

# THE DANCE

Someone was poor and someone was rich. Someone wanted something; someone else had been slighted. As Anna bent back the spine of her book, she pictured its author's small dramas taking place somewhere like this mansion, where she sat cooling her heels while Colette pirouetted upstairs in what had once been a bedroom. Eliza's class was in the dining room downstairs; on previous Wednesdays, Anna had just waited out her daughters' classes in the billiard room beside it.

But this week, net and sequined fabric were unfurled across the billiard room floor. Because Anna had never learned to sew, because she wished not to reveal that, she had skirted the billiard room completely. From her new position on the neither-here-nor-there of window seat on the mansion's landing, she watched a teenaged dancer run down the curved staircase, swinging a pair of soiled toe shoes carelessly by their satin ties. Side one two three. Back one two three...Stretch and turn and lift! caroled a voice, off somewhere.

"I adore her," a voice said from the stairwell. A woman Anna had never seen before was climbing the stairs. She stopped on the landing, catching her breath, a reminder that the Arts Center wasn't Anna's house — wasn't anyone's, anymore. Even if, in the room upstairs where Colette danced, serviceable grey paper had peeled back in places to reveal a blandly pink-and-white floral.

The woman wore stylish, slim-legged jeans and leather boots that extended almost to her knees, impractical for the wet weather outside. A filmy blue scarf had been looped twice around her neck.

"It's wonderful," Anna agreed, realizing the woman meant Jane Austen.

She was not about to admit she found Mansfield Park slow going. Or that she spent more time looking up from her book to watch dancers from the more advanced classes than she ever did reading.

The woman's suede jacket was stained dark by rain, which would have troubled Anna if it had been hers. "Do you know?" the woman asked, "where I go to register for a class? Is the office upstairs?"

The week before, Anna hadn't even bothered to stick Mansfield Park in her purse before Eliza and Colette's classes, had just spent her hour at the Arts Center paging through a magazine instead. As she flipped past the glossy double-spreads of photographs, she realized that now that they all — she meant women with children, the only sort she knew anymore — had acquired a taste for low-slung flared jeans, extraordinarily skinny-legged ones had become the height of fashion.

It was a style she knew to be unkind to her own short legs. "Yes," she said to the woman, who was clad in just the sort of jeans she'd admired in the magazine. She reached for her phone and checked the time. "The office's upstairs. But it's after five. No one's there now."

Not at all a dancer's, she'd had to recognize about her own legs. She was the only mother who sat at the Arts Center during classes who hadn't been a dancer herself. Until she registered Eliza and Colette for classes back in the fall, she hadn't even known that at eight, Colette was getting started years behind schedule.

“Closed,” the woman repeated. “Of course.” She bent her head to dig in her purse. “I should have thought of that.” She pulled out an envelope. Her lips twisted into a disarming moue, as if to say what can you do? “Would you mind slipping this under the door for me? I’m double-parked in the drive and my daughter’s waiting.”

Anna’s hand reached out for the envelope before she thought. Unattended cars that blocked the drive at the Arts Center caused consternation, had been the subject of an abundance of emails back in the fall.

“Thanks so much,” the woman said, turning toward the stairs. “You’re a lifesaver!” She put her hand on the balustrade. “You’re so lucky,” she called back over one shoulder. “To be able to sit here and read Jane Austen.”

She clattered down the stairs. Anna looked at the white envelope in her hands and stood up. What light there was left at five o’clock spilled through the window above her head.

When she reached the top of the stairs, she turned left. Was she lucky? For a second, she saw herself and the Arts Center as she imagined the woman might, her luck something lovely and unlooked for that had fallen into her lap. Even the building she was in seemed perfumed with good fortune. She stooped to slide the envelope under the office door. How else could anyone ever have afforded to maintain it? Luck twined itself like a vine up the mahogany staircase.

All that dusting! she thought idly about the intricacies carved into the wood. The woman’s envelope wouldn’t fit under the door, no matter how hard she pushed it. She carefully propped it against the door jamb.

As she walked back down the hall, she peeked in a doorway. There was Colette — bending gracefully at the waist in her pale blue leotard, her hands brushing the wooden floor, her face rapt.

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Once, according to the brochures left fanned on the console in the Arts Center’s entry hall, the billiard room’s elaborate paneling had lined the private train car that belonged to a Coca-Cola magnate. Once, the Arts Center itself had been the home of that same magnate’s family.

