

# DIVINE STRANGERS

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Epic Moon Ink

**For Cameron, Errett, Gabriel, and Beau**

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## Journal Entry 1 - Hatching a Plan

“Check, check, double check, triple gazillion check ... I’m ready!”

“Don’t get sassy, Miss. I’ve been waiting a long time for this,” Mom murmured, the needle and thread still dangling from her lips as she tugged my zipper. “How do you like the dress?”

“It’s itchy.” I twitched.

“Beauty is uncomfortable,” she advised with a wink.

I settled down for the moment and watched her pull several more dresses from the trunk. *How many did she make?* “Well, let the masquerade begin, as long as I get to go to town tonight. I can’t take another second of this captivity!”

Mom brushed my damp hair while I fidgeted in my shoes. They felt weird. “Can’t you wait till tomorrow? I really want to see if these fit. I could fix your hair.”

I glanced out the window with a giant pout. “Mom ...”

Dad came to my rescue. “Let her go, Elaina. Sixteen years is long enough to be cooped-up.” I ran and threw my arms around him—first hug. Dad reminded me of our only but all-encompassing rule, “Just don’t do anything to make your mother cry.”

Mom sighed with defeat and gently packed away the gargantuan pile of dresses, tucking her blonde hair behind her ears.

“Thank you. I love you guys,” I squeaked and bolted out onto the balcony with my hair still in knots. I had a plan. First, I wasn’t going to get too attached to anybody—I’m a stranger, I’m a danger (I even had a motto). Second, I was going to find a niche and blend right in. I was going to be like a speckled grouse on the prairie, dull and difficult to find. And finally, I was going to handle things on my own—rely on me, myself, and I.

My eyes stung as they adjusted to the bright world. I acclimated with the river below, snaking through the canyon. *North, East, South, West ... altitude 900 feet above sea level.* I felt like an eager Rapunzel, yearning from the turret of her castle to explore a magical kingdom. Endless blue sky was unbelievably provoking. I was inspired by the ingenuity of trees and the millions of voices singing from them, and the invigorating way breezes tickled my new damp skin. My joy was not of the peaceful variety. No, it was an urgent, fiery delight that drew my heart to the fore of my chest, hungry for adventure.

“I’m worried about her,” Mom fussed at Dad behind the glass door.

“And what did you do on your first day, Elaina? You ransacked the woods. I still remember,” Dad teased her. “She’s ready.”

“It’s not the same. I had you.”

“It’s better, she has us. Besides, we thought we’d never see this day, so don’t try to predict the future,” Dad comforted her.

I was already gone, speeding the two blocks downhill on Nightfall Road into my new world. Although many generations of us have been born amongst the caves, the river gorge, the peaks and hollows, always returning again and again to the same tiny area to build a nest and raise a family—*my* time was unique. I wasn’t going to waste a moment of it!

Our home was perched on the side of a giant river bluff, towering above a quaint, little town in the river valley, comprised of two blocks of historic, appealing storefronts and a dozen or so streets with picket-fenced cottages betwixt stately manors. The town was like an anthill in the shadow of a pumpkin patch; tall peaks hovered on every side, and the Mighty Mississippi River fed its heart like a vine. Boulder-sized chips of golden sandstone littered the shoulders of the constricted blacktop into town, where a sign warned: *Falling Rock*.

At the bottom of our hill, I rushed past a high-steepled church and started investigating immediately. The few dignified brick buildings housed souvenir shops, a diner, a dance studio, and several antique stores. Most of the houses had weathered *For Sale* signs at the edge of their walks. I liked it. It was going to be easy to slip into this secluded story land. In a small cobblestone lot, encircled by rain trees, I stood face to face with an aged, green-bronze statue of a giant with open wings.

#### General Clark and the Legend of the Firebird:

When Missouri was rugged, untamed, and unexplored, sightings of giant, winged beasts besieged the early pioneers with panic. In 1812, twenty settlers vanished. Tales of sky-monsters spread like wildfire. General George Clark, of the well-populated St. Louis region to the south, thought the rumors a laughingstock. He responded to urgent requests for military backup by sending only a small troop to evacuate women and children. To his dismay, the sixteen-foot-tall fort in the valley was completely abandoned. After seeing the “fear in their eyes,” Clark himself led the expedition to hunt these fantastical creatures, but came up empty-handed; no sighting of a “Firebird” was ever officially

documented. In Clark's honor, the township of Clarksville, Missouri was officially founded in 1817.

I snooped along a downtown sidewalk, peeking in the picturesque shop windows until sparkling glass, twinkling in the afternoon sunlight, caught my eye. The shop was closed, so I peered through the storefront at the lovely trinkets—glass wings of all different colors strung on ribbons of gold. Was this my ironic welcome?

I didn't have time to dwell on it. Someone was coming; a man and a boy. I froze. They passed without a suspicious glance. I watched them wander away, oblivious, toward the Sky Ride, a trolley of ski-lift style chairs floating up and down the lofty peak to an amusement park on the north side of the hill. Relief washed over me.

