

Still Life And Death

by
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Savanna sat beside Aidan in the darkened auditorium of Carson High School, waiting for Mollie's ballet number. There were still several ahead of her, and then her tap dance was nine songs after that, plenty of time to change costumes. Dress rehearsal ran for two days, with a one-day break before the recital this Friday. When Aidan had asked if she had any interest in coming with him tonight, she'd immediately said yes. She fondly remembered her dancing days, and all the magical excitement surrounding rehearsal and the spring recital. Plus she needed an excuse to keep an eye on the Blakes and Marcus Valentine.

In the large holding area backstage, she'd carefully styled Mollie's fine blond hair into a bun, using dabs of hair gel when the silky strands wouldn't stop slipping through her fingertips. She'd finally gotten it perfectly centered, with most of the fly-aways tucked into bobby pins, then told Mollie to hold her breath while she'd spritzed it with hairspray before sending her over to her group—a dozen or so children around her age, wearing sparkly, pouffy pink ballet costumes with springy tutus.

Aidan had arrived before her and snagged them seats dead center in front of the stage, in the sixth row, which, he told Savanna, was the perfect distance from the stage for pictures and video—far enough away to be able to see the full dance, including the feet, but close enough to see detail. In full dad-mode tonight, his camcorder was on a tripod in front of him and his camera was ready for still shots. Photos and video weren't allowed in the auditorium during the recital, only in rehearsal. She could see he'd done this before.

She hadn't shared with him her ulterior motive for wanting to come to dress rehearsal tonight, but she needed to know if her and Jordan's ploy this morn-ing had had any effect at all. Now, as the jazz instructor helped her students find their marks onstage, Miss Priscilla was visible in the wings at stage left, talking with her husband. With the dim lighting, it was impossible to get a feel for their interaction.

Five or six songs later, Mollie's group came onstage. Aidan went to work filming and snapping photos, while Savanna had the pleasure of sitting back and enjoying the dance. Miss Priscilla returned to the stage to give them notes, reminding them the most important thing to do was to smile. Savanna leaned over and offered again to operate the camcorder or camera, but Aidan declined. He turned to her. "Look how great she did on just the first run-through!"

She nodded. "She's very focused, you can tell. And she had the biggest smile up there."

While they waited for Mollie to come back to them in the auditorium after the ballet dance was over, Savanna scanned the instructors in the front row for Marcus Valentine. Maybe he was running late? According to the program, Mollie's tap rehearsal was another six songs—or about a half hour—from now.

When Miss Priscilla took center stage a few numbers later to announce that Mr. Marcus had had an emergency come up and all remaining tap numbers would be postponed to Wednesday instead of today, Savanna was only mildly surprised. The parents in the row ahead of her put their heads together and consulted the program with the light from their phones.

Savanna leaned forward. "Excuse me. What happened to Mr. Marcus, do you know?"

The woman who always sat across from Savanna in the lobby during tap classes turned to reply. Her little boy, Andy or Alex or something like that, was in Mollie's class. "No," the woman said. "He was here earlier, but he left a few numbers ago."

Outside the high school in the cool evening air, Savanna congratulated Mollie on a beautiful job well done. She parted ways with Aidan and his daughter, with the plan to meet them here tomorrow to watch Mollie's tap number.

It was dark by the time Savanna pulled into her driveway. Coming through her front door, she found it was unlocked. She must've forgotten to lock it. Her dad would be so upset with her if he knew.

She whistled for Fonzie. Then she hung her sweater and car keys on their hooks, dropped the tote of projects she had to grade, and sank into her plush couch by the front window. She hadn't realized how tired she was until just now. When she called Fonzie's name again, she heard yelping and scratching coming from the bathroom.

Had she accidentally closed him in there after work today, when she'd been rushing to get to the auditorium? Poor dog! "Fonzie, I'm so sorry, buddy," she called. She hurried down the hallway and flung the bathroom door open. The little dog catapulted out onto the hardwood, his feet skittering and clacking as he barked and whined at her, pawing at her legs. Savanna bent and scooped him up, hugging him. "It's okay! I can't believe I locked you in there!" He leaped out of her arms and raced toward the kitchen. Sheesh. He must need to go out.

She moved down the hallway and halted abruptly in the doorway to her kitchen. Every cabinet and drawer stood open.

A quick glance over at the dining room confirmed someone had been—or was still—in her house.