

Curtain Call

A DRIVEN DANCE THEATER NOVEL



CHAPTER ONE

I never thought I'd find myself back here, especially not standing outside the YMCA with a big bag on my back, double-checking an address on my phone. The sound of cars honking and the smoky smell of roasted nuts from a nearby cart bring it all back. I pull my hoody more tightly around me as I walk down Lexington Avenue. There was I reason I left New York four years ago. It only involves, oh, the worst and most painful humiliation of my life.

"Branwen O'Hara." A guy with a hipster beard takes my name at the front of a line at the East Village warehouse studio.

Behind him bodies are everywhere: some in tights, some in sweats, most performing hip flexor stretches or standing around with paper coffee cups in their hands. The carpet in the lobby smells like old sandwiches, and the air is thick with anxious murmurs.

The guy is looking at me. Waiting. My heart pounds against my ribs. I don't have a class card, or enough money to buy one. I slide my hand into my pocket, looking back at the line that's formed behind me. It's twice as long now, and everyone is staring at me. But I can't leave. If I leave, it's over.

"Next." He looks down the line.

Okay...

I hesitate, unsure of what just happened. He waits for me to proceed, so I take a small step past the desk, and he moves on to the next person.

Walking straight into the studio and not looking back, no one stops me. I start to take off my sweater when the guy from the desk speed-walks toward me. I freeze. He pauses. He looks

like he is trying to remember what he came to say, and then he lets out a loud exhale. He rubs his forehead.

“You’re here to deliver a package, right?”

Uh... I’m half-dressed. A few dancers look up from their stretches. My eyes cut into his—did I actually think I would get in for free? I grab my sweater and jab my arms into the appropriate holes. My eyes sting as I plan a fast exit.

Two dancers in side splits sip on steamy mugs of tea. They look up when he laughs. His face completely transforms.

“Sorry, that was mean. I couldn’t help myself with that big bag you’ve got.” He smooths away a smile.

He’s joking?

My eyes hit the ceiling. I can’t believe it. I shake my head. The blood is draining from my cheeks and pooling in my chest.

“These ‘auditions’ are all posturing. Judith offers them to feel important, and part of my job is to make sure she does.” He says this part quietly, maybe so the gawkers can’t hear him, and starts warming up.

I can stay, then? I drop the bag that holds all of my worldly possessions, but I’m not quite ready to untie my Converse runners for the second time. My hands are resting on my hips when I realize what’s going on.

“I get it. You let people like me in to fill the room, but no one ever gets hired.” My chest sinks as I say it. *Classic. Great.* Another dead end. I roll through my spine and press my nose to my knees in a hamstring stretch. Heat floods through my head, and my heart pounds in my ears. Tension is growing in the room. The choreographer, Judith Smart, slips off her shoes at the front

door, revealing her knobby toes, and shakes out her thick, frizzy hair. I decide to stay even though this isn't really an audition. I need the class to keep in shape.

“Where do you dance? You look familiar.” Class Card Guy bends one arm behind his back and leans into it.

I lift my head from my knees and inhale. The scent of tiger balm opens my sinuses.

He adjusts his arm behind him, and I hook my heel on the barre to rotate my hips while extending my leg backward into an arabesque. “I danced for Chances Dance Theater in Los Angeles.” I was the principal. The single dancer Raina used to oblivion. There were shows where I did not see the inside of the wings until the final bow, something my body refuses to forget. I leave out those details.

“An out-of-towner—should have known. Well, if you need a place to crash, you can stay here. The couch is famous in this community.”

I spot the caved-in dinosaur in the corner. I have slept on worse this month. Once my old director Raina found out I was leaving, she put a halt on my last paycheck. It wasn't that I wanted to leave Chances. I had to.

Class Card Guy places one hand on his lower back and the other on the barre, twisting into a spinal rotation. Judith flicks her beady eyes my way, and I lift my leg higher behind me. Her curly hair spills down her back. She loops it into a knot and starts to demonstrate the first exercise. A percussionist rolls two sticks over a drum. I make my way to the front row while stretching the kink out of my neck—my least favorite couch-surfing souvenir. Maybe there's a small chance this could lead to work.

The first bend of my creaky knees into a plié begins with Judith cuing the musician, and class ends with applause. I roll into a deep split, place my hands on the ground to stand up, and enter the lineup of dancers waiting to speak to her.

“You’ll be in class tomorrow.” She looks at the notebook that rests on her knee, licks her finger, and flips a page.



