

COME A STRANGER

Book five in the celebrated Tillerman Cycle



CYNTHIA VOIGT

CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

About Cynthia Voigt

This one's for you, Helen:

~~because of the way you would always keep on trying to stand *en point*, in your bare feet; & for
lots of other reasons too.~~

CHAPTER 1

Mina jumped out over the back steps and landed in a fifth position demi-plié. Arms out back straight, she bent her knees into grandplié, and then up, sliding into fourth position. She leaped out, once, twice, three times, high across the yard, to the music that played inside of her head. She raised her arms slowly, lifted her right leg into a passé, and then as slowly straightened it into an arabesque, keeping one arm curved over her head, one curved in front of her. When you felt like this, there was nothing to do but dance.

At the sound of clapping, she turned around. She didn't mind if someone was watching nothing like that ever bothered her. "Morning," she called across to Miz Hunter, who was dressed for services and sitting in the rocker on her front porch. Miz Hunter was a tiny woman, short and small boned. Her toes barely touched the wooden boards.

"Where you going to, Missy?" Miz Hunter summoned Mina over. The old lady knew where everyone was, but had trouble with names these days. Every girl she called "Missy," every boy "Sonny," because she just couldn't fetch up their names. Mina guessed maybe all their faces got jumbled together in Miz Hunter's memory with all the boys and girls she'd taught for a couple those years in school. "In such a hurry. And all gussied up for church."

Mina stood below the porch, looking up. Miz Hunter had her red hat set on her head as bright as cherries. She had her gloves on and held her purse in her lap.

"I'm going to that camp in Connecticut. The dance camp. I got a scholarship."

"Where in Connecticut is that?"

"Someplace at a college. The town is called New London."

"I know where that is."

"You do?"

"You don't teach school for thirty years and not know where New London, Connecticut, is? I've never been there but I know where it is. You don't know where it is, but you're going there. It's surely funny about life sometimes, isn't it, Missy? Are you going out to tell the news?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Careful you don't make people jealous," Miz Hunter advised.

"Kat wouldn't be jealous," Mina explained. "She knows how much I want to go."

"There's nobody born yet, except maybe the One, who didn't get jealous now and then. And you well know, Missy. Even that One too, I expect. He wouldn't be human otherwise, now would He? So you take good care of your friends."

Mina thought about that. She thought about the camp from Kat's side. Mina would be gone all of July and most of August, and even the last week in June too. Eight weeks. From Kat's side, it wasn't such good news, she guessed. "I will, ma'am," she told Miz Hunter.

“Thank you for the advice.”

“Although if it were up to me, I’m not sure I’d let a girl your age go off among strangers for eight weeks.”

“They’re not strangers,” Mina argued. “They’ll all be dancers.”

“People you don’t know are strangers,” Miz Hunter corrected her, just as if Mina sat at a desk in her classroom. Mina bit back a laugh at how schoolteacherish Miz Hunter was. “Xenophobia, there’s a word for you. It means fear of strangers. From *xenos*, stranger. That’s Greek,” Miz Hunter instructed. There was nothing wrong with her brain. Nobody could say that.

“I didn’t know that. Thank you.” There was never to be any slightest hint of impoliteness to Miz Hunter, Mina’s parents made that clear to all of them. *She’s old, Momma said, and deserves special politeness for that. She’s lived a long, useful life before she came here. For her time, she’s done wonders.* So Mina made herself stand patient for however big a bite this conversation might take out of her time with Kat. “Are you afraid of strangers?” Mina asked.

Miz Hunter smiled then, the way old people often did, as if she was remembering something far away, as if she’d like to take Mina into her memory and share it together almost as if Mina already was a part of whatever she was looking back at. “I can’t barely remember what it felt like to meet a stranger, these days,” Miz Hunter said. “There aren’t any strangers I’ve noticed around here, are there?”

“No, ma’am. My poppa, he doesn’t let people stay strangers.”

“You’d better run along, or you’ll find yourself too late to tell all your good news.”

“Yes, ma’am. Good morning to you. I thank you for the advice.”

Mina walked off sedately enough, remembering now that her Mary Janes weren’t dancing shoes, and it wasn’t good for them, or for her, to try to make them dance. Moist sunlight floated around her. It was a fine morning. She heard Miz Hunter’s rocker start up creaking behind her as she turned down the street. Birds were singing away. A baby wailed somewhere, and a TV played, but mostly the Sunday morning quiet lay over the whole long street. Everybody was inside, getting ready for church. The porches were empty, the chairs and swings and steps had nobody sitting on them.

Front porches were for daytime sitting, Mina thought, her feet starting to skip and hurry her along. Back porches, which were screened, were for the evenings, for the families to sit together. Especially in the dark nights of deep summer, you’d hear the voices of people talking, the invisible words falling slow through the air. Like rain plopping down, relaxed and sleepy.

Mina guessed there was a lot she’d miss about being gone for the summer. She thought she’d better make Louis a cage for keeping fireflies before she left; a glass jar with wire screen fitted around its top, a preserving jar, and she’d have to wax the inside of the metal ring that would hold the wire top in place. Summer evenings, all the little children caught fireflies and put them in cages and jars and counted up who had the most. After the children went to bed, the parents set all the fireflies loose to fly away under the dark trees, their funny little

lights flicking off, flicking on.

Louis was just big enough now to be able to learn how to catch a firefly without mashing it. You had to know how to cup both hands and close them together. The firefly needed room in there to flutter around. Then you had to have someone take the top off your jar for you, so you could put your hands over the open neck and gently open them, like prayer hands unfolding, to get the firefly where you wanted him to go. Louis wasn't nearly old enough to catch a firefly one handed; he'd mush it for sure, and then he'd feel so bad he'd cry.

Kat was upstairs, dressing for church. Mina waited by the foot of the stairs while Kat's father called up. "Katanga? Company for you."

"Come on up, Mina."

Mina looked at Mr. Beaulieu. "Go ahead, child," he said. "Tell her we'd like to get out of the house sometime before Doomsday."

