Chapter Five

Olivia walked slowly through Central Park. People passed on bicycles, walking their dogs, talking on their phones. Couples held hands and kissed on benches and the side of the path. As she walked, the dream she'd had the night before replayed in her head.

“It's all right," Lena said in a whisper. "I'll just hold you all night, and we'll fall asleep like this."

Olivia smiled and breathed in the smell of Lena's peach lotion.

She heard screams. Lena's screams. Or maybe they were her own? "Lena," she tried to call out to her.

Then she'd woken with her legs twisted in the sheets, her heart pounding, reality crashing down around her. She'd thought about calling Nicki, but decided not to. It was three in the morning, and she didn't want to wake up Paige, but, also, she wasn't ready to tell Nicki about Lena.

She was about to stop to buy a soft pretzel with mustard from a food vender when her phone vibrated in her pocket. She passed the man selling pretzels and pulled her phone out of her pocket. "Hello?"

"Hi, Olivia? It's Nicki."

"Hi. How are you?"

"Good, thanks. How are you?

"I'm fine."

"Good."

There was a beat of silence. A woman passed pushing a stroller. Olivia headed towards the side of the path to be out of the way of foot traffic.

When she spoke, Nicki's voice started quiet and shook a little. Olivia could tell she was nervous. "I was wondering if you'd like to--if you want,”--She took a breath.--"to go out after your show one night. For dinner or a drink, maybe?”

Olivia's mind raced. Could she say yes? Part of her wanted to. But what about her dream last night and the ballerinas and the shadows in her head, all the reminders of Lena that kept showing up? What did they mean? Were they some kind of warning? A reminder that-

Nicki interrupted her thoughts. "Olivia? Are you there?”

"I'm still here. And yes," Olivia heard herself say. "I'd like to go out with you. That sounds nice. When would work for you?”

"How about Friday? I know a place down the road from where you perform.”

"Okay. See you Friday.”

"Okay. Take care.”

"You, too. Bye.”

"Bye.”

She put her phone back in her pocket and looked ahead on the path at the angel statue. She told herself that one date did not necessarily lead to a relationship, and not all relationships ended the way her relationship with Lena had. But the shadows still danced in her head, and now they were accompanied by faint, distant screams.

The next morning, Olivia sat reading the Arts section of the New York Times. She read an unfavorable book review and scanned a few more headlines before she stopped at a dance review. She skimmed it, thinking painfully of Lena. The phrase "dances with the grace of a swan" caught her attention. It was an over-used cliche, but on more than one occasion, someone used that phrase, or a phrase like it, to describe Lena. She was so graceful and happy and free when she danced. Olivia remembered the first time she saw Lena perform. How effortless she made it all look.

Olivia swallowed and skipped to a review of a recital she missed a few nights earlier because she and Paige were performing. Doing what she loved, getting to do it with her sister, and having an audience to sing to was what she wanted, but sometimes she was disappointed she missed opportunities to see other people's performances. Would she have gone to see the ballet from the review she just read if she hadn't been working?

"Hey," Paige came out of the bathroom, playing with the patterned scarf she was wearing. "Which way do you like better?" She took off the scarf, folded it in half, and draped it over her shoulders before pulling the loose end through the hole where the fabric was folded. She tightened it around her neck. "Like this? Or this?" She took the scarf off again and tied it in a bow around her neck.

"I kind of like the first way better, but don't pull it up so far."

Paige adjusted it and went back into the bathroom. "That looks so much better. Thanks."

"No problem."

She came out of the bathroom and stood next to Olivia. "I thought I'd go walk around a little. Maybe check out the farmers' market by the deli we passed the other day. You want to come?"

"Sure, if you don't mind waiting for me to shower."

"They're only open until eleven."

"Then I'll just put my hair in a ponytail and change."

"Okay."

Paige was paying for a basket of cherry tomatoes when Olivia felt someone tap her shoulder. She turned and saw Nicki.

