



FIONA JAYDE

# *Pas de Deux*

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*One wrong move, and she could be dancing on her grave...*

Two years after an injury put her dancing career on hold, Lynnrina Kovaleva is determined to reclaim her place on the stage. On the eve of her comeback production, she takes the edge off her nerves with a one-night stand in the strong arms of celebrity bodyguard Mateo Rivera.

Ex-cop Mateo is celebrating one hell of an anniversary: eight months since he was declared unfit for duty. When a delicate beauty boldly propositions him in a bar, he chooses to lose himself in her body rather than lose his mind to alcohol. This choice comes back to haunt him when he's hired to protect a prima ballerina who's been receiving threats.

Despite her shock at seeing him again, Lynn must not allow their intense attraction—or any creepy fan letters—to undermine her performance. Mateo can't reconcile this coldly focused dancer with the passionate woman who seduced him. Yet he sees fire under the ice, pain hidden by the smooth mask of perfection.

The vivid memory of their entwined bodies wars with the job at hand, but he must keep Lynn safe—regardless of the cost. The most difficult challenge, however, will be keeping his hands to himself.

Warning: Contains *jetés*, *pliés*, a chilling touch of danger, and the boiling heat of an unwanted attraction that combusts into passionate sex.

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# Pas de Deux

*Fiona Jayde*

# Dedication

To Lace—a huge thank you!

# Chapter One

At least she hadn't wasted her four years at Juilliard.

Her lips curled in the appropriate half smile, Lynn kept her shoulders soft and her eyes sparkling. Yes, she loved the idea of fusing classical ballet with a contemporary story. Yes, this was truly an opportunity to be on the cutting edge of her profession and her art, a perfect comeback vehicle for a ballerina of her reputation.

Thinking of six solo duets, she squelched a sudden, vicious need for chocolate and sipped her Perrier under Dominic's watchful and guileless eyes. The brilliant and sought-after choreographer was cataloguing every move she made.

"Each one will be a story arc of strength and characterization of 'a modern woman'." Dominic used his hands in air quotes then gulped another swallow of his cognac. The tiny diamond on his pinky winked at her in the dim intimate light of the bar. "Lovers and enemies, friends, foes. I have the main steps outlined, but you know how it goes."

"Of course." Lynn kept smiling while relief threatened to melt her. The contracts had been signed; she was the prima for the *Pas De Deux* production. After nearly two years of recovery, she would be back onstage, and all the sacrifices wouldn't be for nothing.

"You do know Pavel Zolotov signed on."

She kept her smile firm even if every nerve inside in her body stiffened. "It will be good to see him."

"I'm counting on it." Shrewd grey eyes watched for even the smallest signal of disgust.

Lynn took another fortifying sip of water and wished like hell for chocolate. Zolotov had broken her heart as publicly as possible, using her naïveté to elevate his own exposure. And started her tradition of pre-rehearsal one-night stands.

"Darling, if it's a problem—"

She peeled her lips back in a wider smile. "That was what, seven, eight years ago?" She tried a charming, elegant shrug. "We're both professionals."

"We'll start off slow." Dominic drank his cognac with flair. "I figure—" He stopped mid word, raised his eyebrows at something over her left shoulder. "Hellooooo there."

Curiosity beat down manners, but when Lynn turned she didn't see what he was looking at.

"Tall and dark and Puerto Rican walking into—of all the joints—this bar. A bodyguard, excuse me, 'security specialist'." Dom's diamond sparkled with another set of air quotes. "Mateo something. I met him

at a party when that opera diva was in town.” He leaned closer to whisper. “When a man looks like that—” His hand fluttered dramatically over his chest. “Just like Whitney and a hot Latin Kevin Costner.”

She snorted, couldn’t help it. A glance up at the mirrored ceiling showed the Latin Kevin Costner hunched over a drink sitting in a booth just behind her.

“What was I saying?” With occasional glances over her shoulder, Dominic pushed away his empty glass. “I’m just thrilled with this. Just flying. The cast is too—I got a guy pushing off retiring. Simon Powell—you know him?”

Under the rapid-fire words, Lynn nodded. “He was a pretty big deal in New York.” And had always been unfailingly kind to her amidst the curious glances and the half-hidden whispers. In the incestuous world of ballet, he had appointed himself a type of older brother, encouraging her when she was ready to end everything, silently sitting with her while she tore up newspapers and cried.

“You don’t stay a big deal when you start pooh-poohing the parts.” A short and dismissive shrug. “He’s perfect though. We’ll start off slow and build. You’ve settled in?”

She’d moved yesterday into a luxury efficiency with rented furniture and bars over the windows. Her fault for waiting till the last possible minute to get a place.

She just nodded and kept her perfect posture until Dom ran off with a light airy kiss over her cheek—as if he was afraid anything else would sully her perfection. Ironical, since tomorrow he would choreograph multiple seductions with her in the starring role.

When she was sure Dom had left, Lynn let herself slouch in the rich dark leather of the booth and pulled the pins out of her hair. Relief and dread spilled over taut nerves.

Pavel or no Pavel, the contract was already signed. Just because she’d been a naïve idiot when she was barely twenty was no reason to let her family’s sacrifices go to waste.

Giving in to the craving for something sweet and rich, she ordered a chocolatini. Waiting for it, she looked up at the mirror image of herself—wild honey curls, loose sloppy posture, elegant wool dress minimizing breasts a touch too large.

She figured with two hours of class and eight more sweating in rehearsals, she’d drop plenty of weight. Which meant she could allow herself at least a drink to celebrate.

When it finally came, Lynn toasted herself, letting the rich taste curl softly in her belly. A good drink and a one-night stand. A pre-rehearsal staple for the past seven years.

The Latin Kevin Costner was still brooding over his glass in a booth behind her, his hair dark and curly, his exposed forearms taut and sprinkled with crisp hair. And when he suddenly looked up to meet her gaze, his eyes as dark as midnight, she knew he was the one for the first duet.

Sliding her fingers through her hair to tousle up her curls, she gulped down liquid courage and stood up. “Drinking alone?”

Time hummed while those onyx eyes skimmed over her. “Not if you join me.” The rough husk of his voice caressed her skin with subtle shivers.

Keeping her smile firmly in place, Lynn slid into the booth opposite him. This was the awkward stage—the casual attempt at small talk.

“I’m Lynn.” Short sweet and without baggage.

“I’m bad company.” He lifted up a long blunt finger to signal for another glass. And in a move she considered positive, he jerked his chin towards her, indicating a refill.

She hadn’t counted on the long silence. The past few times she’d done this, men happily talked about themselves before proceeding to preliminary groping.

This one wasn’t in a hurry to make the second move.

“Lynn. Russian?”

She shivered when he said her name, slow, as if seeing how it tasted on his tongue. “Ukrainian.” Surprising that he picked out her accent—she barely had a trace of it left.

Silence stretched until their drinks came. He took a long gulp from his glass. “I don’t do small talk.”

“Then I’ll get to the point.” She studied him over the rim of another chocolatini. A stubborn jaw, a crooked nose that looked like it’d been broken more than once. Heavy black eyebrows, tired liquid brown eyes. Firm lips and a day’s growth of stubble.

Dangerous. Not like the fragile male dancers she was used to. Under the beat-up leather jacket, he looked big, male and rough.

More shivers danced over her spine. “I’m starting a long and stressful project.” She doubted a man like him would be impressed with details, and that at least was a relief.

He didn’t look at her, didn’t say a single word. Instead, he simply cradled the now-empty glass in his wide palms.

“I won’t have time for...anything.” Lynn never could actually say the words. Luckily her chosen partners always got it. “I want to have one wild night before I start.”

Now his eyes flashed to her. “You want to fuck before your thing?”

She should have gotten up, but that was probably what he hoped to accomplish. “Putting it crudely, yes.”

“You’ve no idea who I am.” He spoke clear and slow, an edge of danger to that raspy, make-me-wet voice.

“You’re a bodyguard.” She gave him a thin smile, noted the way his lips were full and firm. “And I’m a good judge of character.”

“I bet.” Another signal for a refill. This time Lynn shook her head when he tilted his head silently asking if she wanted another.



Usually men jumped at this chance for a meaningless quickie. Sex was a simple means to blow off steam, a way of reminding herself that being touched meant nothing.

Just as it would mean nothing when Pavel would touch her tomorrow in a perfectly orchestrated parody of love.

He didn't look at her as they sat in the uncomfortable silence amidst the murmurs and the laughs and clinks of glassware. A woman wrapped in heady perfume shuffled past their table for the door, letting in the cold San Francisco wind while she called out for a taxi.

The chill ripped through the fake warm courage of her drinks. Keeping her movements casual, Lynn pushed her glass away. His hand closed on her wrist, his fingers warm and firm and callused. "You change your mind?"

Her pulse raced now at that dark voice, that firm yet gentle grip. The flush that started at her cheeks became a tingling flood of heat between her thighs.

She forced her voice to remain even. "I'm not sure yet."

His gaze stayed steady on hers even when he let go. "Why do you do this?"

No one had ever asked. "I'm seeing my ex tomorrow." It came out in a rush, a breath she didn't know she had been holding. "If you aren't interested—"

That dark gaze narrowed on her face. "I'm interested. Would you like proof?"

If the intent had been to make her blush, he was too late. "I'll take your word for it." She took a breath. "My place is just around the corner."

His mouth curved now, dangerous and wicked. "Lead the way."

At least she hadn't wasted his money or his time.

Three Stolis pleasantly buzzing in his head, Mateo opened the heavy wooden door into the wind and fog that was late February in San Francisco. The woman—Lynn—walked out beside him. A queen wrapped in a long white coat.

Maybe she was exactly what he needed. Good healthy sex instead of wishing for another drink and wondering if alcoholism was far away.

Eight months on leave, one hell of a date to celebrate. Nearly a year since the Bloods left a civilian injured and his partner nearly dead. Nearly a year since he slapped his badge onto the captain's desk after some idiot with a psychology degree declared him unfit for duty. He was unfit while his partner lost the use of both his legs.

With the wind tearing into his jacket, Mateo snuck a look at the Queen of Sheba with her head held high, her profile elegant and perfect, those bright curls ravaged by the wind. Before he could talk himself out of it, he reached out to touch her hair, felt its warm silk against the cold skin of his hands. And was surprised to see confusion in her eyes.

“You sure about this?”

She shrugged, her face lit up by streetlights. Fine bones with gently arching brows, soft brown eyes a man could drown in. Her lips weren't painted, and in the cold lights of the night, Mateo found himself wondering what they would taste like in the searing wind.

He wasn't a man who wondered long.

Ignoring the passing cars, he took her arm, spun her around. Gave her a moment to scream or pull away before he fit his mouth over hers for that first taste.

Dark and rich chocolate, pliant and warm.

She pulled back with her hands over his chest, her warm eyes wide and dreamy.

“You sure about this?” His body tightened with pleasant hardness. Before, that brazen show of nonchalance hadn't done much for him. But her sweet upturned face, her softly parted lips appealed to him more than he would've liked.

She'd use him to get back at her ex. He wouldn't think of the past for a few hours. The way he figured, they were even.

“I'm sure.” Trembling husky voice. She left her hands splayed on his chest, her fingers long and delicate. Mateo pictured them wrapping around his cock and took her mouth again.

Harder this time, until she trembled, moaned softly when she took a breath. He eased away before giving in to the urge to slip his hands under her coat and see what her skin felt like.

“You taste good,” he murmured instead and took her hand in his.

To his surprise she didn't pull away. “I'm up there.” She tilted her head at a freshly painted five story with bar-covered windows on the first two floors. Through the haze of arousal, the cop in him couldn't match the student haven on Fullerton Street with the elegant white coat draped over her slim body.

“Last chance to back out.” He was a fool to say the words. She looked determined to go through with it.

Her smile was sweet and somewhat shy. “I told you. I'm sure.”

Bravado now, he could tell by the way she squared her shoulders, kept her spine tall and straight. Her hand still joined in his, her fingers cold and delicate, they went through the metal-trimmed gate to walk up to the second floor. She flipped on her apartment lights to reveal old wicker furniture and empty walls.

“Nice place.” He still couldn't connect her to it: the seventies décor, the postage-stamp-sized kitchen, couple of brown cardboard boxes shoved along the walls.

“Can I get you anything?” She stood just out of his reach, playing the polite hostess before the next required step.

She didn't look like the destructive type, yet by all indicators, she expected a cold and faceless fuck. Except he could sense nerves pumping from her, as if she was afraid, excited. Maybe a little bit of both.

Arousal was a hot fist in his gut. “Come here.”

Those long unpainted fingers inched up towards the light switch.  
“Keep the lights on.” He reached for her white coat.

## Chapter Two

Lynn didn't know why she was trembling. Surely this wasn't nerves, not now, not when the awkward part was over. There was no reason to feel nervous with this intense dark-eyed stranger who technically hadn't even told her his name.

Her pulse fluttered somewhere in her throat when he unbuttoned her coat and with slow movements drew it off her shoulders.

Maybe this wasn't right. He didn't act as if he wanted her, but then again, she hadn't made the most romantic proposition. Maybe he really was some kind of psycho...

"Last chance," he murmured, still not touching her, his heat enveloping her body.

She watched his face, those dark and intense eyes, those sensual lips that seemed both merciless and sexy. "You've already said that."

He kissed her, hard and raw, and sent her pulse out of control.

"I have condoms." A breathless whisper. She didn't want romance, didn't want shivers or nerves. Except arousal teased at her skin, caressed her with his heat, stroked her between her thighs with light and teasing movements.

"You're a girl scout." He still hadn't touched her, as if giving her that final chance to change her mind and kick him out.

Her pulse roaring in her ears, Lynn reached for the ties of her dress and tried to keep her hands from shaking.

"Hold on." He moved to stand behind her, the rough skin of his palms gently closing on her wrists. Slow, his hands moved over her bared arms, sliding over trembling skin, drawing her into his body.

Her buttocks pressed against the hard bulge of his cock. The arms that closed around her were strong and taut and clad in leather. He nudged her forward, his scent surrounding her with every step. She reached the tiled bar with him behind her, braced her forearms on the cool hard surface and fought for some semblance of control.

"Bedroom." She hadn't intended for her voice to come out breathless. More shivers tap-danced up her spine.

His breath was hot against the sensitive shell of her ear. "Not just yet."

The long length of his body trapped her against the bar, those blunt hard fingers once again moving over her arms, traveling lower with exquisite slowness, brushing the sides of suddenly aching, swelling breasts.

“Where do you like to be touched?” Low intimate voice.

She pressed her hips against him and tried to stop herself from shivering again. “Surprise me,” she managed through dry lips and couldn’t quite contain a moan when finally he gently cupped her breasts.

Another wave of heat flooded inside her. As if he had all night, he shaped his palms over her breasts, with fleeting movements brushed his thumbs over her nipples.

Blindly, Lynn reached again for the ties of her dress.

“Not yet,” he murmured, and slid his hand into the overlapping folds of wool over her chest.

Slow, torturously slow.

