looked up from her bowl of cornflakes. “Dad, I don’t think I’ll have time to read.”

“Sure you will. At least on the plane.” He picked up Hannah’s bright red suitcase and carried it out to the trunk of the car, while Vanessa once again issued last-minute instructions, as if in the space of twenty-four hours Hannah might have forgotten them. “Now, remember to call me as soon as you arrive.”

“I will, Mum.”

“And if you’ve forgotten anything, just go buy it.”

“Yes, Mum.”

“Have you got your bankcard and your credit card?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I guess you’re all set then. Oh, just one more thing. If you get homesick—”

“I won’t.”

“Okay,” said Vanessa, planting a kiss on her daughter’s cheek. “Fingers crossed that everything goes smoothly at the airport this time. And I hope you have a really wonderful time.”

“Thanks, Mum.”

“I’ll miss you.”

“It’s only three weeks.” Hannah bent down and put her arms around Kimmy’s neck, allowing him to lick her face. “Don’t worry,” she said. “It’s not like I’ll be gone forever.”

Adam, just in from a morning swim at the neighbor’s pool, came pushing past them. “Are you still here?” Barefoot and wearing a pair of board shorts, he

reeked of chlorine.

“Can’t wait to get rid of me, huh?” It was meant as a joke, but there was an unexpected tightening in her chest as Hannah hugged her brother goodbye.

---

Simone woke up with the sun streaming in through the window. Though the curtains were drawn, they didn’t quite meet in the middle, and in any case they were too thin to keep the room in darkness. The bed opposite hers was empty. Everyone else in the dorm had a roommate, but for some reason Simone’s roommate hadn’t arrived. Though there were advantages to having a room to herself, like she did at home, it did feel lonely.

Simone brushed her teeth, showered, put on a leotard and tights, and slipped a skirt on top. Then she left the dorm and headed over to the Caff for breakfast.

Chatting eagerly among themselves, the other dance students were all looking forward to the day ahead: meeting the teachers, finding out what repertoires and routines they’d be performing in three weeks’ time, and most of all, doing what they liked best—dancing. Simone couldn’t help feeling like an outsider as snippets of their conversation reached her. The others all seemed so thrilled to be there. She alone wished she were elsewhere.

She thought of her mother, who’d already rung to ask her whether she’d been placed in the correct level—the highest one—and who her teachers were. Harriet would expect a full report, no details spared. Simone sighed.

She looked at the variety of breakfast foods her fellow students were tucking into. Though she had no appetite, she knew she’d need energy to get through the day. *I must stop feeling sorry for myself*, she thought. She forced herself to swallow a mouthful of toast, then made her way over to the studio for the compulsory warm-up.

Several of the other dancers had arrived before her. Some were stretching, while others were chatting, making introductions or catching up with friends they hadn’t seen in nearly a year.

Simone looked around to see if she recognized anyone from previous summers. A boy with a pale face and sandy hair looked familiar, but she couldn’t quite place him. Then she remembered—he lived in Canberra, and his name was Liam. He’d been a little on the short side last time she’d seen him, but he’d grown in the past eleven months. Now he towered over the rest of the class.

Next to him was a guy Simone had never met, with dark wavy hair and large brown eyes. He had classic, sculpted features, and Simone found herself staring. He must have felt her eyes on his face, because suddenly he turned and looked straight at her. Simone blushed and looked away.

“Hey, Simone!” A striking girl with long, long legs and coal-black hair was calling her name. This was Sam, her friend from Sydney who came to Candance every year. They gave each other an affectionate hug. “How are you?” Sam started doing warm-up prances as she spoke and rushed on without waiting for an answer. “We’ve got Virginia Roth for warm-up and ballet. I’m so psyched I can’t wait to start.”

“Looks like you don’t have to,” said Simone as the famed Miss Roth appeared in the doorway.

“Great to see you all,” the ex-principal dancer said with a smile. “I’ll just do a quick roll call before we begin. We’ll start with the boys. Mitchell Brock?”

“Here.”

“Liam Cousins?”

“Yeah.”

“Tom Delaney?”

“That’s me,” said the new guy, looking directly at Simone. She bit her lip and looked away, making a mental note to keep her eyes on the teacher for the rest of the lesson.

# five

“I think I should wait,” said Manfred. “What if they send you home again?”

“They won’t, Dad. What are the odds?”

“Even so,” Manfred said, “I’d rather wait till you board the plane.”

