

Virginie T.

The fallen angels - Tome 1



Dance my Angel



Virginie T. **Dance, My Angel**

Аннотация

Paranormal romance between a human in danger and an angel

Caitlyn has been the lead dancer of the American Ballet Theater of New York for several years. Lonely and withdrawn, her life revolves around dance, and her biggest fan is none other than her grandmother. Everything changes when someone starts to harass her. Who can it be and for what purpose? Her grandmother is ready to do anything to protect her, including putting her on the path of her mysterious neighbor Baraqiel.

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Virginie T

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Chapter 1 Caitlyn

After dancing for so long, I should not be so stressed any more. After all, rehearsals always go the same way and I already have the leading role, just like the last five times.

They do not call me the rising star of the American Ballet Theater for nothing, and certainly I am far from having stolen my

place. I have fought and sacrificed enormously to be at this point.

Dance is an integral part of my life, of my being myself, and it is out of the question that I will let the last events prevent me from being me. I close my eyes, clear my thoughts, and remember the crucial stages that took me to where I am now.

I came to New York during my younger years, thanks to my dance teacher at the time and his constant insistence before my parents. I could never thank him enough for the future he allowed me to have. I still remember the harassment he inflicted on my parents. Mason Jaz is a very determined person, to say the least, and my success was something he had close to his heart. I started classic dance at age four, like many little girls, pushed by my mother who that way hoped to channel my overflow of energy, while at the same time to allow me to open up to the world and to the people around me. At only three feet tall, I was a very withdrawn child, in search of an outlet for the whirlwind of emotions that boiled inside me, and that I did not understand. Everything was a source of inner conflicts, of stress, reaching almost panic attacks. So, very early on I made the choice to speak very little and to stay away from any social interactions. A doctor had diagnosed me with a form of autism, mild enough to allow me to have an almost normal life and average intellectual capacities, but sufficiently developed for human relations to be a real problem for me. At the time, that meant nothing to the young child I was, except that I was different from other children, and I did not see the need of this gentleman in a white coat to

notice it. My mother had thought dance could be a cure for my ailments, a way to express what I was holding in my body and in my heart. If she had known at the time how far that would take us, she might have thought twice about it. Mason quickly saw my potential, and from a simple hobby this activity became my passion, devouring, invasive, and one that changed the life of the whole family, as well as their vision of the future.

Dance was indeed a miraculous cure. Through it, I could express my most inner feelings: rage, envy, love. I started dance competitions at only six years old, impressing the juries with my maturity, and snatching up the prizes every time I participated. On the other hand, my parents, willingly or not, took me from town to town, roaming Florida up and down and across. At that time my parents gave me everything so as not to hinder my progress, even putting aside their own desires and needs. Nothing existed other than dance, at the end quite the opposite of what my parents wanted from me, which was that I opened up to the world. My school schedule was overloaded, between the regular school classes that I put up with by obligation, and the 10 hours of dance a week, but that was never enough for me. Back then, dance already was the only thing I lived for. My father worked countless overtime hours to pay for my classes and the family budget was tight, even though Mason did not charge us his whole fees. My parents had to give up their desire for a second child because of lack of time and of resources. When I was eight years old, it was obvious to everyone that things could not go on like

this forever. The problem was that dance had become my drug and I was unable to do without it. The weeks I was on vacation were always a real physical torture for me, even though I trained in solitary, and the return to the dance classes a real relief, the breath of oxygen that was essential to my survival. So my teacher suggested to my parents the idea of sending me to New York, to The School of American Ballet, which for me was paradise on earth. Their categorical and immediate refusal was a stab to my little heart. They were denying me the right to be normal, to be me.

In retrospective, I am now aware of all the sacrifices they made so that I could realize my dream, but at the time I was too young to understand, and I was mad at them. Very much.

— Send me to this specialized school, please. Mason said it would be perfect for me.

—It is not possible Caitlyn. We have a job, friends, home, and there is no way you will go alone thousands of miles away.

—But I am always alone anyway, what would then be the difference?