She exhaled when he found her breast again, this time boldly caressing a straining nipple through the lace she wore, his touch brutally erotic, his lips a few shivering moments from her neck.

Trembling, she pressed herself into the hardness of his body, arched when he teased a gentle fingertip over her nipple.

“Take off your dress.”

More heat speared between her thighs.

With fumbling fingers, her heartbeat throbbing against the rough skin of his palm, Lynn struggled with the ties, finally unknotted them to let the dress hang open. Waited.

He didn’t push it down her shoulders. Instead he cupped her other breast, brushing a finger over a puckered nipple, electrifying the tugs of aroused need that lanced into her core.

Breathless, she pushed down her dress, shivered when his lips trailed kisses on her back, just above the lace of her bra.

A whimper with each slow, torturous kiss.

His arms no longer held her. She leaned further onto the counter, shuddered as his callused palms traveled over her hips, her upper thighs, her belly. He took his time dusting soft merciless kisses on her spine, sliding his fingers over the lace edge of her panties. Then he inhaled with his lips against her skin and she wondered if he could smell how wet she’d gotten.

“You smell amazing, *preciosa*.”

Another jolt that rippled through her veins. “Touch me.”

“Like this?” He cupped her with his hand, his lips curving against her spine when she could only groan in answer.

Finally, he reached under her panties, caressed the soft lips of her sex, found the swollen knot of her clitoris and held her motionless, suspended, breathless.

Lynn tried to grind her hips into his hand as pleasure coiled inside her. With a quick movement he tugged down her panties, pushed them down to her knees so that she had to fight to spread her thighs apart.

A slow wicked caress of fingertips along the crease between her buttocks had her trembling. Just one more touch, that would be all she needed. But when she reached down to finish it herself, his hand closed over hers, firm and insistent. “No.”

“I want to—” She couldn’t bring herself to say the word.

“You want to come.” The words caressed her lower back.

“God. Yes.”

Moist air trembled over heated skin. “Then say it.”

She couldn’t think past the onslaught of pleasure. She couldn’t say the words.

As if to coax them out, he used a fingertip to lightly slide over her clitoris, making her cry out, melt into him, force her legs further apart with panties still around her knees. Grinding into his hand, she still couldn’t find the touch she needed.

He teased a circle in her slick heat. “Tell me you want to come.”

“I...ah.” She couldn’t think, could barely concentrate on standing. Arousal stabbed through her blood, her body coiled for release he wouldn’t give her. “I can’t.”

“You can.” His lips were once again above her ear, his body pressed against her back. “Say it for me.” His finger moved inside her, maddening and slow.

“I want—”

He moved his hand, sparking another shock of pleasure.

“I want...oh God.”

Another touch, gentle and fleeting, teasing her to the very brink until she had to say the words before her blood exploded.

“I want to come,” she breathed and let the pleasure vibrate through her, rob her of light and sound and breath. She would have stumbled back if he wasn’t supporting her, her muscles pools of warm and lazy wax.

The shivers wouldn’t stop, but he didn’t seem to care. He pressed more kisses on her neck, teeth scraping lightly over hypersensitive skin. The telltale sound of a zipper had her clenching her belly, arousal that should’ve been sated unfurling once again.

“Condom.” She barely could breathe the word. “Let me—”

“I got it.” A low insistent growl.

She gripped the bar with shaking hands and listened for the sound of foil ripping. Another endless moment and the tip of his cock pressed into her, iron hard and full, slowly working inside her with firm shallow movements, each deeper than the last.

He held her steady for his thrusts, sliding further with each sensual stroke, the rhythm of his hips echoed by the soft sucking noise of her arousal. Arching her back, Lynn gripped the thick muscles of his forearms, squeezed herself around him as pleasure took a subtle bite of pain. He stretched her to the brink and then stopped moving, as if allowing her to get used to his length.

His breaths were harsh, his cock pulsing inside her. She sighed when he finally rocked his hips, then slowly pulled out only to work inside her once again. Another slow and torturous withdrawal, another merciless advance, so tight, so good, she sobbed with it, arching against him, turning her head so that his mouth would find hers.

His hands were on her hips now, anchoring her for long penetrating thrusts that left her helpless, breathless, caught. She fought to part her thighs, couldn't go past the fabric that restrained her while he fucked her slow and deep, each plunge a clenching shock, each slow withdrawal a caress that left her craving more.

"Harder." The word was a crude whisper while Lynn strained against whatever kept her from opening herself wider for him.

His answer was a harsh loud inhale. He pushed into her, a long hard stroke. She gripped the counter, struggled with the fabric around her knees.

"Harder." She felt the thrust of the next plunge, braced for another. With each hard move she forced her thighs to spread until she heard fabric ripping, letting her part her legs and open herself fully.

"Harder!" The last word ended in a scream when he shoved into her, withdrew again to plunge in harder, his body slapping against her buttocks, fast and deep and delirious.

His fingers found her clitoris again, firm rhythmic strokes timed with each rub of his cock, each thrust a roar until the pleasure froze. She shattered out of control and screamed while he clutched her tight against his chest and surged wildly into her.

She was used to endless hours of rehearsals, her muscles strong with years of discipline and training. Those years didn't matter now. She would've slid down to the floor in a contented liquid rush if he hadn't held her up. Her heartbeat slowed with lazy satisfaction, his mouth nibbling a lazy path over her neck.

"Bathroom?" His tone remained the same, a rough and low caress.

He still had on his leather jacket and she was leaning on the bar clad in black lace and knee boots. "First door on the left." Embarrassment wasn't permitted. When she was sure he wouldn't see her, she pulled her dress back on, trying to figure out where to shove her ruined panties.

A minute later, he came out holding his jacket in his arms, his pants zipped up. Lynn simply scrunched the scraps of lace inside her hand.

"Would you like something?" She had a crazy urge for chocolate but wouldn't go for her stash with him still here. Her body throbbed, her skin still tingled. She wondered what he'd do if she asked him to spend the night.

Post-coital contentment. She'd get the same from a small square of Ghirardelli's Dark.

"I have an early day." She sounded like a bitch and if she'd clench her thighs, she would start shivering again.

His lips curved up a bit as if those dark and liquid eyes could see right through her. "Yeah. I better go."

Simple and clean. At least he hadn't made the false offer to call her, knowing full well he didn't have the means.

"You sure you don't want anything?" Maybe she wanted him to linger, maybe spend the night, maybe have breakfast. *Stupid post-coital crap.*

"I'm good."

"All right then."

To her surprise he crossed the space between them. A long blunt finger traced a soft path over her lips before he kissed her, hard and quick.

"Good night, *preciosa*."

She didn't watch him close the door behind him. Instead, she stood in silence, with her torn panties bunched up in her palm. At least now she could go have chocolate.



## Chapter Three

Mateo wouldn't have thought she was a prima ballerina. Hell, he wouldn't have thought he'd ever see her again until a man named Dominic called him three months after that night because their star needed protection.

Eight years as a cop had honed his observation skills. And yet he wouldn't have connected that long and finely muscled body with the fragile softness of ballet.

"The first episodes were minimal." Dressed in all black and accented with silver, Dominic waved a hand over the stacks of papers crowding the fussy antique-looking desk. "False fire alarms, things like that."

Crammed into a small office covered with posters of ballet, Mateo still couldn't believe the irony. His old friend and the founder of Channing Securities had given him the files yesterday, copies of letters, reports, witness statements. "Right up your alley," he had smirked and thankfully wasn't around to watch Mateo's jaw drop to the floor. The first photo of the client showed Lynn standing on her toes, her leg extended high behind her, her arms curved in a perfect arc. Delicate, beautiful perfection, except there had been nothing delicate in that erotic long and finely muscled back, those firm strong limbs that he still thought about.

"We've hired additional security, but after the other night, combined with these—" Dominic pointed at the red file containing copies of the letters, "—I want to take the extra precautions."

"What about the other night?" He had already read the letters, the sickly sweet promises of love typed on cheap printer paper.

"Some creep followed her home after rehearsals."

Mateo consciously kept his hands from clenching into fists. "Could have been any creep."

Shrewd grey eyes met his. "It's possible. But I hate taking risks."

Mateo wondered how she would react to this. Clearly she hadn't wanted to reveal herself, had even shortened her name to play the fantasy.

Lynnrina. Lynnrina Kovaleva. It suited the prima ballerina perfectly just as Lynn suited the sensual woman who had the guts to ask him to come up. He could still feel her fragrant and smooth skin under his palms, the subtle flare of her hips, high round breasts that fit so well into his hands.

His body hardened, thinking of her once again. And a perverse part of him wondered at her reaction once she'd see him.

"I haven't told Lynnrina that we hired someone." Music poured out from every doorway as Dominic led the way along a well-lit hall. Numerous ballerinas frozen in dramatic black and white held their poses in discreet wood frames along the walls.

"Really. She doesn't think it's serious?"

Dominic slid a sideways glance in Mateo's direction. "She's determined not to let this interfere with work."

He'd googled her as soon as shock receded. This was her first performance after a major surgery for a torn muscle. He remembered the pink line of a scar above the inside of her knee and wished that he'd put his lips there to soothe it.

"I'd say it's past the point of interfering." The shattered window had been facing Franklin. *I won't allow her to dirty herself* had been written in ink over a torn-off piece of *San Francisco Chronicle* rubber-banded to a good-sized brick. "How much coverage are you expecting?"

"Make sure she gets here, make sure she returns home safe." Dominic didn't pause when a girl of about fourteen shuffled past them with tearful red eyes. A muffled sob was cut off by a slamming door. "She'll let you know of anything she has going on. Mostly you're to make sure she isn't alone. I doubt she'll go out by herself at night, but you'll let me know if that becomes an issue."

This was said with a shrug. Mateo wondered how many ways she'd kill him if he let slip about her wild streak. He thought back to her stubborn chin, those soft sparkling eyes that had a hint of steel in them. The low hoarse voice that begged him to fuck her harder.

"She should get an alarm system." Not that a good alarm would stop someone committed to getting in, but at least it was something.

Another sidelong glance. "If you have someone you could recommend for an alarm, I'll consider it."

The sounds of piano grew louder at the end of the hall, something rhythmic and classical and buoyant. The heavy double doors led into a large circular room shiny with wooden floors and mirrors. At the far left, a man-sized elephant with long curly hair had wedged himself behind a grand piano, plucking fast and cheerful sounds from the keys.

She held on to a barre in front of a mirror with three other dancers, two males and a female, all focused intently on her movements. Those wild gold curls were pinned up above her head, her slender body clad in a simple black leotard. And when she sank down low with her knees out and her heels lifting up, Mateo felt another stab of lust inside his gut.

He was a damned professional. Maybe no one would notice if he took a few minutes off the clock to find a swift cold shower.

With her arm curved in front of her, Lynn completed her glide upward. And when those soft brown eyes widened in the mirror, that stab of lust coiled into a hungry fist.

"You didn't." She turned with a sharp graceful movement, her feet tucked into ballet slippers with shiny pink laces crisscrossing over her calves.

Mateo had a sudden vicious image of her wrapped around him wearing nothing else.

"Tell me you didn't."

The wrath of those fiery eyes were directed at the man beside him. Thankful for that, Mateo took the time to force his blood to cool.

"Darling." Dominic moved in, his palms up in the air. The piano gave way to a sudden and curious silence. "You know I had to do it."

In an exasperated move, she ran her hand over that smooth and supple neck, the one Mateo still remembered kissing. She still hadn't looked at him.

"Don't you think you're overreacting? Just a bit?" Her hands were on her hips, her dark eyes pleading.

In the plain light of day, her face flushed, her skin lightly sweating, she was far from the cold perfectly posed woman in the photos. His cock pressed hard against his zipper as if in complete agreement.

"Overacting? *Moi*?" Dominic took both her palms with long exaggerated gestures. "I'm paid to overact." There was steel behind that bright and shiny smile. "You'll indulge me, won't you?"

She sighed, clearly not thrilled, clearly not willing to keep up the argument while the other dancers found the sudden need to inspect something in their shoes, or in case of the piano elephant, his sheet music.

Mateo waited for another kick of lust when those stormy dark eyes finally met his. As punches went he wasn't disappointed. He simply hoped that she wouldn't look below his belt.

"I can take care of myself." Low voice, a soft hint of an accent.

Mateo wondered if she knew that she rolled her *Rs* when she was upset or... *Fuck*. At this rate he'd have permanent zipper marks. "Really." He didn't state it as a question.

"Yes. Really." If looks could kill, he would be frying. Except he couldn't focus past the nipples pebbling under the dark fabric of her top.

His one regret had been not having tasted them.

"Show me." He didn't even know what he was saying.

"Excuse me?"

"Show me how you take care of yourself."

She smiled, serene and beautiful. And Mateo barely missed a pink-shod foot aimed at his jaw.

He caught it just before she clocked him, felt a short tremble when he gave in to the urge and rubbed his thumb over her skin.

Those dark eyes flared wide and soft and brown.

"Let go." A firm no-nonsense voice. More color on her cheeks.

"Say pretty please."

The silence stretched, so tight he could've snapped it.

"Let go." She whispered it, a hoarse and silent plea.

"Might want to take another self-defense class." Disgusted with himself, arousal pounding his body, Mateo opened up his hand and thought he heard a muttered curse. If nothing else, the words cheered him right up. "Didn't think I'd see your face again."

The face in question flushed even more scarlet.

"You two have met?" Dominic braved a step.

"We're long-lost friends." Shooting them all a long death stare, Lynn—Lynnrina—smoothed a hand over her hair and went back to the barre. "Shall we continue?"

The ensuing whispers were drowned by a waltz.

At least the next few hours weren't boring. There was no need to stick around while she was surrounded by people, but Mateo was too much of a cop not to familiarize himself with the surroundings and all the players. And through it all, he had to force himself to keep the damned arousal at bay.

"Too sharp, Simon, ease up those elbows. You aren't fighting her yet." This at the thirty-something man wearing all black, his skin a glowing pink, his mouth frozen somewhere between a scowl and a smile of deep concentration.

"André, forget Swan Lake. Your part is human here, quit the prancing. Kristine, longer *jeté*." The kid in grey sweats and a Giants cap ducked his head with his next jump, his body nearly as slender as the brunette who neatly sidestepped him, her eyes watching Lynn with dead-set focus in the mirror.

Lynn with her elegant and supple body made those same leaps look effortless, as if the air itself held her. And when a lean blond poured into white tights and sporting a heavy Slavic accent made his grand entrance, Mateo had a good idea who she'd been referring to when she'd mentioned her ex.

"No, your hands here." The Blond Prince rolled his *Rs* and kept his hands close to her pelvis, turning Lynn upside down in a series of sharply executed turns. Pavel Zolotov, the Russian Royalty of Great American Ballet.

The other dancers—male and female—hungrily watched their every move. Lynn didn't look at the Russian Prince, her features blank and smooth. When his arms brushed lightly over her breasts, Mateo had sudden urge to plant a fist into the royal jaw.

"High! *Grand jeté*. Arms higher!"

They leapt with perfect timing, the hunter and the prey. The other dancers sighed when Pavel lifted her into a horizontal line, spun her around in a complicated pattern before sliding her down against his body, his mouth inches from hers. Music and time and whispers froze.

