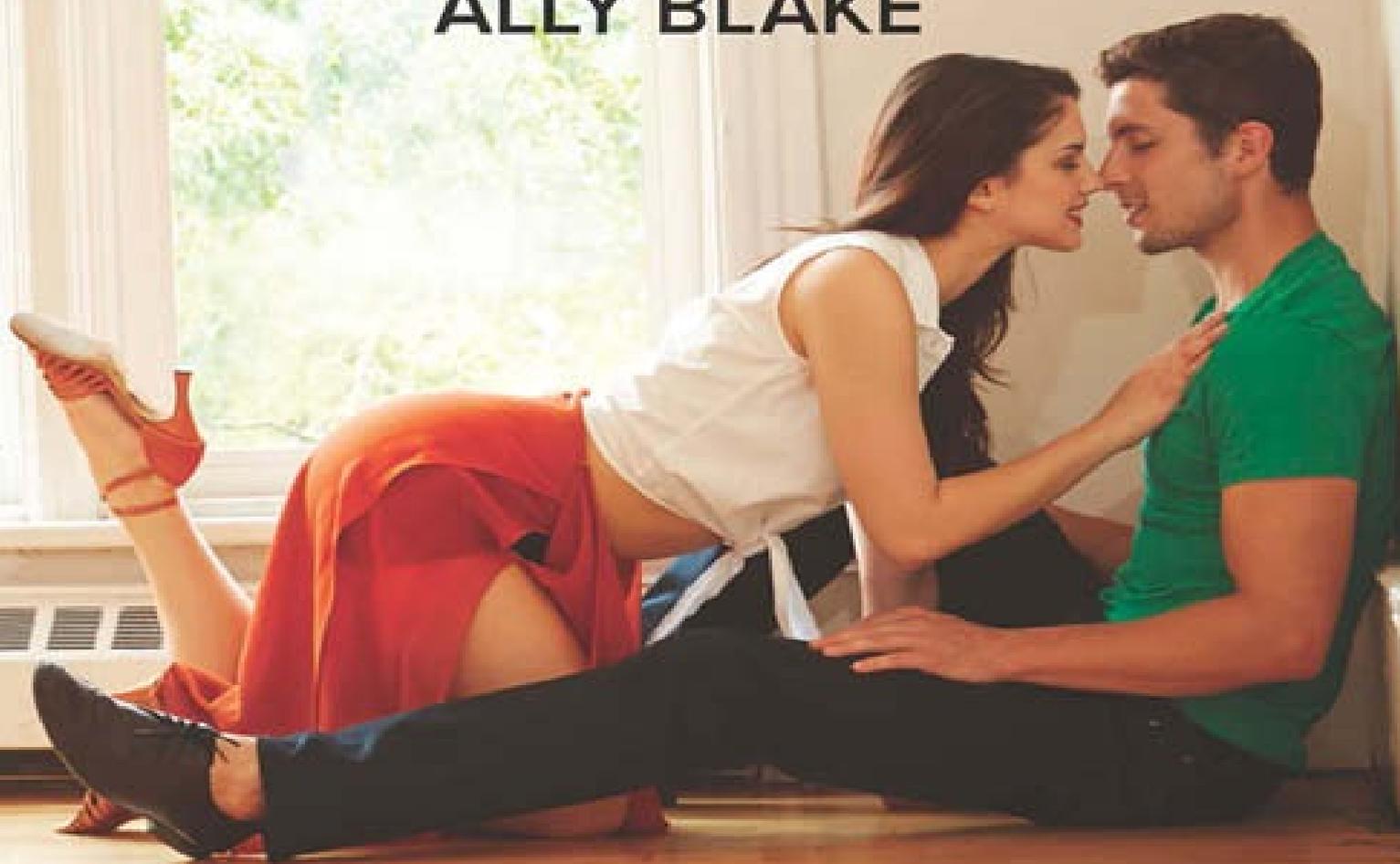




KISS™

# THE DANCE OFF

—  
ALLY BLAKE

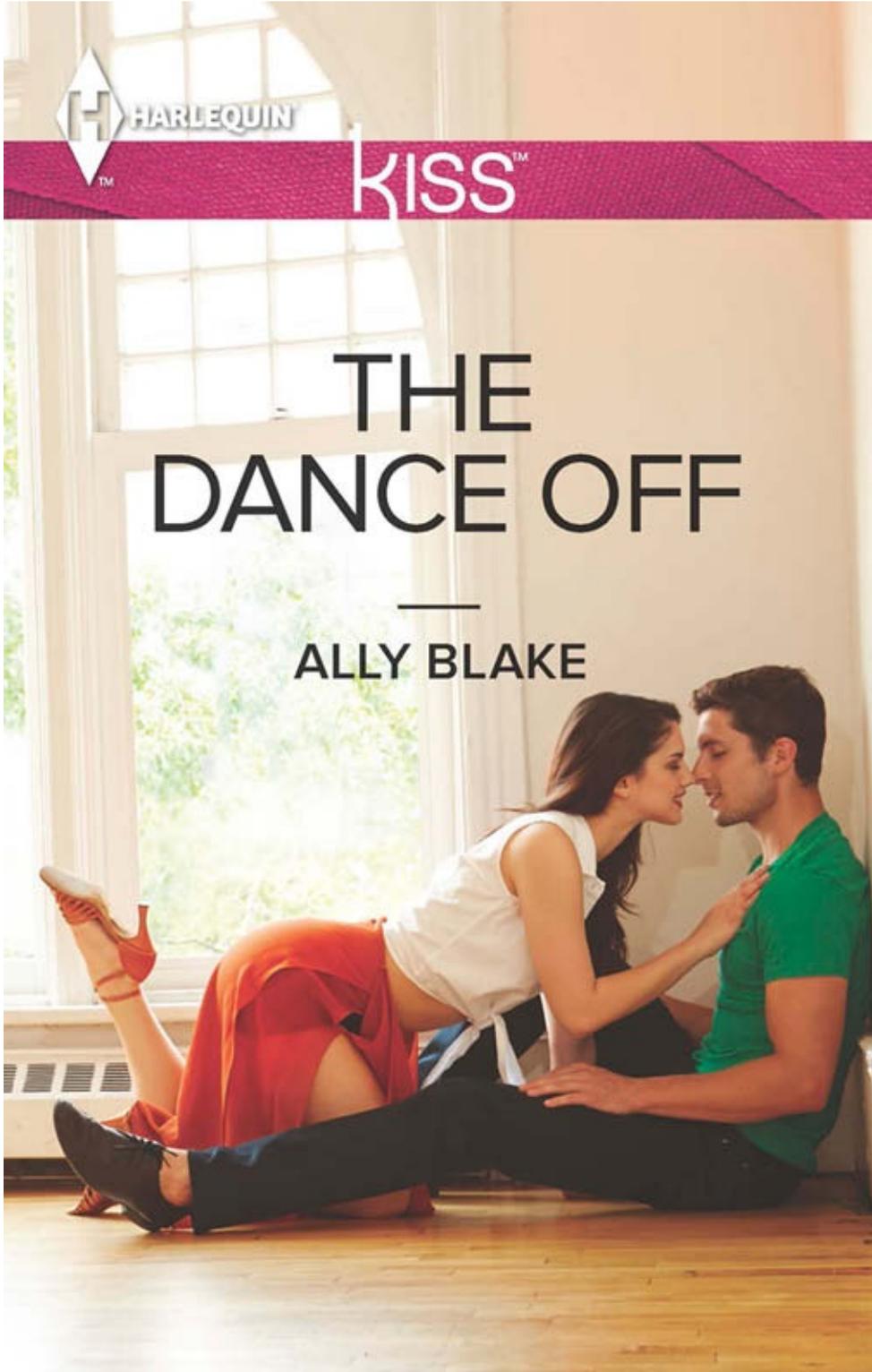




KISS™

# THE DANCE OFF

—  
ALLY BLAKE



## ***“Where are your leg warmers?”***

Dancing lessons...? Architect Ryder Fitzgerald can't think of anything worse! But when he spots smoking-hot Nadia Kent, who'll be teaching him his steps for his sister's wedding, he decides this might not be so torturous after all....

Nadia is staying well clear of Ryder, however jaw-droppingly hot he is—she let a guy get in the way of her ambition once, but never again. (No matter how well he swivels his hips!)

But as electricity crackles in the studio, restricting their chemistry to the dance floor becomes a challenge. Only question is, who's going to make the first move?

## ***SNEAK PEEK PREVIEW OF***



KISS

### ***THE DANCE OFF***

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***She slid a pair of beige shoes with small heels from under the couch and buckled herself in. Without looking up, she said, “You look hot.”***

“Why, thank you.”

Was he flirting? Of course he was. This woman was...something else. She was *riveting*.

“If I were you, I’d lose the jacket, Mr. Fitzgerald. It gets hot in here—hotter still once we get moving—and I don’t fancy having to catch you if you faint.”

Calling her bluff, he slid his jacket from his shoulders and laid it neatly over the back of the velvet chair. He tugged his loosened tie from his neck and tossed it the same way. Then he rid himself of his cuff links and rolled his shirtsleeves to his elbows. Moves more fit for a bedroom than a dance hall.

Her gaze was so direct as she watched him losing layers, it only added to that impression, and he felt himself break out in a sweat.

Then, with no apparent regret, she looked away, leaving him to breathe out long and slow. She pulled her hair off her face and into a low ponytail, lifted her chin, knocked her heels and Scheherazade was no more. In her place stood Dance Teacher.

Which was when Ryder remembered why he was there and really began to sweat.

Dear Reader,

I am such a lover of dance movies, I can't even tell you.

*Singin' in the Rain, Strictly Ballroom, Girls Just Want to Have Fun, Footloose, Shall We Dance?*... I've seen *Dirty Dancing* at the movies six times and a bazillion times since. And, boy, could I go on! But this is just going to end up being a list of the best dance movies ever if I don't contain myself.