Under their wounded gaze, I left to find refuge with my confidante and my number one unconditional fan, my grandmother, who lived only a few blocks away.

—Granny, they won't let me make my dream come true. They would rather have me end up as a waitress. But I was born to dance, you know that. I can say everything I want with ballet steps. I need it to feel good. Why is that they don't understand

this?

— Hey, my Caitlyn kitten, calm down. Come and give grandma a hug.

Snuggled in her arms, listening to her slow and steady breathing, my torments always subsided. Even today, she has that scent of roses that goes to your head and that calm voice after her long experience of life. She has always been the only one with whom I feel I am like everybody else. She understands me even if I do not say a single word. She has never considered me a weirdo. For her I am her beloved granddaughter, whom she affectionately nicknames Caitlyn kitten.

—Everything will be sorted out in due course, my kitten. You will see.

I did not believe her, but I did not reply because she was, and still is today, the only person I did not want to disappoint under any circumstances. Besides, my grandmother was right. It took two years. Two long years of battle between my stubborn parents and my persistent teacher, two years of frustration and of going back and forth to grandma to calm me down, but we ended up leaving Florida. My parents were transferred to New York so they could follow me on this adventure, finding me too young to be away from my family. That day was a real heartbreak. In my eagerness to attend a specialized school that lived up to my expectations, I had not realized that leaving this sunny place also meant I would be away from my grandmother. That was an immeasurable pain, just soothed by the promise she made me.

—I will go to see you regularly, and I will never miss any of your premieres. I promise you Caitlyn kitten. And you, promise me to do whatever it takes to be at the top. Make your dream come true, and show the world who the real Caitlyn is.

—I'm going to miss you, Grandma.

While I had cried in the car that was taking me to my destiny, I was unable to say a word of thanks to my parents, who had left everything for me: their family, their friends, their home. Even today, when I remember the moment when I said goodbye to my grandmother, I feel a pinch in my heart and a smile, all at once. Because she has kept her promise, and I have kept mine.

For many, the admission to The School of American Ballet is a myth, something that one hopes for, something you dream about, but you never achieve because it is something reserved for the elite and the privileged few with an exceptional life. Fortunately for me, Mason had prepared me well and it turned out to be just a formality. With only 10 years old, I dazzled the older ones with my performance and the emotions I transmitted through my steps. I chained pickets, arabesques and cat jumps with no misstep, and I received a full scholarship to join the following weeks the courses with the teenage girls. Yet another difference with the rest of the girls. The age difference meant that we did not have the same life nor the same goals, and that despite a common passion, I continued to be isolated. Fifteen-year-old girls blossomed in their budding bodies and were always seeking the boys' eyes. By contrast, I spent my days in front of the mirror,

with the sole aim of achieving perfection in my practice. That has not really changed since, as the jealousy with my progress has kept this situation alive. My teen-age years had little in common with those of the other girls. I flirted a little, more to do like everyone else than because I wanted to, and when I did it I had no great success. There was an invisible barrier between these young fellows looking for an experience and me: the barrier of a total lack of understanding. I never understood what they expected of me, and vice versa. On the other hand, I did not know what I expected from them. Being a little less lonely, no doubt. The experience was not really unpleasant. Only I felt no particular attachment to my boyfriends, and given how easily they left me I think the feeling was reciprocal. Then, since I was not successful, I finally decided that it was better to be alone than to be misunderstood.

And here I am twelve years later, ready to take the stage for the dress rehearsal of the *Sleeping Beauty*. Playing Princess Aurora is a bit of a little girl's dream, and tomorrow, at the premiere, my grandmother will be present, in one of the front rows. She will stay with me for a few days before returning home, and this time will allow us to reset the meters to zero, erasing the absence felt during these few months of been away from each other. My parents will also be there, but too many unspoken grudges have blocked our relationship. My acceptance by the ballet school and the scholarship I obtained allowed me to take off quickly, and at the same time to have my independence. Very

rapidly, more reproaches were spurted against me and my status as an ungrateful daughter grew even more. They resented me for having made them leave Florida, for never having time for them, and for not even giving them the consideration they were entitled to expect as parents. When I was younger, I retorted to them that I had asked them to send me to New York, but that I never asked them to follow me. As if parents worthy of that name were able to send a ten-year-old child thousands of miles away, alone! Things quickly escalated and now it is too late to remedy them, the jealousy towards my exceptional relationship with my grandmother has taken on cataclysmic proportions. Deep down I thank them for giving me so much, but I am unable to express my gratitude to them and it is too late for them to understand it. So, for them I am only a disappointment, despite my incredible success, and the sacrifice of a second child that they made, who they feel would have given them more than me.

