



Sparrow

MARY CECILIA JACKSON



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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SPARROW

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March

Running down the hall, phone pressed to my ear, I raise my eyes to the huge clock above the library doors. It offers no hope.

“Where are you, Birdy?” Lucas says. “Levkova’s going to slaughter you! She’s already doing that thing where she’s standing near the piano with her arms crossed, looking at us like we’re a bunch of zoo animals.”

I take a corner too fast and my elbow hits the lockers. I run faster.

“Are you seriously talking to me in the studio? Put your phone away, or she’ll murder you before she even gets to me!”

“I’m not that stupid. I’m in the hall, but even out here I can see her eyes turning all frosty. You know how they get, like freaky little balls of ice.”

“Oh my God, it’s almost two forty. I’m going to have to drive like a fiend to get changed in time.”

I’m breaking the Eleventh Commandment, incised into our

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brains for the last three years: Thou Shalt Not Be Late for Ballet Class.

“Holy crap, Birdy, you’re still at school? You’ll never make it! You know you won’t get in if you’re late. She loves locking that door at three o’clock, hearing the cries of the damned on the other side.”

“I’m going as fast as I can! Try to stall her.”

“Oh, right. Like that’ll work. She’ll turn me to stone with her ice-ball eyes before I even get close. I’m telling you, she’s in a mood. She just told Charlotte to stand up straight, that orang-utans moved with more grace. Why are you so late?”

I turn the last corner, backpack slipping off my shoulder, dance bag banging against my hip. I can feel my bun falling out of its knot, hear the tiny metallic pings as bobby pins hit the floor behind me.

“Ugh, Coscoroba kept me after class. He wanted to talk about my term paper. You know how you can never get away from him, right? I mean, he’s nice, but God, once he gets going you can’t get a word in. Today he had to tell me the entire story of Prometheus and his super-unfortunate liver. I swear he never took a breath the whole time.”

“Gross! Okay, look, she sees me out here,” Lucas whispers. “I don’t want to die a horrible death, so I’m going in. Good luck! If you don’t make it, I promise I’ll cry real loud at your funeral.”

“Stop it, Lucas! I’m running as fast as I can!”

Lucas hangs up, and I shove my phone into my bag. The halls are empty, echoing with the sound of my feet pounding the tile floor, the ragged gasp of my breath. I hate disappointing Madame Levkova. She is my rock star, the sun at the center of my universe. Today she’ll give me the look that tells me I’ve let her down, remind me that people who are late are lazy and inconsiderate, and I’ll feel like crap for a week. If I rush in just as she’s locking

the door, she may not even let me dance today. Depends on how irritated she is.

Juggling books, bag, and backpack, I burst through the massive front doors and breathe the cold winter air into my lungs.

The student parking lot is practically deserted, which would be a little weird for a Thursday, except it's been a tough winter. After the last bell, people scurry home, like rabbits to their burrows. A few cars are left, probably yearbook kids, or people staying late for tutoring. My car is all by itself, in the corner under a huge maple tree, now bare of leaves, empty branches silhouetted against the leaden sky. Some people hate winter in Virginia, but I like how spare it is, cold and clean and uncluttered. I raise my face to the sky. There's snow on the wind.

A car squeals to a stop inches from my left hip. I fall to my knees, dropping everything, spilling notebooks, pens, and all my ballet stuff across the asphalt. I'm so terrified I can't even breathe. I count to nine in my head, trying to slow the panic. When my hands stop shaking and I can breathe again, I look up and see the grille of a huge black Mustang. I smell exhaust, feel the relentless percussion of heavy metal.

I know this car.

Tristan King, white in tooth, blond in hair, rich in parents. Hollins Creek High School's highest deity, star of the track team, lusted after by anyone with a pulse. Delaney and I have been swooning over him since middle school.

"Oh my God, did I hit you? Are you hurt?" He and all his gorgeousness come flying out of the car, wearing the dark gray suit and crimson tie all the athletes had to wear for the awards assembly this morning. He kneels down to help me collect my things.

"No, no, I'm fine," I manage to croak. "I've got this, really. It's okay."

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“I am so, so sorry! Oh no! Your knees are bleeding!”

“Really, it’s nothing, honestly.” I hold my hands out to keep him away. “They don’t even hurt.” I’ve torn huge, gaping holes in the knees of my black tights, and the skin underneath is scraped and raw. Blood trickles slowly from the cuts and soaks into the ragged edges.

My pointe shoes, tied into their nerdy mesh bag, are under his car, along with my books and notebooks. But all the truly awful stuff—deodorant, tampons, panty liners, body spray, Dr. Scholl’s blister pads and foot powder, even the dryer sheets I stuff into my dance bag so it won’t reek of sweat and BO—is right out there in the pale winter sunlight. All the embarrassing, disgusting detritus of my life. My own personal Museum of Mortification.