Now, a wooden shepherd’s crook was stood up in one corner of the empty billiard room, a prop from a previous recital. Cast-off ballet shoes littered the floor. When Anna ushered Eliza into the room the next week, she sat down cross-legged on the floor, avoiding the gaze of the two figures in the painting that hung across the room.

The portrait above the mantel in the billiard room was a glimmer of oil paint: luminous greeny-grays and grayish golds, a smear of tawny light. It was, in fact, exactly the sort of painting Anna would’ve expected to find above just such an ornate mantel embossed with shields and roses and tiny antic bas-relief knights — if she’d bothered to give the mansion a second thought back before she drove through its wrought iron gates for the first time. But she hadn’t. The Arts Center was simply a means to an end, a necessary part of an equation.

Little girls longed to dance; good mothers made it possible for them to do so.

She let go of Eliza’s hand and let her eyes meet the doubled gaze of the two women in the painting. They had to be mother and daughter, she’d decided a

few lessons back, they were so similarly buxom and beribboned. The elder of the two surveyed the room with a proprietary gleam, her jaw squared.

Anna sighed. “Please,” she coaxed Eliza, reaching into her bag for a pair of pink tights.

The woman who sat on the other side of the room looked up from the bolt of shimmering gold and white fabric on her lap. The snippets of cloth on the floor around her indicated how long she’d probably sat there.

“Not her,” said the woman beside her, continuing a conversation Anna and Eliza’s entrance seemed to have interrupted. She handed over a pair of scissors. The first woman took them and started cutting fabric.

“That’s right,” she agreed. “No time.”

The two women were Kelli and Jen. They possessed sheaves of daughters, like lovely buds gathered tightly into bouquets. So many daughters that Anna wasn’t even sure how many aloof long-necked girls in gossamer tights that required handwashing there actually were. Or which of them — they’d all sat for their Royal Academy of Ballet exams over winter break — belonged to Jen, and which belonged to Kelli.

The five-year-olds Kelli and Jen brought to Pre-Ballet were their youngest, their last ones. Their little girls and Eliza attended the cooperative preschool six blocks away; in fact, Kelli had been the first parent there to speak to Anna.

The first time Anna volunteered at the school —parent teaching, the thick handbook the director had pressed firmly into her hands called it — she and Kelli stood next to each other in the school’s tiny kitchen, silently heaping pretzels and cheese cubes onto child-sized plates. Finally, Kelli turned to Anna. “Is yours Eliza?” she asked. She leaned over the sink to fill the pitchers Anna had forgotten. “She really loves to dance! Have you signed her up for classes at the Arts Center yet?”

Anna had felt gratitude someone was paying enough attention to her circumstances to map out a course of action for her, even if it were just about dance class. Now, of course, she realized Kelli was just like that. It was Kelli who taped brown Kraft paper over the long wall of mirrors in the dining room in preparation for the yearly visit from the Royal Academy of Dance adjudicator. It was Kelli who brought that same adjudicator lunch to eat between her evaluations, snipping a camellia from the bush at the entrance to the mansion and placing it in a bud vase on one corner of the tray.

Eliza extended one leg imperiously in front of Anna, admiring the pointed arch of her foot. “No,” she said in a languid, stubborn voice. “I won’t wear them.”

Arts Center regulations demanded that dancers wear pale wisps of fabric, no matter the weather. Anna put the bunched tights back into her purse and started slipping Eliza’s outstretched foot into the first ballet slipper retrieved from her bag, running a finger around the foot to stretch the leather.

“Those aren’t mine, Mama!” Eliza leaned away from her. “Those are Colette’s!”

Six months ago, Anna had had no idea ballet shoes started their lives exactly the same, without left or right feet. Now she was at the Arts Center so much that she’d started keeping extra ballet slippers stored in her purse throughout the week so she wouldn’t forget them.

“Oops,” she said, looking down.

“These are mine.” Eliza fit her feet into the next pair. With use, they had molded themselves to her feet like some second skin. She stood up on her toes with satisfaction.

“Off you go,” Anna said, turning her toward the door. She sat back and reached into her bag for her book.

“Where’s Pre-Ballet?” a voice asked from the hallway.

Anna looked up. The same woman who’d asked her about the office the Wednesday before stood in the doorway holding the hand of a dark-haired girl about four, Eliza’s age. The girl was still solid and sleek as a seal, grown out of the belly she’d probably had at three, not yet grown into the faint, hardly-there suggestion of hips she’d have by Colette’s age. She had pansy-dark eyes to go with her brown hair, was painfully wringing the hand of the woman, trying to escape her grasp.

“Don’t want to,” she cried.