Mina laughed and Mr. Beaulieu laughed with her, and Mina laughed the harder because Mr. Beaulieu had that kind of chuckling, fat laughter that made you glad to hear it. They were laughing because the Beaulieus were always a little late, wherever they went. They just moved slower than the rest of the world. Mina thought that was because until they moved north they'd lived in New Orleans, where it was so hot you couldn't move fast without killing yourself off. "If you move slow you live longer," was Mr. Beaulieu's way of looking at it, and Kat's momma always added, "Enjoy it more too." You never knew what time dinner would get onto the Beaulieu's table, but you knew it would be delicious. At Mina's house, dinner came on at six exactly, and it was usually good enough. Mina's stomach liked being fed right on time, but it loved being fed Mrs. Beaulieu's jambalaya, all spicy and ricy and chunked up with meat and poultry and sausage.

"I'm getting hungry," she told Mr. Beaulieu.

"You're always hungry when you come here. Get Kat downstairs in ten minutes and there'll be time for biscuits, which we just happen to have fresh baked."

"Ten minutes?"

"With butter, hot biscuits with butter."

"Ten minutes isn't awfully long," Mina said.

"And honey too."

"I can do it," Mina said, charging up the stairs.

Kat had a room to herself, because she was the only girl. Her two brothers had to share but Kat had her own small room, with a bedspread she'd picked out herself and curtains that matched, and a matched set of twin beds, dresser and desk. Kat's curtains and beds had ruffles on them too. She kept things neat.

Mina moved right in and started making the bed. Kat had her church dress hung out on the handle to her closet, and she was wearing a slip while she fixed her hair. "How old were you when you could catch a firefly in one hand?" Mina asked her.

"I don't know, I don't remember. Do you remember *that*?"

"I think I was six, or maybe seven." Mina folded back the top sheet. She always put more

care into making Kat's bed than her own. Kat cared about things like that, and she didn't.

That was one of the things Mina liked about Kat. They looked alike too, which was another thing, except that Kat was short and slim while Mina was tall and skinny. Another thing was dancing.

"Do you think this barrette looks good? It doesn't match my dress, but it'll match up with the choir robe."

"It looks great," Mina said. "Okay, maybe not great, but good enough. Let's go downstairs."

"In a minute. Relax, Mina Smiths. You've never been late yet because of me."

"That's because I never do wait up for you." Mina smoothed the spread over the fluffed pillow. Kat slipped her yellow and red striped dress over her head, buttoned the buttons carefully up the front, then went back to the mirror again, fussing smooth the skirt, fussing the sleeves just right on her arms. Mina stood beside her and looked at them both.

There was something about Kat. Dainty and perfect. Kat's face had a small look to it except for her big eyes. Mina's face looked bigger, more bony. "You're really pretty," Mina said.

Kat knew that. Ever since she'd arrived in third grade, there had been no question that Katanga Beaulieu was the prettiest girl in their class. Kat didn't put all that much importance on it, and Mina was willing to bet that even if she'd been as ugly as a potato Kat would still have dressed and groomed herself with the same care. It wasn't vanity that made her do that, it was self-respect.

"I'm going to that camp, I got the scholarship." Mina couldn't hold it in another second. She watched Kat's face in the mirror. "Miss LaValle called up my momma yesterday, as soon as they called her."

Warned by Miz Hunter, Mina saw just a little sad expression of disappointment and jealousy flicked up in Kat's eyes and then go out. "I guess I'm not going then," Kat said, studying her own face in the mirror.

"I'd like it a whole lot better if you were," Mina said.

"But you know you're the best."

"But that doesn't mean you're not good enough," Mina answered. She didn't like anybody telling Kat she wasn't good enough.

"I guess you'll be really better when you get finished there. I guess you'll be miles ahead of the rest of us. I'm proud for you, Mina," Kat said, meeting Mina's eyes in the mirror, and meaning what she said. "I think it's great, and so will my parents when we tell them."

"You tell them later about it. For a while now, I'd like it to be just our secret."

"You can't keep any secrets," Kat teased.

"For a while I can. Then"—Mina laughed—"they just bust out. So don't wait too long."

She thought that Mr. and Mrs. Beaulieu would probably be disappointed for Kat. She thought that they'd rather get to be disappointed together, in the family, without having to cover it over with their good manners for Mina's sake. Mr. Beaulieu had a good job with the

state health department, but they couldn't afford to send Kat to dance camp on their own.

"There'll be nothing to do, with you gone all summer," Kat realized. "Just dumb ol' Rachele and Sabrina."

"They're not so bad."

"But they're not like you."

Mina couldn't argue with that. "I'm gonna tell my momma to put all my babysitting job over to you. You've got to save up that money. So next summer, we can both go. Remember Miss LaValle said they usually figure to give the scholarship three summers running."

"I can't earn that much money."

"If you save it, you can. Or maybe near enough."

"Oh, Mina." Kat smiled at Mina's reflected face, happy enough again. "There's nothing slows you down, is there?"

"Not if I can help it." Mina smiled back. She saw Kat's face catch some of her enthusiasm and confidence. "Best friends?" Mina asked.

"Best friends," Kat answered. They linked arms and went on downstairs.

* * *

Mina opened her mouth and sang. The melody flowed out like . . . She didn't know what it sounded like to everybody else, but it sounded like silver to her, her voice flying up above the rest of the choir; it sounded like a silver bird rising, gliding along, falling down and then soaring up.

They were all, all twenty-three of them, swaying gently with the hymn. "Where shall I be when the first trumpet sounds," she sang, they all sang together, women and girls, all in heavy black robes with starched white collars, sopranos and altos. "When it sounds so loud till it wake up the dead," Mina sang, singing out.

She could see Kat out of the corner of her eye, four robes down the line from her. For the second time Mina thought about switching her swaying, pushing back against the shoulder to her right, and the way the whole line would start banging around against each other. That would give Kat the giggles. But she looked out at the congregation and saw her momma sitting in the front row, with both eyes fixed on Mina's face. Sometimes, Mina could swear her mother could read her mind. Momma's right eyebrow went up and Mina wiped the mischief off her face. And sang, hearing how her voice blended in, up above everybody else: "Where shall I be when it sounds."