My happiness would have been total if my fame, all relative I grant you, the world of dance still is not Hollywood with its movie stars, were not accompanied by the inconveniences I had from the publicity. My picture has been appearing all over New York for weeks, to advertise the show that will take place at the famous Lincoln Center, and since then I can no longer step outside without being recognized, without signing autographs, and, more worryingly, without receiving a few somewhat creepy letters. I try to get over it, but the recurrence of these letters is starting to undermine my morale. However, I do not have time

to think about it any longer.

—Caitlyn, it is your turn. Your solo in the forest.

Here we go. A grand jeté to place myself in the center of the stage, entrechats, pas de bourré, manège, and then pirouette fouetté. In classical dance, it is all about rhythm, precision, finesse and muscle. I have a slender body without the slightest effort, which earns me the envy of many dancers who have to be on a strict diet, and this allows me to be in total harmony with the music, that transports me to another world, a clear world in which I evolve without any obstacle. In fact, I would rather say I had been evolving. No matter how hard I try to close my mind to parasitic thoughts that overwhelm me, it is impossible for me to build walls between my feelings and my artistic expression, so they have always been closely linked. For instance, now I know, even before I made my last jump, that I have not been up to the task. I feel it in my heart, and in the faces of the other dancers in the troupe that confirm it to me. They seem very happy to see me fail. The world of dance is a world of sharks, just like Wall Street. They are looking for the first opportunity that will allow them to take my place and reach front stage. Of all of them, Agatha is the cruelest of all. She is my fiercest competitor, the most ruthless. All the pretexts are good to prove me wrong. She has been mad at me ever since I joined the American Ballet. Before I arrived, she was the greatest hope of the troupe. I arrived with my innocent air and my ignorance of the competition and she became the second one, my understudy in case of an accident, only that there

have never been any accidents. Agatha is eight years older than me. She is living her last years on stage, and as time goes by she has become more and more bitter. I guess she wanted to end her career in apotheosis and now she is aware that I am the cause of her failure. I am in the prime of my life when she has, at most, only ten years of dancing in front of her. No matter what she does, I will always be there, taking the place that she considers hers by right, and all her money will never get her anywhere. Agatha comes from a large aristocratic family that owns many properties in Manhattan's poshest neighborhoods. She has long believed that her prestigious name would always open all doors to her, even if she had to lay a few banknotes on the table to unlock the most obstinate locks. My arrival has put an end to her illusions and she does not accept it. She went so far as to offer me a large sum of money if I retired from the stage. She obviously took my refusal very badly. I have no interest in money. What is the point of being rich if you are unhappy? Without dance, I feel like I am locked in my own body. I could not live without it. My competitor has not understood it and she will never understand it. The only thing that matters to her is the glory. Glory and recognition. As if ballet were a glamorous world filled with glitter! Ballet for me is mostly a world of sweat and hard work.

— Psst. Caitlyn. You are not at your best today, are you? I could replace you if your mind is elsewhere. The public will not lose anything because of the change, I can assure you, and we have to think about our fans first.

As if I were going to accept. I would rather walk past her without even looking at her. What makes her burst more with anger is when I ignore her, more that when we have a verbal argument, and very soon I understood that.

— You are just a bitch. The leading role is rightfully mine and I will have it.

In her dreams for sure. Actually I am occupying that place and I am not about to leave it. It is time for her to be reasonable.