CHAPTER TWO

It's my fourth morning crashing on a couch belonging to Susan Brown, a classmate from Julliard. We shuffle around each other in silence. I reach into a top cupboard for a mug as she butters a bagel, chews loudly, and huffs when I ask her when she'll be back from the class she teaches in Brooklyn. She only has one key.

"Never mind. I'll just wait for you at the coffee shop downstairs, and you can text me when you're—"

"I'm working late again." She cuts me off while looking at her phone. I so cannot read her expression. Her bun is tied so tight, it is pulling on her temple skin.

"I'll just find something to do, then?" I frame it as a question. I am not about to ask her for a key. After living with a woman who didn't want me around for the latter half of my childhood, I can read the signs. Dad's second wife also had a favorite saying about guests stinking like fish after three days.

Writing romance with an edge.

I roll up my sleeping bag and pack my things, which aren't a lot, racking my brain for another sleeping option. I'd hoped to have some kind of employment by now. When I decided to fly here, I had a solid audition lined up, but the receptionist cancelled after I arrived, saying the position had been filled.

"Ready?" Susan waits beside the door, tapping her toe, and I shove my sleeping bag into my knapsack so it pokes out the top. There's no time to roll it up properly, and I am too flustered.

"Yup." I grab my phone and hairbrush off the counter and juggle them into my bag on the way out.

“So...tonight.” Susan scratches her brow, signaling mild irritation. Okay, so she’s tired, overworked, and underpaid like every other artist in this town. But...

“You didn’t leave the stove on, did you?” She grimaces.

As I far as I know I didn’t eat anything this morning, or last night. My stomach might be digesting itself. Though I did have that cup of tea... *Jeez*, did I leave the stove on? Absolutely not. Why would I do that when I have been cautious of my every move?

“So the key...” She lets out a labored breath, and my guts twist. She doesn’t want me to stay, and she really doesn’t want to give up her precious key.

“Hey, forget it. I really appreciate you having me, but I can find another place if it’s too much.” I swallow tightly. I have no other place to stay.

“You sure?” Susan blinks her eyes wide.

“Of course. I did go to school here. It’s not like I don’t have any friends.” My lashes flutter. Okay, I *had* friends. I *had* friends here until my reputation was tarnished and I moved across the country.

Writing romance with an edge.

“Great, well good luck, then.” Susan offers me a hollow smile, and my heart drops like a cold piece of metal. Susan is gone, along with my sleeping arrangements. She’s off to the first of the three jobs she works, ready to complain about it to whoever will listen. I hope she knows how lucky she is.

I stare at the traffic, unable to think.

I don’t know where to go, so I walk without aim. I’ve probably walked three quarters of the length of the island, enduring the odd whiff of stale urine, contemplating the mystery behind the millions of black dots on the sidewalks, and blocking out random blurbs of conversation while waiting for the street lights to change. A guy in Vans carrying a messenger bag has been in

front of me for the last ten blocks when I remember: the shoe shop where I worked weekends when I went to Julliard. Why didn't I think of it before? I do have a friend here. Hurray.

Through the display window, Marnie, an old bestie, is working the floor. Man, I'm happy to see her, and I really need to let go of this bag. It slides down my arm before I make it through the door. The movement stretches that tight, hard-to-reach spot between my shoulder blades. I let out a sigh. It's been a journey.

"Can I help you?" She flicks a sheet of glossy hair over her shoulder before she realizes it's me, and goes in for a hug. "Holy shit. Branwen O'Hara?" She stops halfway. "Why is your bag so freaking big?"

I hadn't thought about how to explain my situation.

"Did you move back here? We have to go for coffee, or dinner." She straightens a pair of Camper boots.

I let out a sigh of relief. This could be my break. There is a reason to my madness. We can go *wherever*. I'll explain *everything*. I'll order a tea or hot water. Maybe she'll even take me in for a night or two, or knows someone who can. Though I can't stand imposing, Marnie is more personable than Susan, and my options are very limited. She looks at her phone.

"I'm busy tonight, but how about tomorrow?"

The kink in my neck is throbbing. My breath gets stuck high in my chest. I have very little cash and should have stayed at Susan's one more night. But *fish*: I could see it in her face.

After three days, Branwen....

This was the worst idea.

"I am dying to hear what it's like to be a star dancer traveling the world." She looks at me. I smile. My cheeks are stiff.

“Sure.” The traveling part is correct. I won’t explain the rest. There’s no point. She already has plans tonight. Of course she does.

Outside, I run my fingers tightly against my skull and through my hair. I think about calling Susan. I just can’t do it. She tapped her toe while I packed. The Y it is, though the recreation area is only open till midnight. So I end up in a twenty-four-hour sub shop on the same block. The hours go by slowly. Painfully. I stay up all night.