So let's just say, despite all that fabulous training, it never occurred to me to write a story about dance. Then one day an image shimmied into my head—probably when I was in the shower, which is when all my best ideas spring forth.

Night—summer—sultry—sky on the edge of rain... And a man—tall, dark, smooth—in suit and tie, glowering up at a dilapidated building. This man is important, busy. He likes things neat and tidy and doesn't have time to waste. And yet there he is, about to head inside to take the first of what will no doubt be an interminable string of dancing lessons. Enter the dance teacher—exotic, hypnotic, raw where he is smooth, and as snarky as she is sensuous. I *so* wanted to see how that dance turned out!

If you love dance movies as much as I do, I hope Ryder and Nadia's tale will take you somewhere familiar and new all at once. Then come and chat about your favorite dance stories with me on Twitter and Facebook (Ally Blake, Romance Author), or email me at [ally@allyblake.com](mailto:ally@allyblake.com).

Till then, happy reading (and dancing)!

Ally

[www.AllyBlake.com](http://www.AllyBlake.com)

# THE DANCE OFF

*Ally Blake*



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

In her previous life, Australian author Ally Blake was at times a cheerleader, a math tutor, a dental assistant and a shop assistant. In this life, Ally is a bestselling, multi-award-winning novelist who has been published in over twenty languages with more than two million books sold worldwide.

She married her gorgeous husband in Las Vegas—no Elvis in sight, though Tony Curtis did put in a special appearance—and now Ally and her family, including three rambunctious toddlers, share a property in the leafy western suburbs of Brisbane with kookaburras, cockatoos, rainbow lorikeets and the occasional creepy-crawly. When not writing, she makes coffees that never get drunk, eats too many M&M's, attempts yoga, devours reruns of *The West Wing*, reads every spare minute she can and barracks ardently for the Collingwood Magpies footy team.

You can find out more at her website, [www.allyblake.com](http://www.allyblake.com).

### **Other Harlequin® KISS™ titles by Ally Blake:**

*The Secret Wedding Dress*

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These and other titles by Ally Blake are available in ebook format at [www.Harlequin.com](http://www.Harlequin.com).

For my Dom, whose snuggly hugs,  
gracious affability and eternal wonder  
makes my heart go pitter-pat each and every day.

Love you, baby boy.

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# ONE

**Loose gravel coursing** through the gutter slid and crackled beneath Ryder Fitzgerald's shoes as he slammed shut his car door.

Through the darkness of late night his narrowed eyes flickered over the uneven footpath, the barred windows of the abandoned ground-floor shopfronts, past big red doors in need of a lick of paint, up a mass of mottled red brick, over deadened windows of the second floor. The soft golden light in the row of big arched windows on the third floor was the only sign of life on the otherwise desolate street.

He glanced back at his car, its vintage curves gleaming in the wet night, the thoroughbred engine ticking comfortably as it cooled. Since the closest street lamp was non-operational—tiny shards of broken glass pooled around its base, evidence that was no accident—only moonlight glinted off the black paint.

And he silently cursed his sister.

Glowing, Ryder pressed the remote to double-check the car alarm was set, then he glanced at the pink notepaper upon which Sam's happy scrawl gave up a business name and a street address, hoping he might have read the thing wrong. But no.

This run-down structure in one of the backstreets of Richmond housed the Amelia Brandt Dance Academy. Inside he would find the woman hired by his sister, Sam, to teach her wedding party to dance. And considering in two months' time he'd be the lucky man giving her away, apparently that included him.

A *wedding*, he thought, the concept lodging itself uncomfortably in the back of his throat. When he'd pointed out to Sam the number of times she'd done her daughterly duty in attending their own father's embarrassment of weddings, she'd just shoved the address into his palm.

"The instructor is awesome!" she'd gushed. *Better be*, he thought, considering the price of the lessons he was bankrolling. "You'll love her! If anyone can get you to dance like Patrick Swayze it's her!"

Ryder, who'd had no idea who Sam was talking about, had said, "Life-changing as that sounds, there's no way I can guarantee my attendance every Thursday at seven for the foreseeable future so you'll have to have your dance lessons without me."

Lucky for him, Sam had gleefully explained, the dance teacher had agreed to private lessons, any time that suited him. Of course she had. Sam had probably offered the doyenne enough to lash out on a six-month cruise.

"Your own fault she's so damned spoiled," he grumbled out loud.

A piece of newspaper picked up by a gust of hot summer wind fluttered dejectedly down the cracked grey footpath in response.

Ryder scrunched up the pink note and lobbed it into an overflowing garbage bin.

He tugged at his cufflinks as he sauntered up the front steps. It was a muggy night, oppressive in a way Melbourne rarely saw, and he was more than ready to be rid of his suit. It had been a long day. And the very last thing he wanted to do right now was cha-cha with some grand dame in pancake make-up, a tight bun and breathing heavily of the bottle of Crème de Menthe hidden in the record player. But Sam was getting

antsy. And he'd spent enough years keeping the *antsy* at bay to know revisiting the high-school waltz would be less complicated than dealing with one of his sister's frantic phone calls.