When they had sat down again, and the people had rustled themselves into attention, Poppa stood up. He didn't wear a robe, just a dark suit with a shirt so white it could have been new snow. He went up to the lectern that had been set up for the readings and the sermon.

Poppa's little church didn't have a fancy altar, just a heavy wooden table with a fresh cloth on it on which the ladies had embroidered words and pictures. A silver cross stood up on top of that. They didn't have proper choir stalls, nor pews, except for half a dozen somebody had

picked up at a flea market sale in Cambridge. Mina had been in a lot of churches in her day, between church-going and choir-singing, so she knew what Poppa's church didn't have. The windows were plain glass, the outside was plain wood, painted white, and the little stone steeple that rose up above the steep roof had no bell to ring. What happened was, whenever they were having a drive, saving up money for something particular, like more pews so the whole room could be filled with them and not be part pews and mostly folding chairs, something always came up. There would always be some family that needed the help, or some one person in some kind of need. The deacons would empty the church pockets to help out. Like Miz Hunter, when the church took a mortgage on the little house she lived in and rented it to her for what she could afford. Nobody minded that, and nobody seemed to mind the fancy touches. Mina didn't. She liked the way the generous May sunlight poured through the plain glass windows.

Poppa said he was pretty sure God didn't mind, because he was pretty sure God's mansion was about seventy-seven times as grand as the biggest cathedral in the biggest city in the world. Rome was Mina's guess, but Momma had said she'd favor something in the Gothic style, with spires and arches, with steeples rising up high as man's hopes. Nobody argued with her, because Momma did a lot of reading and generally knew what she was talking about. Nursing was her vocation, she said, and her family was her life, and Poppa was her dearly beloved; but history was her passion, she always ended up saying that. Poppa always answered he'd rather be her passion, but Momma answered that she didn't think history could make much showing as a dearly beloved, so she thought she had things pretty straight. And Poppa laughed.

Mina studied her father as he opened the pages of his sermon. He was a big man, with a strong face and dark eyes that had a way of answering to what they were seeing. He had a big, quiet voice that carried through the whole church. Oh, Mina thought, with a swelling of her heart, oh, she loved her poppa. Oh, she was proud of him.

"Now the word of the Lord came unto Jonah," Poppa read. He always started a sermon with a text. "Saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it." He looked up then, and all around at the people.

"I always wondered how Jonah had the heart to say no to the Lord. Did you ever wonder about that? I always did. I thought I'd have tipped my hat and said yessir so fast He'd have wondered if I truly heard Him. I would have been too frightened to do anything else. But when I study the situation, I think I can understand where Jonah's courage came from. I think it must have been the courage that comes from fear.

"What was there for Jonah to be afraid of? What could wind a man's heart around more than the voice of God speaking into his ear? Think of Jonah, think of him caught there between his two fears. What was that other fear, I ask myself.

"My guess is he was afraid to go into Nineveh. Like any man living, Jonah was afraid to go out and live among strangers. Do you blame him?"

Poppa waited, just half a minute, watching the heads shaking no, to be sure they'd got his

idea down clearly.

“Strangers are a fearful people, now as then,” Poppa said.

Mina folded her hands in her lap and listened.

CHAPTER 2

All the windows were open and Mrs. Landseer was keeping a close eye on the storm clouds blowing along on a gusty wind. The wind blew the air in the classroom cool. Sooner or later Mina knew, would come the cold edge that meant that the storm was imminent. She hoped it would hold off until after lunch recess. No, she didn't; she hoped it would hold off until the middle of lunch recess. She wanted to be outside when the storm came, to see it pull at the branches of the trees, feel the wind whip around her body, and hear the long roll of thunder. She wanted to see lightning bolts, at least one, rip down through the dark sky and feel the shiver of fear go along her bones. She wanted the hard slanting rain to soak her, before she ran back into the building. Mina loved storms. Crisfield didn't get much by way of winter storms, but you could count on thunderstorms, all summer long. Kat couldn't understand it, not even when Mina dragged her over to stand at a window and watch. "It's so big," Mina would say, "it's just so—big," as a storm fought its way across the sky.

This was the season of lasts: last science experiment, last spelling list, last math chapter, last assembly. It was the last all-school assembly they were rehearsing for now. The fifth grade was giving plays. This was their last rehearsal before the performance tomorrow morning. And then, after another week, it would be the last weekend, then the last Monday, last Tuesday. Excitement was building up. Mina had already begun on her firsts for the summer. The first dinner eaten on the porch, while the long day stretched out like the band of golden light falling across the yard. She might miss the first fireflies this year, because she would be at ballet camp, for the first time in her life.

She brought her attention back to the rehearsal. They had three short plays to perform. The biggest cast, twelve of them, had the first play, and Mina had helped out by arranging things and writing it down, so everybody knew where they were supposed to stand and how they were supposed to look. It was a pretty dumb story, Mina thought, about villagers learning how to share a magic pot that never ran out of stew. It started to get disorganized whenever the soldiers of the king (who wanted to take the pot away from the villagers) came onto the stage. She watched the soldiers enter, watched Bruce especially. He was prodding Jason and Jake with his wooden sword, getting them out of the straight lines soldiers stood in. Mina stood up at her desk. "Bruce Billings," she called out. "If you know what's good for you you'll cut that out right now." He stuck his tongue out at her and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling to show how bossy she was, but he cut it out.

The next play was all boys, four of them, doing a take-off on Mr. Rogers. Mina watched John Cooper carefully, because he had asked her how to act when he was playing Mr. Rogers, and she wanted to be sure he did things right, like the way he messed up tying his shoes. John had written the play too, and it wasn't bad at all, Mina thought. She smiled at him when

they were finished, to let him know she thought he'd done okay. The rest of the boys, Mr. Speedy Delivery and King Friday and Handyman Negri, would ham it up too much, but John didn't care so much about them, so—except for a few suggestions to them—Mina kept her mouth shut. John was just a perfectionist for himself.

