## 22. the dying swan

**Azrael Carmen** I raised on tiptoe, my arms folded. Le Cygne thrummed through the studio so ly. I circled the place, gliding my hands up in the air. The old record player spun to the slow music notes from the corner. I felt it on my skin. A burning pain on my bare feet inside the unbreakable pointe, it sliced up my legs to the very center of my chest, splitting me a inside out. Sweat trickled down my face. I gritted my teeth as I bent to the music before emerging again to mimic the strive toward the horizon, as though a moment more I was going to fly and explore the confines of space with my very soul. Except I knew I would not fly anywhere. I did this tragic routine a thousand times over. I was always dying with the swan. But, some death was meant to be a<sup>4</sup> celebrated. The air turned eerily cold, humming from outside into the windows. It sliced through the thin layer of my leotard. I listened as notes gradually relaxed and sank to the floor, my skirt fluttering the side of my thighs and my arms waving faintly as in pain. Then, I stood up again and faltered toward the edge of the studio. My bones quivered like the strings of harp and by one swi forward gliding motion with my right foot, I sank again to my le knee. a It was coming to an end. The swan struggled between life and death against earthly bonds. I slid my arms down my leg and bent to accept the everlasting torment. And, there, transfixed by pain, the aerial creature died. I felt very still but my body trembled frantically as the music died into a screeching scratch. The room shrank down thrice its size. My leotard suddenly felt too tight and I could barely breath. I dug my nails into my skin as I brought my legs up to my chest and broke down in the middle of the hauntingly cold ballet studio. I cried for the ballerina in me who couldn't dance. Angry tears streamed down my cheeks at the woman who broke me. Former Prima ballerina assoluta, Melanie Carmen, stared down at me from the picture I religiously kept hanging on the wall with her icy eyes that matched mine. Even in her death the woman was taunting me, cutting me into pieces. a "Happy death anniversary, mamá." I glared at her, abruptly standing straight up. I stalked toward her picture like I did every years since I was seventeen and yanked it o, smashing the frame and shattering glass until I felt better. ď It was a never ending cycle. I only ever danced twice a year. The unfortunate event of her birthday and the day she died. I could not handle doing the thing I loved most anymore. Not with her haunting every leap I took. Her so spoken criticism still drummed inside my head. Dancing used to free me and now it was my death by a thousand cuts. đ My father said she cursed me. But, I knew I just wasn't strong enough. Except the times I danced for Elliot. As much as I hated his stupid face, he anchored me to the ground and under his gaze I didn't feel like I was breaking apart. å Maybe because his cocky grin reminded me that someone needed to stay strong and humble his fucking ego. å I glanced at the clock at the thought of him. A calming sense wa ed over me because this time I didn't have to come home to an empty house where my own puppy was half ignoring me. I wiped my face and could not change out of the costume fast enough, hurrying back. 🝠 Then, I drove back to the city while the flame ate my leotard and pointe shoes. And, the abandoned dance studio where I buried my mother under disappeared from the rear view mirror. The townhouse was silent and dark. I dropped my keys into the bowl and strode though the empty hallway to the kitchen. I absentmindedly opened the fridge and grabbed a bottle of water. Turning around, I leaned against the sink and drank the water. Elliot and Oakley must be on their evening run again. It was absolutely absurd how they became best friends in a span of four days. I even caught the grumpy puppy played with an actual dog toy instead of chewing on my heels. Everything was changing and I wasn't sure how to feel about it. á Speaking of changes, I stopped dead in my fucking track as my eyes tracked around my house. There was something wrong with it. I took a step forward and swirled around as I carefully studied the kitchen that opened up to my living room. I stopped for a moment to glare at the sight of his jacket draped across my couch. Even the air smelled di erent, like the hint of citrus from his cologne. There were stack of boxes lining neatly against the wall next to my shopping bags. My hardwood floor looked like it had been polished into precise shininess. I caught myself stumbling back into the stool behind the kitchen island. Feeling the need to take a seat and a fucking deep breath. My hand accidentally brushed across the cold marble island that felt and looked a whole lot cleaner. I quickly turned my head to the sink and found it empty. a "Oh God." I muttered as the last few days flashing back before my eyes. I was living with a boy. đ It was not supposed to be like this. He was going to suck and I was going to murder him then kick his ghost out by next week. a I never had many girl friends but I overheard enough of complaints from the wives I sadly attended charity ball with. Living with a boy meant your house turning upside down with a shit storm because they messed things up. But, my fake boyfriend was apparently broken because he was being suspiciously too perfect. I hated it. á I should be scolding him for leaving the toilet seat up. Elliot always put the damn thing down. I planned to bitch about him scattering dirty dishes and half empty cups everywhere but he dutifully cleaned a er himself and me. I made him water my little dying green garden, knowing he was going to fail. The bastard saved my basil and parsley from dying a horrible death of dehydration. I thought and glared at the happy little plants in front of the window. My own home was mocking me as I sat here sinking into mortification and horror. He was disrupting my life. An unwanted parasite leeching onto my skin like a fucking blood sucker. And, the most the terrible thing was the fact that he tricked me into signing my name next to his. Twice. The world had o icially gone to shit because my brain was all scrambled from all the grin he kept flashing at me. I could feel my dignity leaving with every drain of morals I had le. "Honey, I'm home." The sound of his voice snapped me