



wish

indigo dreams series #1

GRIER COOPER

WFSH

by Grier Cooper

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Advance Praise For WISH

“An extremely touching, heartfelt, and often humorous account of a young woman's journey to live her passion. WISH reminds us, that despite our obstacles, we can live the life we dream. You won't be able to put it down.”

– Zippora Karz, Former Soloist, New York City Ballet
Author of *The Sugarless Plum/ Ballerina Dreams*

“Grier Cooper expertly weaves her insider knowledge into this compelling read. Even if you've never danced en pointe, you may find yourself reaching for ballet slippers after reading Wish.”

– Charity Tahmaseb, co-author of *The Geek Girl's Guide to Cheerleading*

“Grier Cooper’s WISH contrasts the elegant and disciplined beauty of ballet versus a gritty and often violent home life. She handles the topic of alcoholism with poignancy and honesty and choreographs in light-hearted moments of friendship, sibling rivalry and a budding romance to round out this touching story of art and love.”

– Paula Yoo (*Good Enough*, HarperCollins)

“Grier Cooper writes with emotional hooks that penetrate deeply. Her wonderfully-flawed characters are unforgettable. This book and its lovely dancing protagonist sparkle as if onstage!”

–Corina Vacco, author of *My Chemical Mountain*

“I absolutely loved WISH; it brought back such memories of high school, boys and ballet. What a gift this is to young dance students.”

–Lauren Jonas, Artistic Director, Diablo Ballet

“Grier Cooper is completely able to express these years of sweat and tears with the accuracy of someone who has lived through it herself. It's a great read; I highly recommended WISH!”

–Jenna Lavin-Crabtree, Former dancer with Atlanta Ballet, Miami City Ballet
Full time Faculty/Choreographer, Ballet Academy East, NYC

Chapter 1

When I hear the voice I have come to hate, I stop what I'm doing. It doesn't matter that I'm right in the middle of abdominal crunch number 38. This gets preference. I roll on my side and press my ear to the floor. It's hard to hear things through the carpet—more difficult to distinguish the subtle nuances I've learned to listen for—but I don't have a choice. My body tenses as I strain to hear, listening to catch important clues. Is the voice sharp, scratchy and impatient? Bitter and dark? Or round and cloyingly sweet? These things matter. Each one dictates a different course of action.

Another voice responds. But which one? I can't tell. The voice gets louder and I sit up, prepared to move quickly. The volume reaches a crescendo, and I jump into place by the doorway. Just in case. Loud words ring up through the floor below my feet. I stop breathing. Something clatters to the floor with a loud, metallic clank. I hear a scratching sound. I realize with a start that it's my nails digging into the wooden grooves of the door-frame.

I hold my breath until things go quiet again. After I wait one full minute (again, just in case) I lie down on the floor again. I know I should finish exercising but it feels good to lie still for a moment. Truth be told, I hate abdominal crunches. I close my eyes and a fragment of memory surfaces: a favorite moment from a long time ago,

back before my brothers were born, when I flew. I'm not kidding. I remember my body floating weightless, toes hovering several inches above the intricate paisley patterns in our front hall carpet; dust motes twinkled in the sunlight like tiny golden fairies swirling all around me.

It was over too soon. The good stuff always is. But in those few sparkly moments I was free in a way I have never felt since.

When the memory fades, I force myself to do my last round of crunches. The overly bright pink carpet beneath me scratches the bare skin at the nape of my neck but I grit my teeth and continue. My abdominal muscles are on fire and I latch on to that fact. It's proof that something I'm doing is having an effect somewhere. Sometimes when things get bad, I close my eyes and imagine that blissful flying feeling in my body again. My cells remember. That's how I know it must have happened. The closest I've gotten to that feeling again is during the final moments of ballet class when I leap across the floor. Those few milliseconds of freedom where I defy gravity – the chance to fly – that's what keeps me coming back to the ballet studio.

Lately, I don't ever want to leave.

I hope this is the year Miss Roberta takes me to audition for the New York School of Ballet so I can finally start my real life. But the second I think this, the doubts slither in. Am I ready? What about my brothers? Right now there are no answers, only questions and conflicting feelings.