After a few cautious moments, a delicious aroma reached out and snatched my attention. Following my nose to Finch and Son Diner, I stole a quick glance through that window, but had no interest in encountering noisy, old men drinking coffee.

In my haste to cross the road, I accidentally stepped right in front of a car! “: (\)<| :” I let out a few faint, anxious chirps and jumped back on the sidewalk. *I hope Mom didn't hear that.*

Fatefully, from that same car, a girl with short, brown hair popped out and waved to the driver before running into a building across the street. She seemed about my age ... fuel for my curiosity and reckless scheming. Of course, I was pushing too hard. I should have reminded myself to take my time, but excitement consumed me as I pictured my *normal* life.

Ducking back into an alley, I spied as the car drove away. Over the next few moments, more girls were dropped off, all of them going to the same place. I was positive I had found exactly the kind of niche I could fit into. I deliberately approached Nightfall Dance Studio.

It was a rush to push open the door. A woman greeted me with a bright smile as soon as I crossed the threshold, “Hello! How are you today?” She waited patiently as I inspected the trophies and framed photos of her in fancy costumes, surrounded by smiling girls.

I spun around and introduced myself bravely, “My name is Ever Robins. I would like to learn to dance.”

“Great! Dancers call me Miss Shelley. So, you're a beginner? How old are you? What style did you want to learn?” She rattled off too many questions. I was distracted by the huge mirror.

I answered, but I sounded unsure, “I'm sixteen?”

“Age is a good thing to forget. My goodness you’re tall, nice for a kick-line.” She followed me as I stepped up on the dance floor, at this point completely absorbed with my reflection. I stared into my own sandy brown eyes and opened my full, almost puffy lips to reveal straight, white teeth. I lifted my chin and admired my long neck, lifting my hand to caress my collar bone. My fingers made graceful curves as I stretched them one by one. I twisted my wrists several times, inspecting their mechanics and taking in the full view of my long, lean shape. I tensed muscles and felt proud ownership of my strong body. I was pleased with my likeness for a mere flash because I didn’t know any better. I had not yet inspected the dancers surrounding me on all sides.

Our contrast knocked me down a peg. They were delicate, streamlined, graceful girls wrapped up in black dance leotards, beige tights and pink satin shoes, hair tightly bound, eyes lined in black and lips painted in various shades of pink and red, like sculptures. Immediately, I was unsure of my appearance, wild and messy, standing a full head taller than most of these teenagers, with my honey-streaked hair in unruly twists, and wearing the bright, red dress my mother made for me. Mortified, I realized I was standing alone in the middle of the dance floor making an awkward spectacle of myself!

“I’ve got beginner jazz classes on Monday, you could start next week.” The dance teacher continued to gloss the situation, but I burned with embarrassment about my awkward behavior.

“Can I try today?” I stubbornly prayed for a chance to redeem myself. I didn’t want to surrender to being a reject ballerina.

“Yes! You are more than welcome, but this is an advanced ballet class, so just follow what you can and don’t worry about the rest. I really break it down in the Monday class.”

I searched the faces in the room ... most were looking up at me, fighting snickers because I had been playing in the mirror ... some seemed annoyed, maybe that I was delaying class, but ... *thank goodness* ... the girl with short, brown hair was smiling warmly. I stood next to her.

The music was lovely, and the exercises were effortless. There was only one mistake on my part. Evidently, pointe shoes are made for standing on tiptoe. The girls balanced on their shoes, but when I rose up and balanced on bare toes, everyone caught it. A few mouths popped open. I dropped down immediately.

“Didn’t that hurt?” the warm-smile girl whispered. I chose not to answer, but no, of course not. Stretching my muscles felt wonderful after all that time cramped up. Moving in time with the

music was enthralling. Everything in my cluttered mind settled. My only frustration was how quickly the class ended. Ballerinas applauded the teacher gently as she dismissed class.

Dance had lifted my heart. I could learn to watch where I was going when crossing the street, tone down my just-blew-into-town look, and fit right into this refurbished town. I was definitely ready! I was back to feeling confident and maybe a bit too superior.

After dance class ended, Miss Shelley shoved papers into my hands and a free dance bag. “I thought you did great! Normally girls of your stature have trouble with coordination, but you have nice control and impressive flexibility. I hope you like it here, Ever. Here’s all the class information so your parents can stop by and officially sign you up.”

“Thank you.” I threw the bag over my shoulder, slipped on my shoes, and hurried outside. A hint of color remained around the dim lamps on each street corner and under the warm, glowing store windows. I couldn’t see the river anymore, only a silvery reflection rippling on the surface. The bright, full moon was dazzling. I waited in the dark shadows under the awning of a closed gift shop, not wanting any of the ballerinas to see me nosing around as they departed to a line of blinding headlights. My plan was to walk home slowly, to postpone the day’s end, so I lingered in the shadows until the last car pulled away.