"Again."

The music soared, she floated up, her arms out as if she was sailing on the damned Titanic.

Then she was sprawled over the wooden floor with the Russian Prince above her.

“You need to lose a kilogram.” His smooth voice carried to every corner. Breathing hard, Zolotov extended his white and pampered hand. “I don’t think I can handle all the lifts.” More murmurs, now in Russian.

Mateo didn’t need to understand the gist given the angry flush over Lynn’s cheekbones. Ignoring Zolotov’s extended hand, she stood, wincing a bit, her chin up high, her dark eyes shattered. She gave a quick sharp nod when Dominic asked if everybody was okay. And Mateo saw her chin tremble.

“Hold it.” The piano player had already played the first chord, the sound sharply ending. Aware of everyone’s shocked gaze, Mateo walked across the floor towards Zolotov. “You want to run through what just happened here?”

Dominic’s mouth dropped. Lynn turned away from the damned mirrors and used a stretch to hide her face.

“I was supposed to lift but—” A small shrug from the Prince, while Dominic twisted his hands together. “You are the bodyguard?”

“You got it.”

“Of course.” A small smile from royalty to peasant. “Dominic insisted in case of something happening.” His tone indicated that he didn’t quite believe it.

Mateo had to force himself to keep a pleasant expression. “You don’t believe there’s a threat?”

Another shrug. “Coincidences.”

“And you’re the one closest to my client. You’ve got the opportunity, the means...” He let the sentence hang amidst the gasps of horrid fascination. “You didn’t happen to *jeté* around fire alarms?”

“That...that is ridiculous. I cannot believe...” The accent thickened with every outraged phrase. The last was followed by a dramatic flounce out the wooden doors.

“Take ten, everyone.” Another death stare, this one from Dominic before he rushed out after the Russian Prince.

## Chapter Four

How often had she told herself she was long past humiliation?

Because she needed a fix, Lynn unwrapped another piece of Midnight Dark and let the cold numbness of an ice pack seep into the low part of her thigh. At least the tiny space that was her dressing room allowed her the privacy to sulk while sitting on a bag of ice.

She didn't look at herself in the light-bulb-rimmed mirror. Instead she let the taste of chocolate soothe her frazzled nerves and bruised ego. Maybe she'd gain another kilogram and cause a real problem. With that, she reached into the bag to get another piece.

Wimpy ass bastard. At least this time he hadn't asked for her to bind her breasts so that they wouldn't brush against his arm, *distracting him*. This time, he'd copped a feel right after telling her in Russian how she really should watch what she was eating.

After another piece of chocolate, Lynn faced herself in the damned mirror. Red blotchy eyes, sniveling nose. A perfect prima ballerina.

"Get over it," she told her own reflection and crumbled the shiny blue and silver wrappers in her hand.

Pavel probably figured they'd get media attention with this stalker business. And stupid her just had to blab about how she thought somebody had followed her.

"That's what you get for overreacting." Disgusted with herself, Lynn stuffed the bag of Darks into a drawer before giving in to the urge to take another piece.

Mateo was as handsome as she had remembered, those sensual dark eyes watching her every move. He'd goaded her into kicking at him and when those long fingers wrapped around her ankle, she felt the same flush of desire she'd felt months ago.

She couldn't afford for him to stay here. But then again, she couldn't exactly tell Dominic that she'd pounced on his Kevin Costner. Aside from being stalked by someone who insisted she keep her art "pure", the last thing she wanted was more gossip about whom she slept with.

*Never again.*

She was trying to do something about bloodshot eyes when someone knocked discreetly on her door. "Yes."

Simon stuck his head in, his gaze sympathetic and tired. "Just wanted to check in on you."

She found the strength to smile. "I'm okay."

“Of course you are.” Easy confident tone, a long assessing look. The lines that had crept around his mouth and eyes in the past eight years added a layer of sophistication to his jowly face.

She’d always wondered if he had a little crush on her. Back then, swept up in love, and later in betrayal, Lynn never really paid attention. Now, she just hoped that they could remain as comfortable as they’d been in New York. Amidst the snarks and gossipers, she hoped for at least one friendly face.

“Honestly, I’m okay. Nothing to worry about.”

“I’m not worried.” He grinned at her. “I am wondering if we should go out to lunch and give our Drama Bitch a reason to complain.”

She couldn’t help but laugh. “The thought did cross my mind.”

He looked like he was about to say something, but a quick glance behind his shoulder had him frowning. “We’ll talk later.” He stepped back to reveal her new bodyguard coming up behind him.

Lynn had to force her muscles to relax when Mateo nodded to Simon and walked into her dressing room without an invitation. “Babysitting the client?”

“Yeah.” Same low voice that had made her shudder. “You doing good?”

“Just peachy.”

“I can see that.”

She frowned when he straddled a chair facing her, big and male and dangerous in a dark turtleneck and black slacks.

“About that night.” She nearly reached for the drawer where she stashed the chocolate, caught herself at the last moment. Steeled herself to meet that liquid gaze.

“You don’t owe me an explanation.”

She owed it to herself to portray at least some level of professionalism. “You’re right, I don’t.” He sat with his arms crossed over the back rim of the chair. “But if you’re working here—”

He interrupted her again. “That night was personal.”

“And this is business.”

“You catch on.” He stood and held out his hand. “Mateo Rivera.” His lips curved just a bit, reminding Lynn just how they’d felt when he kissed her.

She didn’t want to touch him, didn’t want to remember those hands on her skin.

*You’re a professional, for God’s sake.*

“Lynnrina Kovaleva.” The rough heat of his palm seared her skin.

“I think I prefer Lynn.”

Quiet voice, somber intense eyes. She had a sudden need to change the subject. “That night, I knew you were a bodyguard.” She hadn’t meant to sound so breathless. Her hand was still clasped within his. “Dom said he met you at some party. I’m not as stupid as you probably think.”

“Really?” His fingers tightened when she would have withdrawn her hand. “You got a couple letters from some psycho with a hard-on for ballet, a shattered window and now someone following you home. Saying it’s nothing is what, smart?”

She wouldn’t play tug of war with him. Instead she forced herself to meet his gaze. “I’m no movie star, for God’s sake.” She wouldn’t think about the crawling feeling she got under her skin each time a piece of paper told her she couldn’t prostitute ballet for money, the same feeling she’d had the past three nights when a shadowy figure trailed her.

She had too much at stake, had made too many sacrifices to let some creep run her off the production of this piece. She’d keep her head low, even if it meant having a bodyguard.

“I’m still trying to figure out who gets this obsessed about ballet.” Reasonable tone, low heat between her thighs. “Your Russian friend seemed into it enough.”

“You can’t be serious.” She stood now, tested her muscles with a simple step. No pain, just a small warning of tension.

“You sure you gave it enough time?”

Lynn wondered how much he knew about the injury, hoped he didn’t remember seeing the scar. Thinking of those hard hands over her thighs once more stirred up unwanted tugs of passion.

“It’s fine.” She stood *en pointe*, held it for a moment, his gaze on her like an intense caress.

“How long you’ve been in the US?”

She frowned at the sudden topic change. “Excuse me?”

“You barely have an accent.”

She spared him a glance and focused on her muscles. “My parents sent me to New York when I was eleven.” Scared and crying, waking up at dawn six times a week so Aunt Maria could take her to the lessons. Always aware of the sacrifices everyone made so she could be a ballerina in America. “I didn’t think I had an accent anymore.”

She could almost feel the way his gaze heated. “When you get...mad.”

Lynn refused to flush.

“Tell me about Zolotov.”

Dignity was a hard and icy cloak. “It’s personal.” The hell of it was, she had rolled her *Rs* just now.

“Not if he’s taken up creative writing.”

Feeling the tension in her thigh she let it rest a bit. “Pavel won’t do anything that won’t benefit Pavel.”

“I’d say free publicity would benefit him plenty.”

That was an understatement. He’d broken her heart in public so that people would flock to see how they would dance together. The production of *Ruslan and Ludmila* had been a hit. “If that was the case, he’d have the stalker stalking *him*.”



“You sure about that?”

She simply shrugged and stood *en pointe* again.

“You agreed to dance with him again.” Another veiled reference to her being stupid.

She used the vanity for support, held a *plié* until her thighs started to tremble “He’s one of the top ten male dancers in the US.”

“And you?”

She shrugged again and slowly lifted up her knee, testing the working leg. “And I can’t lose this chance.”

He simply raised an eyebrow.

“He’s an asshole.” She couldn’t afford to be a diva. But saying the words was almost like eating forbidden chocolate. Sinful relief.

“That part I figured out.”

Lynn smiled at the dry tone, stood up *en pointe* again. Stable, strong. *Un, deux, release and up again.* “He’s harmless.” She let her arms float up above her head, watched herself in the mirror, collided with his dark and intense gaze.

Her mouth went dry, the low and liquid pulls inside her belly spiraling into a pulsing heat. And her thigh turned into a stone. She would have stumbled if he hadn’t grasped her waist, holding her steady, his lips a heartbeat from her mouth, his body hard and solid rock.

“Easy.” His breath held hints of coffee and mint chocolate.

She couldn’t be easy, not with her pulse dancing allegro in her veins. Her breath caught while one of those large hands curved over her hip, pressing lightly into her throbbing muscle. Probably checking for signs of injury.

Her enflamed nerves were just her stupid lack of sense.

Lynn tried to clear her throat, managed to squeeze the words out. “Is this business as well?” She would’ve moved except she wasn’t sure she wouldn’t fall on top of him.

“What happened?”

“Cramp.”

He knelt to press his thumb above her knee, relief and pain and more arousal.

“I mean what happened with your leg?”

She swallowed hard before she could make out the words. “Just...stupid. We had this master class, and I didn’t warm up.” She had been too upset about Vera Rushko getting the lead in Balanchine’s *Swan Lake*.

Her Aunt Maria had been furious.

“The injury is fairly common.” She had just gotten off the phone with sacrifices ringing in her head. Sacrifices and guilt trips about all her family had done for her.

“Lynn?” Dominic’s voice behind the door.

Mateo’s hands were still on her.

“Let go.” She couldn’t control her voice going soft, her body shaking. She wasn’t quite sure she knew how to read the intense promise in his eyes when he moved back.

“Darling, tell me you didn’t take it personally.” Dom filled the doorway, his brows already raised.

Lynn put on her best smile. “I can handle Pavel.”

“Sweetheart, of course you can.”

She saw right past the sincere face. Dominic wasn’t considered brilliant for nothing. He wanted Pavel for the chemistry, the tension critics had hailed as *magical* when she headlined *Ruslan and Ludmila* in New York.

That innocent shrewd gaze shifted past her shoulder. “Did Lynn show you the letters?” A graceful explanation of why Mateo was in her tiny space.

“Not yet.” Her bodyguard didn’t bother lying.

Dom offered a small smile before focusing on her again. “Why don’t you take the rest of the day off? I’ll round up Kristine.”

Kristine was probably already planning her debut, but that was to be expected. Lynn had been that hungry once, and lucky breaks were often a combination of timed luck and someone else’s injuries.

She wouldn’t be treated different, not due to surgery, not due to psychos. Not due to jealous ex-lovers getting attention by humiliating her. “I need go over the coda for the second set.” She could feel Mateo rising to protest. To negate any arguments she walked out of her room without looking back.

Dominic extended a gentlemanly arm. If her thigh throbbed a bit, she just ignored it and didn’t think of Mateo’s fingers moving on her skin.

Manners wouldn’t let her simply leave without saying something. “You don’t need to hang around if you have other things.” She glanced over her shoulder

He clenched his jaw. “I got that.” A cold tone of a stranger. “Let me know when you’re done.”

It wasn’t up to him if Lynn stayed at the studio, stretching and bending and jumping, her body a long fluid line of exquisite motion. It wasn’t up to him if she hid small wincing of pain when she thought nobody was looking.

His job was to protect her. Keeping her from doing stupid shit to herself wasn’t included in the contract Channing had him sign.

Watching her chat with the red-haired understudy, Mateo could understand the need to prove herself after a long climb back to past perfection. She hadn’t turned tail and run, she hadn’t buried her head in the

sand, or in the bottle as he'd considered in those first couple of numb weeks when Phil was in the hospital and there was no change in his condition.

By eight, when Mateo was considering physically carrying her out, Lynn finally waved her goodbyes and slung a huge black bag over her shoulder.

And ignored him when he tried to reach for it. "I'm parked in the back."

"I'd rather walk." Those exhausted brown eyes challenged him to say something. Instead, with a quick tug Mateo simply took her bag and was surprised she didn't fight him for it.

The cold wind tugged at her pinned-up gold hair. He had a sudden urge to pull it loose and free. "You shouldn't put too much strain on your leg." They had about three blocks to her apartment. To their left, the lit-up City Hall stood with its columns and flags proud against the wind.

"Are you a sports therapist?"

He knew enough about rehab from watching Phil those first few months. "I'm just a bodyguard."

"Then let me worry about it."

He shrugged but kept an eye out for any signs of limping. Lynn didn't look at him while she walked, the lights from passing cars moving over those soft lush lips he knew would taste like chocolate.

And then he saw her wince and rub the injured muscle of her thigh before crossing her arms against the chill.

"We're driving." He didn't care what she had to do to prove herself.

Lynn spared him a snooty glance. "I said I want to walk."

"We drive or I carry you." He didn't care if he came off as a jerk.

She firmed her lips into a line that drove him crazy. "I don't know what you thought about the other night, but being manhandled isn't a turn on."

"Manhandled." Mateo put himself into her path. "I'll show you manhandled."

He put his mouth on hers, let the pent-up frustration and arousal and need rise up so she could taste it. Her lips felt firm and pliant under his, her body hot and trembling. He slid impatient hands under her sweatshirt to find that soft, smooth skin, to taste more of her, to breathe in all that scent.

The sudden honk of horns razored him back into the present. Her mouth wet and shiny, Lynn stepped back, her eyes guarded and hot.

His cell phone beeped before either of them could say something. Figuring he'd take a second to cool off, Mateo read the screen and felt cool dread replace arousal.

"My mother's in the drunk tank." *Once again.*

The mouth he had just kissed formed a silent *O*. He didn't know why he'd told her this, why he didn't simply say something about an emergency.

Except she took his hand. "We'll drive."

Silence stretched taut and heavy.

She spoke when they reached her apartment and got out of his ancient Ford. "You really don't need to walk me up."

With a jerky movement, he reached for his wallet and drew out a business card. "My number's on the back. Call if you need anything."

She took the card, careful not to touch him. At the moment, Mateo didn't give a damn. Ignoring what she'd said, he walked with her past the metal lacing of the gate.

"I'm sorry." Her tone was soft while she rummaged for keys inside her bag. "If there's anything I can do..." Her face was clean and pure and tired. She'd pulled herself out of the shit that life dealt her and struggled to the top.

And he had to go back and face his failures. "Just lock your deadbolt."

He waited till he heard the lock turn.