A droplet of sweat rolls down my right temple and trickles into my ear. I shake it off and finish my last crunch, then flop back on the floor. I imagine what I look like from above: a cast-off rag doll, forgotten and tossed aside.

I stand and take one last look in the mirror. As usual there are a few stray flyaway hairs. I scowl at them and glue them into place with a final spritz of hairspray. That's as close to perfect as my bun is going to get today.

The voice is back, muddled with irritation. This time I'm in the crosshairs. Mom yells again, just in case I didn't hear her the first time. It's impossible not to, even though she doesn't believe in occupying the same room as the person she's talking to.

I grab my ballet bag and fly down the stairs. I know better than to keep her waiting.

Seven blocks before we reach the ballet studio she is screaming so loudly that I see her larynx. Wait. That's not the right word. What is the word...you know, for that dangly thing you always see vibrating in cartoon characters' throats when they yell? The uvula. That's the word. Only this is no cartoon – it's my life. I see all the signs that a blowup is coming: tight jaw, white knuckles on the steering wheel, growling about every little thing that's bothering her. Usually I jump in and smooth things over, but not this time.

“I’m sick to death of picking up after a houseful of pigs! I’m so goddamned tired all the time because of you!” Mom yells.

Her hands pound the steering wheel and my stomach twists with a sick, fluttery feeling. It’s like the world has suddenly spun out of control and there’s no solid ground under my feet. I should be used to this by now – I’ve had almost sixteen years of practice.

My head droops like a wilted flower and I stare at my lap. I shut my eyes. It’s so hot in the car that my thighs are sticking to the blue leather seats. I hate that.

I have to escape. My mother is driving me crazy.

I ask myself why this keeps happening. I know she hates driving. Plus today, her lead-footed determination fell short by a few seconds and she missed the light at that one intersection on Post Road where you have to wait an eternity before the light turns green again. Charlie left his towel on the bathroom floor this morning; that kind of stuff always pisses her off. Maybe she’s just having a bad hair day. It’s Saturday and she’s not due back at the hairdresser’s until Wednesday morning. All of these things add up, heat her inner coil until it boils over and spills out ugly words.

On the outside my mother looks like an old-school movie star – polished blonde perfection, hair always in a flawless twist – but lately she’s wound up like a tightly coiled snake on the inside, ready to strike at any moment. When I think of her, competing emotions swirl around in my ribcage: disappointment, anger, fear and something else – longing. For the person she used to be, a person who now makes occasional cameo appearances. Sometimes I feel sorry for her, but watching her now, her contorted screaming face, (uvula shimmying back and forth like a bobble-headed hula dancer on crack) all sympathy evaporates.

I need to get out of this car to focus on my body, to feel the cool metal ballet barre in my hand. If Mom doesn’t stop yelling soon I’ll be late for class and Miss Roberta will have my head. I’m tuning it out for now, like watching a movie without sound. Watching without listening almost makes it comical. Like noticing the uvula thing.

She jabs a well-manicured, red-lacquered finger in the air (religiously re-manicured every Tuesday morning) and Charlie cries louder. Poor kid gets blamed for just about everything since he was the mistake, the unplanned child. He’s too small to stick up for himself so I try to protect him as often as I can. I squeeze his little hand three times, our secret sign. I love you and it’ll be okay. He scoots in closer to my side. Brad rolls his eyes at me from the front seat and smirks. I ignore him and stare at my reflection in the window, hating my strawberry blonde hair and pale skin, all the parts of me that look like her.

Here’s another tactic: only listen to every third word she says. Using this filter, the dialogue goes something like, “Christ... goddamn... ever-loving... useless... godforsaken... dirty... you... tired... enough.” I’ve edited out most of the obscenities. Seriously, half of what my mother says would be censored by the FCC.

Pretty ironic, since she went to Catholic school from kindergarten through senior year. The woman was practically raised by nuns.

She'll eventually exhaust herself and tell my dad what crappy kids we are the second she gets home. Dad will do what he usually does, which is nothing. Or he'll go work in the yard so he doesn't have to deal with it. Until next time. Lather. Rinse. Repeat.