I stole a quick glance across the street into the diner and discovered with shock that I was being watched ... I was absolutely past the fear of eye contact, no I wasn’t the least bit afraid. I was thrilled to be of interest to the young man gazing in my direction—another encounter to improve my skills. His black hair was tucked under the narrow, white hat of his crisp uniform. He had a square jaw, thin lips, straight brow, piercing dark eyes, and he was tall like me. It was only a split second before a charming smile flashed across his face, and then he returned to cooking.

As the moment faded, I decided that it was more likely he would have seen his own reflection in the glass, as I was surely hidden against the dark bricks. I noted, with curious amusement, the interaction that he had with the customers. He flipped a pan behind his back and cheerfully winked at a lady. His eyes flickered up a few times during the passing moments as I hid in the shadows, but a wild desire was intensifying to step into the light.

Surprised by soft footfalls approaching my back, I overreacted and spun around to protect myself. She laughed at me, a boisterous chortle for such a tiny person. “Sorry, didn’t mean to sneak up on you. Did you want to get something to eat?” asked the dancer.

I dropped my defensive stance instantly and nodded back to her with an apologetic face, hoping that I hadn't scared her. I admit, the aroma from the diner was calling to me, but most of the excitement I felt was for the chance to further study the cook ... as if he were an experiment and I were capable of methodically observing man's behavior. Strictly immersing myself in the role, I convinced myself in the split second it took me to agree and follow her.

"I usually wait for my boyfriend, Ian, over at Finch's. He picks me up after jam time with the guys. I'm Beth. Did you say your name was Ever?" She snapped up her sleek dance studio jacket and lugged a giant, pink purse and oversized dance bag across the street.

I nodded again in front of the diner door.

"That's cool. Where did you dance before?"

"I ... no ... never." I sounded stupid.

"Well, you are definitely a natural!" she laughed unaffected, "I've never seen anyone catch on that fast! And that trick you did on your toes ... Wow!"

A bell tinkled above my head as Beth shoved the door. The bewitching boy rang out a greeting right away, "Hello, Beth." He knew her. They were friends. We slid into a booth. I continued to study him from the corner of my eye.

He sang a phrase with the song I hadn't even noticed playing, "Oh, we're halfway there," and flipped potatoes on the grill.

A man at the counter sang a line, "take my hand, we'll make it I swear."

As soon as I was confident that it was safe to observe him outright, because he was in the midst of a musical act with the whole front counter, a huge disarming smile stretched across his face, and he spun around suddenly, catching me. Too mesmerized to look away, I blushed as he danced and sang to our table, "Whoaaaah, Livin' on a Prayer."

Beth introduced us. "Ever, meet David and Kristen." *Who?* I hadn't even noticed the little dinette at his side.

"What's up?" His mellow voice was charming, but his words were confusing. My eyes flicked to the ceiling and back to his calm face. He laughed coolly and continued to loosely move to the music.

The front counter continued to sing backup, "wah oo wah oo wah oo oo oo."



I had over-estimated my ability to handle attention, or to contain my nerves as his broad shoulders puffed in a show like a bird of paradise. He was intimidating, to say the least. Our eyes met and I felt ... I felt captivated.

"I'm new." My answer fell short. *What was I doing?* I looked down in shame.

Kristen interrupted, "What can I get you?"

Beth quickly ordered, "House salad and water, please."

I felt panic and anxiously listened to Beth for coaching. She handed me her menu. I couldn't focus. "I don't know," I mumbled pitifully.

"Let me fix you my special." David winked. My whole body shuddered.

Kristen questioned me again, "Anything to drink?"

I pointed at a container of orange juice, and Kristen shrugged while pouring me a glass. I could tell she knew something was wrong with me.

"Is somebody coming to pick you up?" Beth watched a car park outside. I shook my head.

David's eyes hardly left me as he cooked with spectacular rhythm. "So, new as in—new in town?"

"Yes, the house on the hill with the wrap around balcony, Fourth and Nightfall, big vegetable garden," I answered too eagerly and long this time.

"Ah ... You do talk," Beth sweetly teased. I breathed, embarrassed.

"Robins' place?" He knew my name.

"Ah, what happened to Mr. Robins? Are you going to keep the vegie stand open?" Beth asked.

"He's my dad. I am Ever Robins." I quietly introduced myself, but it echoed in my head like a significant moment.

"Ever ..." The cook thought it over. "Awesome. Thanks for comin' in tonight." His polished coolness was shaking my facade. I felt a strange flutter in my spine. David was clever, his intense eyes cut right through me and felt like a test. "So did you help grow these potatoes?" He made me worry that he was searching for holes in my camouflage, or maybe he was just being friendly ... I cowered in my seat and shook my head.

"You're lucky I found you. Don't want the wrong chicks to snatch you up first!" Beth said.

"New blood's serious in a small town," David agreed.

Beth was blabbing along, "I never knew the Robins had any kids. Where've you been?"

"Mrs. Robins your stepmom?" David asked, continuing to pay too much attention to me.

“No,” I answered while internally scolding myself. *I should have gone straight home after dance, I should have called it a good day and quit.* I sat with my hot face in my hands and envied how easily they interacted with one another.

“Boarding school?” Kristen asked.