I pray for a sudden sinkhole to swallow me whole, a bolt of lightning to fry me to ash, an alien abduction. I’m straight up dying of embarrassment. Dying. Like I-can’t-breathe-and-my-heart-hurts dying.

Tristan looks at my knees and says, “Hang on a second. I’ll be right back, okay? Don’t go anywhere.”

I stumble around, gathering my things, surreptitiously trying to wipe away the blood. I lied. My knees hurt like a stinker. I give up and sit down on the curb to assess the damage.

Tristan comes back holding a first aid kit. Kneeling down in his perfect suit, paying no attention to the dirt and gravel, he says, “I’m so, so incredibly sorry. At least let me fix you up.”

“You actually carry a first aid kit in your car? Do you run over a lot of people?”

He laughs, and the sound is low and sweet, like soft notes rising from a cello. His teeth are dazzling up close, straight and impossibly white, probably representing a small fortune in orthodontics and bleach. Even his eyebrows are gorgeous.

“Nah,” he says. “You’re my first attempt at roadkill. If you

think your knees are messed up, you should see mine. Bruises and scars like you wouldn't believe. I run high hurdles, and sometimes I miss."

He gently wipes the blood from my knees and brushes away stray bits of gravel. He's so close that I can smell his hair. Lavender, I think. Or rosemary. I breathe him in as deeply and quietly as I can while he dabs Neosporin on the scrapes and covers them with Band-Aids.

When he leans forward and kisses each bandage, I have to work hard not to gasp. Once, when I was really, really small, my mother did the same thing, and for a moment I'm lost in the memory. The way her long hair fell like a dark waterfall over her shoulder as she knelt on the bathroom floor in front of me. Her polished fingernails peeling the wrapping from the bandages. The softness of her lips as she kissed my scraped knees. And though I know it's impossible, for a few seconds I swear the fragrance of my mother's lily of the valley perfume dances in the cold air.

"There," Tristan says, looking up at me. "Now you'll heal faster. Kisses always make things better, don't you think?"

I'm not thinking at all, because my brain has stopped working. I should stand up and push him away. I should tell him he's way out of line, and call him a presumptuous Neanderthal. But his strong hands, his lips on my skin, are making me shiver, and I feel all hot and floaty and liquid, like warm honey is flowing through my veins. I don't want him to stop. I want him to do it again.

"Yes," I whisper, mesmerized by the depth of his gray eyes, the color of a mourning dove's wing. "Kisses always help." I wonder if he can hear my heart pounding.

He stands and helps me to my feet, holding on to my hands for longer than seems necessary. Standing so close, I feel the heat of him, how alive he is. I have the completely bizarre urge to rest

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my head on his chest, wrap my arms around his waist, and draw that warmth, that life, into myself. I shake my head, tell myself to snap out of it. Me: Amoeba. Him: Tristan King.

Still holding my hands, he pulls me a little closer, then reaches out to tuck a stray curl behind my ear. Looking into my eyes, he smiles and says, “Better now? Will you be okay? Want me to drive you home?”

I nod, never taking my eyes from his face. “I’ll be fine, really,” I whisper.

I don’t want him to let go. With my hands in his, I feel safe, as though he’s standing between me and the entire rest of the world, like my own personal knight, complete with sword and shield, sworn to protect me. He is so impossibly beautiful.

He gathers up all my books, places them carefully in my backpack, and zips it. Then he crawls under the car for my pointe shoes.

“Your suit,” I say, as he wriggles back out. “It’s all dirty now.”

He shrugs and smiles. “Doesn’t matter. Assembly’s over, pictures are done.” Cradling my pink satin pointe shoes in both hands, he holds them out like an offering, as though he knows how precious they are to me.

“I’m glad I ran into you, Sparrow.”

“You’re hilarious.” I take my shoes from him and stuff them into my dance bag. I feel like I’m moving in slow motion, my heart, my body unwilling to let this end, my brain knowing that it will, and that when he’s gone, it will feel like none of it ever happened. I try to fix all the details in my brain, right now, so they’ll be there later. So it will be real.

“Thanks. I do what I can.”

“So, anyway,” I say. “Thanks for not killing me, but I need to run. I’m unbelievably late for ballet.”

I head toward the ancient Volvo that my dad lets me drive

to school and ballet but nowhere else. Tristan runs after me and grabs my hand.

“Wait, Sparrow. Don’t go. Not yet.”

It feels like my heart has jumped straight up into my throat.

“You sure have changed a lot since we were in geography class together,” he says.

“That was fifth grade, Tristan. We’ve all changed. The last time you spoke to me, you said nobody likes ballerinas and ballet was stupid.”