Charlie's scream pulls me from my thoughts. My eyes snap open. My mother grips him by the arm as she shakes him, hard. "Another goddamn mess to clean up. Like I don't have enough already." Charlie's cries turn to sobs. I notice scuff marks from his shoes on the back of Mom's seat.

"Great, just great," she growls.

Not right, not right, not right, says a little voice inside me as my heart races frantically. I can't let her hurt him.

"Mom, you can't—"

"Shut. Up." She whips her head towards me, eyes blazing. "Do not start with me or I swear to God I will make you regret it. Just try me and you will find yourself out of ballet classes so fast your head will spin."

The words hover in the air, followed by a sudden blistering silence. A door slams shut in the center of my chest. I fight back the leaden weight of anger and panic with slow, steady breaths. I wish I could make her stop freaking out all the time. But how? I clench my fists, digging the nails into my palms to stifle any urge to respond. At last she guns the accelerator and drives the final few blocks to the ballet studio. The car rolls to a stop and she eyes each of us in turn. Slowly she turns back toward me. "All right," she says. "Get out."

Chapter 2

I feel all weird and shaky as I climb out of the car. I close the door and lean against it with my head bowed. I take a deep breath. I have to pull it together before I go to class. Not easy to do when you have liquid hate pulsing through your veins.

“Indigo, is that you?” a voice says out of nowhere.

Crap. It’s Mrs. Davis. Her blonde wavy hair is shellacked into place, her perfectly shaped eyebrows arched in excitement. My heart sinks even further. I swear she and Mom have a secret arranged marriage thing planned for me and Ryan Davis, the maniac perverted son I was forced to play with all through grade school. He spent every one of our play dates either beating me up or trying to look under my dress.

She eyes me up and down like I’m the main course for supper. “I’m so happy to run into you. I have a favor to ask.”

Dread keeps me rooted in place, paralyzed. Must escape before it’s too late. Behind me I hear the car window glide down. I turn to see Mom leaning across the front seat to angle herself into the discussion.

“Why, Pam, how nice to see you.” My mother’s voice oozes with syrupy sweetness. She’s talking in that nice phony voice she only uses when we’re out in public. We call it her Christmas voice. It’s as fake as the rat poison disguised as sweetener that all the skinny moms in town stir into their morning lattes. No one would ever guess that only moments ago she was screaming her head off at us in the car.

“Likewise, Elizabeth. How are your boys doing?”

“Busy with hockey, as always. And yours?” Mom’s voice now has a slight Southern twang to it, as it does when she’s laying it on extra thick.

“Same. But you know, I was just about to talk to Indigo about tutoring my Lila; she’s behind in reading. I think learning from an older girl she looks up to would do her a world of good.”

Before I can stop her, Mom says, “Well, of course, she’d love to help out. Wouldn’t you, Indigo?”

No reason to ask me what I think.

They both look at me expectantly. Mom’s lips are pressed together in a tight line, a sure sign that she expects no argument from me.

“Uh, sure, Mrs. Davis,” I say.

“Oh, fantastic, honey. Thank you so much. How about first thing next Saturday morning, at your place? I’ll pay you ten dollars an hour. Oh, Lila will be thrilled!”

I can’t believe how easily I just got roped into tutoring Lila. That’s the thing about this town: it’s impossible to go anywhere without running into someone you know, and usually it’s the person you were hoping to avoid.

The Christmas voice echoes in my head as I climb the stairs to Miss Roberta’s ballet studio. It’s only when I reach the top of the stairs that I realize my hands are gripped into tight fists and my jaw is sore from gnashing my teeth together. I unclench my fingers and shake out my hands, imagining I’m flinging off the bad juju.

The smooth leather texture of my ballet slippers is comforting as I slip my feet into them. I throw on leg warmers and look for a spot at the barre. There’s one last spot, right next to Marlene James, ex-fourth grade best friend, now turned horrible person. Lovely.

Monique gives me a questioning look from her spot three places down at the barre, but I shake my head and look away. While I mechanically prepare for class, I don’t talk to anyone. I’m still too upset. I throw my right leg up on the barre and fold my body over it, then switch to the left. A thorough full-body stretch is a must before every class, but thanks to my mother that’s all I have time for today.