“A performing arts school, right?” Beth tried to pull information from me. I shrugged sheepishly, clammed up, and just kept sipping orange juice while they drew their own conclusions.

“I bet she had to wear those creepy plaid skirts and long socks.” Kristen elbowed David.

“Hot,” David replied.

Kristen put the food on the table, uninterested in whatever David saw in me. “House salad for you and French toast for the mysterious stranger.” She rolled her eyes.

I took a bite—I took a bite and laughed with joy. Nothing else mattered. Want to see a monster? Get between me and that plate! I ate every bite and nearly licked the dish clean.

“Good food fast keeps ’em coming back!” David announced while Kristen took my empty plate. I left money on the table and stood to leave.

“So, are you going to go to school here now, too?” Beth asked.

“I sign up for classes at Fort Valley High School tomorrow morning, I’ll be a junior.” I was thankful to know at least one answer.

“Meet me in the morning. I’ll totally make sure you get a good schedule,” Beth said.

“You go there, too?”

“We don’t have private schools around here,” David explained. “You’re in the wilderness now, sweetheart!”

“I’ll see you in the morning,” I promised Beth and backed out, refusing to meet David’s eyes as they followed me to the door. The retreat back to our home on the steep hillside was no victory lap, but my head was cleared with fresh night air. As expected, Mom and Dad were waiting on the balcony, anxious to hear every detail of my adventure.

“How’d it go?” My dad, Michael Robins, was the Protector in the family. He took his job seriously. He watched over Mom and me like a hawk. I have to give him credit though, he wanted me to get out and spread my wings a little.

My Mom, Elaina Robins, is a Comforter with a warm heart, inviting home, and hot meal ... exactly the type of gracious and selfless mother that I didn’t want to disappoint. Her advice was

always from the heart, but I just wanted to find out some things for myself. After all, everything had changed so drastically since my parents were my age. The culture was completely different, and this was *my* time.

I was sincerely eager to dive right in and make them proud. They had spent sixteen years preparing me for this moment, and now they wanted a report. I handed over the dance registration forms. Dad looked pleased as he shared them with Mom. “That’s my girl.”

I told them about the dance studio, my first friend Beth, and all the other pretty little dancers. I described the amazing food at the diner. They were both really impressed with me. Some of Mom’s anxiety was squelched. I edited out the part about the cook, David. I didn’t want Mom to worry, and I knew she would, as many times as she had complained about how there weren’t any good families left.

We spent the evening discussing the little shops in town and how they actually used the Legend of the Firebird to draw tourists. No one believed that giant mutants with wings infested these knobs and lived in the caves along both sides of the Mississippi River, or else there would have been warnings posted. “The Meek don’t believe any of it,” Dad assured me.

“I blended right in.”

“Course you did ... wouldn’t let you visit the Meek if they could really see you,” he said.

“But they know ... their shops are full of wings, and there’s the statue in the park.”

“They don’t believe their own history. They think it’s a hoax or scary fairytale,” Mom chirped. “South of here, just across the river, there’s a painting on the cliff. I need to show you your grandmother’s endless writings on the subject of birds that devour men. The original rock carving was authenticated by Pierre-somebody when he explored the river in the year sixteen-seventy-something for France. The painting doesn’t impress as credible, thank goodness. It looks like different animals mixed together. Picture this ... body of a tiger, face of a dragon, antlers of an elk, scales of a fish, teeth of a bear and a tail that wraps around its whole body. The only things birdlike are the wings and maybe talons, but it has four legs. So it’s not convincing at all.” Mom was off on a tangent and ready to pull out all the journals when Dad cut her off.

“Ever has another big day tomorrow, Elaina! Maybe she would like to see those another time.”

“I didn’t mean tonight, Mike!”

“Let’s see what you think of your new room.” Dad motioned toward the stairs. They followed me down. They had been busy! It was perfect.

“I love it, thank you.” The dresser had a glass top, preserving pressed, purple flowers, fern leaves, and long blades of golden grass, and the drawer handles were made of thick vines. I had one large window seat that opened onto a porch. The bed posts were made of large willow branches that appeared to grow right out of the wood plank floor.

“Glad you like it,” Mom gushed as she and Dad closed my door.

“Goodnight, Ever.”

I dove in, pulling mossy green and lavender blankets with satin edges around my shoulders. I felt loved. I flipped off the lamp and drifted off to peaceful sleep.

## Journal Entry 2 – Captivated

Nothing prepared me for the confusion and mayhem that was high school. As promised, Beth met me right off the school bus and helped me line up my classes or I wouldn't have survived it. First hour was Ag, short for Agriculture Science—she said there were a lot of field trips. Second hour was drama. She insisted on that class, as well, followed by English, Algebra, Biology, Spanish, and American Government.

Beth paraded me all over school. At the sound of a bell, chaos ensued. I didn't dare leave her side. The swarm, all too familiar with its own, was extremely interested in my arrival. I chose to play shy in case I fell into a situation that I didn't know how to handle or got lost.

