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EXCERPT FROM NOVEL
“DANCING BETWEEN THE
BEATS”

BY:

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Paige Russell

10:30 a.m., Friday, 23 October

Paige hovered over the drinking fountain outside the main ballroom. As she gulped back the bubbling water, she tilted her head the slightest bit so she could follow Tony's every move reflected in the wall mirrors. The staccato beat of Tony's Cuban heels reverberated across the floorboards. Mr. Machismo was *on* this morning, his movements precise and powerful. His white shirt was open, and the elaborate gold cross he never took off was lustrous against his spray-tanned body. Paige could see the sheen of sweat on his chest. Tony oozed male Latin-dancer perfection. Yeah, Tony could be a total pain in the ass, but he was still sexy as hell. The trick was to make sure he didn't know that's what she thought.

She'd never seen a dancer embody the passion of the paso doble like Tony. Back arched, chin high, teeth bared in a matador's snarl, he swept a muscled arm backward and swirled an imaginary cape. He stopped mid-step to appraise his line in the mirror. The sudden silence caught Paige off guard, and she raised her head. With a wicked thrust of his pelvis, he winked at the reflection of Paige's wide-eyed stare. Tony grabbed his sweat towel and strode across the empty ballroom.

Flustered, Paige thrust her face back into the water fountain, gulping back water like a drought survivor. *Please, God, let him walk past me.*

"Paige?" Tony's voice was close to her ear. Her brain froze. She prayed to St. Jude—the patron saint of lost causes—for a sophisticated, witty quip. But her plea went unanswered.

Paige spun, water droplets flying off her chin, creating a perfect arc in the air. A delicate spray of water hit Tony and dribbled across his chest.

“Hey, sweetness, I took a shower already.” Tony steadied Paige with a firm grip on her shoulder, and dabbed at her dripping chin with a corner of his towel. The scent of clean male sweat mingled with a delicious spicy aftershave muddled her senses.

“Paige,” Tony said, lightly massaging her shoulder as he spoke. “I was about to say, before you drowned out my words, that I’m heading to the costume room.”

Tony’s melting-chocolate voice made Paige weak-kneed. She felt herself flush under his touch, his words not completely registering on her brain’s receptors.

“Paige.” He repeated her name, gently but firmly, like a parent waking a drowsy child.

Tony’s lips twitched at the corners. He seemed to enjoy her discomfort. Was it that obvious? Paige raised her face to meet Tony’s eyes.

“Our custom Latin costumes arrived late last night. Even Sylvie hasn’t seen them yet, and she won’t be in for quite a while,” Tony said. He placed a practiced finger under Paige’s delicate chin and tilted her head back.

Tony’s eyes immobilized her. His pupils were dilated, and she felt like she could see into the depths of his soul. The frightened-rabbit feeling melted away. Trust replaced trepidation.

Tony smiled. He leaned forward and, in a conspirator’s whisper, said, “Would you like to be the first to see them?”

Paige nodded. The nod was involuntary.

“Follow me.” Tony was already walking down the hall to the staff dressing room.

“The new costumes!” Paige finally found her voice as she trotted obediently behind Tony. “Yes. I’d love to see them, Tony.” She couldn’t believe her luck. She was going to be the first one to see Tony and Sylvie’s much-talked-about competitive outfits. Knowing Sylvie, hers for sure would be super gorgeous. She felt like a dazed groupie. Paige glanced at her reflection as they passed mirrored walls. The false

eyelashes were a bear to put on, but between the eyelashes and the makeup Brianna was teaching her to apply, she was beginning to look like she belonged in the glamorous world of ballroom dance pros.

In the dressing room, one long table was strewn with makeup cases, magnifying mirrors on stands, hair ornaments, thread and needles to sew the ornaments into place, and an assortment of brushes and combs. Tony drew Paige behind a large, curtained-off changing area where the costumes were stored. He tossed his sweat-dampened towel onto a chair. Two racks of sequined, beaded dresses stood next to a shorter rack of men's stretchy dance pants, shirts, and vests. On the wall, large hooks held two opaque garment bags: magnets to Paige's steel. She shot Tony a questioning look. He nodded his permission.