"One lesson," he said, wrenching open the heavy red door and stepping inside.

A Do Not Enter sign hung askew from the front of an old-fashioned lift with lattice casing. His eyes followed the cables to their origins, but all he saw were shadows, dust, and cobwebs so old they drifted lazily by way of a draught coming from somewhere it structurally ought not to.

Less impressed by the second, Ryder trudged up the steep narrow staircase that wound its way around the lift shaft, the space lit by a string of lamps with green-tinged glass so pocked and dust-riddled the weak glare made his eyes water.

And the heat only grew, thickened, pressing into him as he made his way up three floors—the ground floor apparently untenanted, the second floor wallpapered with ragged posters advertising student plays from years past. As it tended to do, the hottest air collected at the top where a faint light shone through the gap at the bottom of the door, and a small sign mirroring the one downstairs announced that the big black door with the gaudy gold hinges led into the Amelia Brandt Dance Academy.

Ryder turned the wooden knob, its mechanism soft with age. Stifling heat washed against his face as he stepped inside. He loosened his tie, popped the top button of his dress shirt and made a mental note to throttle Sam the very next moment he saw her.

The place appeared uninhabited but for the scent of something rustic and foreign, and the incongruously funky beat of some familiar R&B song complete with breathy sighs and French lyrics.

His eyes roved over the space—habitually calculating floor space, ceiling height, concrete cubic metres, brick palettes, glazier costs. The tall wall of arched windows looking out over the street appeared to be original and mostly in working order—he only just stopped himself from heading that way to check his car was still in situ. From above industrial-size fans hung still. A string of old glass chandeliers poured pools of golden light into the arcs of silvery moonlight streaming across a scuffed wooden floor.

Speckled mirrors lined the near wall, and to his right, in front of ceiling-to-floor curtains that made his nose itch, reclined a sad-looking row of old school lockers with half the doors hanging open, a piano, a half-dozen hula hoops in a haphazard pile on the floor, a row of bookshelves filled with records and sheet music in piles so haphazard and high they seemed in imminent danger of toppling, and lastly a pink velvet lounge—the kind a woman would drape herself over in order to be painted by some lucky artist.

Ryder took another step, his weight bringing forth a groan from the creaky old floor.

The music shut off a moment before a feminine voice called from behind the curtains, "Mr Fitzgerald?"

He turned to the voice as his earlier prediction shimmered to dust. In place of a grand dame past her prime, Scheherazade strolled his way.

Long shaggy dark hair, even darker eyes rimmed in lashings of kohl, skin so pale it seemed to soak in the moonlight. A brown tank top knotted at her waist, showing off a glimpse of taut tummy. An ankle-length skirt made of a million earthen colours swayed hypnotically as she walked. Feet as bare as the day she was born.

Ryder straightened, squared his shoulders and said, "I take it you're the woman whose job it is to turn me into Patrick Swayze."

She blinked, a smile tugging briefly at one corner of her lush mouth before disappearing as if it had never been. "Nadia Kent," she said, holding out a hand.

He took it. Finding it soft, warm, unexpectedly strong. And so strikingly pale he could make out veins beneath the surface. Warmth hummed through him, like an electrical current, from the point where their skin touched and then she slid from his grip and the sensation was gone as if it had never been.

"You're early," she said, her voice rich with accusation, and, if he wasn't wrong, shot with a faint American accent.

"A good thing, I would have thought, considering the late hour." He caught the spicy scent again, stronger this time, as she swayed past.

"And whose idea was that?"

Touché.

Light as a bird, she perched on the edge of the long pink chair, her dark hair tumbling over her shoulders in dishevelled waves, her exotic skirt settling about her in a slow sway. And Ryder wondered how a woman who looked as if she'd been born right out of the earth had ended up in a gloomy corner of the world such as this.

With a flick of the wrist, she hiked her skirt to her knee, revealing smooth calves wrapped in lean muscle. She slid a pair of beige shoes with small heels from under the couch and buckled herself in. And without looking up she said, "You look hot."

"Why, thank you." His instinctive response echoed through the big room. The only evidence she'd even heard him was the brief pause of her fingers at the last buckle before she slid her hands up her calves to swish the skirt back to the floor.

Was he flirting? Of course he was. The woman was...something else. She was *riveting*.

While she didn't even spare him a glance as she pressed herself to standing, poked a small remote into the waist of her skirt, and, shoes clacking on the floor, walked his way. "If I were you I'd lose the jacket, Mr Fitzgerald. It gets hot in here, hotter still once we get moving, and I don't fancy having to catch you if you faint."

He baulked at the thought, and for a split second thought he saw a flare of triumph in her eyes, before it was swallowed by the eyes so dark he struggled to make out their centres.

Calling her bluff, he slid his jacket from his shoulders, and, finding nowhere better, laid it neatly over the back of the velvet chair. Moth holes. Great. He tugged his loosened tie from his neck and tossed it the same way. Then rid himself of his cufflinks, and rolled his shirtsleeves to his elbows. Moves more fit for a bedroom than a dance hall. Her gaze was so direct as she watched him losing layers it only added to the impression.