My legs are made of lactic acid in the morning. I must have overdone it in class, and I have a hard time walking up the stairs.

My bag hits the ground—a relief to my throbbing shoulders—and it now has its own place outside the door with the others. A muscle-ripped African American girl in black tights and a vintage Van Halen tee torn at the neck punches the cards. No Class Card Guy. The inside of my ears start to pound.

She holds out her hand. I search my pockets, though I know they are empty.

“I forgot my card.”

Writing romance with an edge.

I feel bad about lying, but I don’t have an extra hundred bucks for a class card, and it might be my last shot at a job.

“I can’t let you in unless you have a card.” Her eyes lower to the manila envelope between her fingers. She’s not impressed. I wouldn’t be either. I’m not the best liar.

“Please.” I look over my shoulder. “Judith asked me to be here.” Which could mean a chance to get hired. “I used to dance for Chances Dance Theater, I just moved back to New York. I went to Julliard. I’m looking for work... I heard Judith is hiring. I *really need* a job.” When I say this, the backs of my eyes burn. This is serious. I’m homeless. I should have found work weeks ago. I’ve eaten through all my contacts. All my money. There’s nowhere to go. Only

months ago, I was a principal dancer with a top company. I danced for Raina. Raina makes ‘great’ dancers. Like, she grinds them up in her bare hands and spits them out. I was one of those dancers. I *am* one of those dancers.

She looks at me, and for a second I think she might cave.

Please cave. The life drains out of me, as though my batteries have just died. She has to cave.

“Sorry.” The girl’s eyes fall to the envelope. My batteries are officially dead. Zonked. Retired. With a lick of her pink tongue, she seals it, stretches her long legs out of the chair, and shuts the door.

I’m deflated. I fall against the wall, let my butt hit the ground, and bury my face in my arms. I am too tired to even think about taking on the stairs. But then I remember something I just saw—or rather didn’t see. I look to the place next to me on the floor where my bag was. *It’s gone.* Impossible. No. This *cannot* be happening. I look to the other side and all around me. I scope the entire lobby. Nothing. My pulse stops before it thuds again. I pat my pockets. *Thank God* I still have my wallet and phone. Shoes: still here.

Next thing I know, I am outside with my phone clutched in my hand. Tears blur my vision. I’m ready to call Susan, or my dad in Santa Barbara, but I can’t decide who would make me feel like the bigger failure. Definitely my dad, but then the toe tapping comes back to me, the looks. She accused me of leaving the stove on and didn’t even trust me with the key.

I don’t even have a sleeping bag anymore. I must be hitting rock bottom, because I am pulling out my phone and calling my dad. It’s ringing. My heart stops. I can barely breathe. The voicemail comes on. I think about hanging up, but it’s easier to talk to a voicemail than a real person, isn’t it?

“Hey, Dad. I know it’s been a while. Look, I wouldn’t be calling, but I didn’t know where else to turn. I know you’re busy with Karen and the kids, but...can you call me?” I cut the message short because my voice is choking and the pressure behind my eyes is phenomenal.

The icky feeling I am left with after the call has me charged. I start to walk at a fast, don’t-mess-with-me clip, with no particular destination in mind.

I pass a tattoo parlor, a few coffee bars, and a gourmet burger joint. There’s a sake bar, which—if things haven’t changed much in the last few years—will be filled with college students by the end of the day. There’s a high-end consignment store where I’d shop if I had money, and then...a presentation center for a condo converted from a... synagogue. And... *oh yes...* there’s a table with baked goods. I’d forgotten how much I love the East Village.

My stomach is having a conversation with itself, and I could really use a frigging coffee. A hipster agent in a skinny pantsuit talks to an elderly couple. The man has his hands behind his back. The woman holds a cloth grocery bag and wipes her nose with a tissue. I take the opportunity to grab a sip of hot java and bite into a gluten-free, coconut-crusting pastry. The jam is a welcome surprise. *God, that’s good.* I take another bite, and then another. I reach my fingers out for more. No food has ever tasted this good, and it’s filling a hole that is much deeper than this empty stomach. I let my burning eyes close. Then there’s a voice behind me.

“Buying?”

My eyes blink open. *What the...?* I tear my fingers from the table, suck in a breath, and turn around.

“Sorry?” I swallow.

A man from a very good gene pool that includes eagle eyes and high cheekbones straightens his perfect posture in his fitted black suit. I stop, place the coffee on the counter, and

make my way to the door, taking the donut with me. But he follows me onto the busy street. I turn around and catch the oblique shape of his tightly drawn brown eyes. His hair falls to the side of his face, and the dark stubble of his jaw does not undermine his stance of authority.