Chapter 2Caitlyn

The day of the premiere has finally arrived. Despite an upsurge of letters, for me very unpleasant, I was able to succeed by emptying my mind as much as possible, and by letting go out, through dance, all the emotions that lingered on me. That had not been without difficulty since the letters had become more and more threatening in the run-up to the show. The last one, the very same day of the show, did not arrive at the theatre like all the others, but directly at home, to my sanctuary, to my refuge, which then seemed to be less safe and less comforting. Therefore, the choreographer found my expressions a little too aggressive during our last rehearsal, and asked me to use makeup to soften my facial features tonight to the maximum, but overall he is satisfied with my performance.

My grandmother is here, I know, I feel her eyes on me. She had no time to visit me at my dressing room before the

performance, but I always know when she is here. I immediately feel more soothed, which I need a lot. Like for any autistic person, noise, crowds, are factors difficult to bear. Fortunately, the hall is plunged into darkness and the audience is silent, focused on the music and dancers who evolve fluidly on stage, telling one of the most famous children's tales. I make my entrance with some pirouettes on pointe. I close my eyes and let the music take me away. I feel the vibration of the sounds from the tip of my toes to those of my hair, waving in rhythm, occupying all the available space on stage. My heart beats with the violin notes, my breathing accelerates as my steps are linked. I feel everything at the deepest of my being: Aurora's exile, her isolation in the middle of the forest, the joy of finding her loved ones, the pain of losing them as soon as she is back, and the hope of finally being loved. This ballet is made for me. It kind of traces my own life, from the time I left Florida to the time I found my place on stage. No prince charming for me, but a great love all the same: the love of dance. This passion that fills my heart with joy. Time runs so fast on stage. At a frantic pace that I cannot realize. Very quickly, too fast, the ballet is over. The curtain is lowered to the deafening applause of the audience. With all this uproar I feel my shoulders tense. I wish I could run away from the crowd, but it is not possible. I am the first dancer of the show and the spectators are largely here to see me. I manage that the ovations do not to go on forever, but that is the only compromise I have been given. Therefore, I clench my

teeth while the whole troupe joins me on stage and we greet the audience together as soon as the red velvet curtain rises. The room is now lit, allowing me to realize the extent of people that came, and I prefer not to prolong this vision that makes me panic. I am looking for my grandmother's eyes. She is in her usual seat, on the balcony to the left of the stage, and I focus on her face. Her features have not changed since her last visit ten months ago. To believe that time has no hold on her. Her silver hair is straightened in a sophisticated chignon and her outfit highlights her slim waist. I may be far away, but I can guess her pride in her look and in her smile. I see from the corner of my eye my parents by her side, but like every time they look at me, their faces do not express anything. No joy, no pain. It seems that my performance and my success have left them indifferent. I wonder why they keep coming to see my premieres since they never seem to enjoy ballet. Fortunately, the curtain finally drops and I can erase my facade smile that creates cramps in my zygomatics. The whole troupe jumps for joy and kisses, taking care to avoid me. Everyone has understood that I am not tactile. Only some dancers pay attention to me and nod to congratulate me.

— You are pathetic. You think you are so much better than everybody else that you cannot even rejoice with us.

It seems that Agatha has not exhausted all her energy on stage. She is full of gall for me. I prefer to ignore her and turn my back on her to go to my personal dressing room, but my competitor has decided otherwise. She stands in front of me, blocking my

way, and raises her voice so that all eyes are on us.

— Look, you have nothing to gloat about. Your performance was not terrible. Only mediocre. Do you have a preoccupied mind perhaps? You should leave the show before you ruin it for good.

— Leave her alone, Agatha. Caitlyn danced very well tonight. She has been fabulous, like always.

Alex... My guardian angel against all odds. Our story was brief and of little interest, but it turned out that to me he became a much better friend than lover. He is the only one who has adapted to my versatile character and my obvious lack of communication. He rapidly realized that it was not meanness on my part, but that was the way I was. He is the defender of the oppressed and the just causes. I believe that I alone represent most of his work as a knight in shining armor, even though I am not the only one to benefit from his unconditional support. I am probably withdrawn, but Agatha does not like anyone and makes some of us feel it. I take advantage of Alex's intervention to sneak discreetly down the hallway while Agatha shouts her bile to anyone who wants to hear her.