Then with no apparent regret, she looked away, leaving him to breathe out long and slow. She pulled her hair off her face and into a low ponytail, lifted her chin, knocked her heels and Scheherazade was no more. In her place stood Dance Teacher.

Which was when Ryder remembered why he was there, and *really* began to sweat.

"Can we make this quick?" he said, recalling the reams of architectural plans curled up in the shelves by his bespoke drafting table at home. More awaited his attention inside the state-of-the-art computer programs back in his offices in the city. Projects of

his and projects headed up by his team. Not that he had his father's trouble in settling on one thing; he simply liked to work. And he'd rather pull an all-nighter than spend the next hour entertaining this extravagance.

Nadia Kent's hands slid to her lean hips, the fingers at the top of her skirt dragging the fabric a mite lower. The faint American twang added a lilt to her voice as she said, "You have somewhere else to be at ten o'clock on a Tuesday night, Mr Fitzgerald?"

"There are other things I could be doing, yes."

"So it's not that you're simply too chicken to take dance lessons."

His eyes narrowed, yet his smile grew. "What can I say? I'm a wanted man."

"I'll take your word for it. Now," she said, clapping her hands together in such a way that the sound echoed around the space and thundered back at them. "Where are your tights?"

"Excuse me?"

"Your dancing tights. Sam told you, I hope. If we are going to get any kind of indication of your aptitude you need to have the freedom of movement that tights allow."

He knew she was kidding. Okay, so he was ninety per cent sure. But that didn't stop hairs on his arms from standing on end. "Miss Kent, do I look like the kind of man who would have come within ten kilometres of this place if tights were required?"

He'd given her the invitation after all, yet when those sultry dark eyes gave him a slow once-over, pausing on the top button of his crisp white shirt, the high shine of his belt buckle, the precise crease of his suit trousers, his gut clenched right down low. Then her answer came by way of a smile that slid slowly onto a mouth that was wide, pink, soft, and as sensuous as the rest of her and the clench curled into a tight fist.

His voice hit low as he said, "If this is how you play with clients who are early, Miss Kent, I'd like to see how you treat those who are late."

"No," she said, "you wouldn't."

She slid the remote from her skirt, flicked it over her shoulder, and pressed. The sound of a piano tripped from hidden speakers, filling the lofty space; a husky feminine voice followed. "Now, Mr Fitzgerald, you're paying premium to have me here tonight, so let's give you your money's worth."

When she beckoned him with a finger, moving towards him all the same, saliva pooled beneath his tongue.

He held up both hands. "There is another option."

*There*, he thought as a flash of anticipation fired in the depths of her eyes before she blinked and it was gone. But now he knew he wasn't the only one sensing...awareness? Attraction? Definitely *something*...

"What do you say I pay you the full complement of lessons, and we call it a day? Sam needn't ever have to know."

"Great. Fine with me. But when you hit the dance floor on Sam's wedding day, and all eyes are on you as you trip over Sam's feet, what shall we tell her then?"

He wondered for a fanciful fleeting second if the woman might well be a witch. Less than five minutes and she'd struck him right in his Achilles' heel.

"You done, Mr Fitzgerald? Because honestly, I teach two-year-olds who put up less of a fuss. You're a big boy. You can do this."

She lifted her arms into a graceful half-circle in front of her, an invitation for him to

do the same. But when he did little more than twitch a muscle in his cheek, she swore—and rather colourfully—before she walked the final few paces, took his hands, and, with a strength that belied her lean frame, lifted them into a matching arc.

Up close he caught glints of auburn in her dark hair. A smattering of tiny freckles dusted the bridge of her nose.

Though his thoughts dried up as she fitted herself into the space between his arms and dropped his right hand to her hip. His palm found fabric, his fingers found skin. Smooth skin. Hot skin. Her skin.

She slid her right hand into his left and the heat of the night became trapped between them.

“Nadia.”

“Yes, Ryder,” she said, mirroring his serious tone.

“It’s been a while for me.”

The teeth that flashed within her smile were sharp enough to have his skin tighten all over.

“I’ll go easy,” she said. “I promise. You just have to trust me. Do you trust me, Ryder?”

“Not a bit.”

The smile became a grin, and then her tongue swished slowly across the edge of her top teeth before she tucked it back away.

Maybe not a witch, but definitely a sadist, if how much she was enjoying this was anything to go by. “Nadia—”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake! One last question. *One*. And then you shut up and dance.”

Stunning, sadistic, and bossy to boot. An audacious combination. And, as it turned out, dead sexy. Which was why he made sure she was looking right at him, those eyes dark with frustration, before asking, “Who on earth is Patrick Swayze?”

At that she laughed, threw back her head and let rip. Her hips rocked against his, sending a wave of lust rolling through him. *Holy hell*.

