

vanessa jones

SING

like

NO ONE'S
LISTENING

CHAPTER ONE



If this was the opening sequence of a musical, I'd be stepping up to these doors with a leather suitcase in each hand and a smile on my face, about to break into song about what a wonderful morning it is or the fact that the hills are alive or something equally as cheesy.

But it's not a musical.

There's no orchestral swell, no birds tweeting. Only the grumbling underscore of traffic on Old Compton Street, a faint whiff of car fumes and bacon and, given that I came here alone, the excruciating absence of anyone to sing to. Only the *thud-thud* of my terrified heart to keep me company.

The vast, pale brick building sits elegantly on a corner of Soho Square. My ears pick up a mixture of classical piano and hip-hop beats from within, making me shiver with excitement. To my right there's a steel plaque, which reads:

Duke's Academy of Performing Arts
Formerly The King's School
Founded 1854

In smaller writing underneath I can just make out another sentence:

It was only in the theatre that I lived.

Oscar Wilde

No pressure, then.

OK, time to focus. This is not just the audition of my life. I'm auditioning *for* my life. Checking the time on my phone, I take a breath and step through the tall doors.

Omigod, it's *huge* in here. There are students everywhere, milling around, stretching, gossiping...they're even on the walls—adorning the white painted atrium in signed, framed ten-by-eights ranging from the 1920s to the present day. There are some names I recognize; lots I don't. A wealth of writers, directors, actors, and dancers look down at me gloatingly with their glassy half-smiles.

I guess only the best students make it onto the Duke's Wall of Fame. Seeing their success makes my throat contract in an actual gulp.

How long have I got? Four minutes. Just time to slip to the toilet and go through my song. There's a student at the front desk waiting to sign people in.

"Name?"

"Er, Nettie."

She scans the register.

"Sorry—it's Antoinette," I correct myself. "I don't really use my full name."

"No worries." She finds my name and looks back up in a double take. "I'll change it."

I thank her and squeeze past before she has a chance to ask me anything else that might make her realize who I am.

There are doors leading to enormous studios on each side of the foyer. I pass two on my left: one housing a street-dance class and the other a musical theatre lesson. I pause at the second studio window just as a boy is hitting the last few notes of “Bring Him Home,” the rest of the class watching, spellbound. Wow. He’s *amazing*. Wicked, jaw-droppingly good. I can’t help wondering if that’ll be me one day, here at Duke’s, learning my craft, owning it, being generally brilliant...

OK, enough. Daydreaming won’t get you a place here.

I tear myself away from the studio window and make my way through to the changing rooms. The adjacent toilet is white-tiled and clean. It’s deserted. I lock the door and sing full out at my reflection. It goes OK, but God, I’m nervous. Maybe I should sing the other one. It’s probably easier.

I start to gather my things together.

My phone bleeps with a voicemail. Absent-mindedly I put it to my ear and haul my bag over my shoulder.

“Hi, Nettie. I’m in town—”

The tiles on the toilet wall go blurry. *“Did you say you needed shower gel?”*

The shock of her voice makes me retch.

“Call me if you think of anything else. I love you.”

Mum.

My knees buckle. I wildly grab the sink for support, dropping my phone on the hard floor in the process. It lands with a loud crack.

Mum...

I double over and throw up into the toilet.

... How?

I scabble on the floor for my phone. The screen is a spider web of smashed glass but I can still see the list

of voicemails, and there she is, right at the top. This isn't possible. This *isn't possible*.

I go to swallow but it hurts. My head's too full of blood. I'm sure it's going to explode. I'm going to self-decapitate and bleed to death here in the bathroom, like some sort of teen horror movie opening sequence.

I try to steady myself.

It doesn't make any sense. Mum died over a year ago. Why have I got a voicemail from her?

Is she...?

Maybe it's all been a mistake. Maybe she recovered somewhere in secret. Maybe it's all been a long, hideous dream. Maybe...

This is ridiculous. Maybe-ing doesn't help—it just makes it worse when you come back to reality. God knows, I'm the expert.

Get a grip. You can't go to pieces—not here, not now.

I look in the mirror, struggling to take a deep breath as I wipe vomit from my lips. It's just some sort of technical blip—a mistake by the phone company. It's got stuck in the ether and been delivered late—like, fourteen months late. That's all.

I *cannot* let this affect me. Not today. It's too important. Just breathe.

I can't, though. I *can't* breathe.

I was doing so well. Today was going to be difficult without Mum, I knew that. But I was holding it together—at least I was until I heard her voice. Now I'm winded, mugged. My throat's swollen with raw emotion and acid-burn and my eyes are stinging.

Oh no, not now. Don't cry now. Get it together, Nettie.