Anna dog-eared her page and set down her book. “It’s through that door. It just started.”

“We wait in here,” Jen added, calling across the room. “Want to join us?”

The woman had already stooped to unbutton the girl’s coat. “Wait?” she repeated. “I was going to come back after class.” She pulled off a puffy layer of down jacket and revealed the spun-candy leotard the girl had been dressed in.

“I guess you could do that,” Anna said. The Arts Center was always full of mothers. They sat on the stairs and the floors and in the dim hallways, waiting for classes to end, tilting rapt faces toward the oblongs of their cell phones.

“Good,” the woman said, pushing the girl toward the door. “See you after class, Olive.”

The girl looked back. The woman reached up to settle the strap of her bag more securely on her shoulder. “Wait.” She checked herself and looked at Jen. “Don’t I know you?”

Jen looked up from the fabric in her lap. “Little girls,” she said.

Anna knew she meant that there were only a certain number of places to go. The same women saw each other over and over and over again by the time their daughters were four.

“I know how I know you!” the woman said. “Olive applied at Intown Cooperative. You gave us our tour. Those sweet little rainboots for them to change into when they go outside! I loved them.”

Kelli stood up and studied the woman’s face. “Of course. You wouldn’t believe how many interviews we had this year. It’s hard to keep track.”

Anna knew that there’d been so many applications to the preschool that only two or three children were going to be offered admittance. The interviews Kelli’s Enrollment Committee had come up with were meant to stop families from even applying.

The woman’s smile faded. “Well.” She fiddled with the strap on her purse and started backing out of the room. “Olive would love to go to school there.”

The two women in the portrait above the mantel gave them all what Anna couldn’t help but think were reproving glances. She watched Kelli thread her

needle. She ought to offer to sew the tulle and net that lay on the floor into angel wings for the recital; she ought to have chosen something more worthwhile to read. Proust. Moby Dick. War and Peace. Unconditional Parenting. Was Persuasion really a better book than Mansfield Park, or was it just that back in the fall when she'd read Persuasion, Jen and Kelli hadn't taken over the billiard room yet?

"Did you see where my mommy went?" a voice asked her. The dark-eyed child had sidled back into the room. She stood at Anna's shoulder. "Would you take me to the potty?" she added, breathing noisily.

Kelli and Jen exchanged a glance, a tiny shrug. Anna looked at the girl. "OK," she said and held out her hand.

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When Anna led Eliza and Colette from the parking lot toward the Arts Center a week later, the asphalt drive, where older dancers were being disgorged from lumbering, dark-colored SUVs, was resurfaced with puddles. The camellia bush beside the entrance had gone gaudy and glossy with rain. Its rosettes pocked the wet pavement.

Eliza stooped. "Not now," Anna said. Rain starred her coat sleeve. "We're getting wet! You can get one later. When it stops raining."

Under the shelter of the porte-cochere, umbrellas were being fought to a clashing half-mast. Anna furled her own gingerly. A small jostled ballerina stood at the top of the stairs, blocking the way into the building. The sound of her wailing echoed off the arched stone ceiling. It seemed to have been created for Anna, especially, since no one else seemed to notice. Colette dropped Anna's hand and placed a foot on the bottom step. She looked back, her shoulder turned, her beautiful neck extended.

"I know where to go," she said. "I don't need you to take me." She plunged into the river of girls as it parted to go around the small figure on the top step.

"That's that girl named Olive," Eliza pointed out, yanking Anna's hand.

"My mommy!" the girl sobbed as they climbed the stairs toward her. Dampness had crimped the wisps of hair framing her face. "She forgot her umbrella. She told me — just go inside."

Eliza stretched out a hand. Girls jockeyed; shoved. Anna held open the door and herded the two girls under her outstretched arm.

In the dark hallway outside the dining room, the other mothers were already crouched, removing street shoes and rain boots from small feet. Anna pulled off Eliza's coat. The dancers around her were already tilting their faces upward, for final kisses. The girl named Olive stood beside Eliza, watching Anna out of her dark eyes.

"Do you want me to help you take off your coat?" Anna asked. Eliza pirouetted away from her, back, and ran into the dining room. She sat down on one of the mats arranged on the floor in a lopsided circle. "Did you bring your ballet shoes?"

The girl gave a stiff nod and pulled a slipper from each coat pocket. They had crumpled in on themselves until they looked like something else altogether. Gloves turned inside out. Soft catkins, the first sign of spring.

“I’m Eliza’s mommy.” Anna leaned in to unzip her.