The station smelled the same, old coffee and stale urine mixed with the cheerful Pine-Sol scent. Of all the dives in San Francisco, his mother had to salsa in a traffic jam a block away from Richmond house.

The guys pretended not to notice when his ass walked through the front door.

Mateo couldn't look at the man handling the paperwork, stuck in a wheelchair behind a desk. Light duty as they called it.

Light duty 'cause you weren't good for nothing else.

To his left, somebody cursed in sloppy Spanish. Shaking his head, Mateo forced himself to look Phil in the eye. "Thanks for letting me know."

His old partner typed something on the computer keyboard, his fingers fast and furious. Before the accident, he used to hunt and peck and curse the damned thing. "Least I could do."

Curious glances all but pricked Mateo's skin, with people suddenly just out of earshot. Apparently cops were just as bad as dancers. "You doing good?"

A tired attempt at a smile. "I'm doing." Phil had lost more hair now, and what was left was greying in the temples. "Lifted a hundred yesterday."

"No shit?" Phil did look good now that Mateo thought of it. His hair might have gone grey, but he'd lost the pasty color of his skin.

"No shit." Another smile, bigger one. Still tired eyes, but now that Mateo was looking, he could've sworn it was from the job, not from the eternal prison that was now Phil's body. "Yeah, we had one hell of a day." As if reading his mind, Phil nodded at the stack of papers strewn over the counter. "Had a guy so hyped up he thought he was a bowling ball. In handcuffs. I thought I'd have to go and sit on him."

It was supposed to be a joke, except Mateo felt his gut viciously twisting.

His mother chose just then to appear, escorted by a uniform with ears on alert.

The paperwork was a long tired blur. And once she was inside his car, Luisa dug out a slim gold-colored lighter. “You got smokes?”

“Glove box.” He still kept a pack there, though Luisa was the only one who used it now. “Four months this time.”

She shrugged and lit up, leaning back against the seat. She’d once stayed sober for three years because some yahoo in Social Services threatened to take Mateo away. It came back, as it always had, a nip here, a few there. Three months, six months, always followed by a good binge and the long climb back onto the wagon.

By the time he graduated the Academy, she’d let herself be dragged deep into the bottle. Seeing as he was the reason for it, Mateo didn’t blame her much.

“You gonna talk about it?”

“*Madre de Dios.*” She puffed a stream of fragrant smoke.

Because the smell still called to him, Mateo rolled down the windows.

“I got messed up.” She had her eyes closed—two hours in the Sobering Center put her into a downswing. At least this time she hadn’t kicked the arresting officer.

“You should tell those *pendejos* to leave me the hell alone.” She tried to form a smoke ring.

“I’m not a cop no more.”

“Yeah. Good.” Another drag. “You got cop friends, don’t you?”

*You got rich friends don’t you? They can spot you a five for lunch if you don’t want to pack it.* He wished again for a good drink and kept his hands clenched at the wheel.

“Next time, you spend the night.” He hated how he sounded when he was around her, rude singsong Spanish.

“I told that asshole not to call you.” Gruff tone, scarlet-tipped fingers holding a cigarette. They both knew he would bail her out again, as he had since he was twenty and at the cop academy, scared shitless a background investigator would find out.

They did, of course, but having a Spanish speaker on the street was worth more than a few questionable relations.

She lived at Lombard, renting a single room in a falling-apart Victorian.

“You don’t need to baby-sit me.”

He’d heard that before. “I signed off on it.” Besides, he preferred this place to his own silent and empty apartment by the wharf.

Luisa shrugged—no thank-yous, no tearful recriminations. Even when he was ten and she came home smelling of men and booze and he cleaned up after her, Luisa never thanked him or promised it wouldn’t happen again. But she stayed sober for a while until the next time.

Her studio smelled of old beans and dust and cigarettes. Through the open partition to the bedroom, he saw the same wooden cross that had hung over his pillow when he was just a kid. On the second-hand vanity with its fancy carvings, *Virgen Maria* blessed them all in silent benediction.

Luisa pressed her fingers to her lips and touched the white faux marble before stubbing out a cigarette next to the sainted feet. "You hungry? Want something?"

That too remained the same. Whenever she came home, dead on her feet or drunk like a sailor, his mother always asked if he wanted to eat.

"I'm good."

He never knew the gringo who had been his father. Luisa never mentioned him. Beside the sainted feet, she'd lined up photos of her son growing up, the tough kid from the street, the young man with a mustache and a muscle shirt. The two of them at Golden Gate park on his thirteenth birthday. She'd worked a week of double shifts to buy him a small cross made out of real silver.

Mateo didn't need God, but he still wore it. And she'd never put up the pictures of him graduating the Academy or joining the SFPD.

She was already snoring behind the paper-thin partition when he reached for a pack of cigs on top of her refrigerator and wondered how long he'd take to end up on the bottle next to her.

Lynn loved early mornings, when the air was crisp and full of possibilities. She hadn't slept much, using the time to unpack a few things, making the dull grey walls more livable. Now, as she stretched in front of the single window in her living room, the faces of her family and friends smiled at her from various surfaces.

The rush of early morning traffic washed over her from the opened window, helping keep her mind on extension and control. And if Mateo's face, his eyes, his lips, kept breaking her focus, she firmly pushed those thoughts away.

Control, dedication and intent. Those were the words she had to live by. As she sank deep into a center split, the slow pull in her muscles was as familiar as breathing. No pain, no stiffness. Just slow grueling discipline.

She kept her breaths rhythmic and even, lying back on an exhale, slowly pulling her legs together as she breathed in. Her feet flat on the ground, she extended her arms, slid her palms onto the floor above her shoulders so she could push herself up into a high bridge.

Slow controlled movements. She arched her back, counted aloud softly, holding the stretch, feeling her mind and body warming up.

The small white paper by the front door caught her attention when she was pulling herself up from the bridge, counting each vertebra. Another glance told her it was an envelope, probably pushed under her door.

She should've continued stretching. Instead she padded barefoot to pick the envelope up, frowning at the lack of writing on the smooth white surface.

The contents chilled her blood.

*Your flawless grace has always been an inspiration. I wish I could express in words how much I love watching you dance. Your Odette was pure elegance of motion. Your Ludmila was innocence itself.*

*Please, don't succumb to crude investors who live for ticket sales and their cut. Preserve the purity with which you light the stage. Don't let them pimp you out for money. I won't let them make you a whore.*

That last part, typed in capital block letters, was the main reason Lynn ran for her phone.

Probably a prank, she told herself and tried to force her hands to keep from shaking as she dialed, keeping her gaze firmly on his card. *Mateo Rivera* was printed simple and bold on plain white card stock. She focused on his name and forced herself to breathe.

"Yeah."

"Sorry. I'm sorry. I..." She didn't know what to say, couldn't really speak past the knot that formed in the base of her throat and wouldn't let her breathe out. "It's probably nothing. Just—there's a letter. Probably a prank, but..."

"Lynnrrina." Rough tone that somehow snapped her out of it. "You're at home?"

She blinked. "Yes."

"Your door is locked?"

She nodded, then realized he couldn't see her. "Yes. It's locked. It's probably nothing. I'm sorry..."

He cut her off again. "I'll be right there."

And through the shock she felt disgustingly relieved.

The rush of growing traffic outside the window brought Lynn small comfort while she paced. The faces of her family and friends smiled at her from various surfaces and kept her somewhat sane. Maybe she was a bitch, not putting up pictures of her Aunt Maria, but right now she really didn't give a crap.

She stayed by the bay window of the living room, not looking at the paper she'd dropped by her front door. The envelope it came in glared at her from the breakfast bar. Ridiculous, just as it had been ridiculous to call Mateo at six thirty.

She was making a deal out of nothing. Some deranged fan with an obsession for ballet. Except the deranged part wasn't so harmless now that he knew her actual address.

*He was here.*

She forced away the thought and the ice-cold white panic that followed it.

The firm knock had her jumping even though she'd been waiting for it. Careful not to step on the letter where she'd dropped it, Lynn hurried to the door.

"You didn't ask who it was."

Mateo's gruff voice melted some of the tension in her belly. His hooded eyes and face shadowed by stubble spawned nerves of a complete different sort.

"Thank you for coming." He smelled of cigarettes and alcohol and still wore clothes from yesterday. "I'm sorry for pulling you away." She hadn't thought about his mother and what he must have gone through getting her out of jail. She'd simply thought about herself. Selfish, just as an artist of her talent must become. She pushed the sound of Pavel's voice out of her mind. "I am really sorry."

"Forget it." Without shrugging off his jacket, Mateo knelt over the paper, dug out a pen to push up the folded top.

"I—I found it there. I think it was slipped under the door."

"When did you notice it?" Neutral, matter of fact voice that somehow soothed her nerves.

"Just before I called you. Listen, I know you had a family emergency—"

"I said forget it." He used his pen to lift the paper on the counter. "You call the cops?"

"Not yet." She was an idiot. She should have called the cops and kept him at a distance.

Mateo dug out his phone.

"How's your mom?" She tried for some semblance of normalcy.

He didn't look at her. "She's fine."

"Would you like something to drink?"

He laughed now, a sound she didn't particularly like. "A drink this long before breakfast makes one hell of an alcoholic."

Lynn kept her voice quiet. "I was thinking orange juice."

He shook his head. "No thanks."

She poured herself a glass of juice while he relayed the information using clipped sentences they didn't usually use on cop shows. When he was done, he put his jacket over the paper to keep it out of her view. His gaze followed her every movement.

She couldn't handle another day of nerves, of pent-up lust ruining her focus. "You shouldn't stay at the studio today." Somehow a letter from some lunatic made her less nervous than those hard dark eyes.

His eyebrows rose. "We back to the same game?"



“No games.” She forced herself to put down her glass calmly before she slammed it on the counter. The same counter where he’d fucked her from behind, where she’d begged him to go harder. “I need to focus on the piece and I can’t do that with you watching.” The words kept pouring out even while she tried to get herself to just shut up. “You’re hot then you’re cold, and I can’t catch my balance. Either it’s personal or business, and you—”

“Last night was personal.”

“Don’t freaking interrupt.” Except she didn’t know what else to say now.

“You’re done talking?”

“No.” It came out breathy when she wanted to tell him to go to hell. Except his eyes held her a willing captive.

“You should know I barely slept last night.”

She nodded, suddenly nervous.

“You should know I’m not thinking clearly.”

Another nod, because she didn’t have anything to say.

“You should tell me to go.”

“Then go.” She thought she whispered those two words except his mouth was on hers, firm, wild, desperate.

No control this time, no seduction. He kissed her as if he were starved, as if her mouth was salvation. Impatient hands moved on her shoulders, slid under her tank top to find her breasts. She lifted up her arms to let him tug her top off, baring her nipples to his gaze.

“I’ve wanted to taste them,” he muttered and lowered his lips to a puckering peak.

Lynn expected a storm, prepared for the onslaught. Instead his mouth was gentle, laving her nipple with his tongue, circling before finally he drew the aching tip in his mouth, sucking hard, tearing a cry of pleasure from her.

She wanted to feel skin and heat and muscle. When his lips returned to ravage hers, she tugged at his turtleneck. He tore it off, gripping it from behind his neck the way males do, and let her take her fill.

Tan skin poured over rock-hard muscle. A tiny silver cross hung around his neck. She licked a flat male nipple and heard him growl something in Spanish as strong hands pulled her up for another searing kiss.

She ran her hands over his shoulders, slid them into his hair, tugged at the black wiry strands. He used teeth to lightly scrape over the sensitive skin of her jaw, moving lower, laving her other nipple with his tongue, tracing small bites down her belly. She let out a startled gasp when he lifted her up.

“What are you doing?”

“Just having dessert.”

The smooth tile of the breakfast bar was wicked cold under her buttocks. She braced her hands on the smooth surface as Mateo tugged at her loose yoga pants.

Her throat went dry, his eyes went even darker.

Afraid to breathe, Lynn let him part her knees. Her pulse raced as he leaned in at the apex of her thighs and took a long-drawn breath, inhaling deeply.

"You smell good." His hands were on her thighs, spreading her lips so he could take that first slow lick. Another.

Longer this time, taking his time, soft licks and nibbling kisses until she writhed under his lips for more. And when the tip of his long finger teased at her entrance, Lynn clenched around him and let out a long soft moan.

He tensed, she saw the muscles in his shoulders tighten, then she couldn't see anything at all as he nibbled, circled, lightly sucked on her clit, that wicked finger tearing more screams from her.

Slow and firm licks, gentle fluttering of his tongue. A light pull on her clitoris when he sucked it into his mouth. Her thighs were splayed over his shoulders, her body trembling with vicious need. Finally, he worked his finger fully inside her, pressed upwards. And Lynn shattered, clamping her thighs around his head, riding the tidal wave of molten pleasure that burned up through her veins.

She opened her eyes to find Mateo's hands over his zipper.

"Let me." On trembling knees Lynn slid down in front of him. His cock sprang out to greet her, beautiful and thick, and she pressed a soft kiss over the plum-shaped head before wrapping her fingers around the pulsing heat of him.

He growled, low and deep, when she parted her lips and took him into her mouth in one long silky movement. The scent of an aroused male surrounding her, she took him deeper, loving the feel of the smooth skin of his cock sliding against her lips. His eyes were midnight dark, his hands tangling in her hair as she slowly pulled away to look up at him.

Then she was lying on the floor, her ankles trapped in his wide palms, his dark eyes hungry.

"Condom," he muttered and dropped a kiss over her navel. He groped for his pants to draw out his wallet, his gaze never leaving her face.

"Let me," she managed once again and held out her hand.

His hands fisted at his sides, his breaths grew heavy. Lynn took her time sliding the condom over his skin, cupping his heavy sac, leaning closer to get the musky smell of him inside her.

She screamed as he plunged hard into her, a hard exhilarating stroke that sparked through every nerve ending, every inch of her skin. Buried inside her, Mateo spread her thighs further apart.

She let out a breathless laugh. "I trained for this."

"Really? For this?" Her legs spread in an upside-down side split, he pushed inside her, pulled out, worked himself in again with slow torturous movements.

She clenched around his cock, heard his ragged exhale. "Yes. Trained for years."

He let go of her calves to cradle the globes of her buttocks in each hand, lifting her to him, anchoring her for each thrust. "You're a champ."

His eyes, that glittering dark gaze, watched her with each thrust of his hips, each hard plunge, each slow teasing withdrawal.

Her blood coiled with each rub of his cock, the pleasure blinding, straining, until a final hard thrust sent her screaming over the edge while he hammered into her, shuddering in his own orgasm.

Lynn didn't want to move. She wasn't sure she could, and that was fine and dandy. His arms were still around her, her lips moving over his shoulder, his weight a heavy blanket of warm male.

He shifted away and the bliss rapidly cooled off.

"God. I'm sorry."

At least that forced her to get up. Aware of her naked skin, Lynn picked up her tossed clothes, heard him doing the same in awkward silence.

He headed for the bathroom just as her cell phone rang. Her mood plunged further when she saw the caller ID on the readout.

"Hello, Lynnrina." Dry voice thick with an accent. Her aunt always insisted on speaking English with her.