In Mina's play, Snow White, she played the wicked queen. She came dancing onstage because Kat—who had chosen it and was directing it and had made up the script—and all the rest too, agreed it looked good. Mrs. Landseer stopped things when Mina did that. "Why are you dancing?"

"Because," Mina said. It was strange to dance without any music. "It's to make the queen look different, because she's got magic."

"Kat, was this your idea?" Mrs. Landseer asked. Kat was over by the classroom door, ready to be Snow White.

"Well," Kat said, looking from Mina to Mrs. Landseer.

"I thought so. This was your own idea, wasn't it, Mina?"

"Everybody said it was good."

"I'll bet they did," Mrs. Landseer said. "I'll just bet they did."

Mina knew what Mrs. Landseer meant to be saying, and she knew that Mrs. Landseer didn't really mind. "You are t-rou-ble," that was what Mrs. Landseer said to Mina, all year long. Sometimes she said it to stop whatever mischief Mina was up to. Sometimes she said it to tease her, and let Mina know she was watching her. Sometimes she said it as if she thought Mina was funny. This was one of the funny times.

"It won't do," Mrs. Landseer said now. "Wilhemina Smiths, you go have a little talk with your director and do what she tells you to do."

"Yes, ma'am," Mina said. She knew what Kat wanted her to do, because Kat had sort of suggested it quietly a couple of times. She wanted Mina to come on with big, dangerous, sneaky steps. Mina walked over to Kat that way, crossing the stage section of the classroom, and Kat giggled. "That's right," Kat said. "Thank you, Mina."

"And no more of this *Queen for a Day* act from you," Mrs. Landseer added.

Mina just grinned at her. She'd try.

The air in the classroom turned cold, chilly as October, and Mrs. Landseer ran for the windows. Mina ran too, and hesitated just a few seconds—listening to the sky growl in the distance, watching the way the leaves clutched at the branches of the trees, smelling cold rain in the wind—before she reached up and slammed down the window.

* * *

The way things were, the Smiths family had to work together, the whole family, figuring out where the money was going to come from, how it ought to be used. Poppa was a full-time minister; part of his salary came from the church, which spread out over a lot of states, and part from his own congregation; but it wasn't much money. Momma had a job at the hospital, because she'd become a nurse before she married, so that helped and it gave the

all medical insurance too. The house they lived in belonged to the church. Living there was part of Poppa's pay. Taking good care of the house, the church and Miz Hunter's house was part of Poppa's job. Everything worked out. They worked everything out together.

So Mina's summer at ballet camp got worked out by the whole family. Mina's oldest sister Eleanor, married to a man who worked for the electric company up in Cleveland, Ohio, with two little children already, sewed up some skirts and blouses and dresses from patterns Momma sent her. Charles Stuart—"CS"—was at college, a sophomore, so he couldn't help out much, but he sent down some material he'd copied at the library there about the camp where the camp was being held and the city where the college was. Mina spent saved-up allowance money for enough tights, and Zandor bought her one new pair of dance shoes. After the football season ended, he always got a job bagging groceries, so he had the extra money. "But I'm not buying you any toe shoes," he told her, standing as tall and broad as Poppa. "Those things are ex-pensive."

"If you expect me to hire you as my manager when I'm famous, you ought to be making sure I feel grateful to you now, while I'm just learning."

"Oh-ho, Miss Big Future," Zandor said.

Belle complained and started to get thirteen-year-old sulks, until Momma brought her up short with a, "No more of that, Isabelle." And Louis—well, between planning ahead how awful it was going to be with Belle in charge of him and planning on missing Poppa as usual and wondering if Mina would bring him a present back from up north—Louis kept himself busy.

Summers, the church hired Poppa extra to go around to big cities, while the minister from one of the cities came to Crisfield, to rest up. This was the third year of the project. Reverend Jefferson, the minister who had come to Crisfield for the last two summers, had gotten sick, so he was retiring back to Chicago where his people were. He stayed with the Dutleys, whose children were all grown and out of the house. Mr. Jefferson had a room there when he came south to rest up. But the new minister had a wife and three children. The church was renting him a house outside of town, on the edge of the Beerce property. The house was small, but it would make a big change from the city. It had room for the children to run around outside and a little beach just up the way, on a creek. Momma and some of the women got it cleaned up and cleared out of the wildlife that moved in during the years it was empty. They rounded up a refrigerator and some decent mattresses. The new minister had a church in New York which was the biggest and baddest place to work. So he'd appreciate the peace and tranquility of the country, Momma said.

Poppa said he liked his two-week stint in New York least of any of the cities he visited. He liked Richmond best, and he didn't mind Birmingham either. He kept wishing, every year, that they'd send him to New Orleans, but Momma said she thought New York might be bad, but New Orleans was Sodom and Gomorrah all rolled up into one, and she'd just as soon be steered clear of that place.

Momma missed Poppa when he was away all summer long. They all did. He called up o

Sunday afternoons. He wrote letters and postcards. He even got one or two weekends home when he was close enough by. But it wasn't the same as having him there. Poppa minded but he went on and did it. "It's not forever," he told them. "It's part of the work. And the men—they've earned a couple of tranquil months. We're all doing the same work, aren't we?"

"Things are different up north," Momma would back Poppa up. "Things are different down south. You children—you don't know how easy your father makes it for you."

"I wouldn't mind finding out," Belle said.

"You will, and soon enough," Momma answered. "For the time being, I advise you to count your blessings."

Belle looked around and studied everything she could see. She held up her hand as if to count on her fingers, but said there wasn't one thing she thought of to count.

Momma just laughed.

"I wish *I* was the one going away to camp for the summer," Belle said.

"So do I, honey." Momma laughed again. "So do I."

"That's not funny," Belle said, her voice going high and offended.

It was too funny, and Mina laughed out loud over it. Catch her being thirteen like that, she thought, as Belle stormed out of the room.

