

Tiny Pretty Things

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First Edition

To Navdeep, for all the things you did, and continue to do, to help make all our magic (and mayhem) possible





Cassie

IT ALWAYS FEELS LIKE DEATH. At least at first. Your muscles stretch and burn until they might rip. The bones in your hips threaten to rotate right out of their sockets. Your spine lengthens and twists into impossible shapes. The veins in your arms swell, blood pulsing through them. Your fingers tremble as you try to hold them taut but graceful, just so. Your toes jam into a pretty pink box, battering your feet with constellations of blisters and bruises.

But it all looks effortless and beautiful. I hope. Because that's all that really matters.

Studio B is a fishbowl today, and I wish the three glass walls were blacked out or covered up. I can feel Liz's glare hot and heavy, her face pressed up against the glass. I knew she wanted this—maybe even more than me—but that doesn't mean she deserved it. She'll claim that I got lucky, that it was nepotism, that being Mr. Lucas's niece has its perks. I mean, Bette told me



she said as much in her drunken babblings last night. But I know better. I earned this.

Morkie barks orders at the corps girls, then turns to the pianist to nitpick a chord pace for the spring ballet, *La Sylphide*. I'm the only Level 6 girl cast as a soloist, and while the others pretend to be happy for me—well, most of them anyway—I know they're hoping to see me fail. But I won't give them the satisfaction. Even though it's hard being the youngest one in here. And earlier, when one of them asked me if I was fifteen, I wanted to lie and say I was seventeen or eighteen like them. As I watch the other dancers spin across the floor in a series of pirouettes, I keep my smile plastered across my face. I won't falter. I can't let them know how hard this is. My muscles ache and my stomach churns, empty from a morning spent reliving last night's revelries. I never should have let Bette talk me into drinking. I'm definitely paying the price now.

The music stops abruptly, and Morkie towers over Sarah Takahashi, making her do the turn over and over again, yelling corrections in Russian like Sarah understands her. Sarah bows, and it seems to infuriate Morkie even more. She's my understudy and a Level 8 girl. An 8 girl should've had the lead—an opportunity for the company masters to see her talent and offer her a spot.

I take every second of this break to review the variation in my head, to think through the music. Morkie does the steps one by one, stamping her little heeled ballet slippers. Even nearing seventy, she's still a strong portrait of grace—a true *danseuse russe*.

Bette slips through the door. And she lets it bang closed so I know she's here. I hate how she always finds a way to announce

herself, but I could never tell her that. Everyone watches—her halo of blond hair pulled taut in its bun, her designer dance skirt floating around her like cotton candy, her pink lipstick expertly applied. She's told to find a spot in the back, and plops down right near the dance bags. There were rumors that a fat check from her mom secured her a seat in the studio to learn the role, too, but I didn't dare ask her. She's been so gracious and helpful. Defending me to Liz and the others when I first got here, showing me the ropes, threatening the other girls if they didn't stop messing with me.

Will enters a few moments after. His red hair is gelled up, and he's wearing a face full of makeup. He blows me a kiss and waves. It was announced this morning that he'd be my *pas* partner's understudy. He sits in the back with Bette.

Morkie calls me to the center. The music starts, light and fluttery and serene. Usually I let it take me, the notes lifting me away so I'm no longer myself, the movements of my arms and legs transforming, allowing me to become the forest fairy romancing the Scotsman. But today I'm very much anchored in my too tall, lumbering body. I can feel the pull in each muscle as I glide across the floor, trying to make sure I land every step in the right spot.

I catch myself looking down at the tape marking the stage placements, focusing on the counts in the music. I try not to think of each precise motion making up the variation. Old habits. Bad habits. I should know this by heart now. I tell myself I'm as light as air. But my feet are a second too slow, my arm movements too heavy.

“More! More!” Morkie yells, her voice bouncing off the mirrors. I feel my smile falter. I’m totally graceless in her presence. My confidence seeps out of me with my sweat. Scott waits for me stage left. I flitter over to him, presenting my hand. He pulls me into his chest.

Morkie yells over the music. “Smile. You’re in love with him.”

My grin looks pained in the mirror. My stomach muscles clench when his hands squeeze my waist as he prepares to lift me.