My colleagues are convinced that I have no character. If they had made the effort to know me, they could have guessed rage was bubbling in my veins and shining in my eyes. When I was younger, the slightest annoyance caused a violent tantrum during which I hit and broke everything I could get hold on. Then I started dancing, my seizures were less frequent until they

disappeared. Dance was my outlet and I do not want to go back. Rather look dull and unsavory than crazy. When I was a kid, the first doctor my parents saw accused them of abuse. Of the 42 signs of child abuse, I had more than half of them, ranging from physical injuries to emotional and behavioral disorders. Fortunately, the social worker who was sent to my family for investigation was trained in autistic disorders, which prevented me to be sent to a foster home that would have only worsened my psychological state. The idea of expressing my emotions through an activity comes from her. A blessing. I became less violent, hence the significant drop in bruises and sores on my body, and it became easier for me to concentrate at school since I could let go in the late afternoon. Only my running away continued. I never went far. I took refuge at my grandmother's waiting for the storm to pass. I only had to think of her, to see her appear in my mirror. She is the only person authorized to have access to my dressing room.

— Good evening Caitlyn cat.

She will always make me smile. Despite the passing years, she keeps calling me like when I was little. I put down my cotton pad and my make-up remover to hug her. Here we go. I am finally home. It is enough that she is here, no matter where, for me to feel soothed.

— Good evening, Granny.

— Let me look at you my kitten.

She steps aside a little and I gladly consent to her inspection.

Nothing escapes her, and certainly not the dark circles under my eyes that are now visible without the makeup that camouflaged them.

— You look great, darling. Only you work too hard and it shows. You need to rest.

— I'll think about it, Granny.

She raises an eyebrow skeptically. She knows me too well.

— All right, I'll make an effort during your stay.

— Good. I intend to spend as much time as possible with you.

I'm sure we have a lot to talk about from last time I was here.

I doubt it, but it does not matter. All I want is to be with her, even if we say nothing. And then, if I have nothing to tell her, maybe she does. I know she loves her new home in the middle of nowhere. And her neighbor. Specially her neighbor. She tells me about him every time she calls me. I think she dreams, secretly or not, that we may fall for each other. My grandmother still has dreams for me. She is so sweet.

— Are you ready to go Caitlyn? Your parents are waiting for us to go to the restaurant.

Oh yes. The famous family dinner! The one that only takes place the evening of my premieres and which nowadays is my only contact with my parents. Yet, despite our total lack of contact the rest of the year, I have absolutely nothing to say to them, or rather, I cannot talk to them, and this dinner quickly turns into a silent and uncomfortable meal where my grandmother struggles for two hours to re-create family ties that

never really existed. I am as pleased by this idea as I am to leave my place of first dancer to Agatha.

— You are much more expressive than you think Caitlyn kitten. Don't make that face darling. This dinner is important to our family.

— That is what you say!

— OK, it means a lot to me. I want to reunite my son and my granddaughter.

Those pleading eyes... for a long time I have wanted to have the same eyes. That for sure would have changed my life!

— You're a manipulator, Granny. I just have to change and I'm ready.

— You are the best granddaughter in the world.

— I have no doubt about that.

She stops just before going through the door to hand me an envelope that had been slipped underneath. I receive it with trembling hands. I have started to fear the mail.

— And kitten, put on a pretty dress, please. I don't want your mother to have a seizure when she sees you show up in ripped jeans like last time.

Seeing her face at that time was certainly worthwhile. Nevertheless, I do not have the heart to smile. I open the blood-red envelope knowing in advance what it contains. All the threatening letters I have received have been identical to this one. I immediately recognize the angry handwriting all over the paper. It is coarse and violent, both in words and in the handwriting

pattern, so dry and sharp pointed that has left holes in the paper under the virulence of the strokes.

” You didn't listen to me. I told you you were mine and I forbade you to show your ass in tutus to everybody. You should have quit on your own when you had the chance instead of being a bitch. Now, I am the one who is taking matters in my own hands. You will only dance for me. I will come and get you“.