“All right, girls, let’s get started,” Miss Roberta says, clapping her hands loudly.

I hold the barre lightly with my left hand and begin moving when the music starts. It’s the same music I’ve heard in every ballet class I’ve taken for the past ten years. We always start with pliés.

My knees bend in time to the music: demi plié, demi plié, grand plié. My body moves through the positions while my mind replays the scene in the car. The image of my mother’s uvula is stuck in my brain.

“Indigo, where is your focus this morning?” Miss Roberta’s voice pulls me back into the present moment. I glance in front of me at Marlene’s feet and realize I’m in the wrong position. I shake my head to clear it. Go away, Mom. This is the one place where I get away from you – even if it’s only for an hour and a half.

Compared to the rest of my life, ballet classes are refreshingly orderly and predictable. Barre exercises always follow the same routine. Do everything that works the right leg, then turn and repeat everything with the left.

We move through the barre exercises. Every beat of the music dictates what comes next. The rhythm makes demands and the body answers with precision. Already my muscles are beginning to feel warm and stretchy.

“Monique, your leg does not end at your ankle. Point those toes! Jeanine, you’re sagging. Stand up straight!” Miss Roberta’s voice carries through the room. Today she’s all in pinks with a floral chiffon headscarf. She’s the classic tiny dancer: dark-haired with pert features. Her eyes flicker across the class, constantly appraising technique and posture. Even though she’s tiny, she commands the room. If she sees imperfections or lack of good effort, she will call you out.

Moments later we are doing grand battements. Droplets of sweat roll down my back and the sides of my face. My extensions suck today; my leg just won’t go as high as usual. I’m straining to get it up near my shoulder when it’s usually as high as my head. Everything feels heavy.

“What is going on with your extensions today, Indigo?” Miss Roberta looks disturbed. She addresses the room. “All of you are operating at half speed. Can anyone tell me why?”

“Must be how hard they’re working us in PE at school,” Monique pipes in.

“Great, just great. Those people have no idea what havoc they are wreaking on my dancers. Do you girls have to kill yourselves in gym class?” Her lips curl like she sucked on a lemon. Miss Roberta is extremely cautious about this stuff. In her world, dancers shouldn’t do half the stuff that other normal people enjoy. Skiing, for instance. She has forbidden me to ski because I could break a leg. The list of things I’m not allowed to do gets longer all the time.

“The human body is naturally lazy, girls. You have to make it work for you,” Miss Roberta reminds us. This is the first of the “Rules of Ballet According to Miss Roberta.” The complete manifesto goes something like this:

Humans are naturally lazy and dancers have to work hard to overcome this tendency.

There is always room for improvement. If you think you are a good enough dancer, you’re wrong!

There will always be someone who is a better dancer than you.

It takes hard work and discipline to get ahead.

If you can’t take constructive criticism, you are in the wrong place.

If you are too tall, too fat or too lazy, pick a different career.

The love of dance brought you here and it will carry you through your career.

Ballet is equal parts dedication, inspiration, and perspiration.

The human body is a dancer's most important tool and our biggest challenge (see Rule #1).

Ballet involves sacrifice (of certain dangerous activities...including and most especially boys).

"Girls, get the lead out. Let's see some energy in those leg extensions. Make your bodies obey!" Miss Roberta is not known for her subtlety. Also, she is perfectly comfortable discussing touchy subjects, such as personal hygiene. Three years ago she alerted us about the need for deodorant by making a loud public statement in the middle of class that went something like, "Many of you girls are old enough now that you need to wear deodorant. Some of you are beginning to smell."

We put on pointe shoes and practice more relevés and turns at the barre. Turns are all about balance and spotting. I spot the back of Marlene's head in front of me each time I turn. It's a dance secret; the key to spinning around without getting dizzy. Keep your eyes on a single spot as you start to spin, then whip your head around quickly and find the same spot again.

Marlene is an amazing turner. Today I want to hate her, but it doesn't matter anyway, since she probably won't get much further in ballet with those D-cups of hers.