Morkie waves her hands in the air. We stop midlift.

“You’re supposed to be in love. Where is it? Where is it?” she says, motioning me out of the center. “Did we make mistake in casting, Cassandra?” Her Russian accent makes the words sharp, tiny knives that tear at my insides. “Find it! Find the reason we picked you.” She waves me away with one skinny arm.

Sarah takes my place with Scott to practice the flying shoulder lift I couldn’t do. I tell myself that it’s fine. Necessary. Both boys have to learn how to lift Sarah, then me. Just in case. Frustrated, I head to the back corner, toward Bette and Will. “You’ve got to,” I hear her whisper, but he shushes her as he watches me approach.

“Hey.” He grins, patting the floor next to him. “Rough start, huh?”

I catch my breath, wiping away the little beads of sweat on my top lip. As Bette’s ice-blue gaze settles over me, I feel disgusting and heavy and off. Will gives me a sad frown, like I’m a puppy who’s just been kicked. “Don’t take it to heart,” he whispers again. “Morkie’s a beast.”

“You okay?” Bette asks, offering a smile that’s half grimace.

“I don’t know where it all went,” I say, closing my eyes. I stretch my limbs out every which way. “I was fine yesterday. You saw me.”

“You looked scared of him,” Will says, his eyes on Scott, tracing his every movement. “Have a little crush?”

“I have a boyfriend,” I snap without meaning to. I wish I was partnering with Henri, but he’s at the Paris Opera School. I trust his hands. “Sorry, I can’t figure out what’s wrong with me.”

“Hmm,” Bette says, noncommittal. “Too much alcohol is my guess.” And it makes me remember how she kept filling my cup with the expensive wine she’d taken from her mother’s collection, despite my protests.

I nod my head, eager for an excuse. “I should’ve gone straight to bed after we hung out.”

“You didn’t?” Her forehead crinkles with surprise.

“Sometimes I dance late at night, so it can all stick in my head when I finally sleep.” I put a hand on my forehead, not sure why everything is coming out of me right now. But I can trust her. Alec told me so, even when I doubted Bette at first. And Will is Alec’s best friend. “My legs are a mess.” I scoot over a little, pressing my back against the glass wall that faces out onto the street. The warmth of sunbeams erases the cold that’s settled in my stomach. Even though it’s spring, I’m shivering. “What should I do?”

Bette and Will share glances. They know what Morkie wants. They’ve been here forever. They know how to please her.

“You need to get it together,” Bette says, picking invisible lint off her impeccable sweater. “Morkie doesn’t do drama or excuses.” She leans into a stretch, warming up as if she’ll be

called to the center any second. As if she's here for a reason. "And you need to not drink so much."

"Ouch, Bette," Will says.

I try to keep the shock off my face. "I actually never drank before," I tell her in a whisper. If Bette is surprised, she doesn't let it show. But it's humiliating to say it. Before I came to New York and moved in with my cousin Alec and his family to go to the conservatory, my whole world was just dance class and school and sitting on the couch with my British host mother, waiting for a call or text from Henri. New York is totally different from London. "I didn't know it would hit me that hard." I want to call Bette out for pushing the wine on me, but I don't. She's pretty much the only real friend I've made since I've got to New York, and I'm not about to mess that up.

"Some days we're just off," Will says, and pets my leg like that will help.

I feel my eyes get watery. I lick the strawberry gloss off my lips, hearing my mom's scolding voice in my head as I do it. She says it's totally unladylike. I look over my shoulder and watch Sarah Takahashi nail the lift with Scott that I couldn't. Morkie beams at her.

"Don't worry, Cassie," Bette says. "Will can help you look good out there. He'll rescue you like he's always done for me." The word *rescue* lands hard. Will's eyes dart around the studio, like he's watching a fly.

Bette flashes me a smile that's so big I can see all her teeth. Perfect, just like the rest of her. I'm called back to the center, and now Will is too. I can feel Bette's gaze following Will as Morkie shows Will and me the next part of the *pas*. We mark

the movements one at a time, with painful precision. It takes me almost an hour to perfect them the way Morkie wants them before she lets us try on our own. Then, finally, I stand in the center, ready to show her what I've learned.