My breathing is short and jerky and my hands are shaking so much that the letter falls to the floor. This is the first time that the man writes down his intention to come to see me, because he is a man, no doubt. The first letters that came to me had made me think of a fan a little too possessive. He recounted in his letters the life of a couple that he imagined for us, with a lot of salacious words. Over time, the descriptions became cruder and the words more threatening. He went from “I'm going to take you in every single way” to “I'm going to impale you on my cock and I am going to fuck you until you scream in pain”. He also blames me for my lack of reaction and involvement in our relationship as a couple. What couple? I do not know anyone twisted enough to make up a torrid story with me. The way he imagines me makes it clear that we do not know each other. Apparently, he decided to remedy this fact. I take my cell phone out of my bag trying to regain control of myself. When the letters have become a source of anguish, I have sent them to the director of the ballet who had contacted the police. Unfortunately, at the moment the inspectors have no leads and, according to them, there is nothing to worry

about. It seems that most anonymous stalkers never take action. What about the others? I was not given any answers. I think I am paranoid. Okay, I am a little bit. Let's say I have a natural tendency to extrapolate everything. But it is time for those letters to stop.

— Caitlyn! You've been fabulous. The feedback comments from the spectators are very good.

— Thank you sir, but I'm not calling you for that.

I hear him sighing on the phone. He does not like me either. He supports me because I am useful to him. I make a lot of money for him and he feels compelled to make an effort with me.

— What can I do for you?

— I have received a new letter.

— We've talked about it before. You have to get over it and throw them away without opening them. This man will never act.

— In fact, I received one at home and one was slipped into my dressing room.

The silence that follows reassures me. Maybe I will finally be taken seriously.

— Leave them with Security when you leave the theatre. I am going to send them to the police.

— Thank you, sir.

— You are welcome Caitlyn. Enjoy your evening. You deserve it. We'll see you tomorrow to talk about the investigation.

— All right. Good-bye.

I am relieved by this call. I just hope these new letters will

make a difference. I am already afraid enough of the world around me without adding the fear of a psychopath.

I get ready in a minute. Not that I am in any hurry to see my parents, but I cannot wait to get rid of those damn letters which I cannot stand to see on my hairdresser. I leave the theater after a last glance in the mirror, entrusting the letters to Security.

Chapter 3 Caitlyn

My parents have not changed an inch. My father as always has his unruly graying hair, and his piercing blue eyes same as mine, and my mother is dressed up in her tight pantsuit and her chignon without a single strand of hair sticking out. The way they stare at me is no way different from how they looked at me when I was little. As if I were an alien impossible to decipher.

— Thank you for honoring us with your presence Caitlyn. You took your time to join us! You know your mom cannot stay up for long.

In fact, my mother does have some knee problems due to failing joints, but it is only painful in cold and rainy weather and tonight the sky is incredibly clear.

— Hi, Dad. It's incredibly mild for the season, don't you think? We can even see the stars.

— Don't be rude Caitlyn.

Well, yes. My parents have always stood together, especially against me. My grandmother comes in before dinner is cut short.

More than short, since we are not even at the restaurant yet.

— Let's go eat. I'm starving.

Grandma passes her arm under mine and we walk on the sidewalk in silence, at the head of our little procession. I have the unpleasant impression of being observed. It is like a look burning my back, making cold sweats grow along my spine. I might think this is due to the presence of my parents; however, they have never caused me such an epidermal reaction. I shudder when I look around, but the faint glow of the moon and the few scattered lampposts do not allow me to distinguish the surroundings well, creating at most disturbing shadows in the darkness.

— Are you cold, darling?

— No, Granny. I am OK. I just can't wait to get home. I am tired.

I did not tell my grandmother about the letters. I did not want her to worry about me. She leads a peaceful life and there is no question of that changing.

— When are you going to visit me in Virginia? Clean air and large spaces would do you the greatest good.

— I have no doubt, Granny, but the season is just beginning and the Sleeping Beauty shows will continue for several weeks.