"Hi."

"Hey. What are you doing here?" She pushed her sunglasses higher on her nose.

"The guy at the end,"--Nicki pointed.--"Has the best peppers. I wanted some green ones. There's only one basket left."

"Good thing you got here when you did."

"Yeah," Nicki smiled.

Paige was facing them now so they stood in a triangle. "Hey, Nicki."

"Hi, Paige. I like your scarf."

"Thanks."

"I have to run. I'll see you tomorrow night, right, Olivia?"

"For dinner. Absolutely."

Nicki waved as she turned and walked away.

Olivia turned around, put her face in her hands, and let out a dramatic "ugh."

"What's the matter," Paige asked.

"I look disgusting."

"You look fine."

"She saw me when my hair's all greasy and I haven't showered. I probably smell."

"No, you don't. You're fine, I promise." Paige took Olivia by the elbow. "Do you want to see if we can get that last basket of peppers?"

"Hi, Olivia," Nicki greeted her the next night as the crowd by the table was thinning out. "Are you still up for dinner?"

"Yeah, just let me help Paige finish cleaning up."

"Can I help?"

"You don't have to. Thanks for offering. Really, it will just take a minute." Olivia picked up a stack of pictures on the table and added them to the stack in a box on the table between she and Paige. She tossed two Sharpies on top and closed the box. She turned to Paige. "Can you get all of it?"

"I think so. It helps that your guitar case has those backpack straps built in." Paige placed the box Olivia had just closed on top of a box of sheet music in front of her.

"Yeah, those straps come in handy. Thanks for taking it."

"You're welcome."

"Okay, see you later. I'll bring you back some leftovers."

"All right," Paige smiled.

Olivia and Nicki settled into a booth at a restaurant a few blocks away. "I know I keep saying this, but I loved the show tonight," Nicki said.

"Thanks." Olivia replied, smiling.

The hostess gave them menus and left the table. "You can order anything you want; I'll pay."

"You really don't have to."

"I want to." Nicki reached across the table and gently touched Olivia's hand. A jolt of electricity shot through her. Nicki continued, changing the subject, "'The Hurt Runs Too Deep' is still my favorite. I've missed hearing you sing it."

"I just haven't felt up to it lately," Olivia said quietly.

"That relationship must have been awfully special." Nicki's voice was gentle.

"Yes."

"What was his name? Was he your first love?"

She took a deep breath. "Yes, she was." Olivia wished the waiter would come and ask them for their order so this conversation could be stalled. She opened her menu and looked at it without reading it.

"She?"

"Yes, her name was Lena," Olivia said into her menu. She didn't meet Nicki's eyes, but she could feel Nicki looking at her. Could Nicki hear her heart pounding from the other side of the table?

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I-“

Olivia finally looked up. "You thought I was straight? That's okay. Pretty much everyone else automatically assumes the same thing."

"I know. People automatically assume that about me, too. Just because I don't have a pixie cut and wear flannel all the time doesn't mean I'm straight."

Olivia laughed. "I know. I hate that stereotype."

They smiled at each other knowingly. Nicki reached across the table and touched Olivia's arm. More electricity.

Olivia let out a breath she didn't know she was holding and went back to her menu, trying to actually read it. After a few minutes, she folded her menu, and set it in front of her. Time to change the subject. "I think the Caesar salad looks pretty good," she said. "And the stuffed mushrooms."

"The Caesar salad with chicken?"

"Yeah, but I'm going to ask for it without chicken. I don't really like meat."

Nicki made a small humming noise for a second.

"What looks good to you?"

"I think the grilled chicken with the roasted asparagus and the garlic mashed potatoes looks good."

The waiter came and took their orders.

"I've been meaning to tell you," Olivia said as they waited for their food. "That I like your bag."

Nicki picked up her tie-dyed bag from the bench beside her and held it up. "This one?"

"Yeah."

