

**You
& Me
at the
End
of the
World.**

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Hannah

I should have stayed home.

I should have squashed down that want, that voice inside me that said, *Go on, Hannah. Go out and get more books.*

Bad things happen when I stray from the plan. When I don't do what I'm supposed to do. After all, I designed the plan so I wouldn't have to think about the empty.

Well.

I'm thinking about it now.

The street I'm parked on is as still as a painting.

Light filters down through the twisted branches of the oak trees lining the road, shielding me from the worst of the Houston sun. The temperature display on the dashboard reads ninety-nine degrees, but it's cool and safe inside my mom's big white SUV. I've parked here a hundred times before, half a block away from the used bookstore my best friend Astrid's family owns.

All those other times feel like another life.

I roll my window down a crack. The heat curls in immediately. It's only April—it shouldn't be this hot.

I turn the engine off so I can listen.

It's quiet. The kind of quiet that reminds me of long summer breaks and lazy mosquitos, of my grandma's house in the backwoods of East Texas. The highways should be droning like the white noise on a vintage vinyl record player—always there, but you only hear it between songs.

Right now, I don't hear a thing.

No cars. No people.

Only silence, empty and hot.

I keep my mom's car keys in my hand, squeezing as if the pointed shoe charm on her key chain will transfer some of her famous ballerina stoicism into me.

If I turn back now, all that's waiting is my echoing, empty house and a routine that's already starting to feel stale. Maybe having something to read will turn the volume down on the thoughts I haven't been able to silence.

I need to get out of the car. I don't know what I'm waiting for—maybe I'm clinging to a shred of hope that something normal might still happen. Maybe the front door of the house across the street will swing open, a woman in sunglasses will trot down the steps, keys jangling, and get in her car and zoom off.

It doesn't happen, of course. It's been five days, and I haven't seen another person. Nobody's out there, and sitting here frozen will just give my imagination a chance to rear its ugly head.

As if on cue, a shadow shifts outside the passenger window, right at the edge of my vision.

I whip my head around.

There's nothing there, except for one gnarled branch bending farther over the road than the others. The shadow must have been the flutter of its leaves.

There's nothing there, Hannah. It's just your imagination.

I've been saying that a lot lately. Dancing is the only thing that keeps my panic under control, but it's not like I can put on my pointe shoes and bust out a few sautés in the back seat. So I settle for the second-best thing. I close my eyes and run through the choreography for the “Danse des petits cygnes”—the little swans—from *Swan Lake*.

I use my hands as proxies for my feet, moving them with sharp, flicking precision. It's a rough sketch of what my legs and feet would be doing if I were dancing the complicated steps. It's a thing ballet dancers do to review choreography. Astrid says it looks like some kind of badass sign language. Hand up to the opposite elbow to show *passés*. The shushing slide of one hand in front of the other and then behind for *échappés*.

Entrechat passé, entrechat passé, pique passé.

Échappé, échappé, échappé, échappé.

Chassé relevé arabesque.

When I'm finished, I open my eyes and relax my shoulders.

No more shadows.

I pull my empty backpack over from the passenger seat and wrestle it on. I have to get out of the car before I chicken out again.

When I open the door, an oven blast of Texas heat hits me in the face. Instead of using the sidewalk, I walk right down the middle of the road. It's not like I'll get run over. There are cars parked along the curbs and in people's driveways, but none of them ever move. If there *had* been a mass evacuation, wouldn't all the cars be gone? It's almost as if . . .

No, Hannah.

I promised myself I wouldn't think about it. I'm allowed fifteen minutes after breakfast to sort through my theory board. It's not time for that right now.

As I walk, the black smell of asphalt rises up from the road. Small, tidy houses line both sides of the street, sitting like happy dumplings behind their iron fences. Like any city, Houston is a patchwork quilt, and this quaint row of houses leads to a street lined with battered strip malls. The bookstore is straight ahead, at the crossing of the T-shaped intersection.