I hide the hand covered with trendy donut dust behind me. He has no idea what I have been through. “I’m not under arrest for eating a complimentary non-GMO pastry, am I?” I hold my ground, though I am shaking.

He tilts his head. “And coffee.”

“Which I really hope was fair trade.” I pull a smart smile, not sure how I manage to be witty in my current state of duress. His eyes flicker, and his jaw ticks. Not all at once, but as though the tension is spreading across his face. A driver standing beside a black sedan makes himself known, and the guy in front of me squares his posture with his wide shoulders. I pull my gaze away from the car and cross my arms over my chest when he pulls a black card out of his black slacks and hands it to me.

“Yeah, I’m not really in the market for real estate right now, but thanks for the refreshments. I’ll be on my way.” I’m normally not this rude, but it has been that kind of day, or half-decade, and I do not have the patience for someone trying to sell me something that I will never—ever—be able to afford. But I take the card anyway.

“I’m not a realtor. My name is Kent Morgan.” He clears his throat with an insinuating look, and I look at the card.

The name is familiar. If he isn’t a realtor, he could be a famous quarterback who owns a fashion label or an oddly hot oligarch. He’s too good-looking to be an actor. I’m not so livid that I can’t see straight, after all. Whoever he is, I’ve seen his face near a headline. I find myself

reading the title in gray writing on the thick black card for the second time, and my heart pounds hard against my ribs.

No shit.

This man is... *the* Kent Morgan? From Driven Dance Theater? It's the one classical company that features a contemporary repertoire. The one company that does the type of work I was made for. I suck in a breath as the tension in my neck edges toward my shoulders. I wipe a coconut crust from my lip with my free hand and straighten my unusually slouchy posture, thinking about how to explain myself. He must think I am a complete waste of flesh. Not that I would ever have a chance at Driven Dance Theater anyway, considering I haven't been able to land work with lesser New York companies.

But if there was any work that I was suited for... Oh, who am I fooling?

"Well, it was nice to meet you." I should probably ask him for an autograph, but I don't have a pen and I am honestly too tired to find one.

"You are looking for work, and the girl manning the front at Judith's turned you away because she wants the position herself." He places his hands in his pockets and cuts his gaze to mine. It's as though he can see right through me. I did see a pensive man in a suit leaving the building earlier, but I was more focused on getting to class.

"You followed me?" I tilt my head. I can smell his aftershave.

He breathes in through his nose and pulls me into the depth of his eyes.

"I was going this way anyway. Plus, I don't have time for cattle-call auditions. They never work." He sighs when his gaze tugs away.

“You’re offering me a job?” My voice rises as I blurt it out, probably because employment is the only thing that is ever on my mind, and it’s not easy to hide desperation. Our eyes catch.

“Not quite. Good luck, miss.” The corner of his mouth cocks, but the smile doesn’t touch his eyes. He nods and turns away. My heart caves. My shoulders sink. I knew I shouldn’t have been such a smart-ass.

“Look, I’m sorry I was abrupt. I’ve had a bad day. Or past few years, really.” I squeeze my eyelids together.

He pauses and looks back at me as though debating what he is about to say. “Well, why don’t we start with an audition? How’s tomorrow at two?”

Not one good thing has happened to me since my return to this city, which may explain my doubt. “Are you sure?” I instantly regret giving him an out, especially after the way he looked at me. I scrunch my face as I brace myself, ready for him to take it back. But he doesn’t. “I mean, thank you. I’ll be there.” I shake my head. *Writing romance with an edge.*

“Good.” He nods and makes his way as I wave.

CHAPTER THREE

My old friend Marnie pulls a paper-bag-covered bottle out of her purse and places it on the table.

After being unable to meet up the night before, she insists on buying dinner at a packed Italian restaurant in the West Village where you can bring your own booze. She came prepared, and I am determined to return the favor once I'm gainfully employed, which may or may not happen soon. I tell Marnie about my strange encounter with the infamous Kent Morgan and his unorthodox way of discovering talent for his company.

"Do you think that's odd?"

"How odd can a guy be when he just gave you the opportunity of your life? Take the gift and own it."

"I will—when, and if, he actually hires me."

I decide not to mention that dancers are a dime a dozen in this town. Marnie rolls her fork between her fingers to spool spaghetti onto it. "It's not a bad hiring strategy, when you think about it."