I prepare to dance, waiting for the chord of music to start moving. My mind quiets: the worries, the criticisms, the faces in the glass all drift away. I see Will ahead waiting for me. I pretend that it's Henri. I step into my first movement, folding myself into the music, each arm motion embodying the cadence. I jump and turn and leap and glide. I flutter over to Will.

"Right on the melody," Morkie yells.

Will's hands find my waist. He lifts me up into a flying shoulder lift. His right shoulder presses into my butt, carrying my weight, effortless.

"She's not a box, William," Morkie says. "She's a jewel. Carry her like one. So pretty. So light."

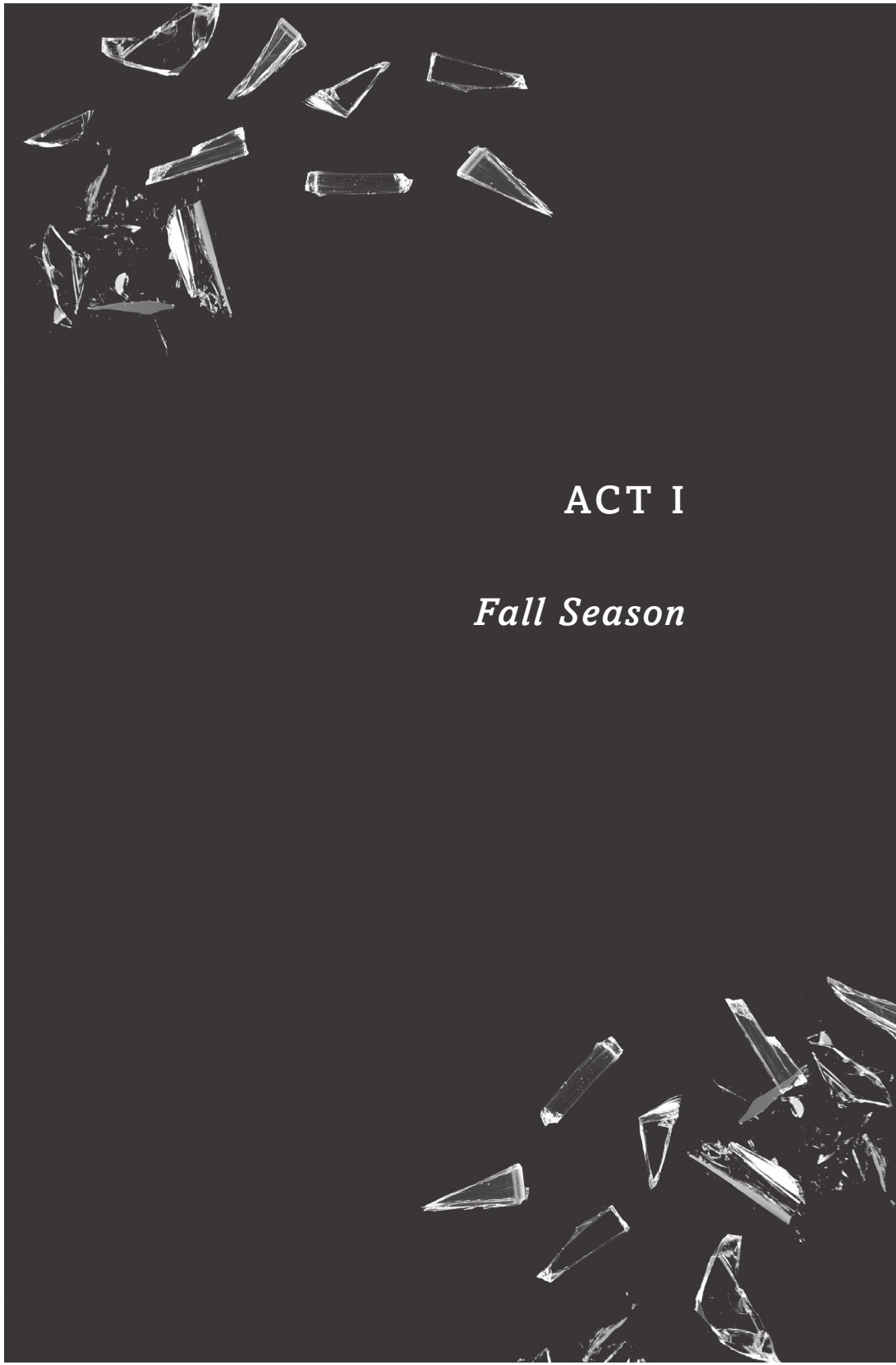
His fingers press into my hipbones as he struggles to hold me there.