CHAPTER 3

From the first, Mina loved her room at camp, room 226, halfway down the long corridor. It had two beds, two windows, two dressers, two desks, and one closet which she shared with her roommate, Isadora. The beds were covered with brightly striped fabric, and the curtains matched the bedspreads. The windows looked out through the leafy branches of trees to the green quadrangle at the center of the college. Although the room was only on the second floor, there was always a breeze to keep it comfortable, because the college had been built along the ridge of the hills that bordered the broad river.

They stayed on the campus for the whole eight weeks, except for one trip into the city of New Haven, to see a performance of *Swan Lake* at Yale University. Some of the girls, especially the older ones, complained that they felt cooped up, imprisoned, but Mina never did, not for a minute.

There were seventy people living in the dormitory, and all of them were dancers. There were four dance classes, divided by age, with sixteen girls in each class. There were three dance instructors and three assistants who were taking the master classes as well as keeping an eye on the younger students. They all lived together and ate together and worked together. Music and dance, dance and music—that was what they did, all day long. They had a dance class every morning and a music class every afternoon, taught by a professor from the college. In the evenings, there was almost always something planned, either observing one of the master classes or listening to a concert given in the small college theater or watching a movie of a ballet or symphony. Sunday mornings they went to the nondenominational chapel, whose bells rang out over the quadrangle and dormitories to call people to worship. Mina sat among the dancers in an oak pew and learned a whole new set of hymns from the bound hymnals that were kept in a rack at the back of each pew with the bound prayer books. The sun shone through the stained glass windows, coloring the air with reds and greens and blues. Mina had never known how much she didn't know about dance and about music; she looked ahead at everything she didn't know, and was glad.

There was always a song rising in her heart, one they sang at the chapel on Sundays, when the collection was being taken. "Praise God," the song rose up inside her. "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." Mina felt like praising God and thanking Him about all day long.

The majority of the girls had studied longer and more seriously than Mina had and knew more. Isadora, her roommate, was sure she was destined to become a famous ballerina. "My mom says she had a feeling, even before I was born. All the time she was pregnant, she went to at least one ballet performance a week and kept music always playing in the apartment. She named me after Isadora Duncan. I've got dance in my blood."

Mina knew what it felt like to have dance in your blood. "Who's Isadora Duncan?" she

asked.

“You don’t know?” Isadora looked at her, as if everybody should know, as if Mina came from a different planet.

“Nope, never heard of her. Are you going to tell me?” Mina didn’t mind not knowing, she just minded not having her curiosity satisfied.

“Isadora Duncan was a great dancer, probably the greatest modern dancer. She’s like Martha Graham, Twyla Tharp . . .” Mina shook her head, she hadn’t heard of any of these people. She tucked the names away in her memory, to learn more about them. “Isadora Duncan was the first—she broke away from classical ballet and went back to the ancient Greeks. She wanted dance to be free from rules and things, anything artificial. She thought life shouldn’t have so many rules. She danced in draperies, in bare feet, like the Greeks. Her dances were free and strong. She died young, when the scarf she was wearing got caught in the wheel of a car. See, she always wore long, long scarves around her neck.” Isadora mimed wrapping a scarf around her neck, her long arms graceful. Mina could see what Isadora Duncan must have looked like. Mina was sitting on the floor by her bed, watching Isadora. “But her boyfriend had a convertible. The scarf got caught in the tire and—it just snapped her neck,” Isadora concluded. “It was a tragedy. She had lots of men all madly in love with her, all the time.”

“What would your mother have done if you’d been a boy?”

“Name me Isadore. There are male dancers.”

Mina laughed. “I know that.”

Charlie, short for Charlotte, who lived across the hall with Tansy, said that Isadora’s mother was typical, a typical stage mother. Charlie often said things like that, in a superior way, as if she knew more. She acted closer to sixteen than eleven, most of the time. “Typical pushy stage mother.”

“You don’t understand,” Isadora said. “I’m going to be a prima ballerina. It’s nothing to do with my mother, except she thinks I can, so she helps out. And all.”

“—and I should know,” Charlie continued, not paying any attention. “I’ve got one too. It’s pretty pitiful in a way—it’s because she wanted to be a singer. But she got married, instead. And had kids, instead. And keeps house, instead. And nags, nags us all.”

“Even your father?” Mina wondered.

“Especially Dad. Then she complains because Dad spends so much time out of town on business and nags him more.” Charlie shook her head, pitying the stupidity of her mother. Charlie had no intention of going on with ballet. She wanted to be in the movies. “I’m photogenic, and—there’s never the same kind of life in ballet, even if you’re a success, not like movies, when you’re a movie actress. Ballet teaches you how to move. An actress has to know how to . . . move right.”

Charlie’s roommate, Tansy, was a little plain girl, quiet and hard-working. Mina couldn’t imagine why the camp had put Tansy and Charlie into the same room. Tansy had even been homesick for the first week, even though she really wanted to come to dance camp.

“How can you be homesick?” Mina had asked, trying to comfort her. “Wouldn’t you rather be here?”

Charlie and Isadora had exchanged a look at that. Mina caught it, out of the corner of her eye. It was almost the kind of look kids give one another across the classroom, when they know something the teacher can’t begin to understand.

“Well, I would,” Mina said to the two of them. She didn’t know what they thought she knew that she didn’t. “Even though I miss my family too.”

“Your family’s different,” Charlie pointed out.

“I miss my dog.” Tansy snuffled.

Mina chuckled at that, and the chuckle spread out warm into a laugh. The laugh lighted up the whole dormitory room, even the farthest corners of it, and pretty soon everybody joined in, even Tansy, sitting up on the bed and blowing her nose into a tissue. She looked at Mina as if Mina was strange and wonderful.