Or maybe it's a strange coincidence. Whatever it is, I have a proper audition with a decent company, and I am going to focus on that—not on the reason I avoided that company in the first place. My stomach is full of pasta, the room is warm, and the wine is giving me a glow. It's the closest thing to relaxation I have felt in weeks.

Marnie and I catch up. She tells me about her growing side business as a matchmaker and gives me the lowdown on our ex-coworkers at the shoe store who have mostly moved on.

“And how are your mom and sisters doing?” They used to visit the shop and buy shoes all the time. Her mom frequently brought us freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. They were famous among the staff.

“My sisters are great. Busy.” There’s a look on her face that tells me there’s more, but she doesn’t want to talk about family. We are finishing our tiramisu and making small talk when she brings up her next networking event in October.

“I expect you to be there.” She points her gaze and slides the empty dessert bowl to the side.

“I wouldn’t miss it.” I half-smile, because I have no idea if I will be here next week, never mind a month from now.

“I’m so excited for you, by the way.” She lifts a brow.

I sigh in disbelief. It has been quite the day. But before I can put my thoughts into words, our table is cleared, and Marnie is standing up.

“This has been fun, but I have to call it a night.” Marnie collects her Marc Jacobs purse off the chair, and my neck pain is back. I shouldn’t have eaten so quickly, but it’s been a while since my last hot meal, and I have yet to find the right moment to ask her for a place to stay. “I have to open tomorrow, and I have so much work to do. The matchmaking business is picking up. Maybe I won’t be a shoe salesperson much longer. Not that it’s a horrible job.”

I detested the job, but I ask her to put in a good word for me anyway, in case the next audition is anything like the others and I don’t get a call from the schools I applied to. She looks over the bill and places two twenties on the table. “You, darling, are going to be way too busy starring at Lincoln Center and hobnobbing with New York’s most eligible bachelor.” She rolls her eyes.

I decide not to remind her that it's an audition for a job I don't have yet, while I summon the courage to ask her *that* favor. But her phone rings.

"I need to take this," she says in VIP mode before she turns her back to me. "Sorry, gotta run. One of my clients is torn up over the date I sent her on. I thought the two were so compatible." She air-kisses me.

The corners of my mouth quiver. "Thanks again for dinner." I could ask to crash on her couch, but she's biting the curb. Orange leaves are trapped in the storm drains. She hails a yellow cab, and the lights on its rear blaze off into the distance. The streets of the West Village are twinkly. A couple deep in conversation slides into a cab holding hands. A group of girls with shopping bags giggle as they walk past me in their Manolos.

Judith's studio is lit up. Flamenco music funnels out a cracked window in the East Village. I walk up the stairs, past the open door, take a breath, and sneak in while the flamenco group wraps up. Class Card Guy said I could crash here. But I hide in the washroom anyway until the last voice is gone and the lights are all out. *Writing romance with an edge.*

I use my phone as a flashlight, tiptoe back inside the studio, and check the locks. I wedge a conductor's baton inside the fire escape door to lock it and find a sweater in the lost and found that covers a shoulder and the top of my butt. I curl up on the beat-up couch. *Ah, sleep, my long-lost love. You are heavy, dark, warm, and don't make me think.* I dream about my meeting tomorrow and getting that damn job. *That's* why I'm here. I need it for so much more than just the money. And not because it was time I returned to the place I should have stayed. I need that job even in my sleep. Because if I don't get it, the consequences will be so much worse than sleeping on this couch and consuming a doughnut diet for the rest of my life. Not to mention that Judith will never give me a second look now that I missed her class.

CHAPTER FOUR

I hear a voice. There's a light in the distance. I take a moment to think about where I am. I can't move my neck. My legs are throbbing, and I reach for a painkiller before I remember they're in my stolen bag. My knees still haven't recovered from my last show, for which Raina had me contorted in ways one should never be bent.

Bass thumps. Rap booms. A deep voice belts out profanities. *What the—?* I look at my phone. It's 5:00 a.m. I get up from the couch as quietly as possible and peek around the corner. There's a guy in a long black trench coat, black steel-toe boots, and gold chains bobbing to the beat while he examines the stereo. This might be my time.

I am going to die today.

My pulse races. *Think, Branwen. Think.* I need out of here. Fast. My shoes, where the hell are they? I spot them a few feet from the couch. If I move he'll see me. He turns his back to me, still grooving, and I start to creep toward them. The music stops, and I freeze. There are footsteps. Trench Man spots me. He stops bobbing and glares in my direction. I grab my shoes and dash for the door. Then I remember the conductor's stick lodged in the fire escape exit. *Shit.* I tug on it. But it's stuck. *Oh no.* Gangsterland shoves his hands into his pockets and struts over to me.