"Aunt Maria." Cradling the phone between her ear and shoulder, Lynn shrugged into her clothes. "How are you?"

"I'm old. How can I be?" No-nonsense voice with just the right amount of guilt in it. The same voice that had told her to get off her lazy back and get back to the studio two weeks after her surgery. Maria never let her forget the sacrifices her family had made so that Lynn could be a ballerina in the United States. "You're in the news again."

She heard water running in the bathroom. "Excuse me?"

"You're in the news again."

Lynn could almost see her, dressed in starched black with carefully penciled eyebrows. "The press releases? I've seen them."

If it was possible, Maria's voice got drier. "You kissed a man on the street for everyone to see. There are photographs. You didn't learn last time?"

The sound of water shut off in the bathroom. With silence squeezing at her chest, Lynn dragged a hand through wildly curling hair. Aunt Maria had always tried to brush out the curls because they were unprofessional for a serious young ballerina.

"Hello?" Edgy impatient tone.

"How..." She swallowed. "How did you find out?"

"Does it matter?"

“Yes.”

“I have Google alerts.”

Lynn had a sudden image of Maria with her dark buttoned-up clothes sitting in front of a computer reading tabloids. “That’s it? A Google alert?” Maybe it wasn’t bad. Maybe someone had just taken a photo. It wouldn’t become a huge deal just like before.

“It was an article. The *San Francisco Chronicle*. The people section. A man who is supposed to be your bodyguard?”

Pavel had most likely set it up and she’d given him the perfect opportunity. Publicity was everything, and he would play the wounded ex in this new version of *ménage à trois*.

“It’s nothing. Someone is threatening the production and—”

Maria’s voice cut through her with the clean precision of a knife. “You are supposed to take this serious.” Clipped disappointed voice. “Your first production after two years and are you in the news for what? Not talent, not your talent at ballet. Why did your parents work to send you here so you could dance? You could have danced in restaurants in Odessa, then your parents wouldn’t be breaking their backs.”

“Aunt Maria...”

There was no point. “You need to focus on your future. We worked so hard to put you where you are, but we can’t carry you on our shoulders now. What do you want to do with your life?”

“Aunt Maria—”

There was no pause. “What do you want to do with your life?”

“Dance ballet.” Small voice, just like when she’d been fifteen and dead tired.

“Then you work to do that.” Now her voice softened. “I didn’t have family who worked so hard for my dreams. You should feel lucky.”

Lynn’s gaze landed on the leather jacket that lay over the letter telling her not to be a whore. “Yes. I’m lucky.”

“Good. You focus on your training and not on men, and you’ll be in the news because of talent.”

“Yes, Aunt Maria.” Saying goodbye, she forced herself to look Mateo in the eye when he came out from the restroom, his face wet, his lids heavy.

“You all right?”

“Of course.” Cool polite tone to match his, guilt weighing on her shoulders. Her aunt was right of course. She had to concentrate on getting her career back and not letting the media—or Pavel—drag her back into the scandals of the past.

“Listen.” Mateo gave a quick look at the phone she still clutched in her hand. She knew his movements now. The one where he raked his fingers through his hair was that of tired frustration. “You’re supposed to be a client.”

“Yes.” The entire company probably knew about that freaking photo by now. “That was quite professional.”

“Goddamn it. Lynn—”

She raised a hand, palm forward, as if somehow that shielded her from his gaze. “Someone took pictures of us last night.” A freaking dirt-scooper probably hired by Pavel to start the free publicity machine that would ensure a hot opening night. “Apparently it’s posted on the *Chronicle*’s website.”

He frowned. “And?”

“And?” Of course he didn’t care. “I’m supposed to be a prima ballerina. Instead I’m in the media again by virtue of who I slept with.”

“You think people are going to care?”

“No. No one cares.” She remembered the headlines, the stares. The flashes of cameras, the sidelong glances. They all came to see how she would dance with the man who had been gifted with her innocence but had to let her go *so her talent would bloom*. “You probably don’t care either.” The damned *Rs* rolled again. “You should care though. It’s great exposure.”

His nostrils flared, his lips firmed. “I’ll drop off your letter at the station. Unless you would prefer I give an interview.”

Lynn raised a shoulder, cold and regal. Inside her skin, her blood was ice. “I trust you’ll be discreet.”

## Chapter Five

Mateo didn't stay at the studio during the days, just as she'd asked. For the next week he picked her up each morning and took her home in deafening silence. She worked herself like a damned horse, buried herself in rehearsals and classes and pretended not to notice the gossip and the whispers and the looks.

As he'd thought, nobody cared about the photos. No one but Lynn who threw him a death's stare when he came in during the day to speak with Dominic.

"There haven't been any more letters." Dom stood dead center in the orchestra pit, watching Lynn being carried by André, who was sporting a backwards 49ers cap. "Perhaps that was the last hurrah?"

"Perhaps. Or our guy got pissed about that photo stunt and is nursing his obsession." Mateo watched Dominic out of the corner of his eye. At this point, he wouldn't have put it past the man to stage something like this all in the name of good publicity.

On stage, the kid buried his face in Lynn's tulle-covered belly.

"Again! Third positions." Dominic's voice boomed out between the gilded curtains and the red-covered seats. "André, I want to see better *port de bras*. Lynn, when he lifts you up, I want you to *plié*. And let's see if we can get it up to tempo. On three."

The same song had been bouncing in Mateo's head for a damned week.

"The photo stunt could've been avoided." Light tone and not-so-subtle implication. With intense eyes, Dominic watched the stage. "She seems to feel safer with the alarm. Enough to tell me that she thinks your job is done here." His voice rose up. "*Grand jeté!* Busy feet, quick little steps. Allegro!"

Mateo couldn't keep his eyes away from Lynn. Those long and subtle limbs, that smooth and fragrant skin. That serene face of perfect concentration. He knew how much strength and pain and passion hid under that blank mask. "Your call."

"My call..."

Zolotov took the stage, Lynn spun away, was caught, gracefully lifted. Pavel made sure everybody caught his wince. She arched over his arm, her head thrown back just like when she had climaxed.

Mateo pushed the image back.

Dominic sketched something in his spiral-bound notebook. "Lynn, lift your chin. André, look at them, not your damned feet! Now, soft behind them, you're spying on them."

Rolling his eyes, Dom finally turned to spare Mateo a glance. "You know why I do this?" He nodded at the stage where Lynn turned away from Zolotov.

Mateo simply shook his head

"I have the gift for it. No legs, no stamina. But I can feel it in my gut. Thirty-eight years, I learned to trust what my gut says."

The words were much more direct than Mateo had been expecting. He remained silent, his arms crossed, watching the stage.

"My gut tells me this isn't over. Whatever issue you two have, either you deal with it or find me someone else." Again, the subtle implication.

"There's no issue." On stage, André again buried his face in Lynn's tulle-covered sex.

"Good." Dom hadn't looked away from the two dancers simulating love on stage. "She is working hard to get back where she was before the surgery. She doesn't need distractions."

"You hired Zolotov for that."

"Lynn, tilt your head—there, just like that." With a short little pencil, Dominic scribbled something else. "The parts are perfect for them. In the end when she leaves him, Lynn won't need to put on a big act. Just as she doesn't have to pretend the anguish of separation."

"That's not the way I heard it happened."

Dominic simply smiled. "Us artistic types tend to exaggerate. Good, perfect! Take two and let's start on the fifth."

Set to the intense tones of piano, Zolotov was supposed to save the day when the villain dragged Lynn into the shadows. She fought with flounces of her feet, twisted to get away, was finally overpowered. Her partner slowly forced her to the floor.

"No, no, Simon! You're not getting it."

Mateo had to force himself to unclench his hands.

Dom rushed onto the stage. "You love her. You're sick in love with her, you need for her to understand you, welcome you." He flung out his arms, demonstrating a jump. "You don't see that she's fighting. In your head she wants you, just like you want her." With surprising strength, Dom lifted Lynn up off the floor, spun her around, looked up at her with worship in his eyes.

"You got it, Simon?"

The other dancer nodded.

"Let's try it again, and do it with a bit more punch."

By the time Dominic was satisfied, her legs were ready to give out. At this point Lynn only wanted to reach her dressing room and sit for a small precious second. Sit and not move a single inch. She went straight for her stash, barely chewing the first chocolate before tearing open another one and actually biting off a piece.

It hurt to chew. Her whole body was aching.

A month until opening night, and she wasn't sure she had the stamina to carry it. Six different duets, each of them grueling. Her aching feet throbbed at the mere thought.

She took another piece, letting the taste melt on her tongue before she swallowed. At least Pavel couldn't complain about her weight. She'd lost almost ten pounds since they started.

A tub filled to the brim with soothing hot water was just a few minutes away. She simply had to find the strength to get her body up and moving, and face Mateo in the hallway.

She'd seen him speak with Dominic and watch her with those cool onyx eyes. Dark gaze, dark clothes that should have been pretentious yet weren't.

Pushing the thought of him away, Lynn thought about soaking in a tub until her fingers wrinkled. Just a few minutes more.

The quick knock on the door made her softly groan. She didn't want to put on a bright face, didn't think she had the strength for it.

Another piece of Midnight Dark. "Be right there."

She barely had time to hide the wrapper when the door swung open. "I didn't say come in," she muttered with a mouthful of chocolate just as Mateo's gaze focused in on the bag of Ghirardelli's.

"You ready?"

He'd barely spoken her to her since she'd found out about the photo. And since she was the only one who really seemed to care about it, aside from the usual glances and rumors, he probably thought her one hell of a drama queen. Especially since the photo hadn't even made it to the printed version of the newspaper and just remained to torment her online.

She was too tired to think about it. "I need a couple of minutes more." Maybe she'd finally move.

"You tried to get rid of me." Cool voice, his hands tucked in his pockets. Again her dressing room seemed much too small with him inside.

"I have an alarm set up and there've been no more letters." And at this point she was more nervous around Mateo than some anonymous creep. "I don't think I need you..." She paused and started over. "I don't think I need a bodyguard anymore. I can ask Simon to walk me home. Or André."

"We both know that's not why you wanted to get rid of me." Those cool dark eyes were merciless.

"Maybe. It doesn't matter now." She didn't have the strength to shrug. "Give me a few more minutes."

"Your leg bothering you?"

"It's fine." Even her skin was hurting. Only a few more minutes and she could drown in hot water and try to forget she'd have to do it all again tomorrow.

"Why do you do this to yourself?" His voice went soft, nearly soothing.

"Do what?"



"You're exhausted. You're in pain. You work like a damned horse." If she wasn't mistaken, there was a hint of baffled respect in that gruff tone.

"It's what I do." Sometimes she hated it. "I've worked for it my whole life." After the surgery, when she was told there was a chance she wouldn't dance again, the searing panic had been accompanied by a tiny guilty kernel of relief.

"You ever wanted to do something else?"

Because he already knew her dirty secret, Lynn reached into the bag of chocolates. Since he was here and she didn't want to leave just yet she offered him a blue-wrapped piece.

His fingers brushed over her palm, his touch brief and electrifying. Even through aching muscles, she felt a tiny coiling of heat.

"I never thought about doing anything else." She was never allowed to. The rich dark taste of chocolate flooded her taste buds. "My family sent me here to dance."

"Where are your parents now?"

"Still back in Ukraine." They used to come for every big show. Now, she was lucky if they made it here once in three years. And Aunt Maria was too busy taking care of her ailing mother. Sacrifices. Always sacrifices.

"My mother hated it when I became a cop." His eyes were distant in the mirror.

"Really?" She hadn't known he was a cop. She'd slept with him and barely knew him. "You were a policeman?"

He nodded, but didn't elaborate.

"You miss it?"

"Yeah." He stood. "Let's go."

Discipline had been ingrained in her for years. She stood despite the screaming protests of her muscles, but when he took her bag she didn't say a thing.

The ride home smelled like cigarettes and leather. The short walk to her door was just a blur.

"Go relax." Mateo walked in after her as she struggled to remember the alarm code. Not even thinking to protest that he knew the code, Lynn staggered into the bathroom to find hot water bliss.

Warmth seeped into her muscles and had her melting in relief. She didn't bother with salts or bath bubbles, just sank into the small claw-footed tub and let the water pour over her and soothe the pains.

When he walked in with a glass full of something orange, she didn't have the energy to hide her body from his gaze.

"You'll scald yourself."

"It feels good."

He sat on the white edge of the tub. Somehow it wasn't strange having him here. "Drink this."

Moving her arm was too much effort. "What is it?"

“Orange juice.”

“I’ll drop it.”

He didn’t argue. Instead he brought the glass close to her lips.

“You shouldn’t be in here.” Since the glass was there, nearly touching her lips, she took a long cold sip.

“Tell me to go.” Those onyx eyes challenged her to do just that while she was naked in hot water drinking orange juice.

She didn’t have the energy to flush.

Because it tasted good and all of a sudden she was thirsty, Lynn gulped the juice. “You shouldn’t be here,” she said again and leaned back in the hot and churning water.

“You said that already.” Soft gruff voice

When she opened her eyes, he stood holding a huge green towel.

“Why are you doing this?” She sounded like a cranky child. Because of it, she made the effort to stand up and let him drape the towel around her, his movements gentle as he rubbed the moisture off her skin.

“Why are you taking care of me?”

“Somebody has to.” He carried her out of the steam-filled bathroom, his arms strong and secure around her. She didn’t have to pose, to lock her feet, do anything but simply put her forehead on his shoulder and be carried. He laid her face down on the bed.

“I’m too tired for sex games.” Except she felt a low tug of arousal lazily floating in her veins.

Warm palms cradled her feet. “I had another game in mind.” His breath softly caressed her skin.

He pressed a thumb into the aching arch of her left foot, gently but firmly squeezed and rubbed before giving the same treatment to her other foot. They felt tiny inside his hands, dainty and female, and when he pushed to have her flex her toes, she let herself be pampered. Just this once.

His hands continued upward, pressing into the muscles of her calves, the inside of her knees, her thighs. She stiffened when his fingers softly traced over the scar above her knee. Then she felt his lips over it, tracing it, as if soothing it with soft, soft kisses.

Desire coiled harder in her belly.

Lynn didn’t want to move, didn’t want to burst the moment. Instead she spread her thighs apart and softly said his name. “Mateo.”

“Are you sure you want this?”

She wasn’t sure about anything except for this. “I am.”

In the warm silence, he traced slow open-mouthed kisses over the back of her thighs, moving higher towards her buttocks. His hands were on her calves, stroking the sensitive skin with light teasing caresses.

A shudder rippled through her as his lips touched a tender spot just below her spine, lingered there before continuing the journey upwards, each kiss along her back a sensual delicious touch. Another shiver

when he paused between her shoulder blades to lightly scrape his teeth over her skin, then kiss away the tiny sting that added a small edge of pain to the sweetness of pleasure.

His hands tenderly palmed the soft globes of her buttocks before leaving her skin. Foil ripped. Then his weight pressed into her, covering her with warmth, the tip of him probing inside her.

She lifted up her hips and turned her head so she could see them in the mirror, his muscles taut as he loomed over her with his arms on each side of her shoulders, a tiny cross hanging down from his neck.