I yank my attention back to turns. It's nerve-racking, spinning around multiple times on the tip of a pointe shoe. You're balancing on maybe three square inches of surface space, so you have to focus. It doesn't help that I'm tall; there's more of me to control.

Finally it's time to move to the center of the room. I'm always glad to be done with the barre even though it's where the foundation is built. The steps we repeat over and over again are like words in our dance vocabulary, and once we are in the center we flow into fluid dialogue.

We do more tendus and then an adagio. My body blooms and stretches as I raise one leg to the ceiling. Everything remains still as my bottom foot rotates and I revolve like a living jewelry-box ballerina. The music is painfully slow today. We have to make it look easy, but it isn't.

Miss Roberta demonstrates some quick footwork with the lightness of a flitting sparrow. I watch her and wonder what her career was like. I know she was with the American Ballet Theater in New York City – there are photos and newspaper clippings posted around the studio.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Miss Roberta patrolling the edges of the room, watching while we work. Sometimes I swear I feel her eyes burning into the back of my skull. "Feet together in the soussous, Indigo! Imagine you are being sucked up into a straw."

As I dance, I watch my feet in the mirrors that line the front of the room. She's right. They should be tighter. I catch Marlene flashing me a haughty look in the mirror. I watch my feet closely, placing them with care.

"Better. Now apply that same diligence to every step you take."

That's a tall order for me today, but I know she's right. I have to maintain that same level of care if I'm

going to make it as a dancer. Each time I'm here, my job is to move one more step closer to perfection. And if I get my wish, I won't always have her around to remind me.

For now, Miss Roberta is part mentor, part mother and part tormentor. She embodies the strength and willpower I'll need to get ahead, and she reminds me relentlessly.

While the second group does the exercise, I go to the side of the room and take off my pointe shoes – just for a moment. I'm starting to get bunions on the outer joints of my big toes. Some days my feet ache so badly I want to cry, but I have to work through the pain. Pointe shoes look beautiful on the outside, all pink and satin. But they are instruments of torture. Cement ball gowns. The music ends so I quickly stuff my feet back inside my shoes and tie the ribbons. Just in time for turns.

“Long spine, Indigo!” Miss Roberta's eyes find mine in the mirror. “Shoulders down, Elizabeth! Chin up!”

Another turn. I spot my eyes in the mirror, turn twice and land. I hate this floor; the linoleum is slippery and I worry about falling. Only think about turns. No fear. I imagine an iron spike going down through my supporting shoulder and into the ground. It works. I nail the landing perfectly.

“Good, Indigo. Try for three next time.”

We move to the far corner of the room for jumps on the diagonal, the giant leaps that are my favorite. Doing them in pointe shoes is challenging because we're supposed to jump soundlessly. Not easy when you've got cement blocks on your feet.

We end class with a reverence, the same way dancers bow on stage at the end of a show. In class it's a show of respect for our teacher.

“Thank you for your hard work,” Miss Roberta says. I take a deep breath and begin to relax, at last. The feeling I get at the end of class is always warm and yummy. I take a gulp from my water bottle to replace the fluids I lost from all the sweating.

“Indigo, I need to see you a moment,” Miss Roberta says quietly.

The other dancers filter out into the dressing area and I step into her “office,” the corner where the music player lives. She shuts the divider, closing the studio off from the dressing room. Not a good sign.

Miss Roberta clears her throat. “I know you're working hard.” I hold my breath, waiting for her to continue. “But your footwork is still sloppy. Your jumps have improved, but could be stronger and you're still a little loose through your core. You really need to step it up if you intend to audition this year.”

It's like a punch to the gut. I stare at the floor in quiet desperation as I hold back tears, nodding at her directives.

Her face softens. “Look, you have all the tools you need at your disposal. But what you do with them and how far you go – that's up to you.”

About the Author

Since she was forced into ballet lessons at age five, Grier has performed on three out of seven continents. Her first crush was in fifth grade but Tchaikovsky was her first real love. She left home at fourteen to study at the School of American Ballet but after living in New York City, San Francisco and Miami she's decided she prefers to live outside of cities. Today she lives in a somewhat secret seaside hamlet with her husband, daughter and Coco Chanel (a black standard poodle). She is a dance activist and recovered sugar addict.

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