"Thanks. I made it."

"Really? No way. You're so talented. I definitely thought it came from a store."

Nicki shook her head. "I bought the bag at a thrift store and then tie-dyed it."

"That's awesome. I wish I could do that. Do you do a lot of things like that?"

"Yeah, I'm an artist." Her eyes sparkled. "And it's not that hard. I could teach you."

"Any time I've tried to tie-dye anything it's come out looking awful. Nothing like I wanted it to." They laughed. "But your bag looks, like, professionally done."

"Well, if you don't want to try, I can just make you one."

"Really? How much."

"Just whatever the bag costs. We can go shop for one together, if you want." Nicki smiled.

"Okay." Olivia felt her heart flutter a little. She hadn't felt like that since...She swallowed. "Do you do any other kind of art or just fabric stuff?”

“Kind of a little of everything, but painting is my favorite." Her eyes sparkled, the way Olivia knew hers did when she talked about music.

“Yeah? What kinds of things do you paint?"

"Some nature scenes, still lifes, a portrait or two. All on canvas, and usually with acrylics. Sometimes oils or water color, but not often."

"Nice." She tried to think of another question, but she didn't know much about painting.

The waiter put their plates in front of them.

"That didn't take long," Olivia said, picking up her fork.

"For the kind of food they have on their menu, they usually have pretty fast service." Nicki cut into her chicken.

Olivia chewed a mushroom, swallowed, and asked, "What are you working on now?"

"A few things. I'm almost done with a painting of a view of New York Harbor I started a couple weeks ago. I'm always doing more than one project." She speared some asparagus with her fork. "Tell me about you."

Olivia swallowed. "Well, you kind of already know a lot. Paige and I put a lot of ourselves into our show, and you know I work at the diner."

"Yeah, but that can't be everything about you. Tell me about the camping trips you mention before 'Hole in the Bucket' in your show."

Good. This was a safe topic. Olivia told her about camping with her grandparents and Paige when they were growing up-- the campfire songs, roasting marshmallows, boating and fishing with her grandpa, the way he'd yell "Holy Mackerel!" when he caught a fish, no matter what size.

They ate and talked until the restaurant closed.

"I had a really nice time," Nicki said outside Olivia's door.

"Me, too."

"Can I see you again? Maybe after another show?"

"I'd like that." Olivia smiled. Her stomach filled with excitement and a few butterflies as they hugged.

"I'll see you at tomorrow night's show."

"See you then.”

Olivia woke suddenly. The refrigerator was whirring on the other side of the room. Paige rolled over in bed. The people in the apartment next door had the television on with the volume turned up too loud. What had she been dreaming about? Of course, she remembered now.

Lena was practicing in their room. "Hey," Olivia greeted her as she walked in with her heavy book bag over her shoulder.

Lena let out a frustrated sound. "You messed me up. I was counting." She walked over to her laptop on her desk and clicked the mouse a few times. The music started from the beginning.

"Sorry." Olivia put her bag on her desk and pulled a textbook out of it. Her bag crashed to the floor with a loud thud.

Lena let out another groan. "I lost count again. I'm going to practice somewhere else." She stopped the music and picked up her laptop.

"Okay. Sorry." She opened her book and reached up to turn on the desk lamp.

Lena stopped at the threshold to the hallway. She took a deep breath and turned to Olivia. "I'm just stressed, and tonight's the last night..."

Olivia met her eyes. "I know. It's okay. Go de-stress a little. I'll stay here and study."

"You're coming tonight, though, right?"

"Absolutely. I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Sitting on the bottom bunk, her legs under the covers, Olivia bit her lip and tried not to think about what had happened with Lena that last night. She swallowed. The refrigerator motor stopped, and the TV next door fell silent. She heard someone making noise in the apartment above them, and a horn honk outside. She was in New York with her sister. She'd just gone out with a sweet, beautiful girl. She got to sing every night. Everything was fine.