“I know.” The door to the dining room slammed, a signal class was beginning.

“Can you get on your own shoes? Your class is starting.”

“Somebody has to help me!” the girl cried. She gave Anna a naked look from under her fly-away hair.

Anna took the slippers and stooped in front of her. “Where’s your mommy?” she asked in the same bright, conversational tone. “Is she parking the car?”

The girl gave a twitch, graceful, and put a small, hot hand on her shoulder, for balance.

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This week, the fabric Jen had spread out on the billiard room’s scarred parquet floor was a hard navy blue. The satin billowed as she tugged it flat. “Starry Night,” she explained as Anna walked in. She looked up from her position on her hands and knees.

Months ago it had been decided: Art Through the Ages was the theme for the recital. By whom this had been decided, and when, Anna didn’t know. She felt uneasy. Had an email she should have gotten gone awry? Did Jen and Kelli think she’d deliberately ignored one? She gave Jen a small smile and edged past the long garment rack that had been rolled into the center of the room. Kelli bent her head once more over the satin spread out on the floor, holding rustling, translucent pieces of pattern to it, carefully affixing pins, smoothing puckers in the shiny fabric.

The recital was in three weeks. The rack was laden with costumes. Each bowler hat for the toe-shoe class’s Magritte piece had already been neatly partnered to an apple-green cummerbund and stored for safekeeping in its own large transparent baggie. The gold and white wings that would transform Eliza’s class into Botticelli’s Angels had been ordered from DanceExpress. Anna sat down on the edge of the wing-backed chair that had been pulled into the room. She recognized the wan cabbage roses on its upholstery from the Nutcracker performances back in December, when the dancer new to toe shoes who played Maria had used it as a barre to steady herself.

It was too late for Anna to be able to get away reading on the landing of the Arts Center, too late for her to sink down unnoticed in a corner of the billiard room and pull Mansfield Park from her purse. Rain sluiced in sheets down the wide leaded windows on the other side of the room, leaving the paneled room awash with gray light. In the dining room down the hall, the little girls were dancing to — it sounded like Debussy. She’d give anything to be able to curl up in this overstuffed chair with her book. “What can I do to help?” she made herself ask.

Jen looked up, over at Kelli, let the scissors in her hands open, close.

“You could,” she said thoughtfully. Her voice trailed off. “You could.” The scissors sliced up the air.

“You could shake out the wings for Botticelli’s Angels,” Kelli supplied. She stood and walked to a packing box that sat on the side of the room and pulled

back its cardboard flaps. “They’ll all need to be pressed right before the recital. But shaking them out would get rid of the worst of the wrinkles.” She plunged her hands into the box, retrieved a cellophane-wrapped package.

Anna ripped it open and shook out the first set of wings. Jen’s scissors sliced through satin, a solid toothy noise, louder than the rain outside, like unzipping a jacket. “If you hang them on the hangers inside out,” Kelli instructed, “the wrinkles will fall out.” She subsided into silence, pinned another square of pattern to fabric. “You should ask Anna,” she said after a moment, looking over at Jen. “See what she thinks.”

“What?” Anna asked, shaking out another costume.

Jen looked up. “On her application to the preschool she said the nanny would be picking up her daughter every day. She applied for five full days a week, and early and after-care, too.” Snick, snick, snick went the blades of the scissors through the blue satin puddled on the floor. “Do you think somebody in that situation can actually do all the work that’s required at the preschool?”

“Who?” Anna was flattered to be asked her opinion.

“The one in the pink tutu. Her mother.” Jen tilted her head toward the door.

“You have to volunteer for at least two parent teacher days every month,” Kelli added, as if they didn’t all already know this. “The auction. Committee work. All those required maintenance workdays.” She looked at Anna.

Anna picked up another set of wings. The trump card she’d heard so many other mothers play slid surprisingly easily from her mouth. “No,” she said softly. “It would be too much work.” She shook out the wings and hung the costume on the rack. “It just would not be a good fit.”

Jen sat back on her haunches to inspect her patchworked handiwork, nodding in agreement.

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Someone had been wronged. Someone else had not been. Anna had given up on trying to figure out who was who, had stopped reading *Mansfield Park*, in fact. Maybe there’d be time to pick up a book once summer started, when she could sit on a bench at the park while Eliza and Colette played one of their mysterious all-encompassing games and, as Colette kept telling her more and more often, didn’t need her.

But for now, that was unlikely. For now, the minute she got the girls to bed at night she had to sit down at the desk in the spare bedroom and pull the cover off the sewing machine she’d borrowed from her next-door neighbor.