"Beautiful, beautiful," Morkie yells over the music. "Smile, Cassandra."

I smile as hard as I can. I keep my eyes on the mirror and focus on Morkie's instructions. Here comes the fish dive, slow, graceful, deliberate. Except it's not. Will's not supporting my weight anymore, and I wobble, trying to counterbalance, but it's too late. His fingers feel like they've disappeared. Not at all like we've practiced. With his support gone, my right leg drops.

I topple, like I've fallen off the edge of a cliff. The floor feels so far away until I hit it.





ACT I

Fall Season







1.

Bette

THEY SAY ANTICIPATION IS SOMETIMES sweeter than the actual event, so I'm going to enjoy every moment of the waiting. Mr. K certainly loves dragging it out. We swarm around him in the American Ballet Conservatory lobby, waiting for his annual speech on *The Nutcracker*. Then he'll reveal the student cast list. Twice a year, in the fall and the spring, students get to replace the company dancers for a night at Lincoln Center, a test of our mettle. A taste of our future.

That piece of paper basically sums up your worth in our school, the American Ballet Company feeder academy. And I'm worth a lot. Alec and I hold hands and I can't contain my smile. In just a few moments, my name is going to be on the wall next to the role of the Sugar Plum Fairy, and the rest of my life can finally begin.

I saw my older sister, Adele, dance the role six years ago, when I was cast in the part of a cherub and bouncing around in

gold wings and my mother's lipstick. Back then, the anticipation *wasn't* the best part. Back then, the best part was the heat of the lights on my skin and the presence of the audience before us, and dancing in perfect time with my little ballet girlfriends. The best part was the scratchy tights and the sweet metallic smell of hair spray and the sparkling tiara pinned into my baby-fine hair. The glitter dusted onto my cheeks. The best part was the hole of nervousness in my stomach before getting onstage and the rush of joy after we pranced off. The best part was bouquets of flowers and kisses on both cheeks from my mother and my father lifting me in the air and calling me a princess.

Back then, it was *all* the best part.

The school's front doors are closed and locked. Mr. K's speech is that important. I glance over my shoulder through the big lobby windows and see a few people with red noses, bundled up to fight the October air. They're stuck on the stairs and in the Rose Abney Plaza, named after my grandmother. That door won't open again until he's finished. They'll just have to freeze.

Mr. K rubs his well-groomed beard, and I know he's ready to start. I know these little things about him, thanks to Adele, a company soloist. I straighten up a bit more and wrap my hand around Alec's neck, tickling the place where his buzzed blond hair meets his skin. He grins, too, both of us perfectly poised to finally take our places as the leads in the winter ballet.

"This is it," I whisper in his ear. He smiles back and kisses my forehead. He's flushed with excitement, too, and I just know that from here on out I will love everything about ballet again. Both of our auditions went well. I remember how ridiculously

happy Adele looked when she was dancing the Sugar Plum Fairy, and how the role got her plucked straight out of the school and given a spot in the company, and I just dream of feeling that full. There's no one standing in my way. Even Liz is struggling a little bit this year. And no one else can do what I can.

I drop my hand down to his and squeeze Alec a little tighter. Alec's best friend—my ex-friend—Will glares at me. Jealous.

Parents and siblings grow quiet, standing behind the expanse of black leotards.

"Casting each of you in *The Nutcracker* isn't just an exercise in technique," Mr. K begins. Our ballet master speaks slowly, like he's just deciding on the words right now, even though he gives some version of this speech every year. Yet I cling to every word as if I've never heard it before. Mr. K is the single most deliberate human being I've ever met. He makes eye contact with me, and I know my fate is cemented in that quick connection. That look my way is purposeful. It has to be. I bow my head a bit with respect, but can't stop the edges of my mouth from doing their own little upward pull.