The four of them were going to work together on the ten-minute performance that every dancer at the camp had to give for the final exercises. Their instructor, Miss Fiora Maddinton, had told them about it on the first day, after they each had an individual conference with her. In the conference, she had told each of the sixteen girls in her class what she had thought when she watched them during the audition or, in Mina’s case, when she had looked at the tape Miss LaValle had mailed up to New York. Miss LaValle had rented a video camera up in Cambridge and Mina had performed in front of it, the barre exercises and the dance they had worked out to part of the *Nutcracker Suite*. “You have strength,” Miss Maddinton said during her conference with Mina, “and a certain rude grace. Even on the tape your presence made itself felt. A dancer has to have presence. But,” she went on, when Mina opened her mouth to ask what the teacher meant, “you don’t have discipline. It’s discipline I will teach you. Natalie?” she called, indicating that the talk was over, summoning up the next girl. In the long working days, the hours of practice, Mina was learning what Miss Maddinton meant. Miss Maddinton seemed pleased with her. She was surely pleased with herself: She had never worked so hard and learned so much.

The performance, Miss Maddinton had told them, could be done in groups, or individually, but had to be prepared without any adult help of any kind. Even the instructors were going to take part in the final exercises, performing for ten minutes. A lot of the girls from the class had asked Mina if she wanted to work with them, but Isadora and Charlotte and Tansy had asked her first, and she would have preferred to dance with them anyway. They were going to do an original ballet, based on Narnia. The other three had decided that because Mina had never heard of Narnia.

“But those books have been on every reading list since I was in third grade,” Isadora said. “Aren’t they even on your summer reading list?”

“I don’t have a summer reading list.”

“Then outside reading.” But Mina didn’t have that either. “You mean, you don’t have to do book reports?”

“We do reports, sometimes, or projects,” Mina said, looking around at the other three. “For science, or social studies.”

“What wouldn’t I give not to have to do book reports.” Charlie sighed.

They all three lived in New York City and went to private schools, but different schools. Isadora’s rich father sent plenty of money for her and her mother to live on, whether Isadora had a stepfather or not. Tansy’s father was a special kind of dentist, called an orthodontist, and Charlie’s father worked in advertising. Their mothers didn’t have jobs and they had all been interested to hear that Mina’s mother did. About everything in their lives was different from Mina’s, and she loved hearing them talk about their lives.

“I wouldn’t mind book reports. I like reading,” Mina said.

Charlie dismissed that. “You just don’t know any better.”

“Anyway,” Isadora interrupted, “who has an idea for what we can do?”

Tansy did. Tansy really wanted not to dance, but to choreograph. She had an idea and it worked out. “If there are two of the children, a boy and a girl—I could be the boy because I’m so small and all—and Charlie would be the girl—and Isadora would dance Aslan, all in gold, and Mina would be a Tarkaan but she’d turn into Tash, in the middle—”

“How would she do that?” Isadora asked.

“By turning around, or maybe with a mask. I know I can think of a way,” Tansy said.

“Like in *Swan Lake*?” Mina asked. She had loved that moment when the magician swept his cape aside to reveal Odile, as if she had appeared by magic.

“Yes, or something like that. It would start out with the children on stage, being—happy or something—and then the Tarkaan would come in . . .” Tansy stood up from the floor of the practice room where they were working out their project and acted out the parts. “He’d try to be nice first and bribe them. Then he’d try to force them—”

“Force them to what?” Mina asked.

“To go with him, to be one of his people,” Isadora explained quickly. Then she said, “I’m sorry, Mina, I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

Mina hadn’t been offended. She didn’t think Isadora had snapped at her. She waited to hear the rest of Tansy’s idea.

“Then Aslan comes in and the Tarkaan seems to give up, but he turns into Tash and they have a fight over the children. Aslan wins and Tash—is defeated.”

Mina could almost see the dance Tansy was talking about. “That sounds really good,” she said. “Doesn’t it?” she asked the other two.

“What about me doing the Tarkaan, instead?” Charlie asked. “Miss Maddinton says I’m the most dramatic dancer.”

Tansy shook her head. “It wouldn’t be as good.”

“I know what you’re thinking,” Charlie argued.

“Don’t be stupid,” Isadora answered. “You’re dramatic but you don’t—Mina has the presence. Miss Maddinton told her that and she’s right.”

“Only because I’m taller than everybody else,” Mina said, trying to pretend she wasn’t

flattered. It wasn't just being tall, she knew, it was her personality too.

"But can you be bad?" Tansy asked her. "Really, really bad—Tarkaan is bad, but Tash is evil."

Mina stood up and turned her back to them. She thought: dark, evil, dangerous. She let that run all through her body, until she spun around to face them, tall and stiff; then slowly—to music playing *lento* in her head—she went through the five positions, feet and hands, thinking all the time of dark and of evil, and how the dark, evil thing would want to spread out and wrap itself around the three girls in the room. When she finished, she smiled at them.

"Oh, wow," Isadora said, clapping. "That was neat. See what I mean, Charlie?"

"Yeah. I guess so." But Charlie didn't sound convinced.

Tansy just looked at Mina, as if Mina was perfect. Mina knew she wasn't perfect, but she felt good. It was discipline that had enabled her to know exactly how to move through the positions, knowing where she wanted every muscle and every part of her body; she was learning discipline. "I think it'll be fun," she said.

"What music will we use?" Charlie asked.

"Something modern," Isadora suggested.

Mina had just begun to learn about music, and she kept her mouth shut. There wasn't anything she could add to this part of the planning.

"There's some Bartok," Tansy said. "Piano suites, kind of simple but not really."

"You're a walking music library," Charlie complained.

"My mom gives me anything I want."

They all knew that. They had all admired the stereo that was Tansy's own to bring to camp with her, and the stack of records. They all listened to Tansy's records. Mina listened more than anyone else except Tansy, because almost all of them were new to her; as if she had arrived in an unknown country with a wonderful geography, she was always ready to listen and hear something she'd never even heard of before dance camp.

"Mom says since I'm so mousy and all that, I'd better cultivate my brain—"

"Why do they all want us to get married?" Charlie cried out. "It's not as if they were having such a good time."

"It's crazy," Isadora agreed.

"My mother's having a good time," Tansy said. "I think. She's always going out to do something interesting, getting dressed up, you know, a show or an exhibit, meeting interesting people, artists and things, having fancy dinners."