Her hand landed firmly against his chest. “Let’s not set the bar quite so high, hey, twinkle toes? My aim is to get you through three minutes of spinning on a parquet floor without embarrassing the bride.” Curling her fingers slightly, she said, “Deal?”

While his blood thundered through his veins at her scent, her nearness, the press of her hips, her hand at his heart, Ryder’s voice was rough as dry gravel as he uttered the fateful words, “Where do we start?”

“Where all great dance partnerships start: at the beginning.”

As the music continued to swell through the huge room she told him to listen to the beat. To sway with it. To let his hips guide him.

Gritting his teeth, he wished Sam had never been born. That helped for about five seconds before he gave himself a mental slug. While the kid might well be the one disruption in his otherwise structured life, she was also the best thing that had ever happened to him.

Eleven years old he’d been, only a few months beyond losing his own mother, when his father had remarried. A baby already on the way. Even as a kid, Ryder had understood what that meant—that Fitz hadn’t been true to his mother; a woman with such strength, such heart, such insight. Worst of all she must have known it too, even as she’d been sick and dying.

When he felt the familiar sense of loathing rise like poison in his gut, Ryder shoved the memories back into the deep dark vault from which they'd bled. And instead hauled his mind to the day Sam was born. The first time he'd looked into his little sister's big grey eyes had changed everything. He'd vowed to never let her down, knowing already, even so young, that her father—*his* father—would disappoint, would deprive, would step over her to get ahead every chance he got.

And still, with that man as her paternal example, the sweet, clueless little kid was out there right now preparing to get married. *Married*—

“Concentrate!”

Ryder came to with a grimace as Nadia pinched the soft skin between his forefinger and thumb. He glared at her and she glared right on back. For a woman who felt like a wisp of air in his arms, she had strength to spare. “Honestly, Nadia, I don't need this. Show me how to get into and out of a Hollywood dip without pulling a muscle and we're done.”

“First,” she said, “it's Miss Nadia. Dance protocol. And secondly, the sooner you stop bitching and pay attention, the faster the time will go. Cross my heart.” The scoop of her top tugged across her breasts as she crossed herself, the material dipping to expose the bones of her clavicle, the pale skin, the layer of perspiration covering the lot.

“Yes, Miss Nadia.”

She liked that, clearly, breaking out in a soft laugh. “That wasn't so hard, was it?”

“You have no idea.”

She might have brushed against him, or maybe he'd imagined it. Either way, hard was suddenly an understatement.

And as the hour wore on it didn't get any less so. Her hands seemed to be everywhere. Resting on his hips as she nudged them where she wanted them to go. Sliding slowly along his arms as she lifted them into the right position. Resting on his shoulders as she leant in behind him, pressing her knees into the backs of his to move his feet in time.

It was agony.

And not only because he wasn't used to being on the receiving end of such terse instructions. Though there was that too. Several years in charge of his own multimillion-dollar architectural firm, a guy got used to being in charge.

There was also the occasional waft of heady scent from that cascade of dark hair to contend with. The temptation of that sliver of tight skin above her skirt. And those *Arabian Nights* eyes tempting, beckoning, inviting him beyond the dance to places dark and sultry.

And then a knowing smile would shift across her lush mouth just before she counted loud and slow as if he were three damn years old.

When she finally turned off the music, he asked, “We're done?”

“For tonight.”

Then, as if they hadn't just spent the better part of an hour about as close as a man and a woman could be without their lowlier natures taking over, she simply walked away.

At the pink chair she pulled the band from her hair and shook it out, running her hands through it until it was a tumble of shaggy waves. As if she'd sensed him

watching she looked over her shoulder as she bound herself in a wrap-around cardigan, and looped a long silver scarf around her neck. “Next time dress in loose pants, a T-shirt, and bring something warm for after. Even though it’s crazy hot outside, your body will cool down dramatically after a workout like this.”

Ryder didn’t make any promises—he figured a fast cool-down was exactly what he needed. “I’ll walk you down.”

Her eyebrows disappeared beneath a wave of her hair. “Not necessary. I can handle myself. I’m a child of the mean streets.”

Richmond was hardly mean, but, growing up with a little sister with a knack for climbing out of bedroom windows, Ryder had a protective instinct that was well honed. “It’s eleven at night. I’m walking you down.”

She gave him a level stare from those gypsy eyes of hers, then with a smile and a shrug she said, “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.”

“There’s that too.”

He nabbed his jacket and tie and held them over his elbow rather than rugging up. She noticed, but said nothing, clearly considering herself off the clock.

She moved to an ancient bank of light switches and flipped the place into darkness, leaving only patches of cloud-shrouded moonlight teeming through the big arched windows, and Ryder’s gaze was once again drawn to the soaring ceilings, the dusty chandeliers, the obnoxious industrial fans, and last but not least the fantastic criss-cross of exposed beams above, the kind people paid top dollar to reproduce.

Nadia cleared her throat and motioned him out, then with a yank of the door, a bump of the hip and a kick to the skirting board, locked up behind them.