A soft and shallow penetration. A slow withdrawal so he could start again, pushing in deeper with each stroke, riding her soft and tender, filling her with his body, caressing her with his cock.

“Is this what you want, *preciosa*?”

She fisted her hands in the sheet, as that hard muscled body covered her pale skin.

He slowed his strokes, just pulsed inside her wet slick heat. “Tell me you want this.”

“Yes.” She couldn’t breathe. “I want this.”

A slow glide of his cock. “Tell me to fuck you.”

“Yes. Do it.”

His hands massaged her buttocks, spread them apart so that he could trace a wicked line right on the crease. She shuddered at his touch, watching him in the mirror.

“Tell me to fuck you.” Low rough words.

She dragged in liquid air. “Fuck me.”

“Tell me please.”

Her pulse roared in her head. “Please.” A hoarse whisper. “Please. Please.”

He moved over her, pushed in deeper. “Tell me again.”

“Fuck me. Please fuck me.”

He moved inside her, hard and deep. “Again.”

She whispered the words, kept whispering them while he stroked inside her, his hands moving over her back, slipping under to grasp her breasts and tease her throbbing nipples.

His weight felt wonderful, his movements precise and delicious, building the coiling in her blood into a shimmering flash of light. And when they both climaxed, their gasps echoing each other, she dropped a kiss on the tanned hand beside her shoulder and dropped into oblivion.

## Chapter Six

Mateo wasn't sure when he fell asleep. When he woke up in her bed, his arm around her, his body growing hard, the light outside was the pearly grey of a San Francisco morning.

Careful not to wake her, he untangled himself while the morning light seeped through the bars over the window. For a quick second he thought about walking away, pretending nothing had happened. Except he couldn't deny the warmth inside his chest.

She slept with the blond curls curtaining her eyes, her soft and full lips parted. And since she needed rest, Mateo left the room before he gave in to the urge to fuck her senseless.

She'd put up pictures on her walls, fun sentimental shots of her as a young girl in a pink tutu, various photos of rehearsals and group shots of girls wearing leotards and tights. Along with those was a large black-and-white portrait with an unsmiling man sitting beside a woman dressed in white with her veil flared on the floor.

He hadn't heard Lynn talk about them much.

"Hey." She wore a pink terrycloth robe, her eyes still sleepy, her mouth soft.

He wanted to pull open her robe and kiss the high pert breasts inside it.

"Hey, yourself." The warm feeling was back inside his chest.

She brushed a hand through the blonde mess of curls and sent another jolt of lust into his belly. "Thanks for taking care of me last night." She flushed as soon as the words left her lips. The soft accent was back, driving him crazy.

He gave her small nod, schooled his face to be serious to match her expression. "You're welcome."

"Um." A pause. "So now what?"

At least she hadn't kicked him out. "How about breakfast?" He barely got the words out when both their phones rang. He frowned at the number, tried to call back.

Lynn turned to face him with her cell phone pressed against her ear, her mouth trembling, her face pale. "No. He's here." She nodded as if agreeing with the phone. "I'll tell him. Yes."

"What happened?"

Slowly she closed her phone and set it down on the tiles of the breakfast bar, careful, as if she was afraid it would shatter. "André. He was attacked last night." She bit her lip, struggled to keep her tone even. "Lead pipe—someone jumped him. Shattered his knee. They say..." Her voice hitched. "They don't know if he'll dance again."

Ice curling thick and sharp in his gut, Mateo redialed the number on his phone. “Rivera,” he muttered, watching Lynn’s face. “Yeah, she just told me.”

“The police are here.” Dominic’s voice sounded low and tense. “They’re trying to figure out what happened. Get a description maybe, except André says he didn’t see a thing.”

At least now the cops could treat it as a crime and not just file paperwork. “Where is he?”

“St. Luke’s.” A sniff as if Dom was holding back tears. “He doesn’t remember anything and keeps asking if he’ll make opening night. I don’t know what to tell him.”

“I’ll be right there.” Mateo closed the phone and met Lynn’s hard brown eyes. “He’s at the hospital.”

A small nod. He knew just what she was thinking—that if he hadn’t been busy screwing her last night, maybe this whole thing wouldn’t have happened. Maybe if he’d taken the time to look around, he could have saved a kid a world of pain.

“I want to see him.”

“They still don’t know anything yet.” He couldn’t look at her, was afraid to face the empty accusation in her eyes.

“I want to see him.” Steel in that soft shattered voice.

He wasn’t in the mood to argue. “Let’s get going.”

At least it gave the cops something to go on. Detective Williams was a twenty-year veteran, a formidable black man of six five and heavy with it. Ever since Mateo had known him, Williams had showed off pictures of his kids.

He and Williams leaned against a white wall across from Recovery while the nurses rushed past them with cheerful tired smiles. Mateo wondered how they stood the antiseptic smell that permeated every breath of air.

“You ever think about coming back?” Williams didn’t look up from scribbling something in his notebook.

“Money’s good and better hours.” And he still listened to the police scanner nearly every night.

“I hear ya.” Williams sported civvies, a wrinkled shirt and equally bad tie. With the shoulders of a linebacker and a vocabulary that made wharf walkers blush, nobody messed with Eddie Williams. “You change your mind, the cap’n will be glad to have you back. Could always use another cool head on the beat.”

“I’m too old.” Eight months ago he’d nearly shot the punk who cost Phillip his legs.

“Shit.” Williams kept scribbling in his notebook. “They might try to move my ass to a desk next year. You gonna tell me I’m old?”

“Not if I want to live long.”

“Damn straight shit.” He paused for a small second. “I saw the pictures in the *Chronicle*. I like the ballerina better than that opera chick.”

“You’re reading gossip now?”

“Just saying. If you hooked up with a class act like her—”

“—is why that kid got his knee busted.”

Williams gave him a long considering look. “Still blame yourself for Phil?”

Mateo would’ve punched out anybody else who broached the question. “If I’d paid more attention, he’d still be walking.”

“If you paid less attention he’d be dead now.” Smooth easy words that really meant nothing. “I’m just saying—”

“Doesn’t matter now.”

Williams nodded, his mouth sober, his eyes sharp. “I’m just saying. You decide to come back, the door’s open.”

And every day he’d see his partner ride a desk because Mateo hadn’t moved in time to stop a sixteen-year-old punk from drawing.

“Could always try another precinct.” As if reading his mind, Williams shot him a quick look.

“Nobody else will put up with my shit.”

It was a small relief when Lynn came out into the hall, her face pale, her eyes heavy. “He’s knocked out on pain meds,” she said, her posture stiff, her voice brittle and dry. “Doesn’t remember anything.”

Nodding, Williams took the lead. “Can you think of anything unusual last night? Was he worried about anything? Afraid?”

“We rehearsed till nine.” She rubbed her hand over her neck, blew out a long breath. “Duet four, André was seducing me.” She shook her head. “We all know why it happened. The letters all lead up to it.” She rubbed her arms, as if the chill was getting to her.

“Who was around during rehearsal?” Williams kept his voice mild.

“Everyone, really. Dom, Pavel, Simon, the chorus dancers. The stage guys ran around with their tapes. Lighting director got into it with them about placements.” She looked up as if picturing the scene and her eyes sharpened. “You think it’s one of us?”

“It fits.” With a snap, Williams closed his notebook. “A regular, someone whose presence wouldn’t be questioned. If it’s our boy, he watched the scene and got pissed off.”

Dominic flew towards them from the elevator. “PR conference.” He had a hand over his chest, his usually perfect hair falling over his eyes without the benefit of gel. “Horrible as it is, this thing is generating media buzz. They want to make sure we all have the same answers.”

“The same answers.” Mateo didn’t care that Williams tilted his head to the side, watching him with a raised eyebrow. He didn’t care that he got into Dom’s face. “A man is hurt and you’re worried about the

media.” Disgust and disbelief rolled through his gut in equal measures. “Maybe we should be looking at this source.” This was to Williams. “Maybe it’s nothing more than a way to beef up exposure. Send a few letters, hire a bodyguard, break a kid’s knee. Spin it, and see them flock to opening night.”

Lynn’s face was pale, Williams just nodded.

“You’re way out of line here.” Dominic wiped a hand over his mouth, his grey eyes wide and pissed. “You think I’d risk anyone—you think I’d risk my dancers for exposure? You’re way out of line.”

“Then prove it. Take Lynn out of the show. Remove the focus and the cops will tie up the loose ends.”

“You don’t direct my life.” Low and shaking voice. Her face still pale, she moved to stand between him and Dominic, her arms crossed, her eyes shooting fire. “You don’t direct this show.” She kept that dangerous soft tone even as her accent thickened. “Whoever this is, he doesn’t threaten me directly. He loves ballet and has an issue with what he perceives to be inappropriate.” Her thin smile sliced into his gut. “He loves the art itself. If that wasn’t the case, we’d have heard more about that lovely photo.”

“Love turns to hate real easy.” Mateo forced himself to look into her eyes.

Her chin was up, her stance that of a fighter. “Let’s just get something clear here.”

Despite himself, unwanted lust flared in his gut. She stood ice cold, a beautiful and regal ballerina.

“I didn’t work my butt off to quit at the last minute. I’m doing the show.” She turned on Williams. “You have a list of suspects now, a potential motive. You can put on more people to protect the show.”

With a small smile on his face, Williams nodded. “You know your way around cop procedure.”

“I grew up watching *New York Undercover*.” She spared a thin smile. “Dom, with the PR guys happy, you can get more money for security.” Her eyes challenged Mateo to interrupt. “We’ll need to figure out who’ll fill in for André. And I don’t know about you, but I’m sick of this smell.”

She was magnificent when she stomped off, her head held high, her shoulders shaking. Mateo felt like the biggest ass when he caught up with her as she got into one of the elevators. The tense silence was ripe with things he couldn’t say.

“I’ll probably work late tonight.” Tight voice, her cool eyes distant.

“Williams will probably have officers on scene.”

“I’m not leaving this production.”

“Yeah. I got that.” He stuck his hands into his pockets and couldn’t keep his mouth shut. “You kill yourself for it. You train for hours. You’re willing to risk your own safety for it.”

“Yes.” The look she gave him was that of a princess.

“Why?”

There wasn’t a pause. “It’s what I do.”

“You said yourself that your family sent you here when you were eleven. You didn’t have a choice. You have one now.” He couldn’t believe he was about to repeat the words he’d heard countless times himself. “You can’t let guilt dictate what you do.”

“Guilt.” She let out a small ironic laugh. “I didn’t spend almost two years in pain because of guilt.” Her gaze was far away now. “My family sacrificed everything. Everything, just so I could dance ballet.” Her accent thickened once again, and her chin took on the stubborn tilt he’d become used to seeing. “It’s not about guilt. It’s about respect. It’s duty.”

“Duty can get you hurt.” That part he knew without a doubt.

She shook her head at him and crossed her arms. “I’m still doing the show.”

There was no point in arguing. Instead he simply said the words he’d been dreading. “I’ll have Channing take over as your bodyguard.” Channing would let him keep his distance. Keep her safe. He simply had to hurt the best thing that had happened to him.

“I see.” Cold distant tone that burned him. “So you’re just walking away? Like that?” She snapped her fingers. “Just business then.”

He didn’t have the guts to just agree. “If it was business that kid wouldn’t be in the hospital.” He forced himself to meet her eyes, steeled his expression. “If I’d kept my damned mind out of my pants, maybe he wouldn’t have ended up there.”

“You can’t let guilt dictate what you do.”

Nice way to throw his own words in his face. “Channing will take you home tonight.” He had to hurt her to keep her safe. Except his own damned words tore at his insides.

The look Lynn gave him should have killed him on the spot. Instead Mateo merely bled a little, and thought about guilt and sacrifice and duty.



## Chapter Seven

“Ten minutes.”

Nerves were allowed—better to freak out in her dressing room than under the lights onstage. Her makeup on, her hair swept up in a simple bun, Lynn faced herself in the lit mirror and hoped no one could see that she was terrified.

The smell of roses filled her room, the bright blooms cheerful and sunny. None of them sent by M. Rivera.

Smoothing her hands over her satin costume, Lynn wondered why the thought of him not sending flowers upset her more than some psycho with a ballet fetish watching her.

There hadn't been any more letters, any more episodes. The bullet-headed Channing, ex-marine and founder of Channing Securities, followed her every move and didn't say a word about Mateo.

Sometimes Lynn thought she caught glimpses of him at odd moments. Probably checking up on her. And she had too much pride to tell him that he was a giant ass.

She turned when the door opened expecting to see Dom with final pearls of wisdom. Instead, the woman who came in was short and dark and pissed.

“I don't know how you got him to go back, but you undo it.”

“I...excuse me?” The woman didn't appear to be the psycho type, although she did look like she'd had one drink too many.

“Mateo.”

There was enough resemblance that Lynn could guess at the relationship. “You're his mother.”

“And you're brilliant, like they say.” Sarcastic voice, spiked temper. The smell of alcohol was strong on her breath. “I thanked *Virgen Maria* every day when my Mateo quit police work. Then he finds you, and now he's going back. You like your men in uniform?”

The words were crude, but mostly Lynn saw emotion under them. “Mrs. Rivera, I haven't seen your son in weeks.” Except sometimes she wondered if he would come to watch her dance. “I don't know why you're here, but—”

“Mama.” He stood in the doorway, dark and pissed and dangerous. Lynn couldn't follow the fast furious Spanish, frustrated hands.

“No more of this.” Apparently still pissed, his mother started to walk out, then stopped to pin her with a stare. “You care about him, you tell him not to be a hero. I’m not going to go through this shit again.” She trailed the smell of alcohol and paused to straighten Mateo’s tie before she walked away.

Silence stretched taut and heavy. “I didn’t know you spoke Spanish.” Stupid to have said that. He’d called her *preciosa* when... Lynn pushed away the thought before she flushed again.

“Yeah.”

“Your mom really cares about you.” Another type of guilt trip, using tears and angry words to manipulate the choices of your child. She knew that road quite well.

“She’s had too much to drink. Look, I apologize if—”

It was her turn to interrupt him. “No, please. No need.”

Mateo nodded. “She doesn’t want me going back to work.”

“She shouldn’t keep you from doing something you love.” Something lightly squeezed her chest. “What are you doing here?”

He wore a suit tailored to fit his long and muscled body, his hair slicked back, his lips pressed into a firm line. Still handsome. And still cold.” I couldn’t miss the show.”

“I see.” She waited for more words, anything to indicate emotion.

“Five minutes” came out from the loudspeaker.

“You need to finish getting ready.”

He didn’t give her a chance to reply.

She moved in the seductive darkness of the theater. Beauty and grace, fragility with steel hidden underneath. She was pure magic, every movement perfection, every breath sprinkled with angel’s dust.

The captivated audience followed her every move with no idea how long it took to make it look as if the air itself carried her.

Time was a breathless rhythm. Lynn lost herself in dance, didn’t notice pain or aches or tired muscles. When Pavel came on stage to take her away from her new lover, she let emotion play clearly over her face. Her body was her language. She had to choose between a man who wanted her only when he no longer had her and an infatuated youth who worshipped at her feet.