— And then there will be the selection of a new ballet, which of course you will win hands down. Then the rehearsals for the new show and again the performances. It never stops, Cat.

I lower my head, ashamed to be such a bad granddaughter. These remarks are entirely justified.

— I'm sorry to disappoint you, Granny.

She stops so abruptly to look me in the face that my parents stumble upon us.

— You will never disappoint me Caitlyn Cat. Do you hear me? I'm extremely proud of you and so are your parents.

She gives them a strong look to which they can only respond positively.

— Of course Caitlyn. We're happy for you.

It is not really the same as being proud, but I would settle for it. I know I would not get anything better from them. We resume our slow walk.

— I just want you to discover something other than dance. Besides, I'd like to introduce you to Baraqiel.

— Your neighbor?

She agrees, nodding.

— You never told me his first name. It is very strange.

— Don't judge him without meeting him. He is an angel, darling.

Of course! My grandmother loves everyone regardless of anything. The good-natured conversation could have ended there, but obviously my mother had to get involved once we are sitting at the table.

— In any case, mother-in-law, you know well that Caitlyn has no time for love. For that she would have to be interested in someone other than herself, and this is not about to happen.

My mother is getting more and more bitter. I wonder why she

forces herself to come to see me when she clearly does not want to. No doubt that is not my grandmother's fault. She knows how to be very persuasive. I would like to be able to tell my family that I love them, but that would require my parents to accept me as I am and they would never do it. Today it is too late and my silence is always taken as a rejection. In fact, it is more an acceptance of the situation. As always, my grandmother serves as a buffer in our conflicting relationships. I believe that without her, there would be no interaction at all between my parents and me.

— Let's order. It's getting late for an old lady like me.

I choose my dishes, but I feel oppressed between the heavy silence at our table and the hubbub of other customers' conversations. My grandmother knows me well and squeezes my hand under the table.

— Go ahead, you have time.

I get up hurriedly, ignoring my mother who is already starting to grumble. The air from the outside makes me feel good. The light breeze caresses my bare legs and makes my cheeks rosy. I take advantage of the calm of the night to take a few steps before leaning against a wall and looking up at the sky. There is not a single cloud and the stars twinkle on this beautiful black velvet carpet. I could stay here for hours to let this peace invade my tormented soul. When I was little, I dreamed of flying away and dancing on a cloud. Nevertheless, a sound of footsteps on my left makes me startle and realize where I am. I am a lonely woman in a dark alley in New York. I straighten up, an uneasiness choking

my guts. I turn back to get to the door of the restaurant. I am not very far and yet the distance suddenly seems enormous. I feel like someone is following me. I am sure of it. Footsteps. Heavy breathing. I do not like it and a dull anguish squeezes my stomach while my heart beats fast. I quicken my pace, relieved until I finally reach my goal, and I thank the doorman who takes the lead by letting me pass without me having to slow down. In the shelter of the glass doors I turn around, but I only see the deserted and silent street. There is no one on the horizon. My heart resumes a calmer rhythm, but my head is stuck in anxiety. Emotions mix in me, threatening to cause an autistic crisis like I have not experienced in a long time. I take refuge in one of the toilet cubicles, I lock it, I curl up on myself on the floor, and I start to swing back and forth. I need to dance to externalize the fear that consumes me. Only it is impossible to do it right now. So I try to refocus on myself and to clear my mind. Easier said than done!

There is a click of heels on the tiles in front of my door. I back off instinctively, but I am blocked by the toilet bowl behind my back.

— Caitlyn kitten? You're okay? I saw you in the lobby, but you didn't come back to the table.

Hearing Grandma's voice makes me feel good. I choose to focus on that, on her and her voice, counting in my head. Inspiration, 1, 2, 3, 4. Expiration, 1, 2, 3, 4. I repeat the exercise five times in a row. My grandmother, after making a round trip

along all the cubicles, stops at my door.

— Open up kitten. I'm sure you're here.

I extend my arm to unlock the lock and Granny opens it gently. Her eyes are sad when she looks at me. She squats in front of me and strokes my hair as she always does when she feels I am tormented.