He followed her down the stairs, the green glow of the old lights creating sickly shadows on the wallpaper peeling from the walls. But from topside looking down, the way the stairs curled around the shaft was actually great design. If the lift actually worked—

*Irrelevant*, he thought, with a flare of irritation. In fact the place should probably be condemned.

But Ryder didn’t need a team of crack psychologists to tell him why the building continued to charm. It was just the kind of place his creative mother would have adored. Her legacy to the world was her wonderful sculptures made from things found, abandoned, forgotten, lost. Her legacy to her son was the knowledge that following your heart led only to heartache.

Pressing the memories far deeper, he redirected his gaze to the exit.

“Will I see you next week?” Nadia asked as they spilled out of the door.

“I fear you will,” said Ryder as he turned on the cracked grey footpath to face her.

A step higher than he, she swayed sensually, hypnotically, from one foot to the other, as if moving to a rhythm only she could hear. Then she tipped up onto her toes bringing her face level with his. “Sam really has you wrapped around her little finger, doesn’t she? I liked her before, but now I have a new-found respect for the woman.”

Ryder sniffed out a laugh.

Then when she moved past him, jogging lightly down the stairs, he shoved his hands in his trouser pockets to keep himself from doing anything dangerous, like finding that slice of hot skin at her hips again and using it to drag her against him. Like losing his fingers in those crazy waves. Like ravaging that smart, soft, tilting mouth till

she stopped smiling at him as if she were one up on the scoreboard.

But Ryder held fast.

Because, delightful as she was, his only objective for the next few weeks was to survive until Sam's wedding without hiding her away in the top of a large tower where no man could hurt her. Getting all twisted up with the wilful and wily dance teacher, who he was fast gathering had become his sister's friend, would not help his cause one bit.

So instead of drowning in her dark eyes, her lush lips, all that dark sensuality so close within reach, he looked up at the building, past the big red door and up to the big sleeping windows on the third floor. "Do you know who owns this place?"

"Why?" she asked.

Because he was changing the subject.

"Something about the beams," he said, then glanced back to find Nadia halfway down the block.

"Don't ask me," she said over her shoulder. "I just work here."

Ryder watched her until she was swallowed by darkness, leaving him alone on the cracked pavement with his car, his skin cooling quickly in the night air.

\* \* \*

Nadia fell into bed a few minutes before midnight. Literally. Standing at the end she let herself flop, fully clothed, face first onto the crumple of unmade sheets.

And the darkness behind her eyelids became a blank canvas as her memories began to play.

She could hear the creak of the stairs cutting through the song she'd been free-styling to. Could feel the disorientation of being caught out, leaving her breathless, sweaty, off kilter. Back on solid ground, wiping away the worst of her glow—*men sweat, women perspire, ladies glow*, her austere grandmother had always said—she'd peeked through the curtains.

Expecting a male version of Sam—tall, big grin, two left feet, handsome, sure, but slightly goofy with it—she'd been critically mistaken.

Ryder Fitzgerald was tall but that was where the similarities ended. Handsome had nothing on the guy—he was simply stunning. In that midnight suit, snowy white shirt, not a hair out of place, not a scuff on his beautiful shoes, he was big, dark, sleek, and razor-sharp. And to top it off, shimmering at the edges of all that relentless perfection was an aura of rough and raw sex appeal, as if the guy left behind an unapologetic testosterone wake.

When she'd ducked back behind the curtain her hands had been shaking. Shaking! Her breaths had shortened. Her stomach had curled tight and hot while her blood had thwacked against the walls of her veins. And all she had been able to think was, *Oh, no*.

With the grace of hindsight she could hardly blame herself. It had been over a year since she'd broken up with her ex after all. And if she was honest, longer again since she'd felt anything near that kind of all out, sweet, sinful, wonderful, carnal reaction to a man. For a woman whose entire life had been spent learning her body, knowing her body, celebrating her body, the fact that her body had become some sort of neutral

zone had been damn near unnatural.

So much so, in her more wavery moments she'd wondered if something more than a two-year relationship had been damaged during the whole sordid mess. Even more than a bruised ego and a crumpled career.

But no, she was a Kent, and Kent women didn't cry over broken relationships—or broken bones for that matter. They got over it. Which she had admirably, thank you very much.

And then—right when she was doing so great, when she was dancing better than she had in her entire life, when she was mere weeks away from having the chance to reclaim all that she'd given up—right *then* was when the old flame had to flicker back to life?

Groaning, she rolled over and pulled a pillow tight over the thumping in her chest. It didn't help. Even with her eyes wide open she could still *feel* the play of muscle beneath the man's prosaic white shirt—hard, strong, a surprise. As had been his latent heat. All she'd had to do was touch him and she'd felt it pulsing beneath his skin. The exact same heat that had thudded incessantly through her for the entire hour straight.

*Let it go*, she thought. *The man's immaterial*. And heard her mother's voice.

Her mother who'd taken one look at Nadia when she'd turned up on her doorstep a year before with nothing but a suitcase and a sad story...and smiled. Not because she was glad to see her only child, oh, no. Claudia Kent's own ballet career had been ruined over a guy, and, seeing the product of that mistake in the same sorry position, she'd found herself looking down the blissful barrel of karmic payback.