Eliza let out a sleepy mutter in her bedroom down the hall. In the kitchen at the back of the house, the compressor on the refrigerator noisily kicked on. The loan of the sewing machine had not included a manual. Anna had been too abashed to ask if one existed. An idiot, she thought now, viciously mashing the sewing machine’s foot pedal to the floor. The room filled with the up-and-down burr of the treadle. But the tiny spear of needle with its even more miniscule eye that kept demanding re-threading — she still couldn’t make it do what it was supposed to do. Which was sew.

It seemed like such a small thing. Had seemed that way when Kelli placed the bundle of slick fabric into her arms the previous Wednesday. They were in such a bind, she explained. All they needed was for Anna to sew angel skirts to elastic bands. Easy peasy.

The polyester Anna was attempting to sew into gathers left an oily feeling on her fingertips. She pushed back her chair. In college she'd repaired dragging hems with Scotch Tape, but maybe she could dredge up enough knowledge to sew twelve elastic waistbands by hand.

She'd been taught how to in high school Home Economics, a discipline that by the time she'd graduate from college with her English major and her Philosophy minor and her dragged hems would be transformed into Human Ecology, the sort of slight-of-hand a cynical English major might enjoy if she lifted her eyes from Wuthering Heights while she waited, every morning, at a bus stop adjacent to the Human Ecology building.

But when Anna had been in eleventh grade, the domestic arts had been considered Home Economics, and she had taken a class in them. What had she learned? How to look up cooking terms in a fat red Webster's dictionary with a frayed fabric cover. Baste Broil Poach Blanch. How to carry a five-pound packet of flour around for a week like a baby. That Home Ec came the quarter before Shop, where she would look up woodworking terms in other fat red Webster's dictionaries, also with frayed fabric covers. Awl. Hammer. Hand saw. That Home Ec came the quarter after Ag, where the teacher had enjoyed wielding his paddle and had had a glass eye.

She slicked the end of the thread into a point with her tongue, stabbed it in the direction of the eye of the needle, all the time thinking glue. Thinking staples. But the wispy synthetic fabric would never hold up to a stapler's gnashing teeth, and glue — what was she thinking? Glue wasn't an option.

She squinted down the sightline of the thread. Pinking shears. Whipstitch. Basting. All vocabulary words she'd been presented with long ago. All words she'd, just as long ago, forgotten.

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Seven months before, she had chauffeured her be-tulle'd cargo of daughters down the Arts Center's curving drive toward the building for the first time. A gingko tree shed a gown of golden fan-shaped leaves onto the sloping lawn behind the building.

Now, it was May, and when she led Eliza and Colette across the grass, the same lawn's green lip was riotous with roses; blowsy, busy divesting themselves of their petals.

"Nope," she said, tightening her grip on Eliza's hand and steering her toward the makeshift backstage area that had been set up at the bottom of the slope. "You can stop after. We're late."

Fittings, tech rehearsal, the run-through known as Full Dress — all of them had gone smoothly, or smoothly enough. Two days ago, the wooden stage that now sat at the bottom of the hill had been nudged piece by piece down the twist of stairs from the mansion's attic, past the incongruous Coke machine on its back porch. The backdrop and wings had been built into place, amidst fervent hopes that for the next three days it would not rain. Now, older sisters and cousins stood in pairs at the walkway that led from the parking lot, their arms bared by

their summery dresses. They handed programs to parents and grandparents about to turn sideways and slip along the rows of stone bleachers that had been built into the slope years ago.

The seats had been set into the hillside long before the mansion's institutional transformation. What kind of person needed an amphitheatre behind their house? Anna wondered. When a family lived in the mansion, had performances taken place here? The sky overhead was a tremulous blue, iced with luxuriant white billows of cloud. The Arts Center staff couldn't have asked for a better day for its recital. She led Eliza behind the scaffolding and curtains that screened the dancers away from the gathering audience. Colette had run ahead. She already stood in the opposite wing with her classmates, self-consciously raising a hand to the lopsided bun Anna had arranged in her hair.

The painting Colette's class was going to interpret was Degas' Dancers. Her bun had taken Anna two, three, four attempts while she restively jerked her head away, eyeing her reflection in the full-length mirror in Anna's bedroom. For a second, as Anna had tugged the teeth of the comb through a snarl and fought Colette's slippery, clean hair, she'd thought —like shooting fish in a barrel. Degas' Dancers, Botticelli's Angels. Even Van Gogh's Starry Night. Who could help but feel things, when such sentiment was deliberately coaxed from them?