"Who are you?" The dude with gold chains nods up.

"Who are *you*?" I snap back. The stick is getting looser, but the corner is stuck on the frame of the door.

"The cleaner." He shrugs, and my rapid pulse fills the room.

The wand unlatches. *Thank you, God.* I toss it to the side and fall into the door as it pushes open, running as fast as I can down the stairs.

There are people out and about. The sky is that eerie blue color, which promises light. I press my hand to my chest and gasp for air. My heart booms in my chest all the way to the Y, where I take one thirty-second shower after the other.

My mind is doing back flips. *What am I getting myself into? What am I doing here? Who do I think I am?* The adrenaline rush from earlier this morning has not worn off by the early afternoon. I dig the black card out of my pocket and head to the studios of Driven Dance Theater.

I slip into the concrete, glass, and steel foyer like I'm under a microscope. The contemporary building is huge, which makes me so small. The walls are white, and the floors shiny and cold. There are a few large repertoire posters mounted on the wall. A receptionist in a black suit behind a gray modern desk directs me to the third floor.

You've got this. I practice positive thinking, though it does not quiet my pulse one bit. On the third floor, a rehearsal is going on in a large white studio behind a massive window.

I see him.

He commands the room as dancers' limbs lash out in matching suits. He runs his fingers through his hair. His jaw knots in concentration as he paces back and forth in his stark black pants and shirt.

Rehearsal ends with applause, and he pushes through the door to the lobby. He looks down and walks straight past me.

"Mr. Morgan?" I hold my breath.

He peels his focus from the floor at the small sound of my voice. He is tall and lean and—even with the soft pink flesh of his lips, the warmth of his skin, and his almond-shaped

eyes—more intimidating than I remember. It could be because we are clearly in his environment. He studies me with a blank expression, as though his mind is elsewhere and I am an unwanted distraction.

“Branwen O’Hara.” I swallow and hold out my hand.

He looks at me like he doesn’t know what to do with me. My hand falls to my side. How to explain? *I’m the girl you caught eating a handout doughnut.*

“We met yesterday.” That should do.

He scrubs the back of his neck. “Right.”

He continues walking through the gray concrete foyer, and I follow him as he paces down a hall. There’s a quiet ride to the top floor before the elevator door swings open.

He motions for me to walk ahead, and then he brushes past me to push open a steel door to an office.

“What can I do for you?” He takes a seat and straightens the papers on his desk.

The Chrysler Building looks like a needle in the background, reminding me where I am and how far I have to go. Shards of shadow make patchwork out of the pavement below. I cross my legs in the seat across from him.

Should I explain everything from the beginning? I clear my throat. He’s the one who followed me. Maybe I should give him the honor.

“I’m here to audition.” I tilt my head, and our gazes link together.

He’s distracted by what looks like a memo on his desk, and I keep going. “Do you nab dancers from all the choreographers in town? You must not have a lot of friends.”

I can’t help myself from being smart, because—when I am not thinking about where to get my next bed and meal, and why someone in thick gold chains and a trench would rob a dance

studio to disco music—the strange interaction between Kent and I has been doing a number on my brain. Then again, so many choreographers are elusive in their hiring practices. Since I quit Chances Dance Theater, I'd realized that the audition is a dying art form.

“I've seen you dance before. You're Raina's girl.” His eyes do that laser thing as he runs his fingers through his hair. It's long on top and tapered into short sideburns, making it fall forward into his eyes at nearly every moment. He slides his palms over the desk and presses them flat to the glass surface.

Another obstinate strand falls into his eyes, and he brushes it away.

“I danced for Raina, yes.” I straighten my posture and decide that now is not the time to point out that just because you dance for someone does not mean they own you. Yet, over the years people had referred to me as “Raina's girl” all the time. Besides, before there's time to protest, he moves on to the next topic.

“Your body is untraditional.”

To the point, and not an ideal subject for an interview, but not the first time I've heard it either. A short breath pushes out his chest. His shoulders widen as he leans forward to prop his elbows on the desk.

While eyeing me, he doesn't stray from his stoic expression, and he certainly doesn't smile.

“Hopefully that won't be a problem.” I hold my breath, meeting his gaze. It crosses my mind to ramble off a list of top dancers who did not have the perfect dancer's body either. I am aware of them all.

He cocks a brow as he slides a few papers to the side of his desk. There's a clearing sound in the back of his throat as another one of those rebellious locks assaults his eyes. He leans

back into his chair. If he's at all like Raina, he prefers to keep dancers on their toes.