Nadia gripped the pillow tighter, this time to stifle the woozy sensation in her belly.

Her mother might be completely devoid of any maternal genes, but at least Nadia had learnt early on how to cope with rejection, which for a jobbing hooper was pure gold. One couldn't be precious and be a dancer. It was the tough and the damned. Ethel Barrymore had once said to be a success as an actress a woman had to have the face of Venus, the brains of Minerva, the grace of Terpsichore, the memory of Macaulay, the figure of Juno, and the hide of a rhinoceros. Working dancers needed all that *and* to be able to do the splits on cue.

Nadia had all that going for her and more. Yet if she didn't nail the fast-approaching chance to get her life back in a few weeks' time, she'd have deserved that contempt as she'd made the same mistake her mother did before her.

Well, not the *exact* same mistake—at least Nadia hadn't fallen pregnant.

With that wicked little kick of ascendancy fuelling her, she reached into her bedside table and found her notebook. For the next few minutes she pushed everything else from her mind and sketched out the moves she'd added to her routine that night before Ryder Fitzgerald had arrived.

In her early twenties she'd lived on natural talent, on chutzpah, and maybe even on her mother's name. A year out of the spotlight and that momentum was gone, and every day away younger, fitter, hungrier dancers were pouring into the void, eager and ready to take her spot. But what those hungry little dancers didn't know was that this time Nadia had an edge—she didn't simply want their jobs; this time she *really* had something to prove.

Sketches done, she slumped back to the bed. She'd shower in the morning. And since she didn't start work till two the next day, she'd have time to attend a couple of

classes of her own—maybe a contemporary class in South Yarra, or trapeze in that converted warehouse in Notting Hill. Either way she'd kill it. Because look out, world, Nadia Kent was back, baby.

Despite the late hour, the last whispers of adrenalin still pulsed through her system, so she grabbed her TV remote and scrolled through the movies on her hard drive till she found what she was looking for.

The strains of *Be My Baby* buzzed from the dodgy speakers in her second-hand TV, and grainy black and white dancers writhed on the screen. When Patrick Swayze's name loomed in that sexy pink font, Nadia tucked herself under her covers and sighed.

Yep, things were still on track. So long as she didn't do anything stupid. *Again.*

Sliding into sleep, she couldn't be sure if it was her mother's voice she'd heard at the last, or her own.

## TWO

“So how was it? Was it amazing? Aren’t you glad I made you go?”

Ryder pressed the phone harder to one ear to better hear Sam, and plugged a finger in his other ear to ward off the sounds of the construction site. “It was...” *Excruciating. Hot. A lesson in extreme—patience.* He tugged his hard hat lower over his forehead, and growled, “It was fine.”

“Told you. And how cool is the studio? And the ceilings. I knew you’d love the ceilings.”

No need to fudge the truth there. The beams were stunning. Old school. The exact kind of feature he’d once upon a time have sold his soul to study. He glanced about the modern web of metal spikes and cold concrete slabs around him, the foundations of what would in many months be a sleek, silver, skyscraping tower—as far from the slumped thick red-brick building as architecturally possible.

His foreman waved a torch in his direction, letting him know the group he was there to meet—and who were about to make his day go from long to interminable—had arrived. Ryder tilted his chin in acknowledgement, holding up his finger to say he’d be a minute.

“She was a dancer,” Sam was saying. “A real one. A Sky High one.”

Struggling to picture sultry Nadia Kent in a pink tutu and a bun, Ryder asked, “Nadia’s a ballerina?”

A pause, then, “No-o-o. I told you. *Sky High.*”

“Sam, just for a moment, treat me as if I am an Australian human male and speak plain English.”

“Man, you need to get out more. Sky High is huge. A dance extravaganza. A kind of burlesque meets Burn the Floor meets Cirque du Soleil; all superb special effects and crazy-talented dancers. In Vegas!”

Ryder’s focus converged until it was entirely on his sister’s voice. “Sam, do you have a *showgirl* teaching your wedding party how to dance?”

“Oh, calm down. She wasn’t working some dive bar off the strip.”

And yet, picturing Nadia in fishnets, towering high heels and cleverly positioned peacock feathers wasn’t difficult at all. Her pale skin glowing in the dim light, dishevelled waves trailing down her bare back, those lean calves kicking, twirling, hooking... Ryder closed his eyes and pressed his thumb into his temple.

“She’s so graceful. And flexible,” Sam continued, clearly oblivious to his internal struggle. “She was warming up the other night when we came in and she can pull her leg up so far behind her she can touch her nose!”

Ryder’s eyes snapped open to search for a speedy exit from the conversation at hand. He had every intention of shrugging off the spark between them for Sam’s sake, but the kid sure wasn’t helping any.

Sam sighed down the line. “If I had half her talent, half her confidence, half her sex appeal—”

“Okay then,” Ryder said, loud enough to turn heads. A few of his tradies laughed