"Technique is the foundation of ballet, but personality is where the dance comes to life. In *The Nutcracker*, each character serves an important purpose to the ballet as a whole, and that is why we take such care in assigning each of you the perfect part. Who you are comes across in how you dance. I'm sure we all remember when Gerard Celling danced the Rat King last winter, or when Adele Abney danced the Sugar Plum Fairy. These were seminal performances that displayed unbelievable technique as well as exquisite joy and beauty. The students stopped being

students and transformed into artists, like a caterpillar leaves its chrysalis and becomes what it was designed to be—a butterfly.”

Mr. K calls us his butterflies. We’re never his students, dancers, athletes, or ballerinas. When we graduate, he’ll give the best dancer a diamond butterfly pendant—Adele still only takes hers off for performances.

“It is because of Adele’s and Gerard’s relationships to the roles of Sugar Plum Fairy and Rat King that they experienced such success,” he adds. “It was the connection they forged with the part.”

I bow my head even farther. Mr. K talking about my sister is another deliberate nod to me, I’m sure of it. Adele’s performance as the Sugar Plum Fairy has been a topic of conversation since the first night she’d performed it six years ago. She was only in Level 6 ballet and hadn’t even turned fifteen yet. It was unheard of for such a young dancer to be given such a role over the older Level 8 girls. And when I was that seven-year-old cherub hugging my sister with my fiercest pride and congratulations, Mr. K approached us both with a confident smile.

“Adele, you are luminous,” he’d said. It’s a word I have been itching for him to call me ever since. He still hasn’t. Not yet. “And darling little Bette, I can tell from your lovely dancing tonight that, in no time at all, you will be following in your sister’s footsteps. A Sugar Plum Fairy in the making.” He’d winked, and Adele had beamed at me with agreement.

He is surely referring to that moment now. He is letting me remember his prediction and assuring me that he had been right all those years ago.

I shift onto my tiptoes, unable to suppress that bit of excitement. Alec squeezes my hand.

Mr. K's voice softens. "Young Clara, for instance, must be sweet and invoke the wonder of Christmas with every step and glance." His gaze drifts to a pretty *petit rat* in a pale blue leotard, her dark hair in a perfect bun. She blushes from the attention, and I'm happy for tiny Maura's moment of joy. I played Clara when I was eleven. I know the thrill, and she deserves to experience every second of it.

Years later, I still think of that performance as the most fun I've ever had. It was right after the Christmas season that my mother started showing me old videos of Adele and asking me to compare my technique to hers. It was that Christmas when everything between my mother, Adele, and me shifted beyond recognition, distorting into a bad TV drama. I get a little light-headed just thinking about it. I can still hear the whir of the X-ray camera like it was yesterday. Looking too hard at those memories isn't a good idea, so I close my eyes for an instant to make the thoughts disappear, as I always do. I give Alec's hand another squeeze and try to focus. This is my big moment.

"Uncle Drosselmeyer must be mysterious and clouded—a man with a secret," Mr. K says. "The Nutcracker Prince should be regal and full of confidence. Untouchable and elegant, but still masculine." Mr. K looks then at Alec, who breaks out into a fully dimpled grin. He is describing Alec to a tee, and I lean against him a bit. He lets go of my hand and wraps his arm around my shoulders. As if this moment weren't wonderful enough, Alec's affection has me soaring even higher. Mr. K lists off a few more

characters and the necessary qualities the dancers must bring to them. I smooth my hair to make sure I look perfect for my big moment.

“And the Sugar Plum Fairy,” Mr. K continues, his eyes searching the crowd. “She must be not only beautiful but kind, joyful, mysterious, and playful.” His eyes are still searching the crowd, which is strange, since he knows exactly where I am. I try to dismiss it as a bit of Mr. K playing around, as he’s known to do.

The Sugar Plum Fairy’s ideal qualities—they’re not mine. They are not words anyone has ever used to describe me.

But the part is mine. I know it is because of the way Mr. K finishes his speech.

“Above all else,” he says, “the Sugar Plum Fairy must be luminous.”

I squeeze Alec’s hand again.

That is me.

I am luminous, like Adele. It is me. It has always been me.

But still, Mr. K’s eyes do not find their way to mine.