I roll my ankle in circles. He sucks in a deep breath and scrubs the smooth skin of his neck. The light scent of cologne floats my way. I almost forget where this conversation is going. Every small movement of my fingers, breath, and posture becomes larger.

“There aren't any openings in my company at the moment.”

His jaw tenses, and I flinch. The edge of the seat digs into my thigh. Not this again. My heart pounds with fury. I stand up.

“Well, thank you for wasting my time. My bad—I should have known you would be no different than any other choreographer in this city.” I smile tightly and head for the door. My heart falls heavy in my chest and my breath becomes labored as my hand reaches for the steel doorknob.

What the hell do I do now?

“Miss O'Hara.”

My skin rises to the call of Kent's voice. I am reluctant to turn around, to face any more disappointment. I tug at my jacket. I might have nowhere to live, but neither do I have any patience left for directors who hold auditions for companies that have no positions available. I take a step back and stare straight into his eyes. “I should have known you would be no different than Judith, offering out-of-work dancers false hope just to make yourself feel important.” I shake my head. There's a distant look on his face as I speak, which only fuels the tightness in my voice. “What am I thinking? You probably started the trend.”

I let out a heavy sigh, and my shoulders drop in defeat.

He sucks in his breath through his nose and rakes his fingers through his hair.

“Do you need a job, Miss O'Hara?” His stance is firm.

“Yes.” I wince as he examines me.

“Then we’ll start with class Monday. You can join the rehearsal after. Think of it as a probation period if you have a problem with auditions.”

“I don’t have a problem with auditions...” I stop myself. He doesn’t look interested in further explanation, and I need to quit while I’m ahead. It’s just dawning on me: he is giving me the opportunity, along with another second chance.

“Good,” he says. “See you Monday.”

I sleep with my eyes open on Judith’s couch with the lights on, phone in hand, and the conductor’s wand under me in case I need a weapon. I’m not very well rested, but at least I make it through the weekend. The cleaner hasn’t come back, so I decide to bunk there through the ‘probation period’ at Driven.

On Monday, a woman greets me at the reception desk of Driven Dance Theater and hands me a silver-wrapped package.

“Mr. Morgan likes all of the dancers to wear this in rehearsal.”

Upstairs the halls are silent, but about fifteen women are chatting when I push open the door to the women’s change room. Two dancers smoke out of a cracked window. One girl on the bench peels a callous off her big toe, and another shaves her pits in the sink. They are all changing into the same outfit, a black one-piece suit in possibly the most seamless Lycra blend known to man. I rip open my package and pull one out. The Lycra suction my skin when I put it on, as if I’m being vacuum packed. The good thing is that it solves my current wardrobe crisis.

The door to the studio swings open, and everyone starts milling in. No one says a word to me. They are so caught up in their own conversations.

A pianist with shaggy salt-and-pepper hair takes a seat at the piano bench and flips open a page. Two dancers lean against the barre, their noses drift together, and their hands press on their hips. The sounds of a cap twisting off a water bottle and a toe sliding across the floor overrides the babble. The air is muggy, sweet, and rank all at once, and the walls are so white they vibrate.

My hips open into a stretch. I fold over and let my head hang. There isn't one skid mark to be seen on the floor. I close my eyes, swallow down a trapped breath, and roll my neck. The ligaments make a sound as they pop over the bone.

A short, sinewy woman in the same suit as the rest of us walks in, and the sound of chatter in the room lowers. A few dancers saunter up to her. She smiles widely in response, and they hug and kiss each other's cheeks.

The steel door at the back of the room swings open. I suck in another breath and internally cringe. *Daniela Doran*. The star. Daniela and I graduated from Julliard together before I moved away from Manhattan to work with Raina Freehurst.

I scrub my hands over my face and blink my eyes. The room is so white I have to squint. This is it. If I don't get this job, I don't know what the hell I'm going to do.

The teacher, who I've figured out is Katherine Morris, clears her throat, and everyone rushes to find the perfect spot at the barre. Before I know it, there isn't a single spot left, and Daniela has claimed front and center. She checks herself out in the mirror. She's all nose with straight thin lips, like an Easter Island artifact with endless legs.

I squeeze myself between two dancers at the back.

Black-suited bodies are lined up in rows along the white walls. The room inhales and exhales as the musical notes sing in preparation, and our arms subtly sway next to our hips. I plant my eyes on the baby hairs that dust the slick neck in front of me.

The tempo builds, and I struggle to stay on top of the beat while picking up the exercises. Katherine holds her chin high and squints over the room as Daniela furrows her skinny plucked brow. The head in front of me tilts in time to the quick motions of the leg. I follow along in time to the snap of Katherine's fingers on the beat.