"Who keeps your house?" Isadora asked.

"The housekeeper," Tansy told them.

That struck them as funny.

"Mrs. Welker," Tansy said. "Who keeps yours, Mina? When your mother's working?"

"We all do," Mina said. "You know, we have chores."

"Even your father?"

“Sure.”

“Boy, if my mother tried to make my father do laundry,” Charlie said, “or vacuum—the would be a fight that would take two weeks to blow over. We’d all starve to death in our rooms before it was safe to come down. But Dad’s in advertising, and there’s a lot of pressure in that. I guess your father doesn’t have that kind of pressure, does he?”

Mina didn’t know. “We quarrel,” she said. Everybody quarreled, it was human nature, and she hoped Charlie didn’t feel embarrassed because her parents had fights.

Isadora’s mother had been married and divorced, twice each. “Don’t I know about quarrels,” she said. “I’d rather think about this performance.”

“I wondered,” Tansy suggested in a particularly quiet voice. Mina sat up to pay closer attention. She’d learned that when Tansy used that voice, it was because what she was going to say really mattered to her. Tansy looked at Mina. “If Mozart could work, for Aslan’s music.”

“Mozart and Bartok together?” Charlie laughed.

Mina had heard some Mozart. His name often came up in the music class. She wondered if Mozart was the kind of music you could dance to, though. She didn’t say anything and nobody asked her opinion. They talked on about which of Mozart’s pieces they should listen to.

“I think we ought to at least try. Whatever else, Tansy really does know what she’s talking about when she talks music,” Isadora finally said. “If it works, we’ll be the most original bet.”

CHAPTER 4

Mina lifted her right leg onto the barre, toes pointed, and stretched her arms toward the mirror. Watching herself in the mirror, she bent her neck so that it would follow perfectly the curve of her back and arms made. Then she looked back beyond herself in the mirror, seeing the whole class, all performing the same exercise, reflected back and forth in the mirrors that lined the two long walls of the room. “Praise God,” the song sang inside her, over the notes of the piano.

This was a real dance studio, as different from Miss LaValle’s garage as—she didn’t know anything perfect enough to compare the differences. Even though from the first minute she had stepped into it, she had felt at home, she never lost the feeling of wonder at how right the studio was. It had two narrow walls of tall windows and two long walls of mirrors that went from ceiling to floor. The upright piano filled the room with its waltz tempo for the barre exercises, as Miss Maddinton went up and down the line, correcting. “That’s good, Mina,” she said.

The floor was polished wood and the air was filled with light. The music went into Mina’s body, and she brought her leg down in time with it, then lifted her left leg. All along the walls, mirrored back and front, fifteen girls did the same. In the mirror, thirty-two arms stretched out. Mina let a smile spread over her face.

It was coming close to the end of camp, with only a few days left before their performance. They named their dance “Narnia” and they were assigned to this same big studio for the rehearsals because they were a group so they needed more space. These days, the four of them came back every afternoon to rehearse. Mina could see why the instructors were making them work entirely without guidance, and she preferred it that way; but she wished she could hear what Miss Maddinton thought, before the performance. Mina had been careful to listen to what Tansy said when she tried to explain how things should be danced, but she thought Miss Maddinton would have some good advice. It wasn’t that Mina was worried about their dance. She knew it was wonderful. She just thought she wanted it to be absolutely perfect. Miss Maddinton might catch something they’d missed.

Charlie called Miss Maddinton the “White Witch,” from the Narnia books, but Mina didn’t see why. It wasn’t as if Miss Maddinton wore only white, or had white hair, or anything like that. Her hair was dark, inky black—dyed, Charlie said—and long. She wore grays or silver blues or silvery pinks, her leotard, tights, and wraparound skirt all the same color. She was a professional dancer who only taught during the summer, only at this camp. Most of the year she was with a ballet company in New York.

Over the summer, Mina had written to her mother about everybody at camp, and what they were all doing. Miss Maddinton had occupied a lot of letter space, because she was a re-

dancer, a professional. Miss LaValle, Mina's teacher at home, had studied dance, but she was only a teacher who gave lessons in her converted garage-studio, with a record player for music. Miss LaValle was built like Miss Maddinton, both of them tall, narrow women with muscular legs, but she was older, and she wore her leotard as if it was a uniform, and it was always a plain black uniform too. Miss LaValle had taught Mina well, Mina could tell that. She liked Miss LaValle and was grateful to her. But Miss Maddinton, Miss Fiona Maddinton—she was a real ballerina. Mina wondered what Miss Maddinton would do for her own ten-minute performance, on the night. Because it got so there wasn't anything happening to write to her mother about, Mina sometimes just wrote down her guesswork about things like that: what Miss Maddinton would do, or whether Charlie's father would lose his job because he lost a big account. Her mother wrote back the news from home, that Zandor got a fifty-cent-an-hour raise and had a new girlfriend, that Belle was bored (and boring, Mina's mother added), messages from Mina's father and from Louis, and her own opinions about the summer minister's sermons and his family. It sounded like Mina's mother liked the minister fine, but wasn't sure about his wife. "We don't see much of her," Momma wrote.

Mina had started off writing to Kat, just silly things, and Kat had written back, but after a couple of weeks that had tapered off. Kat couldn't possibly understand how wonderful it was. Mina couldn't have explained, for instance, how much she liked learning about music, its history, the names of composers, and listening to their different music, the different forms of music could be written in. Mr. Tattodine, who liked Mina because she asked so many questions, had white hair that flopped over his forehead, and a way—when the class was listening to a record—of getting entirely engrossed in the music, until his face looked half-asleep and his hand would come up to mark the beat, as if he was conducting the piece.