Finally, it was time for our first class. I sat alone at an Ag desk for two, digging in my book bag for a pencil and found lip gloss Mom packed for me. I wondered if it was necessary to imitate the ballerinas and their painted lips. It was the poorest excuse for a disguise. *She wears lipstick. She must be one of us!*

Beth sat across the aisle with her boyfriend, Ian, whom she introduced before class. "Ever and I dance together now."

I whispered, "Miss Shelley's going to put me in a beginner class."

"No way, she's really good," she insisted to Ian.

Ian nodded his head and drummed on a book while adding in, "Rock on."

The world seemed to spin faster when David Finch walked through the door with several girls gathered behind him, an entire giggling fan club. Furthermore, every girl besides Beth snapped to attention when he entered the room, including myself. I was just trying to fit in, of course. With defeat, I quickly dabbed on a tiny bit of lip gloss and tried to act busy testing my pencil, wondering if he even remembered our friendly exchange last night. The memory seemed insignificant as he chitchatted with all of his girlfriends.

It would be smart to leave a wide path between myself and an attention-magnet like David. I didn't want attention from his gaggle of groupies either, but he began to look my way. I could feel his stare dissect me, fraying my nerves to pieces.

He drifted closer to me, and at first I pretended not to notice, until he cleared his throat and nodded toward the empty chair at my desk as he charmingly asked, "May I?" My face granted

impulsive permission without even considering another option. Sparks of excitement ran through me when he smoothly slid into the chair and nodded. “Cool,” he said.

I hadn’t learned anything from the nerve-wracking night before. Nope, I was puffed with pride as David sat beside me, beaming because of the attention he was paying me. It wasn’t even a second later when the female faces in the room held me in contempt, except Beth, bless her.

As his admirers dispersed, I worried about the first two of my objectives. Regarding the first one, how attached was too attached? As for the second, was sitting next to the coolest boy in school attracting attention or diverting it?

“Jenny, you do your math?” David asked the girl in front of us. She quickly whipped around, glad for his question. Her curly, short hair bounced around her flushed face.

“No, fell asleep.” She scooted closer to him, leaning her chest over our table, planning to involve him in a long conversation. “I got this new video game ...”

“This is my friend, Ever.”

She grinned at me, only to please him, I was sure, because her eyes darted back to him and her shoulders stiffened. “Oh, hey.” She seemed surprised that he knew my name. She chatted on, trying to ignore it. “This is Airon Lark. He’s a senior.” She wrinkled her nose toward her desk partner. “He doesn’t talk much.”

“Hi,” I suddenly realized that Airon could have been invisible. He was so quiet, I hadn’t noticed him right in front of me. His vividly blond head was held up by a large, pale hand of which he lifted but a finger on the back of his neck in response as he hunkered over a book. Such was the extent he acknowledged our introduction, as he was absorbed in reading and shutting out the world. I respected his antisocial stand. Everyone else was staring at me, but Airon was nonintrusive.

David’s arms shot out, and he impersonated a zombie. Jenny laughed at him noiselessly. Proud of his joke, David reclined with his legs out in the aisle. He stretched a hand to the back of my chair. The gesture made me feel welcome and included, however I didn’t think it was necessary to mock Airon.

The class was at the end of a month-long study of forestry. Mr. Martin took us out to the woods behind the school for a nature walk. Colorful leaves floated to the ground all around as the class wove its way through the path.

“Much different from your old school?” David ignored the teacher.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged.

“Yeah, guess they’re all lame.” He smirked and the breeze ruffled his thick hair. “Where’d you go to school?”

“It was real small.”

“Oh, where at?”

“South.” I pretended to be too interested in the tree discussion ahead of us. Mr. Martin was lecturing about adjacent limbs.

“What’d you do for fun? There’s not much to do around here. Whole town’s in bed by nine,” he leaned over and whispered.

“Do you ever listen to the teacher?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll help you with the test,” David bragged.

I named every tree ahead, “Elm, Ash, Sycamore, Redbud, and Maple.”

David shrugged and walked away with his hands in his pockets, and started casually talking with a girl named Meredith, and Kristen, the dinette from last night. I felt a pang in my chest.

Nothing changed, and yet everything did. Every few seconds, I found myself checking to see who secured David’s favor, or whether by some slight chance, that honor would be given back to me. It felt like a game that I didn’t want to play but refused to lose.

Meredith was also hanging on his every word. I wanted to feel relieved for his distraction, but I couldn’t help watching as David boldly wielded charisma around like a weapon, possibly innocently, but my new skin readily sliced. Wanting his attention back was a wicked temptation.

I needed to clear my head of him. He was obviously too socially advanced for a fledgling to mess with. I let the group move ahead and found myself next to Airon, alone in the back of the pack.

Airon was dreadfully tall, but his posture was out of whack like he was slumped over, hiding his height. I got my first glimpse of his face and wondered why he was hiding. His complexion was pale but perfect with high cheeks and frosty blue eyes. His hair was light blond and so were his eyebrows and eyelashes. A perfect chiseled dent marked the center of his pale upper lip under his strong, straight nose. I wondered if his barely pink lower lip was stuck out in an angry pout, or if it were really that full. Airon had a superior vibe, a loftiness that separated him from the squabbling, busy kids ahead of us. He was intriguing, fascinating, and peaceful.