Lynn chose the youth, and let her face show her remembered longing as she walked away into the darkness and then into the chaos of backstage.

“No, no. That’s simply terrible.” Dominic pushed by her. “Guyliner must emphasize your eyes, not scream to everyone that you’re heavy handed.” He loomed over a seated Simon and with swift dabs wiped a tissue under the dancer’s eyes.

André’s replacement was busy throwing up somewhere behind a curtain, the police escort—the one Detective Williams authorized specifically for him—keeping a stoic face beside him.

She couldn’t find Mateo, but she felt him watching her. Retouching her makeup, she wished he was watching to see her dance and not because of an expected danger.

Channing, her new security consultant, strode briskly up to her. “Everything’s fine. No sign of any problems.”

“Maybe it’s really over? We have two acts left.” And nothing had happened other than Mateo stirring up her equilibrium.

“Possibly.” Channing didn’t look convinced, and Lynn didn’t have time to worry over it.

“One minute!”

Four people on stage, second to final act. Lights dimmed to nearly pitch black. She could almost feel anticipation from below where the audience focused on the stage.

That’s what she loved, Lynn realized. Having them watch her dance, the focus, the anticipation. The applause. The dance itself. In all the talk of sacrifice and guilt she always buried that she actually loved it.

“Places!”

Applause as she stepped forward on the stage, a single soft spotlight covering her solo. Solemn and lonely, realizing that having someone worship her wasn’t enough. One man who didn’t love her back, one man she didn’t love who wanted her.

She ignored the shadows where cleverly placed lights outlined the villain. And when Simon dragged her into the darkness and the music changed from soft to menacing, she almost heard the audience hold their collective breath.

A leap, a twist while the lights echoed their struggle. Simon caught her every time, his hands strong on her waist, holding her to him, dragging her back as she tried to get away.

He pushed his face into hers, simulating a kiss, Lynn fought him as a woman would, with her hands on his chest, pushing with futile effort, waiting for someone to come rescue her.

The young lover pranced somewhere in the background, oblivious to anything but his bliss. Simon had already pressed her to the floor when Pavel leapt to center stage, his head held high, his face merely arrogant where it was supposed to show a righteous fury.

The music changed from minor keys to something strong and major, staccato underscoring the triumph of good over evil.

And in a move that had her gasping with the audience, Simon smashed a fist into the hero's jaw, accompanied by a sickening sound of bone cracking into bone. In cinematic slow motion, Pavel folded to the floor.

She looked up into the tearful eyes of a madman.

"I tried to help you." Simon moved closer. "I told you I would. I begged you." He extended his arms, the motion graceful, sweet. Pleading with her to understand. "You sacrificed your purity. For what? For money?"

She couldn't move, couldn't run, couldn't think beyond a wall of terror mixed with shock. Breaths didn't help, nor did the silent scream to force herself to act. Mateo was here, watching, as were the cops. He'd realize something had gone wrong. She'd have another chance to call him a big idiot. And kiss him. She simply had to stall for a few moments longer.

Repeating that didn't calm her racing heart.

"You should have talked to me," she forced through suddenly parched lips, her voice hoarse and barely audible over her heartbeat. She didn't know what else to say, couldn't get past the fact that Simon had been the one who turned against her.

"You wouldn't have listened. You never had." Those uplifted arms now gestured to the stage. "Look, the house is full. They all came here, not because of how you dance, but to see how you can play the whore. I won't allow you to throw everything away." He took her arm. "You need to understand. I won't allow you."

The Russian hero crumpled when Simon punched him cleanly in the jaw. Standing above the stage in the dark rafters, Mateo froze as his pulse exploded in his head.

Visions of blood, screams, his own twitching, helpless muscles flashed through his mind as Simon turned to Lynn and lifted up his arms.

"Get Williams!" He ran towards the stairs, knowing full well he wouldn't get there in time, knowing full well he'd have to watch, useless and helpless. She probably was terrified and he was doing nothing because he wasn't fast enough, hadn't been smart enough to stop it. The roar in his head nearly drowned the chatter in his earpiece.

He couldn't allow her to be hurt. *Wouldn't* allow it. Onstage Simon tried to bury his head in Lynn's belly only to be pushed away.

His damned gun was stuck under his armpit, beneath the buttoned jacket of his suit. Even if he took the time to draw it, he wouldn't risk the proximity to Lynn. With those thoughts rushing through his mind, he ripped at the buttons while he ran, his motion clumsy, void of breath.

He couldn't be too late. He wouldn't let the bastard hurt her, except he couldn't run fast enough, couldn't seem to shout over the noise of music.

Lynn was already on the floor, Simon above her, touching her face, soft, lover like. Mateo couldn't see her eyes, couldn't tell if she was terrified.

Simon closed his hands around her throat. Fear and helpless rage bloomed a metallic, bitter taste low in Mateo's throat.

The audience sat still, captivated by the story, probably convinced that this was all an act. Lynn thrashed onstage under the fast menacing sounds of the orchestra.

Time slowed. Mateo moved through water, fought through the terror to keep running down the stairs while the music swelled. Simon's hands were wrapped around her throat, and she probably couldn't breathe, couldn't move her head away when he lowered his face to kiss her.

The buttons finally gave way. He grabbed the hot gun from its holster with slippery fingers, clicked the safety, drew a breath. Just as Lynn pulled out something from her hair and pushed it into Simon's throat.

A howl of pain ended in eerie silence.

Mateo heard collective gasps, both in his earpiece and in the air. Nobody moved when he finally rushed onto the stage, his gun drawn at the choking, bleeding Simon.

"Stay back." A brief check told him she was fine, down on her knees, coughing but breathing.

His palm clamped over the wound in his throat, Simon tried to crawl towards her.

"Stay back, damn you!"

"You're dirty!" He wheezed out the words in the dead silence of the theater, blood seeping through his fingers, his eyeliner running in tearful streaks. "You're supposed to understand. You're dirty just like all of them."

Finally a rush of feet, a whoosh of air when some genius finally got the cue to drop the curtain. Liquid and tentative applause as if the audience weren't quite sure just what had happened.

Puffing like a huge tux-clad gorilla, Williams got Simon in handcuffs while someone screamed for a damned nurse.

Mateo finally managed to put his gun back into its holster with hot shaking hands. Lynn was already on her feet, looking around with dry glassy eyes.

"God. Oh my God." She wasn't trembling yet, but Mateo could see the goose bumps starting on her bared arms.

"It's over, *preciosa*. It's over." Mateo drew her into him, didn't care who was watching. He simply held her, let her hide away from prying glances and shuffling feet.

"It's over," she agreed, her shoulders shaking. "I told you I'd take care of myself."

No tears, just sweet trembling lips. He brushed them with his own and held her as the curtain was lifted over their heads and the applause erupted in the theater.

He hadn't touched her since he kissed her onstage.

Three intense hours later, Lynn was pouring her troubles into a bag of silver-and-blue-wrapped chocolates, meticulously tearing the wrappers, stuffing the candy in her mouth and barely able to slow down to taste it.

Still high on nerves most likely. The house nurse had checked her out, as had the EMTs. Both Dominic and Mateo had insisted, and were assured that she was in good health, with just some minor bruising.

She still felt Simon's fingerprints over her throat.

*Simon.* The thought burned in her gut. Once again someone she'd trusted had betrayed her. The way he'd looked at her... Lynn closed her eyes, forced away the image of those eyes alight with madness.

He'd ruined André's career and tried to kill her in front of an adoring audience. All in the name of purity of art.

She shook her head and slightly shuddered. At least it was all over. Reviews aside, Simon would be locked away, probably for years, as Detective Williams told her.

She'd been able to take care of herself and get a small and petty satisfaction watching Pavel moan about his bruised jaw.

And the man who she'd thought had betrayed her had been the one that she could trust.

The knock on the door didn't startle her. She'd been waiting for it ever since Channing took her home and told her to lock up.

"Hey."

"Hey."

Mateo stood in her doorway with his hands in his pockets, gorgeous and tired.

"Thanks for stopping by." She popped another piece of chocolate into her mouth and went back to where she had been sitting at the breakfast bar.

"He's at the hospital with a couple of uniforms on him. They'll book him as soon as they've patched him up."

The words should have been a relief. Instead, adrenaline still pumped inside her system. "Great. Thanks."

He simply looked at her, his gaze moving over her face as if memorizing every feature.

"You decided to go back to SFPD?" A lame attempt at conversation. She didn't know what else to do, what else to ask him.

"Yeah."

“Good. That’s good.” She popped another piece of chocolate into her mouth. “You should do what you love.”

“How about you?” His hands were still stuck in his pockets, his posture stiff, his onyx gaze intense.

“I think I’m going to take a vacation after the production ends. Maybe Hawaii.” She shrugged. “I love ballet. But I need to figure some things out.”

His eyes were dark on hers. “I couldn’t take a chance you would get hurt. I had to back away so I wouldn’t miss something. I…” He shut up. Just closed his mouth and rubbed a hand over his hair.

Hope was a flutter in her chest. “You what?”

His eyes grew mutinous. “I didn’t want you to get hurt.”

Reckless desire boiled through her veins. Adrenaline and chocolate and something she couldn’t quite name. She stepped closer to him, tilted her head so she could watch his face. “You want to try another answer.”

His eyebrows rose, his black eyes heated. “Or?”

“Or you should know that I can kick your ass.”

“Really?”

She slid her hand over his zipper, gently cupped him through the dark wool of his pants. “Yes.” Her throat went suddenly dry. “Yes, really.”

“You sure about this? You’re exhausted and—”

“I told you. I can kick your ass.”

His nostrils flared. “You’re quite the champ.”

She stroked his cock and felt him shudder. “You can bet money on it. Give me a better answer.”

His breath hissed out, but he didn’t move away from her. “If something had happened, Dominic would have had my balls.”

“I have your balls now.” Lynn proved her words by very lightly squeezing. “And I’m still not hearing something I like.” A short pause had her lifting up her head. Had she misjudged it? Just another fling, something to pass the time—

“I think I’m falling for you.”

Her heart tripped in her chest.

“I couldn’t focus on anything but you. Couldn’t stand the thought of something happening because of it.”

“So you made me believe you didn’t give a fuck.”

“I had to.”

“And then you watched me behind my back—”

His hand was suddenly on her wrist, his fingers firm and gentle. “Speaking of back, I’m not hearing back something I like.” Menacing words, dark fire in those liquid eyes.

Lynn wet her lips and smiled. "You'll have to get it out of me, Officer."

"Ma'am." His hands spanned her waist. "It'll be my pleasure."

His mouth found hers. With a quick move he had her pressed against the cool hard surface of a wall, his lips hot over hers, his hands tugging and pulling on her clothing.

She fumbled for his zipper, finally wrapped her fingers around skin and heat and the molten core of him.

"How flexible are you?" His rough voice gave her shivers. They were both naked now, demanding hands and hungry lips.

"Is this an audition?"

Mateo's smile brimmed with wicked sin. He wrapped a wide-palmed hand around her ankle, lifted it up so that her knee was on the level of her shoulder, her sex open for him.

His fingers found her slick wet heat and gently teased her. "Can you handle it?"

She could barely breathe. "Can you?"

He brought his fingertip towards his mouth, took a good slow lick. With shaking hands Lynn bent to reach for his wallet, took her time sliding the condom on his cock. Then he was pushing himself into her, his mouth over hers, his hands anchoring her against the wall.

Slow movements of his hips, quick thrusts, slow sensual retreats driving her mad with need. She couldn't do anything but hold on to his shoulders, keeping her leg up high while he pressed into her, so good she sighed into his mouth. He captured every shuddering breath, every tremble of pleasure. Again those clever fingers found the slick folds of her sex, circled with teasing touches until she screamed in climax, with him pulsing and grinding into her when his own orgasm hit.

When Lynn could breathe again she was lying on the floor, his arms around her, her back pressed up against a warm male chest.

"We didn't make it to the bed."

"Give me a minute." That gruff voice made her shiver once again.

"I don't think I can move."

His answer was to press his cock into her rear.

"You can't be serious." She wiggled her butt against him just in case.

"Dead serious." His large hand rubbed over her buttocks. "Let's see if we can make it to the bed and in the morning I'll take you out for breakfast."

She bit the muscled arm that wrapped around her. "I have a feeling I'll be starved."

He rolled her onto her stomach and fit himself between her thighs. "I'll take you down to Ghirardelli Square."

"Mmm. Yum," Lynn sighed while he slowly filled her. "Breakfast of champions."



## About the Author

Fiona Jayde is a space pilot, a ninth degree black belt in three styles of martial arts, a computer hacker, a mountain climber, a jazz singer, a weightlifter, a superspy with a talent for languages, and an evil genius.

All in her own head.

In life, she is a web developer and an author of kickass, action-packed romances, possesses a brown belt in Tae Kwon Do and blue belt in Aikido, loves jazz piano, can bench-press about twenty pounds—with effort, speaks Russian fluently, is scared to death of heights, and, when not plotting murder and mayhem, enjoys steamy romance novels, sexy spy thrillers, murky mysteries and movies where things frequently blow up.

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*Once burned is all it takes...*

## **Burn for Me**

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*A Rancho Del Cielo Romance*

Twelve years ago, Raul Montenga left home to live life on his own terms. Yet for just as long, his nights have sizzled with erotic dreams of Penelope, the girl he left behind. Enough is enough. It's time to find out if the sparks are real, or all in his head.

Not that he expected a warm welcome, but her cold shoulder and icy rejection sting more than he cares to admit. So he's more than a little surprised to find her tomboy daughter standing nervously on his porch...claiming to be his child.

Dr. Penelope Gibson's worst nightmare isn't that her daughter wants to know her daddy. It's facing—and keeping at arm's length—her biggest youthful mistake. Now he's back and the feelings she'd thought frozen solid are melting fast. Along with her inhibitions, her clothes and her better judgment.

Problem is, Raul's not content to stop at getting acquainted with her daughter. He wants it all—Penelope's love, her body *and* her soul. After twelve years building a life without him, though, she's not sure she trusts him—or herself—enough to try.

**Warning** This book features a wildly hot Latino firefighter dead-set on a mission to seduce. Contains bad words, fiery tempers and scorching sex. Oven mitts required.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Burn for Me:*

He stared down at his daughter—*his* daughter, a thought that in and of itself was growing less incredulous and more exactly what he wanted—and knew in that moment that his life was about to change irrevocably. If he wanted, he could still back away. Keep Chloe at enough of a distance that he could be her friend, give her access to his family but not really change much. He'd work at the firehouse, finding all the meaning in his life in the work there, and keep longing for something more in his heart.

Or, he'd become her father. Be someone to guide her and protect her. Be more to her than he'd ever managed to be to anyone else.

The ease with which he made the decision should have startled him, but it didn't. Like snapping that chain around her neck, the pieces fell together inside him and the lock was set. They still had a long way to go, of course—no kid of his should be expected to live in a room this perfect—but at least he knew he wanted the experience. Wanted to be part of this. *Wanted*.