It was Mr. Tattodine who had given Tansy the idea for where to find the right Mozart music for Aslan. Tansy had been trying movements from symphonies and string quartets, but nothing worked. Nothing made a dance. During the classes on opera, when he was talking about Mozart's life and the reasons that people thought he was a genius, Mr. Tattodine had mentioned *The Magic Flute*. "It was considered at the time that he had written a low piece of work, a popular effort, written for money. Well, he did need money, he always needed money. But it is now taken as one of his richest works, musically speaking," Mr. Tattodine said. Then he smiled at them and said, "I'm sorry, I'm lecturing at you again, I keep forgetting. Let's have a question. Who can define the differences between opera and ballet? The musical differences, that is, because many operas—like *The Magic Flute*—do include dance." Tansy nudged Mina then.

Mina knew four of the seven differences that were given and realized once again how glad she was to be at camp. Mr. Tattodine said the way she learned she was like a sponge or a vacuum cleaner; "But not in the bad sense," he said. Mina wasn't worried about bad or good senses; she knew she could remember almost everything she was told, and she learned that she could hear not only musical phrases and forms, not only harmony and counterpoint, but also the several individual instruments that played together. She loved the whole range

strings, the variety of percussions, the winds and the reeds. Mr. Tattodine had them to playing every instrument, just to get sound out of it. Mina's favorites were the reeds, because to play them you needed to hold the reed properly in your mouth and blow through it properly, which took discipline; but it was also a matter of your breath going through the wooden tube. The reeds seemed the most complicated and natural.

The brasses were her next favorite. When she had the French horn in her hands, in class she got a long clear note out of it, without any trouble, a round winding sound that made you sit up at attention and called out to you. "I've just got a lot of hot air," Mina said laughing and passed the horn to Isadora. "That's why I'm not having any trouble with it."

Once Tansy had listened to *The Magic Flute* and found passages of music that she wanted to do, passages that would be like counterpoint to Tarkaan's Bartok, they moved ahead with their dance. It took work, hours of practicing to get the steps right, to get each individual performance right, to get everything put together right so that the dance worked the way Tansy wanted it to. But hours of work were no trouble. Charlie and Isadora complained sometimes, but Mina never even felt like it.

"What are you, some goody-goody?" Charlie demanded during their second-to-last rehearsal.

"It's because her daddy's a minister," Isadora, stretched out on the floor beside Charlie said. Tansy had been called out to the phone, which was odd because parents usually called during the hour the girls had free before lights out. Mina was trying to get Charlie to go over the part where Tarkaan was trying to win over the human girl. Charlie didn't see the point in doing it without having Tansy there to watch, because they'd just have to do it all over again for Tansy.

"I think she's just stronger than we are," Charlie said. "You don't get as tired, Mina; you can't argue that."

Mina didn't know what it was, except she liked what she was doing so much that she never got tired doing it. She decided to listen to the Bartok again.

Mr. Tattodine had explained to her the way the rhythm worked and the reasons for the notes being what they were and the different scale Bartok was using. She didn't really understand, but she could hear the dance in the music now. Mr. Tattodine was an immigrant, from Hungary, which was Bartok's homeland. He said maybe that was why the music made sense to him. Mina listened to the fragmented chords of the Bartok, standing still but feeling as if her body was moving to the dance.

Tansy came back through the big door at the end of the room. She looked serious. "Everything okay?" Isadora asked.

"My grandfather died."

"Oh. That's too bad," Isadora said.

"Were you close?" Charlie asked.

Tansy shook her head. "I've barely seen him since he went into the nursing home."

"Was he sick?" Mina asked.

“Maybe we ought to stop the rehearsal,” Charlie suggested.

“The performance is the day after tomorrow,” Tansy said. “We don’t have enough time for it. I’m sort of sad, but it’s not as if . . . He wasn’t sick, he just got too old to take care of himself, so he went into a home.”

Charlie and Isadora started telling stories about old relatives of their parents who had gone into nursing homes, or retired to places where there were a lot of old people gathered together. Mina didn’t say anything, because her one living set of grandparents lived with her mother’s brother in Georgia, and the grandparents who had died when she was still a baby had lived just around the corner. She thought of Miz Hunter, but didn’t mention her either. After a while, Tansy said it was time to get back to work, “If that’s okay?”

They were the last of the youngest class to give their performance. By the time they moved onstage, Mina had been so nervous for so long she was too tired to be tense. Mr. Tattodir played the tape they had put together. Mina listened to the first bars of music and watched the curtain draw apart. She wore her black leotard and a mask over her eyes, a black Halloween mask that she had edged with red and gold glitter. Isadora, with her long hair loose, like Aslan’s golden mane, wore a golden leotard and tights; Charlie wore white, with a skirt wrapped around it, and Tansy wore green. The other three had to buy new leotards, but Mina just had to buy the mask, which was lucky. Tansy had thought everything out. Mina’s part required angular steps and positions, while Isadora, as Aslan, moved in arcs and circles. Isadora never came into Mina’s part of the stage, until the end; Mina sometimes moved a little into Isadora’s part, like the tip of a triangle, but she danced out quickly. The two children in Narnia went back and forth.

When Mina changed into Tash himself, all she did was take the mask off. They had painted her eyebrows dark and her mouth red and larger than it was. The music’s sharp lines of melody, broken off, matched her steps. As Tansy had explained it to them, Tash made triangles and Aslan circles. All the dancing showed that, just as the music clashed and couldn’t ever be made to play together. So Isadora moved in circles, leaping, turning golden, while Mina moved dark and strong and cruel to the points of triangles. At the end Aslan’s circles wound all around Tash, and he was driven from the stage. Then the two children and Aslan danced together, to Mozart.

When they took their bows at the end, everybody in the audience stood up to clap. They held hands and bowed and bowed, still breathing heavily, smiling at one another and at the audience. At the reception afterward, punch and cookies served in the dormitory living room, just about everybody in the camp came up to tell Mina what a good job she’d done.

“Thanks.” She smiled. She couldn’t stop smiling. She wished—that they hadn’t performed yet and that it was something she could do again, right away.

Miss Maddinton came up, with another instructor, while Mina was getting another cup of punch. “It was very good, Mina,” Miss Maddinton said. “You’ve learned a lot this summer, haven’t you?”

“Yes.” Mina knew she had.

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