“Dad, please. I’ll be okay. And Mum said you’ve got a meeting.” Hannah flung her arms around her father’s neck, then stepped away. “Go on. I’ll be fine.” But a moment later she was enfolded in one of his trademark bear hugs.

“Bye, Dad.” This time she gave him a firm push in the direction of the car park, and twenty minutes later, she was on the plane.

Finally, the disappointment of the delayed departure was behind her and all her natural exuberance returned. It was all she could do to stop herself from bouncing up and down in her seat as she watched the suburbs of Melbourne grow smaller and more distant.

It took just over an hour to reach Canberra, and it was a little after one o’clock when the taxi drew up to a building on a university campus. The words *School of Dance* were engraved in black and gold lettering on the pale brick wall, and a brightly colored banner was strung across the entrance. On it, in a large, decorative print, were the words *Welcome to Candance Summer School*.

As Hannah entered the building, dancers poured out of the open doorways, heading outside. Having left air-conditioned studios for the warm outdoors, they reached for their water bottles. It was certainly hotter in Canberra than it had been in Melbourne.

Ignoring a small pang of misgiving at the thought of having missed a precious morning session, Hannah looked for the office; she still had to register. It was down the other end of the corridor, and as she made her way toward it, she passed one empty studio after another.

In one studio, though, the last of the morning classes was still in progress. Hannah stopped and peered in through the window. Three or four boys were executing a series of *grand jetés en tournant* in a large circle around the room, their jumps bold and impressive. The girls were taking turns running into the center of the circle and practicing their *fouettés*.

Hannah watched, enthralled. *Fouettés en tournant* were so hard to master that it was generally only the prima ballerina who performed them onstage. They were often considered the measure of a dancer's technique, since it took precision, strength, and stamina to keep on spinning while remaining centered.

Hannah glanced at the schedule posted by the door, not at all surprised to discover that this class was Advanced Plus, the highest level. She was enrolled in Advanced, and even that, she expected, would be quite a challenge.

Torn between wanting to stay and watch and knowing that she should really go and register, Hannah was about to move on when her attention was arrested by the girl who'd just taken up the center position. As she launched into a succession of thirty-two *fouettés*, it became obvious right away that this girl was an incredibly well-trained dancer. But it wasn't just her perfect balance and exquisite technique that kept Hannah rooted to the spot. It was the girl herself.

She had the same build as Hannah, the same tawny hair and light olive complexion. It was almost as if Hannah were watching herself—not that she was anywhere near as accomplished. Yet this girl didn't seem especially pleased or proud of her achievement. On the contrary, she just seemed glad when it was over. Now she was saying something to the teacher, and the teacher was nodding, and a moment later the girl was moving in Hannah's direction.

Hannah stepped away from the door as the girl opened it, and then they were standing face to face, staring at each other, open-mouthed.

"Wow, you're ..." Hannah began, and then she was lost for words.

"Simone," said the girl. "I'm Simone."

"I'm Hannah."

---

At first Simone was silent as the two girls continued to stare at each other.

"You were at the airport yesterday," she said at last.

Hannah looked surprised.

"It was you, wasn't it?" Simone persisted.

Hannah nodded.

“I thought ... that I might have imagined it.”

Hannah smiled. “It is pretty amazing, isn’t it?” Her voice sounded just like a recording of Simone’s.

“Yeah. They say that everyone has a double, but ... wow! We even sound alike.”

“We do,” said Hannah. “And we have the same build. But you’re a much better dancer.”

Simone shrugged. “I dance full-time.”

“Lucky you!”

The corridor had emptied out and Simone glanced through the studio window. Her class was winding up, the dancers taking their bows and curtsies.

“We need to talk about ... this,” she said, waving her hand between herself and Hannah. “Before the others come out.”

“Somewhere private,” Hannah added.

Simone nodded. “We can talk in my room.”

Hannah hesitated. “I’m supposed to go and register. I was on my way to the office when I saw you dancing. I’ve just arrived.”

“But I’ve only got an hour before my next class. You can register later. The office will be open till seven o’clock.”

“But—”

“Pleeease?” begged Simone.

“I don’t want to miss the afternoon classes,” Hannah began.

Simone sighed. “Sorry to be the one to break it to you, but you won’t be able to dance today. You missed warm-up class this morning, and they’re really strict about it. No warm-up, no dancing.”