He tapped the lamp a couple of times to turn it off and reached for the door handle. Penelope stood there, raising her chin when he waited for her to walk out first. She was stubborn, something he should have realized years ago, but some things didn't change no matter how deep in denial a person wanted to go.

Faced with waking up her daughter or standing there staring at him for eternity, Pen finally let go of the door and walked ahead of him into the hall.

Satisfied, Raul pulled the door shut, silencing the chimes by pressing them to the door. The door directly across from Chloe's could only belong to Penelope. She caught him looking, he could tell because she bit her lip. Tempting, very tempting, to stroll over there and discover what secrets the elusive Miss Gibson had in there, but they had talking to do first.

Raul shook his head and pointed to the stairs. Was that relief or disappointment on her face? It wasn't a question he could let himself think about. Much. He forced himself down the stairs, listening for her footsteps in his wake.

It took a while, but Penelope finally came. She walked into the living room where he was putting the poker back on the hearth stand. Vents closed, door closed upstairs. Now, finally, he could lay into her.

Except when he turned, he didn't see the hard-shelled woman who had stood on his parents' deck and told him to back off. This Penelope was worried. Afraid. Of him.

His anger curdled in his belly. "I'm not going to do anything to you, Pen," he growled.

"I know." And then she backed up a step and crossed her arms.

"Now that's just fuckin' unfair." So what if he sounded like a ten-year-old. "You were ready to rip my balls off and serve 'em for dinner earlier. But now that we're alone, you act like I'm going to hit you or something. I thought you were better than that."

"I've had almost five hours to think about what you were going to say. You've always been somewhat...demonstrative when you're upset. I've never seen any value to yelling myself hoarse. So no, I'm not looking forward to this." He could practically see frost coming out of her mouth as she spoke.

"You didn't care about my demonstrations at the house."

"At the house, I was angry."

"But you're not anymore." Of course she wasn't, she'd had her say. And her say had been six kinds of insulting, each and every one of them telling him to keep his distance. Just thinking about it pissed him off all over again. "How convenient for you."

Her mouth twitched and some life snapped in her eyes. "I had every right to be angry. You were giving your family the wrong impression. On purpose."

Damn right he'd done it on purpose. "I was being attentive and you were giving everyone the cold shoulder because things weren't going your way. I hate to break it to you, *querida*, but you don't have all the answers and you're not the only one with something to lose in this situation. Those people are all going to play an important role in her life now. That means they'll be part of *your* life, the same as me. Treating us like shit will kind of get in the way of that."

She rolled her eyes. “I wasn’t treating anyone like anything. I was staying out of the way because the whole point was for them to accept Chloe. *Chloe*. Why weren’t you giving her the grand tour, introducing her to the relatives, instead of finding new and inventive ways to excuse putting your hands all over *me*?”

He focused on the first accusation...for now. “I did. For as long as she stayed still for it. Unlike you, she likes people and dove right in.”

Color flooded her cheeks in a rush. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” he said, taking that step forward she’d put between them and another two besides, “you’re getting more and more like your mother with every damn day and it’s getting on my fucking nerves.”

She froze, her eyes widening while her mouth fell slightly open. He could just see the tops of her teeth, perfectly white and even.

“What the hell happened to you, Pen? Do you even see the way you’re becoming like her? You freeze people out, shut off your emotions and act like you’re too good to be bothered. You’re thirty-two fuckin’ years old, but you’re locked up in clothes and restraints like some goddamned retirement-home lady. You used to talk about the way you’d be when you grew up. That you’d go away and do things, make a difference with your life. Everyone knew you were just waiting to grow up and get out from your mother’s control, but you haven’t. And it’s wrong for you.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, yes, I do.” He walked up to her now, invading her space, almost wrapping his hands around her shoulders, he wanted to shake her so much. “You don’t think I paid attention, but I did. I knew you. I knew who you were under the frills and the manners and all that other shit she used to make you do. You used to *laugh*, Pen. I haven’t heard you laugh once since I came back. Not a real laugh. It wasn’t loud, wasn’t crazy, but fuck, at least you did it. When the hell did you lose what made you special?”

That finally seemed to snap her back to reality because she put her hands on his chest and shoved. “You happened, Raul. *You*. I spent fifteen years throwing myself at you because I couldn’t seem to help it and you never cared.”

He let her move him, shock at her emotional explosion muting his earlier frustration. She pushed again, as if she thought she could throw him across the room instead of a single step backward.

“Finally, finally, when I thought you felt something for me, all that happened was a horrible drunken fuck in a closet. A *closet*, Raul. Nameless, faceless and completely forgettable.” She pounded at him, enough that it actually hurt this time. Or was that only because of what she was saying? “You left and you never looked back. You *destroyed* me. Does that make your ego feel better? I thought I lost everything the day you left, and I’ve spent the rest of my life proving myself wrong. Proving to myself—if no one else—that you don’t matter anymore, and you know what, I’ve done a hell of a job.

“So excuse me if I’m not special enough for you anymore. Maybe it was the pregnancy afterward that took a little of the shine off. Or do you think it was surviving medical school with an infant? It could have

been the pointless relationships I tried to have every now and again, each one a little more depressing than the last. Or maybe, just maybe, it was living with my mother's unflagging disappointment my entire life because at every single turn, I've lived up to everyone's lowest expectations.

"And by the way, yes, she's a bitch, okay, but she's *my* bitchy mother and if you want my respect for your family you'd better damn well have some for mine. Either way, *you* do not get to decide if I'm special, Raul. You made your mind up a long time ago that I wasn't—"

The kiss muffled her words. She shoved at him again, but he didn't let her go. She had to stop talking. Because everything she was saying was ripping his chest open. He licked at her lips, taking her fists into his hands and holding them still. She kept trying to hit him, but eventually she stopped fighting. Instead he felt her lips soften, part and then the darting touch of her tongue against his. She stroked, a warm, wet invitation that he'd have to have been dead for three days to turn down.

Letting go of her hands, he cupped her face, gentling his touch but unable to tamp down the hunger. His body hardened for her, pushing against her. Her palms slid down his chest, burning a trail to his waist, where she grabbed fistfuls of his shirt and pulled his hips closer. Flush, their bodies strained into each other from chest to knee.

The kiss slowed, became an exploration. He tasted her lips, drawing the full curve of the bottom one into his mouth before delving back inside to stroke her tongue with his. His senses filled with her, the taste of her, the scent and the feel of her. She met him kiss for kiss, rising up on her toes to get that little bit closer.

When the kiss finally broke, he still held her face cupped in his hands, but the angry fire in her eyes had cooled, the cobalt color shimmering with unshed tears. With unabashed want. Her lips pink and swollen, open and moist enough for him to want to pull her right back in.

She stared at him, looking almost tormented. "Why can't I hate you?"

Wouldn't everything be easier if she could? He touched her lip with his thumb, caressing it carefully. "Probably the same reason I don't think I can let you go tonight."

He thought she'd get angry again, but all she did was sniff and blink back her tears. Her poise threatened to return, and with it he knew would go any chance of touching her. Kissing her again. Making love to her, which he'd just told her he meant to do.

A good man would have released his hold and left. A good man would tell her she deserved better than the way he'd treated her all her life. But if there was one thing Raul knew about himself, it was that no one in their right mind would ever call him good.

"Don't make me let you go, Pen. I won't be able to."

Penelope didn't pretend to misunderstand. Or lie and say she didn't want him just as much. "What about Chloe? I don't want—"

"I'll be gone before she wakes up."

She glanced down at the couch, a flicker of distaste making her flinch.

“Your bed.” She was going to stop expecting the worst from him one of these days. He’d see to it. Starting tonight. Swooping down, he scooped her up to his chest and headed back to the stairs.

*What if everything you knew about your past turns out to be...wrong?*

## Summer's Song

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Ten years after leaving home, the last thing Summer Thompson expects is to inherit her estranged father's half-renovated mansion. And the last thing she wants is to face the memories of the night her brother died—sketchy as they may be. Now a San Francisco museum curator, she plans to stay east just long enough to settle the estate and get rid of the house. Until she finds it occupied by a hunky handyman who's strangely reluctant to talk about his past.

Damian Knight has something to hide: his mother and sister from a brutal stalker. They've found a measure of peace and carefully guarded safety in Pine Point. Yet when the lonely, haunted Summer steals his heart, he finds himself opening up to her in ways he should never risk. Especially to a woman who's planning to return to the west coast—after selling their refuge out from under them.

Summer's mounting flashbacks leave her confused—and more determined than ever to find out the truth behind her brother's death. But in a small town full of powerful secrets, confronting the past could cost her the man she loves...and even her life.

Warning: This title contains a hunky hero who can do anything with his hands, a heroine desperate to discover the truth, tons of summer heat, and a small town with so much charm you'll want to move there.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Summer's Song:*

She jumped.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you." Damian materialized from the driveway and sat beside her.

"Oh." She let out a breath. "You didn't. Not really." She moved an inch or so away from him, distracted by the heat from his arm so close to hers.

"You're not swimming?"

"I do my swimming with a suit. And I forgot mine." Summer stuck her hands under her thighs. "What about you?"

He shrugged. "Not in the mood." He studied her. "Make any decisions about the house?"

"Ah, well, I'm trying, you know, to make sure..." She couldn't lie to him. Sadie had told her that selling the place with a rental contingency could take twice as long as without it. "I think you might end up having to move. I'm sorry."

He dug in the dirt with a stick. "We've been there for almost three years."

"Trying to make me feel guilty?"

His head snapped up. "No. Just saying."

"I'm sorry," she said again. "I know it's a lousy deal."

"Yeah." He paused. "You ever think about keeping it yourself?"

She kept her eyes on the grass. “Makes more sense to sell it. I mean, I guess my father bought it for me, but he made a mistake.” *There’s no way I could live in Pine Point again.*

She shifted on the step and wondered if the warmth on her cheeks bloomed from the fire or from something else.

“I’m sorry about your dad,” Damian said after a minute.

“Don’t be.” She closed her eyes. “He wasn’t...close to anyone. Didn’t want to be. He had cancer for a while, a couple of years at least. But he didn’t tell anyone until the end. He spent the last week in intensive care, over in Albany.” She paused. “So I heard.”

“You weren’t in touch with him?”

“My mom died when I was really young, and Dad and I...” She took a deep breath. “We didn’t talk after I left town.”

“After your brother died?”

Ah, so he’d heard the story. “Yeah.”

Damian stretched out his legs. In the firelight, the blond hairs on his ankles glowed. “Can’t imagine going through something like that.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“How old was your brother?”

“A week past thirteen.”

He blew out a long breath. “Wow.” He didn’t ask anything else, and for that she was glad.

She reached down and picked up a twig, twisting it until it shredded. “That’s another reason I have to leave. It’s too hard to be here.”

“I’ll bet.”

But Damian didn’t know the worst of it, which was that now pieces of the night kept coming back when she least expected them to. She couldn’t guess when the next anxious moment might strike, or the next corner of the past might peel away before her eyes. She was headed for a nervous breakdown unless she got out of Pine Point, and quickly.

She glanced over. “What about you? You didn’t grow up around here.”

“Nope. Try a place called Poisonwood, ’bout a hundred miles west of Philadelphia.”

She wrinkled her nose. “There’s nothing west of Philadelphia but farmland.”

“Exactly. Which is why I think of Pine Point as a thriving metropolis.”

Summer laughed.

“Oh, come on. It has a movie theater, two grocery stores, a separate elementary and high school...classy place, I’m telling you.”



“Sure. Classy. So how’d you end up here?” It was a strange place to make a home if you hadn’t been born in Pine Point. Single twenty-somethings—especially those who looked as good as this guy did—didn’t exactly flock to its county seat.

His expression sobered. “Long story. Save it for another time, maybe?”

“Oh. Okay.” Summer rose and inched her way toward the fire.

After a minute, Damian came to stand beside her. “What is it you do, anyway?” He held his hands above the flames.

She studied his fingers and the way they threw shadows in the dark. She thought of how he’d touched her with them, feeling her wrist after she fell, and a lump of desire rose in her throat. “I—um—I’m the director of the Bay City Museum in San Francisco.”

“Mm...I don’t think I’ve heard of it.”

“Probably not. It’s pretty small. But it has a lot of great artifacts from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the Gold Rush, railroads, stuff like that. Plus we display traveling exhibits from all over the country.”

Damian’s eyebrows lifted. “Sounds like a cool job.”

Her elbow brushed his, and electricity radiated up to her shoulder. “It is. I just love it. I could spend hours reading about the past—lost civilizations, cities and empires and the way one person, or one event, changed everything...”

“I know what you mean. Makes you wonder how different our lives would be if, say, just one thing had ended up different. If the South had won the Civil War. Or JFK had lived. Things like that.”

Summer stared at him. “Exactly.” The same crazy wonderings about the world kept her up many nights. She’d flip through the archives at work and think, *What would the world be like if we were still a colony of the British Empire?* Or she’d stare at a piece of needlework in its glass case and wonder about its creator. *Who were you, really? Did you love? Did your heart ache at a sunrise? What was the world like, then?*

A breeze lifted the hair at her neck, and she shivered. Faint shouts floated up from the lake. The flames burned lower.

“Course, present day has its moments too,” Damian said. “Tomorrow, next week, next year, all this is history too. Keeps shaping itself while we’re just passing through.”

“I know. But somehow it’s different when you’re living in the middle of it.”

He cocked his head, and Summer wondered if she’d said something wrong.

“You involved with someone back home?”

Her heart skipped inside her chest. “No. I mean, I was dating a guy a few months back, but—”

Damian caught her mouth with his before she could finish the sentence. She lost her breath as his hands wound themselves in her hair, and she staggered against him, tingles in her palms. He smelled like

soap and sawdust and the faint spice of aftershave. She ran her hands along his biceps, iron beneath her fingertips. Something inside her wanted to peel away his T-shirt and feel skin against skin.

Their tongues met and one hand slipped from her hair to the small of her back. She could feel him against her, his want hard and making her own grow in waves the longer they stood there. After a long moment, he moved his lips to her cheek before resting his forehead against hers.

“I’ve wanted to do that since yesterday.”

“Yeah?” She laughed, a ragged, breathless sound in the silence. “Trying to make me change my mind about the house?”

He pulled away from her and frowned. “No. Is that really what you think?”

“I was kidding.”

He stuck his hands in his pockets and backed away. “Sure about that?”

“Damian, please. I didn’t mean—” Somehow she’d ruined things. Her mouth ached with the absence of his.

“Listen, I should probably go. Early day tomorrow.”

“Wait. Let’s talk about this. Please.” But he was gone without even a glance over his shoulder.

Summer crossed her arms as disappointment flooded her. Sparks jumped in the dying fire, and a piece of wood toppled into ash. For a few minutes, she thought maybe he’d come back and let her explain. She’d been joking. She’d just made a stupid comment to fill up the nervousness inside her stomach. He’d see that. Wouldn’t he?

But Damian didn’t return. After a while, Summer laced her hands behind her head and stared at the stars. Maybe her father had been right. Maybe the farther away she went from Pine Point, the better for everyone.



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