A paper coffee cup stumbles down the street, tripping through town like an urban tumbleweed. I hitch my backpack up and walk faster. I don't know why I didn't park right outside the bookstore. Well, I do know why—there are No Parking signs all along that street. But it's not like there's anyone around to give me a ticket.

Something prickles at the back of my neck. Every time I leave my house, I get paranoid someone's following me.

Oh no.

I shouldn't have thought about it. Because now, after every soft

thump of my Converse on the heat-cracked asphalt, I hear a softer echo.

Footsteps.

It's just your imagination. It's just your imagination.

I keep walking, resisting the screaming urge to run. The footsteps get louder. When I speed up, they accelerate to match.

They sound closer now.

And then they *feel* closer. Vibrations run through the ground. It feels like someone small. A kid?

No.

No one's there. Shut up, imagination. Shut up, Hannah.

At the end of the street, I slow down, squeezing my eyes shut, heart thudding and lungs aching.

When I stop, the footsteps stop too.

This time I say it out loud. "It's just my imagination."

I whirl around.

Wild-eyed, I scan the empty street. There's nothing there, but my heart twists anyway, sore with something worse than a haunted house fright.

I'm almost at the bookstore. *Keep going. There will be no footsteps, there will be no footsteps, there will be no footsteps.*

Despite the blood pounding against my eardrums, I still look both ways before crossing the street. Apparently not even an empty city can stop me from being a rule follower.

When I get to the shop, I cup my hands to the glass and peek

inside. The lights are off, but everything looks normal. I test the door handle. Locked. It's a relief. Finally something is how it's supposed to be. The only other place I've been is the grocery store, and every time I walk up to the automatic doors, they whoosh open like nothing's wrong, greeting me with refrigerated air, fully stocked shelves, and empty aisles.

I still have my mom's keys in my hand. My palm is red and damp and marked with the imprint of the tiny pointe shoe ribbons. There's a spare key to the bookstore, in case of emergency. Somehow I don't think this is the emergency Astrid's parents were imagining when they gave it to us.

Taking one last glance back at the deserted street, I unlock the door and slip inside.

As soon as I'm in, I'm cocooned in *brown*. Everything is brown: the wood-paneled walls, the carpet, the crooked bookshelves made from scrap wood. Even the shop's name—Literary Devices—is stenciled on the front counter in brown.

All I want is to sink down against the wall until the tight fear in me loosens, but I force myself to stay standing. I came here to get books.

As I head down the aisles, I toss anything that looks decent into my bag. I want to get enough books so I don't have to make this trip again. Not that I'll be alone for much longer.

If today is Thursday, that means the biggest audition of my life is in less than forty-eight hours. The day after tomorrow. It's everything I've been working toward: a spot in a major ballet company's corps de

ballet. And the audition isn't with just any company, it's my dream company. South Texas City Ballet is where my mom built her career. I already know the ballet masters and the guest choreographers and the layout of the building. I know exactly where I'll fit.

Everything *has* to be back to normal by Saturday. Any second now, I'll snap back into my regular life like none of this ever happened. I have to believe that. Because the alternative is . . . what?

I move to the next aisle, desperate not to think about it.

A book on a display stand catches my eye. A flower, a peony, bursting out of blackness, dusted with chalky pinks and pearlescent blues. I've been wanting to read this one for a while. Kept telling myself to wait until I had more time. As if a girl who dances for five hours a day and goes to school on top of that has any downtime.

I flip open the cover, powerless to resist the pull of the words. Before I turn the page, I glance out the window. I need to rehearse my audition piece again, but I've got the whole afternoon. I can afford to read a chapter or two.

I wind through the shelf maze to get to the woolly yellow armchair in the next alcove. It's my favorite place in the store to curl up and read. On Sunday afternoons, Astrid and I do our homework together here.

I drop my bag and push myself into the cushions, safe at last in my cove of books. The arm of the chair is speckled with drops of red hair dye. The last time Astrid and I were here, she had her head in a mop bucket, rinsing out the paste she'd used to touch up her roots, even though her mom forbids her from dyeing her hair at the store.