I thoughtlessly checked on David again, but regretted it. He was busy whispering to Kristen, and she was obviously enjoying it. He glanced at me as she giggled. I tried to look away as if unaffected. If there were two opposites in this world, they were David and Airon. David was the center of attention, especially Kristen's. With every step down the tree trail, the group surrounding David multiplied.

Airon, on the other hand, only haunted the school, a faded apparition that no one bothered. As the class flowed down the winding path through the woods, I curiously ventured behind Airon. I felt drawn to his calm soul, and soon I was stepping on his lanky shadow. Mr. Martin started pointing out the leaf patterns on a golden apple tree, and the group came to a halt. I stopped beside Airon with a whole quiet friendship worked out in my head, as I cranked my neck up with a smile already on my lips.

"What are you looking at?" Airon's deep voice was filled with unexpected annoyance before he abruptly sidestepped me. I felt like a nuisance.

I sulked a bit, following the herd back to the classroom, realizing that it was self-indulgent to believe my arrival to Fort Valley High School was significant to everyone. Airon really didn't want to be bothered with me. I was embarrassed and disappointed with myself.

David waited for me at the back door of the school. He held it open and made a gesture for me to enter. "You want to go on the Sky Lift with me and the girls on Saturday?"

Regrettably, the insult flattered. *Tamed and inserted into his multitude of admirers, I think not.*

"No thanks." I rushed down the wrong hall. The lesson from class was snarly and had nothing to do with trees. My inborn compulsions were causing a big problem. I needed to listen to my parents, not my instincts. It was true—all the old families were gone. There weren't going to be flocks of admirers to choose from. I was alone, only I hadn't expected it to bother me as much as it did.

Beth found me lost near the gym and escorted me to second hour. Drama class had a lot of the same kids. David went to Algebra, so my mind got a break from obsession. Immediately, I could see why Beth wanted me to take this class. Our teacher, Mrs. Nightingale, was quite a character, very artistic and animated. She was overly excited about the school play, handing me a copy of the script and a list of roles that could count toward my grade. Sewing costumes, painting the set, or backstage support all sounded fun.



I began reading my script, but got sidetracked by a faint noise resonating near the back corner of the room. I flipped the pages of the stage directions, trying to pay attention to character actions. However, in the end, curiosity got the best of me, so I concentrated on finding the sound.

I heard faint music. I victoriously discovered a wire escaping from a boy's collar, and cupped in his hand was one tiny headphone. I played with this newfound talent, turning up the volume and then hearing it fade as I willed.

Super-hearing was fun, so I moved my focus around the room to each little movement. I could make them thunderous or add just a decibel. Ian was tapping his thumbs on his script—I amped it into a concert that filled the room with rhythm. I could even hear the teachers in the classrooms down the hall when I focused. My ears could single out a vibration of any kind ... chewing gum, scribbling pencils, shaking knees. I could hear everyone, even if only by breathing or beating hearts. I moved around the room, listening to each person's personal symphony, until I found someone perfectly still.

Airon was in this class too, poised like a solemn, snowy owl over a field of fidgety mice. While I was peeking in awe of him a second time, our eyes met. I wish they hadn't because Airon had a powerful talent for reminding me that I was an intrusive pest. "Take a picture—it'll last longer," he muttered, but I heard him quite clearly.

Mrs. Nightingale reminded the class that the auditions for the cast were that evening at the dance studio. Beth had the bright idea of telling her, "You have to get Ever to audition, Mrs. Nightingale! She's amazing."

Mrs. Nightingale clapped her hands twice, twinkled her fingers, and made an *oooh* face. I was stuck, and Beth smiled triumphantly.

Clearly, in Beth's mind, my dancing ability erased my other peculiarities, but I wanted to get tights, a leotard, and practice with my hair before I stepped foot in the dance studio again. At least I had the lip gloss. I vowed to be grateful for high school anxieties. There were real dangers in the world, but an audition wasn't one. And frankly, I needed a distraction from boys.

Dang locker! Even for someone with agile machine-like fingers, the combination was sticky. I may have been hasty with my twist. I didn't hear him approach, but when I gave up, David was there, leaning up against the locker beside mine with a crooked smile on his face. I jumped back, startled.

“Do I scare you?” he softly cooed while his flirty smile hypnotized me for a second.

“No,” I lied.

“So, I was thinking, if you’re busy this weekend ...” His eyes dug into mine, and I felt my resolution to stay away from him start to slip. “Come to my baseball game tonight then,” he offered, moving closer.

“Can’t, I have an audition.” I let my hair fall over my eyes, hoping that if I didn’t look at him, I would be stronger.

“As if you have anything to worry about. I saw you dancing last night.” He blocked my exit by propping up against the wall. “It’s cool, the audition is at eight, and my game is right after school. I’ll tell Beth.” He dashed away down the hall.