I press the corners of my eyes with shaking fingers and

head back into the foyer, where a man in a spotted cravat pokes his head out of the audition room.

“Ah, Antoinette. Here you are. We called you a moment ago.”

“Sorry, I—”

“Not to worry. We'd like to see you now, if you're ready.”

I follow him into the studio, barely able to focus.

“So, what have you brought to sing for us?” says the man. He leaves me in the center of the room and goes to sit down with the rest of the panel.

“Er...I've got ‘I'm Not Afraid of Anything’...” I falter. I'm surprised no one laughs. I must look literally afraid of everything right now. The room spins.

“Haven't you got anything else?” says a woman next to him. I try to focus on her face, which right now is just a white blur inside a blackish-gray bob. “We've heard that one seven times already today.” Her voice is cold and clipped.

“Oh. Um, I've got—”

“Well, whatever it is, let's hear it. I need a break from the mind-numbing tedium,” says the voice. I notice the echo it makes through the vast studio. Good acoustics, Mum would have said.

Mum.

I freeze. My feet won't move; I'm stuck in some sort of awful spotlight I can't step out of.

“Everything all right?” asks the man.

“Uh, sure.” Dazed, I force myself over to the pianist to give him my sheet music. As I walk slowly back to the center of the studio and wait for the introduction, I know something's still not right. I'm unsteady on my feet and my throat's small, like I can't get enough air to my lungs.

Mum should've been here today. I wore that dress she gave me for my seventeenth—the one with the flowers. I

picked her favorite song. I *needed* her. But...not like this. How could this happen, now of all times?

The first line is audible, but only just. My voice is thin. Reedy. With every breath it gets worse.

By the end of the first chorus, it's down to little more than a whisper. What's happening to me?

"You'll never get in." My grandmother's last words to me as I left the house this morning float up to the forefront of my mind. *"I don't know why you're bothering. You'll never make it. Look where show business got your mother."*

"I don't care. It's what I want. Mum wanted me to go. She was proud of me—not that you'd ever know."

Mum.

I don't even have the energy to be angry any more. I'm drained of everything right now, except the overwhelming grief throbbing through my chest.

The pianist comes to a halt, and I realize I've stopped singing altogether.

"Nettie, would you like a glass of water?" says the man.

"I—"

"Is there a problem?"

"No, I'm fine. I just—"

I just heard my dead mum on a voicemail and now I can't sing is the problem. But I can't say that, can I? Tear tracks prickle my jawline and I rub them away violently. The panel must think my nerves have got the better of me, standing in the middle of the studio and weeping silently with no explanation.

"Nettie?"

I mouth *"I'm sorry"* and run out.



The envelope sits on the table for a good half an hour before I have the courage to approach it. The gilded lettering on the back glares at me, daring me to rip it open.

There's no way I got in after my fiasco of an audition, but this moment is the last time I'll ever *not know* for sure. Until I open that envelope, I can still imagine how my life would be if I got in, still hope for that chance to start building my life again.

There's no plan B. I didn't apply for any other colleges because I was so set on musical theatre at Duke's, so busy grieving for Mum that I forgot to make a backup plan. I'll be stuck living with Auntie—I have to call her “Auntie” because apparently “Grandmother” is ageing—until I'm as old as her and she's even older, rotting in this decaying townhouse in southeast London forever.

I pick up the envelope. It's only small—surely if I got in there would be loads of information inside? I tear it open, bracing myself for the inevitable. When I read the first sentence, I can barely breathe.

Dear Miss Delaney-Richardson,

We are delighted to be able to offer you a place at Duke's Academy of Performing Arts on the Musical Theatre course, commencing this September.

I see the word “delighted” and the rest of the letter is a blur.

Please see our student portal for a list of all available accommodations, local information, and a list of your uniform requirements.

I've lost concentration. The letter goes on, I think. Something about Miss Duke requesting that places be accepted immediately and some more info on how to pay deposits.

Delighted.

But...*how?*

My audition was terrible. I mean, truly awful. I didn't even stay long enough to do the dance and drama classes, and my singing... I hastily turn over the page, wary there might be some kind of addendum to the letter saying that it's all been a joke. But that's it: the letter, a list of useful links, and a couple of maps marked with all-night pharmacies and emergency dentists.

Did I get in because of Mum? She trained there as a dancer years ago. Maybe they recognized my name and thought I must be some shit-hot prima ballerina. They'll be disappointed.

Look. Who cares *how* I got in—I got in. I'm *free*. I get to leave this place and all the horrible memories and start a new life doing what I love.

I'll prove myself worthy of a place when I get there. I'm going to make it as a singer. Except for one small problem.

I can't sing anymore.