"Music, people." She cups a hand to her ear.

From the corner of my eye, Katherine watches me. She walks toward me with her toes pointed out like she's a descendent of a royal penguin bloodline.

"What did that poor barre do to you?" She has a wicked case of coffee breath. I relax my fingers on the smooth wood and strike the beat.

Front, side, back, side, *side*, front, back.

Toes bat the floor like hot poker.

I blink across the room.

Back, side, *front*.

My foot slips a beat, but I manage to catch it. Katherine snaps her fingers faster, gives me a look, and shakes her head.

Other side. We all turn at once.

My hand reaches for the barre, and my eyes land on another fuzzy neck.

Damp auburn hair pulled tight into a knot with a scarf wrapped around it.

My knuckles whiten.

Poor barre.

Fingers relax.

One foot crosses over the other.

Knees pulled *up*.

Tail bone *down*.

Shoulders roll back.

Breathe.

With Katherine's eyes on me, I tense before relaxing into a rond de jambe. The slower tempo is a hot bath to my nerves. Her hands land on the hips of the girl in front of me.

"Is this the Wild West?" Katherine curls her lip. The girl doesn't flinch—she soldiers on. When Katherine is satisfied, she moves on to the next body.

"You know the drill," she says after barre, waving one group away. My row creeps to the front. The room gets muggier by the second. Moisture crawls down my neck, and I resist the urge to wipe it. It would break the movement.

The pianist's ten fingertips lift off the keys. Katherine waves me to the front. *Shit*. I jog over. My breath is high in my chest. Petit battement.

She groups me with the guys.

Ankles, knees, hips. *romance with an edge.*

Push.

Lift.

Lift.

Lift.

Higher, higher, *higher*.

I spring off the ground, and the musical notes.

Up.

Up.

Up, down, down, up.

Down.

Beat: front, side, back, side.

Look.

Side, side, *back*, side.

Lift.

Lift.

Step, step—brush—and... *lift.*

Air tunnels under my hips.

Feet hit the ground.

Other side.

The pianist's ten fingertips lift in time with Katherine's chin, and the next group is waved on. We rush to the side as her eyeballs slide in their sockets. I could be a feather. Endorphins multiply. I become a petri dish for them. There is nothing like a good sweat.

Brianna Stark
Writing romance with an edge.

The other dancers haven't initiated contact. They've only looked at me with uncertainty, like I am an unusual artifact in a museum display. A small group is sitting together in the corner. I contemplate introducing myself. A male dancer is leaning against the barre, where two girls stretching on the floor are debating who has the best massage therapist. They look up at me.

Then Kent walks in, and everyone stands up and faces the front. Their postures are so alert; it's as though they have antennae on the backs of their necks.

We are all upright in perfectly spaced lines, and there's dead silence until the chatty guy from earlier, someone called Cory, jogs to the sidelines with a chair hiked over his head. He places it front and center. Kent moves toward it without looking at him. Kent doesn't thank him or even nod, and he certainly doesn't sit. Not even close. He paces back and forth at the front of the room as Cory slips in to his spot between two dancers in the second row. Someone clears their throat and places their hand to their mouth as if the sound accidentally escaped.

The pacing finally stops. The room is *more* silent. He plants his feet into the ground and looks up at us with what resembles heightened awareness. He's not looking at us, but through us. He might even be reading our minds.

If everyone was on edge in class, the tension is ten times multiplied in rehearsal. Eyes bug and fingers twitch. The room reacts to every frown, nod, and blink Kent makes. The round clock looms overhead as I rub the back of my slick neck and move through the choreography on the sidelines.

Circle through, under, and around, *turn, turn, turn*, an edge.

Pause.

Move. Move.

Pause.

Shift into extension.

Suspend.

Look at me, look at me, look at me.

The clock ticks. Footsteps scatter.

Bang.

Another dancer and I collide.

“Sorry.”

I bite my lip. Kent doesn't look. I know, because I am aware of every move he makes.

Try again.

Through, under, around, *turn, turn, turn*, pause, *move, move, pause*.

Bodies dodge.

Sweat runs.

The damp suit suctions to my body. I tug at it, and it clings back.

Once more, the music starts.

Through, around, under, *look at me, look at me, look at me*. I am aware of every abrupt shift in my body as though out of body, until I'm not, because I'm in it.

Time stops.

I'm there. Lost. Caught up. Flying high.

And then it's over.

Kent leaves the room. A few dancers mingle out the door, and the rest stretch on the

floor.