His eyes widen and he puts his hand over his heart and staggers backward, like he’s had a sudden shock. “Seriously? I said that?”

“You did. I remember every word.”

“Wow, I was kind of a jackass, wasn’t I?”

“Yeah, you kind of were.”

“I was wrong. And ballet is awesome.”

I can’t help it. I laugh.

“Right. Have you actually been to any of our performances? You don’t exactly seem like the kind of person who’d be wild about ballet.”

“Okay, totally busted. But my mother’s on the conservatory board, and she’s always talking about you. She showed me that article that was in the paper last year. She says you’re mad talented.”

That article is still taped to the refrigerator. My father refuses to take it down. He even highlighted the line about me being “the rising star of the Appalachian Conservatory Ballet” and called me “Superstar” for a week. It was mortifying.

I feel myself blushing, the red stain creeping all the way up my neck and into my cheeks. Now my freckles will look awesome. “You should come see a performance with your mom sometime.”

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“Maybe I will,” he says softly. He reaches out and cups my face in the palm of his hand, stroking my cheek with his thumb. “You’re blushing.” He’s so close I can feel his warm breath on my skin.

My knees go all rubbery, and I picture myself falling down right where I’m standing, fainting like a Victorian maiden in one of my aunt Sophie’s romance novels.

When I speak, my voice comes out all shaky and whispery.

“Listen, really, thanks for the Band-Aids and everything. But I’ve got to go. We get fined five dollars every time we’re late for class. I’m sorry I ran out in front of you. Hope I didn’t give you a heart attack or anything.”

He smiles and pushes his sun-streaked hair out of his eyes. He has deep dimples on both sides of his mouth. “Have dinner with me on Saturday. Please. Let me make up for almost killing you.”

Approximately five thousand thoughts rush through my head. Me at dinner with Tristan King, holding his hand at a candlelit table, sharing a dessert. Kissing him at my front door. Wondering why he’s bothering with me, when he’s had tons of girlfriends, some of them even college girls. How tightly Sophie will hug me, how she’ll whisper that she’s happy I’m finally getting out of the house and, even better, going on an actual date. Best of all, telling Delaney. She’ll completely lose her mind and scream the scream she reserves for all miraculous occurrences.

“Ummm, that would be great, but I can’t. I have rehearsal most of the day on Saturdays, and then—”

“And then what? You’ll go home and sit by your window, crying sad little ballerina tears and wishing you’d said yes. You have to eat. I’ll take you wherever you want to go, even if you want, I don’t know, a gluten-free, vegan, pizza-free pizza. Come on, say yes. Please. Otherwise I’ll never get over the guilt.”

I hesitate. This will require all kinds of explaining and promising to my father. I'll have to get Sophie to run interference. If we start tonight, it's possible that we can get my dad to cave. My heart beats a little faster. This could actually work.

"Sparrow, come on. I'm sorry I was a jerk in fifth grade. I'm sorry I almost ran you over. Let me make things right. It's just dinner, some pasta and bread, maybe a glass of sparkling water if you're feeling fancy. It's not like I'm asking you to donate a kidney."

I melt, fast and gooey, like a marshmallow in a campfire. "Okay, yes. But I eat like a normal person, just so you know. All ballerinas aren't anorexics who live on celery sticks and bee pollen."

He laughs. "Point taken. We'll have cheesecake and ice cream, too. I'll pick you up at seven."

"Just be prepared for my dad. No way he'll let me walk out the door without grilling you. He's a trial attorney, and he almost always wins."

"Got it. Beware of kick-ass lawyers. I heard about his big murder case."

"Yeah, everybody says he's ferocious in court. And he's going to treat you like a hostile witness, so gird your loins."

"I'll suck up hard-core. Maybe he'll let me off easy."

"I wouldn't count on it."

Laughing, he walks to his car and gets in, gunning the engine and waving as he peels out of the parking lot.

Levkova has definitely locked the door by now. I may as well go straight home and scrape up five bucks to put in the Jar of Shame she keeps on the piano. I'll do an *adagio* barre in my room and give myself corrections. I'll be alone, but maybe it won't suck so much today.

I throw my dance bag on the passenger seat and sit for a

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minute while the heater groans. My knees hurt, and my hands are so cold I can't even feel them, but I can't stop smiling. I resist the urge to text Delaney about what just happened, because I want to hear her laugh when I tell her how my tampons were scattered all over the parking lot like candy from a piñata. I want to see the look of utter disbelief on her face when I tell her I have an actual date. With Tristan King.

It always surprises me, how life can change in an instant, how everything can turn upside down on an ordinary winter afternoon. In my heart, I feel the cautious flutter of hope.