“But—”

“Don’t look so disappointed,” said Simone. “I’m dying to find out more about you.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Great! Can you give me a second?” Simone dashed into the girls’ changing room and slipped her feet into a pair of scuffs. She wound a wrap-around skirt around her waist and hurried back out, shoving her pointe shoes into a bag. “Come on, let’s go.”

Outside, groups of students having lunch together dotted the lawn. They were too engrossed in conversation to pay much attention to the identical girls, and too far away to see the resemblance between them.

“It’s lucky no one’s close enough to notice,” said Simone. “I don’t think I’m ready to answer any awkward questions.”

“No,” said Hannah. “Neither am I.”

Simone led the way across the grass, toward the dorm, while Hannah followed, wheeling her suitcase behind her.

# six

Hannah put her suitcase down and looked around. The room was clean but fairly basic. There were two beds—one made up, the other bare—and a large window overlooking the extensive grounds. There was a large built-in wardrobe, and a door just inside the entrance that opened onto a small bathroom.

“I’m supposed to have a roommate,” Simone said as Hannah eyed the unoccupied bed,” but she hasn’t turned up yet.”

Hannah threw her a questioning look.

“Everyone else arrived yesterday,” Simone explained, “except the girl who was meant to room with me.”

“*I* was meant to arrive yesterday,” Hannah said, grinning.

The two girls giggled, and for an awkward moment, neither one knew what to say.

Hannah was the first to break the silence. “It couldn’t just be a coincidence, could it, that you look like me?”

Simone didn’t answer right away. She was busy studying Hannah’s features.

“Let’s go look in the mirror,” she said at last, “and see just how alike we really are.” Hannah followed her into the bathroom and they stood side by side, gazing at themselves and each other in the mirror.

Despite their different hairstyles, their similarity was un-deniable. Simone took the pins out of her bun, removed the hair net, and allowed her hair to fall. She brushed it out, then handed the brush to Hannah, who gave her own hair a few deft strokes. Simone’s hair was about six centimeters longer than Hannah’s. And while Hannah’s ears had never been pierced, Simone had tiny holes in hers. Other than that, the two girls really did look identical.

“Try this,” said Simone. She ran her fingers through her hair, swept it up off her face, and drew it back into a ponytail. Hannah did the same. The girls had

exactly the same hairline, but Simone had a slightly more prominent vein in her left temple, and Hannah's eyebrows were just a little more rounded.

They continued to study each other in silence. On closer inspection, Hannah thought she looked a little healthier than Simone. Her own face was fresh and glowing, but Simone had dark rings beneath tired eyes. And although both girls were thin, at certain angles Simone's thinness verged on boniness.

"I don't think anyone could tell us apart," said Hannah at last, "unless they'd memorized the differences."

"And unless we were standing side by side."

"So ... what's your story?" Hannah began. "Who are your parents?"

Simone shrugged as she looked at their joint reflections in the mirror. "I don't know that much about my biological family," she admitted. "I was adopted."

"Me too."

The two girls slowly turned to face each other. "Well ... I don't know about you," Simone continued, "but I was born on—"

"Wait, let me guess," Hannah interrupted. "The fifteenth of June, 1997."

Simone just nodded.

"You were six weeks old," Hannah continued, "and you were living in an orphanage in—"

"Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil," Simone cut in.

Now it was Hannah's turn to nod. "Me too."

"Then we must be ... "

"Identical twins," said Hannah slowly. "But ... I'm sure my parents would have told me if I'd had a sister ... "

"If they knew ... "

Hannah twisted a lock of hair around her finger. "I've always wanted a sister, but it never occurred to me that I actually had one."

"Didn't it? Sometimes I wondered ... I had a sense that something was missing. But it never occurred to me that I had a twin."

Once again the girls were silent. "Where are you from?" Hannah asked after a while.

"Melbourne," said Simone.

"Of course! Me too. That's why you saw me at the airport yesterday. What part of Melbourne?"

“North Fitzroy,” said Simone. “You?”

“Armadale.” Hannah’s face broke into a grin. “So we live, like, a twenty-minute drive away from each other?”

“It looks like it. Stranger things have happened,” said Simone.

“It’s like that movie, *The Parent Trap*,” Hannah said.

“Except that *their* parents were still alive, and they split the twins up deliberately.”

The girls left the bathroom and sat cross-legged, opposite each other, on Simone’s bed.

“We could have gone the rest of our lives without even knowing of each other’s existence,” Hannah said.