I saw him several times throughout the day, and I still never got a chance to get out of going to his game. He was always unapproachably surrounded by girlfriends. I was always stuck in an awkward situation ... unable to open my locker, or in the wrong classroom when the bell rang, or finally realizing that my locker was number twenty-five and I had been trying to open forty-five all day.

“I promised him. Besides, I gotta see that you get to that audition,” Beth answered my complaints after school and towed me past the bus line to the baseball field.

“Maybe they’ll win.” Ian marched along by her side, but he looked doubtful.

“He acted like you wanted to go,” Beth laughed.

I sat on bleachers with Beth and Ian, focusing on homework, resolved to drop Algebra the very next day, as it would take me a century to catch up. The ballgame was also puzzling. The aim seemed to be to collect all the boys of the same color back to the little cages on the edge of the field. Our school wore red, and another school wore blue. A few men in black and white stripes would yell “Out!” three times. Whichever color that was in the little cage would have to spread out and wait for him to yell it three more times, and then they would slap hands and backsides and cage up happily.

Of course, David looked great in uniform. The bill of his cap shaded his stormy eyes and sharpened his jawline. It made him look even more intimidating, but he ignored us. After an intolerable hour and a half of watching them go back and forth, I heard David’s name as clear as a bell from a boy in blue.

“David Finch is up, easy out.” My head snapped up.

Ian noticed my sudden interest and felt it was his duty to update me. “It’s the bottom of the ninth, tied zero-zero. David bats next ... if he can get the runner home we win ... but we’ll probably have to go to extra innings.”

It was at this point that I realized hitting the ball might be a significant part of the game. David jumped out of the dugout, swinging his stick, shaking his feet out, and rolling his shoulders, making a real busy show of getting ready. For the first time since his invitation back at the locker this morning, he called for my attention, “Hey, Ever!”

My cheeks got hot. “Hey.” I lifted my hand in barely a wave. Before that moment, the fence was a barrier that I thought he was not allowed to look through.

“I’m going to win the game for you! How ’bout that?” he shouted. Everyone around me giggled. He nodded confidently with his fingers wrapped in the chain link fence, lifting the stick to point at a tree beyond the fence. “It’s going right in that pine,” he announced.

My eyes measured the distance. It seemed impossible!

Ian whispered under his breath, “Whoa dude, he’s lost it.” He nudged me in the shoulder.

“Why is everyone laughing?” I asked Ian as I covered my blushing face.

“I think you’ve driven him crazy—no way he can hit that far,” Ian laughed.

“David has been acting really strange around you,” Beth agreed. “Poor guy, he’s got it bad.”

“Really? What does he have?”

“I think everybody’s noticed he’s got a crush on you,” Ian agreed.

“I don’t think he likes me very much at all.”

David’s name was spoken from every direction after his haughty display. My eyes quickly darted around the ballpark as I anxiously heard him being discussed. I twice heard the strange phrase, “He’s no Babe Ruth!”

The middle guy in blue threw the ball. Beth groaned. He threw the ball at David many times. Nothing happened. I was pretty sure David was almost out of chances to hit the ball. I wondered if pushing him out of the way and smacking the ball for him would help. I’ve got serious coordination, but it would definitely draw too much attention, and I had vowed not to do that.

“Finch will hit a home run when pigs fly,” I heard a boy in blue brag.

The only thing I could do was to pray for a miracle. *Lord, save this boy from his impending doom.* Despite my best efforts to resist him, I felt a bond form between us as if there was an invisible tether connecting our hearts.

Everyone got excited over a ruckus when the ball was thrown around, and a boy in red dove at a white spot. People said he stole something. Meanwhile, David was playing in the dirt with his shoe. It quieted down when the guy in the middle hunched over to sneer at David with the ball before his face. Before I knew what happened, *Crack!* David sent the ball sailing through the sky until it disappeared into the green of the pine tree.

The sudden uproar from the bleachers startled me. Ian was as surprised as anyone. “I can’t believe it. Pinch me, did that just happen?”

“I like baseball. This was fun,” said Beth. When David stopped running, another boy in red jumped onto his back and was carried into the dugout. I assumed this was significant.

I had to admit, “I’m really glad I came.” David was being gossiped about all over the ballpark again, but his name was spoken with admiration and respect. I zoned out, listening to the chatter with my head down.

“Good hit, man!” Ian’s voice snapped my head out of the clouds, and I looked into David’s eyes with swelling admiration.

He handed me the ball. “For Ever.” It was corny, but the grin on his face was captivating.

“I’m impressed.” I took the ball and placed it in my jacket pocket, smiling wildly at him.

“Good luck at the audition,” he added as he picked up his equipment bags, spun around, and jogged away. I watched him go, wondering if there was any possibility of a future where I would be smart enough to avoid him.

### Journal Entry 3 – Auditions

Ian drove Beth and me into town. “Think you’re going to like it here?” Ian asked.

“Yeah, I’m figuring things out ok.”

“I told you it’s a good thing I found you, some of the girls in our class are so stupid,” said Beth.

“I didn’t really have any problems with the girls. Why didn’t you warn me about Airon Lark?”

“Yeah, just stay out of his way,” Beth giggled.