— What's going on, darling?

I do not want to talk about it. Not now, and certainly not here. I am going to tell her everything. I need to. But I would do it at home, in the safety of my apartment. If I am still safe there, which I'm not sure about anymore.

— Your parents love you Caitlyn Cat. They just don't know how to behave with you. They can't understand you.

— I know, Granny. It doesn't matter.

I prefer that she thinks my reaction is due to this awkward dinner, for the moment anyway.

— Come on, come on, darling. Don't stay on the floor, you'll catch a cold on that frozen tile.

She helps me get up and arranges the bottom of my dress which is slightly pulled up.

— You are past the age of showing your panties, my dear.

Her comment draws a smile from me and we join our table hand in hand.

— Finally here you are again. What were you doing Caitlyn? Were you handing out autographs?

I could laugh about it if only I did not want to cry. My mother

is convinced that I prefer fame to family life by their side. How wrong she is! What I have chosen is normality, freedom. In the end, I chose to free my mind from all the feelings that bombard me all the time, to live an ordinary life, even if most people do not think it is that ordinary. It is true that a picture of me dressed as a classical dancer is on half of the buses of the city and that I regularly make an appearance in all trade magazines. However, all I see is that I do what I love. And until recently, I was able to ignore all the crap around me.

— You could at least sit down, so we can finally start!

— Sorry. Of course!

Indeed, as usual, I was lost in my thoughts and I remained frozen next to the table. Then I sit on my chair and the meal goes like all the others, in an almost religious silence, only interspersed with phrases from my grandmother who desperately tries to renew the dialogue between all of us.

— Maybe tomorrow we could visit the city together.

— Certainly not! Our national star surely has better things to do than spend time with us.

Definitely my mother will never forgive me for being who I am: independent. When I was diagnosed with autism, she was upset, my tantrums being unmanageable, but she also thought that I would always need her by my side to succeed in life, and she liked that idea. She thought I would be mommy's little girl forever. The future has shown her otherwise.

I would rather answer grandma so I do not argue with my

mom.

— I'm not working tomorrow. We are given a day off. I just have to practice in the morning and then I'm all yours.

— A real miracle! It doesn't have to happen often, because you don't even take the time to call us!

Grandma intervenes, as always.

— I'd love to visit Ellis Island. We have never been there before.

I have never set foot there either. Being stuck on a ferry has never excited me more than that, but walking away with my grandma from the Big Apple and my worries, even for a few hours, is a very seductive idea.

— That's a great idea, Granny. We will go there after lunch. I'll get the tickets before my rehearsal.

— And you don't even ask us if we would like to join you, of course!

I swallow the lump that is blocking my throat. My mother will not spare me anything tonight. Looks like it is time to settle our accounts. Unfortunately, I can't stand it but I'd rather be docile than face it, even if I break the armrest of my chair by clenching my fingers on it.

— Dad, mommy, would you like to come with us to Ellis Island tomorrow?

— Well, it so happens that we cannot do it. We are working tomorrow. We are not available when the lady decides to give us some of her time.

That is what it is all about! And after that they are going to blame me for making no effort. I bite my tongue to avoid screaming, so hard that blood fills my mouth. I cannot wait for this meal to end so that I can finally take refuge at home and get rid of my overflow of tension. I have set up at home a whole room for this single purpose with a mirror and a crossbar on the wall. A mini personal dance hall that will serve me well if I want to be able to close my eyes tonight.

Finally home! My comfortable income allows me to have this big 3-bedroom apartment in the heart of New York, close to the American Ballet Theater, so I do not have to take public transportation. A real luxury for me. I can walk everywhere and that suits me very well. I open the door and ask my grandmother to come in before me. She may be fit for her age, but I feel she is tired and I am sure she will be looking forward to go to her room. Because she has her own room in my house. I never invite anyone but her, so the third room has been furnished according to her tastes and desires.

— Look, Caitlyn Cat. A letter has been slipped under your door. Is it that you have a secret admirer whose existence you have hidden from me?

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