Simone shook her head. “No, I don’t think we could have. I believe in Fate, don’t you?” Without waiting for an answer, she continued. “You know, I really didn’t want to come to this summer school, but now I’m so glad I did.”

“You didn’t want to come?” Hannah was stunned.

“I’m so sick of dancing,” said Simone.

“Then why *did* you come?”

Simone sighed. “No choice,” she said finally. “I’ve been coming every summer for the last four years. I can’t remember the last time my mum asked me what *I* wanted. She just books me in.”

“Have you told her how you feel?”

“I’ve tried,” said Simone. “But she ... she’s not a great listener, my mum.”

“And your dad?”

Simone shook her head. “It’s just me and my mum.” Her gaze drifted toward the window and for a moment she seemed someplace far away. “Anyway,” she said, snapping back to the present, “it’s complicated because my biological mother—or should I say *our* biological mother?—was a dancer.”

“*Was* she?” Hannah’s heart beat a little faster. “How do you know?”

“My mum told me,” said Simone. “It’s the one thing she does know about my natural mother.”

“But *how* does she know? I mean, my family weren’t given any information about my biological parents.”

“Well, all I can tell you is that they died in a car accident on the way to the hospital. They were almost there when the car crashed, which is how I

survived.”

“How *we* survived,” Hannah corrected.

“My father ... *our* father ... was driving. He was killed almost instantly, but they managed to get my mother to the hospital, and I was born by C-section just before she—”

“*We* were born by C-section,” Hannah interrupted.

“Yeah, I guess ... before she died.”

“I still don’t see how you know all this. The orphanage didn’t tell my parents anything. They said it was against the rules ... ”

“My mum dragged it out of one of the nurses,” Simone explained. “That’s why I dance. She sent me to ballet lessons as a way of ... honoring my mother’s memory, I suppose. And once she discovered I was good at it, she decided that I must have inherited my mother’s talent.”

“Well, she was right about that. Where do you take classes?”

“The VSD,” said Simone.

“The VSD?” Hannah almost squealed with excitement. “The school that every dancer wants to go to?”

“Not *every* dancer,” said Simone.

“Don’t you like it there?”

Simone shook her head. “I did at first. The thing is, I don’t really want to dance anymore. Not as a career. I hate performing. I hate the feeling that I’m being judged. And it’s just so tiring. Sometimes,” she confided, “I cry from exhaustion.”

Hannah just stared at her, wondering how Simone could hate the very thing that she herself craved. She would have given anything to be one of the lucky dancers at the VSD. How wonderful to have the chance to train professionally! But how terrible to be pushed into it. She tried to imagine what it must be like, day after day, to be forced to do one strenuous class after another if it wasn’t really what you wanted to do.

“That must be awful,” she said.

“You have no idea.” Simone gave herself a little shake, then glanced at the small alarm clock by the bed. “I’ve got a jazz class now.”

“Already? Has it been an hour?”

“Yeah. Look, I’d better go.”

“But ... you must be starving,” said Hannah. “You haven’t had lunch yet, have you?”

“I’ll grab an apple from the Caff on my way to class. How about you? Are you hungry?”

“Nope,” said Hannah. “I ate on the plane.”

Simone gazed at Hannah as though trying to memorize her features. “I still can’t believe you’re here and you’re my roommate. Why don’t you unpack while I’m gone?” She paused in the doorway. “I wish I didn’t have to leave now, but they do a roll call.”

Hannah regarded her twin with sympathy. “You really don’t want to go?”

Simone sighed, her face a mixture of exhaustion and sheer lack of enthusiasm. “I really don’t,” she said.

“Well, you know, I haven’t registered yet ... ” The twinkle in Hannah’s eye was unmistakable.

“You mean ... ?”

“Yeah,” said Hannah. “I could go in your place.”

“Would you?”

“Why not? I can’t wait to start dancing.” Hannah had already flung open her suitcase and was tossing her dancewear onto the bed. “Where’s the class?”

“The same studio I was in before.”

Hannah pulled on jazz shorts and a matching top.

“Wait!” said Simone. “Won’t it look strange if I’ve changed my clothes?”

Hannah shrugged. “Not necessarily. Lots of people change between classical and jazz. They’re such different styles.”

“I guess ... ”

Hannah tied the laces on her jazz shoes. “How long is the class?”

“An hour and a half, but—”

“See you in an hour and a half, then.” And before Simone could finish the sentence, Hannah had gone.

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