“Man’s a loner,” Ian added. “Wanted him to join my band, but ...”

“So, what’s an audition like anyway?” I asked.

“Ok, all you need to do is learn the choreography,” Beth was excited to tell me. “Miss Shelley will have us dance in groups, and if you do well you get to move on to a smaller group.”

“Dance ’til you’re eliminated,” Ian interjected.

“I don’t even have dance shoes yet.”

“You’ll do fine,” Beth said.

“Listen, don’t let your nerves get to you. Beth thinks you’re good, and she knows her stuff.”

Ian glanced up at the rearview mirror. His eyes were sincere.

The studio was pretty ... the mirrors and glass sparkled. The faint scent of cleaning solutions lingered. Also, the energy of the night was totally different. Beth and the few other ballerinas in leotards and tights were outnumbered by the bizarre drama students. One girl had dark eye makeup and large spikes going down the middle of her head, which looked kind of creepy. Another boy had an interesting, tight haircut with shapes carved into it. I risked looking at myself in the mirror again alongside this new crowd, and it paid off. My homemade dress wasn’t the flashiest outfit in the room. Even my hair didn’t seem so messy with so many theater kids cramming the space. If compared to something that I wasn’t—mainly delicate, proper, little ballerinas—I stuck out. But in my own way, I was beautiful.

I pulled my hair into a ponytail and stood on the dance floor with all the other hopeful drama students. “Everyone spread out so you don’t smack your neighbors. Face the back and look over your right shoulder on the first accent in the music. Five, six, seven, eight, boom!” Miss Shelley’s energy was contagious.

For a half hour we learned a three-part combination. The first part was lighthearted and fun. The second part was more serious. I was sure that it was from the scene in the script where the

main character was trapped and scared. The last part was dark and fit for a villain. The boys especially were having fun acting fiendish.

It was crowded. I danced in miniature so as not to hurt anyone. Miss Shelley helped all the kids with questions on steps and gave some advice to those who lacked confidence, “Fake it ’til you make it!” She divided us in half and I became part of group two.

I was smashed up against the wall, so I didn’t get to see much of Beth in the first group. After light applause, it was my turn. Beth was smiling when I passed her. I had a desire for dancers to be more like the ballplayers, so I raised my hand to offer her a high-five. She played right along. The whole dance studio was full of chatter and laughter. Honestly, I was really glad she tricked me into it.

I stepped out onto the dance floor, relieved to have more room to move. Part one ... I bounced, turned, flashed my jazz hands, and smiled. Part two ... the music changed dramatically and my face loosened and an ache swelled my heart. I understood this character; when I covered my face, her anxiety engulfed me. In my mind, she pressed her legs into the ground with hope to fly free, but when she sprang up she was tangled and caught, and she crumpled with disappointment. She knew what it was like to nearly get hit by a car, get caught acting stupid in front of the mirror, and get lost in a sea of high schoolers. I used the choreography to express my anxiety about being in a strange, new world and I bled emotions into my dance.

Part three ... it was time to visit the dark side. I needed to expose anger to channel aggression, but I wasn’t old enough to have lived through any real suffering of my own. Squabbles with Mom over dresses hardly fit the bill. Instead, I tried to empathize with the only guy at school today who was hostile. Airon Lark had so much aggression that he wouldn’t even allow me to smile at him today. Why was he so cold? What did I do to him? I syphoned the anger out of his crystalline eyes, fed off the sneer from his handsome, pale lips, and threw myself into the character of the villain. I felt justified to kick and claw and tear through the air. I crouched deep and stuck out my neck to intimidate before I leapt straight up in the air, my right leg still pointed at the floor, but my left leg stretched so far back that I felt my toes run through my ponytail. For my ending pose, I prepared to crush my enemy—*she deserved it!*

When the music ended, the room was completely still. I slowly relaxed from my ending position. Where had the spirit of exuberance gone? I anxiously checked the faces around the room. Most eyes were on me, actually. For a moment, I was sure I had done something wrong.

Ian was the one to break the awkward silence. “Yeah!” he exclaimed, right before roaring cheers filled the room.

“Love it! Group one ... match *that* intensity!” Miss Shelley shouted. Apparently, I missed whatever it was, too lost in my own head. Everyone was back in a great mood, and the fun was back on. I danced in three smaller groups and things were never weird again. The audition was fun. Right after it ended, I went out to the sidewalk to thank Beth.

“Oh my Gosh! You’re such a liar!” I was afraid of Beth’s words, but her expression was really more of a sarcastic smirk. I stood dumbstruck, as my brain raced to figure out what she knew.

“Where did you come from? Are you running from the ABT?”

Instead of panicking, my instinct took over ... everything seemed slow, crisp. “What is the ABT?” I stayed carefully composed.

“American Ballet Theater—Hello?”

I didn’t understand her point, but was relieved she wasn’t accusing me of anything valid. I really needed to go home! Exhaustion was hitting me hard, and I longed for the safety of my room and comfort of my bed.

“What a coincidence ... Hi, David. Did you see that? She’s a star, right?” Beth giggled.