She crouched backstage. At the planning meeting at Kelli's house a week ago, she'd been assigned the job of keeping the littlest girls, the ones in Eliza's class, from running out onstage before they were supposed to. They milled around her, docilely held up their arms to receive the gold and white netting of their skirted costumes. Their dance would just be a swirl or two onto the stage, and a curtsy. Then they'd need to be shepherded offstage.

The air smelled of hairspray. "A dance mother's best friend," Kelli muttered around a mouthful of bobby pins. She stood beside Anna, combing the ponytails presented to her with long inattentive strokes, one eye on her watch.

A sudden amplified hiss and crackle and the blare of the first bars of Vivaldi's Primavera interrupted the girls' chatter. "Time," Kelli said, stepping back. Monet's Water Lilies filed onto the stage to the sound of wild applause.

The Water Lilies were only a year or so older than Colette but seemed much more than that with their hair slicked back into identical buns and bright red lipstick that turned their mouths sulky. At the dress rehearsal, they'd been drilled over and over in footwork Anna knew she'd never have been able to keep in her own head, had been reminded of the importance of a dancer's smile. They wore them now, without a falter, their faces masklike and knowing.

"Beautiful," Kelli whispered beside Anna, giving the costumes a considering look. She shoved her hairbrush into one back pocket and ran to the opposite side of the stage, where Degas' Dancers waited for their turn to go on. The belled skirts the girls were wearing had required a painstaking session with starch and steamers; now they needed one last fluffing.

Anna looked over the heads of the little girls clustered around her at Colette, who was moving into her place in the line and placing her hands on the waist of the girl in front of her. The expression on her face mirrored that of the girl in front, the girl behind her. There wasn't time for Anna to slip across the stage and whisper one last good luck into the curve of her ear.

The girls were counting the beats, their expressions wary, watchful. Kelli nodded to them, and they moved onto the stage with a running shuffle-step. Anna squatted, fastening the hook-and-eye on one last angel costume. She could only catch glimpses from the crack between two curtains: the flash of curved arms,

scissoring legs. Colette moved past the gap in the backdrop, her face scoured clean of expression.

Anna didn't have time to watch, anyway. Eliza's class was up next, and she was the one supposed to get them into position. "Angels," she hissed, to get their attention. "Girls." She pulled the nearest one by the shoulder toward the gap in the scaffolding and helped the rest form themselves into the line they'd learned, behind her. "Ready?"

But two still hung back, turned away. One had her head bowed. Her silly tulle wings drooped down her back. Her mother must not have known to stiffen them with starch, or, after that, to store the netted skirt inside out on a hanger until the afternoon of the recital. The other stood close beside her, patting her hand. Anna hurried toward them.

The girl turned and Anna saw that it was the dark-haired one, Olive, her face streaked with tears. Anna's own daughter Eliza stood beside her.

"It's time to go on stage!" Anna cried brightly.

Eliza turned to Anna and tugged at her hand. "She's sad," she whispered as Anna bent down. "Her daddy can't come."

Kelli gestured urgently at Anna from the other side of the stage. The music rose, ebbed, hastened. The beat Anna was supposed to listen for had passed. "I'm sure he's out there by now," she soothed. She turned Olive's shoulders and steered her to the end of the line of girls starting to surge onto the stage. "Smile real big for him, honey!"

The first girl in the line had already stepped into the audience's vision and was making her wavering, twirling way across the expanse of the wooden platform. Olive stopped short. She stared back at Anna. "He can't be," she said matter-of-factly. Anna leaned close to catch her words. "He died when I was little. In a car crash." She gave Anna a measured look.

Anna opened her mouth to say something, but the jostling girls had already propelled Olive onto the stage. They hopped around her, their arms curved over their heads.

Anna sank back on her heels. She looked at Olive through the gap in the curtain, gestured —up, up. The girls on either side were already twirling. They waved at their parents; twisted toward them, away. Anna forced herself to smile. Olive looked at her uncertainly and raised her hands until they met overhead. Anna nodded. Olive turned toward the audience and started to dart and weave through the line of girls. Hands clasped, released. The girl in front of her flung her hands above her head, both artless and artful.

From Anna's position between the two curtains, she could see everything. Beyond the lip of the stage, a bouquet swathed in green floral paper slid abruptly from a lap to the lawn. The audience climbed to its feet in a lovely, wavelike movement, and dozens of cell phones and cameras pointed toward the stage.