out of my a daze like a bucket of cold water. Holy shit. Did I just conjure his ugly face straight out of my head. Fuck. Oakley strolled into the room first as Elliot locked the front door. The flu ball looked at me weirdly before slithering up to me and nuzzling his head against my legs as if he knew something was wrong with me. My chest lightened a bit and I let out a heavy sigh. I bent over to kiss his head and let him licked at my cheek even if he was a traitorous little shit because I loved him anyways. a "Where have you been? You got o work two hours ago." Elliot asked, walking into the room. I was dancing on my dead mother's corpse. I grimaced at my own thought but because I didn't want to scare o my fake boyfriend, I settled on something else. "I went for a drive." Which wasn't technically a lie, I did drive out of the city for awhile. "Are you avoiding me? Tired of my face already, Jane?" He asked and I knew if I looked up he was probably pouting. Although, despite his mocking tone, he sounded like he didn't really believe my bullshit. Why couldn't I get a stupid fake boyfriend? a "At least you're self aware. You do have an ugly face." I muttered and finally broke away from Oakley. a Insults instantly died from my mouth. I felt my throat drying. He stood there watching me, shirtless and sweaty from his run. I glared at the cut of his broad shoulders and the hardened abs that trailed down to his narrow hips where a running shorts hung purposely low. He tilted his head to the side and checked me out while raking a hand through his messy hair and making it stick up everywhere. He then rubbed his jaw as sweat dripped down his face. å The sight would make any models on Vogue wept with envy and shame. "How many people did you traumatize on your run? You look hideous, Elliot." I cleared my throat, gripping my half empty water bottle. ď He walked toward me slowly as Oakley the traitor Carmen walked away. He stopped in front of me, fingers sliding up my thigh as he spread my legs part before stepping between them. A string of shiver shot down my whole body and I shuddered. I silently watched him. His scent was so overwhelming, it sent my head spinning. He still smelled so good. Like my worst nightmare coming to life. Why did he have to smell so good? I didn't like this. The warmth radiating o his body fought away the cold I brought with me from the dance studio. I followed his movement as he unwrapped my grip around the water bottle and stole it away. "Your neighbors enjoyed the view plenty." He informed me like it was a good thing while drinking my water. I glared as he took a step back, taking his warmth with him. I wasn't sure if I wanted to scream at him and demand he came back to give me a hug because I needed it, or if I wanted jump on the bastard and strangled him to death. a "I'm breaking up with you." I grumbled, grabbing an apple from the fruit basket and throwing it at his fucking head. a My neighborhood consisted of pretty trust fund daughters trying to be independent and leggy supermodels jogging around in cute shorts. And, they all hated me. a The only one I approved of was Mrs. Berkeley next door. She was around a hundred with an elegant bob cut and baked the best cinnamon rolls. We were sort of acquaintances because she called me a bitch straight to my face when I first moved in here. I tolerated her ever since and vice versa. We had an unspoken bond. a Elliot stood there grinning at me like a fucking idiot. He bit into the apple I threw at him, tilting his head sideway as if mocking me. "Are you jealous, sunshine?" "Go die in a hole, Elliot." I glared, getting o the stool and trying to storm o. He chuckled and caught me with a tight hug. My face smashed into his sweaty chest as I cursed at the bastard. "Later. And, literally. You make me live in your basement, woman. The hostility and cruelty isn't lost on me." a I felt a smile creeping up my mouth with satisfaction as I remembered the looks on his face when I showed him his new bedroom. "Are you smiling, baby sunshine?" He asked, immediately turning my smile upside down.  $a^3$ "Let me go." I muttered but sank a little into his embrace. I needed my anchor even if I hated him. a His grip loosened around my shoulder and he casually slid his hand up and down my body. He sighed as he dropped his head to nuzzle my neck. "For practice. Just in case we need to hug in public." He murmured so ly when he felt me struggling. a I allowed myself a moment of weakness and circled my arms around his neck. "Okay." I agreed because the last time a paparazzo caught him hugging me I had look like I wanted to murder him in the picture. "You don't smell like blood. I assume the small children are safe from you for the day." He hummed into my neck. a I dropped my arms and elbowed him in the ribs, pushing his chest as he stumbled back with a low groan. "I hate you." "You broke my bones." He mocked gasp as he dramatically rubbed his ribcage. "Don't make me go over there and break your face." I narrowed my eyes at him. He raised his hands in surrender. A grin tugging at his mouth as it always did every time he looked at me. "Can't take you on a date with a broken face."

"Good. I'm breaking up with you." I glared.

needed to make a call to my dad about today.

Dress Casual."

arms over my chest.

you think I am?"

Elliot Salvatore.

daughter and leggy blonde."

sound of his chuckles following me.

nothing about ballet so leave me alone.

ps. college is still kicking my ass<3

"No, you're not." He stuck his tongue at me. "We're leaving in twenty.

"Did you make an appointment with Barbara?" I asked, crossing my

His eyes dropped to the cleavage poking out of my shirt for a second

I bit down my lips to stop my mouth from betraying me by smiling at

him or something. I said nothing and walked around him to get ready

even though giving a girl twenty minutes was absolutely ridiculous. I

And, I needed about a century to myself before going on a date with

"Jane?" He called out just as I reached the staircase. I turned my head

and he was smiling at me weirdly. "You're my favorite trust fund

I glared at the idiot and practically ran up to my bedroom with the

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A/N: i was totally winging/bullshitting it. i know absolutely

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before he shook his head in amusement. "Of course, I did. Who do