Paige unzipped the bag closest to her. It held a man's costume. The nearly transparent silver-gray shirt had small ruffles in the front, defining the deep V-cut. Paige stroked the fabric, picturing Tony's ripped, tanned chest exposed by the neckline. She carefully zipped up the garment bag. She hesitated for a fraction of a second in front of the second garment bag, but once her finger touched the zipper, she couldn't unzip it fast enough.

"Ohhhhh," she sighed. The dress was the most exquisite thing she had ever seen. Her fingertip cautiously traced a line on the heavily beaded stretch fabric of Sylvie's Latin costume. The dress sparkled like a Christmas ornament in candlelight. Along with the beading, the dress was studded with hundreds of silvery Swarovski crystals. She felt her eyes dampen with tears of pure longing.

"Try it on, sweetness," Tony urged, pointing at the changing screen.

Paige hesitated, torn between temptation and uncertainty.

"You can trust me. Live a little, have some fun," Tony said. "Would I ever steer you wrong?" He placed open palms over his heart. "It's okay, Paigey girl. Sylvie won't care, and, if you're quick, she won't ever know. Go." Tony reached around Paige and released the delicate costume from the confines of the garment bag. He motioned her toward the changing screen.

Paige's reluctance evaporated as quickly as children's tears when they get their way. She snatched the hanger from Tony and disappeared behind the screen, the dress a white comet's tail trailing behind her. Her practice clothes fell to the floor, and she stepped into the confection of a costume, tugging hard to force a fit around her midriff and breasts. Paige was taller and at least one dress size bigger than Sylvie, and her breasts certainly didn't need padding.

She slipped out from behind the screen and stood in front of the mirror, open-mouthed and speechless at her transformation. She felt Tony's eyes graze her body. His possessive stare sent a tremor down her spine. The design of the dress bared one arm; the other was encased in a translucent, crystal-covered, silky sleeve. She felt her face warming and was tempted to cross her arms over her chest. The padded bra presented Paige's mounded breasts like an offering to the gods. She had never seen herself this way. Diamond-shaped cutouts revealed her taut tummy. She flicked her hips, sending the skirt's ten inches of fringe swinging.

"Come here." Tony's radio-announcer voice had gone husky. He pulled Paige into a close dance frame and began to lead her into a sensuous Latin rumba. He led Paige through a hip-snapping spiral turn and then out into a flirtatious Cuban walk. The beaded fringe flew around Paige's hips. She draped one arm over her head, running her hand down her side in an imitation of Sylvie's seductive arm styling. She felt sexy and powerful and more confident than she had ever felt in all the twenty-four years of her life.

The heavy drapes snapped open. Metallic curtain rings clanged against the steel curtain rod as Sylvie loomed in front of the startled dancers. The sensuous scene shuddered to a stop.

"What the fucking hell?" Sylvie's storm-cloud blue eyes radiated waves of palpable fury. Her tiny five-foot-three frame stretched tall, like a wildcat making itself larger to terrify its prey. "Paige. You scheming little bitch. And I was actually starting to like you." Sylvie's acrylic fingernails flashed in front of Paige's face—weapons designed to slash and maim.

“Oh my God, Sylvie,” Paige whimpered, backing away. She wrapped her arms protectively across her exposed breasts. “Please, please don’t be mad. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean any harm. The dress was so beautiful, and Tony...” Paige turned pleading eyes to her Mr. Machismo dance hero.

“You son-of-a-bitch-in-heat,” Sylvie shrieked at Tony. Her eyes narrowed to tigress slits, her face a mask of pure rage. “That’s *my* 3,000-dollar costume you let this little nothing squeeze her fat ass into.”

Sylvie lunged at Paige. Paige felt the tips of Sylvie’s fingers slip through her ponytail.

“Sylvie, no, NO!” Tony yelled, springing in front of Paige. Sylvie cannonballed into his chest, and he staggered off balance. Her nails grazed his cheekbone.

Swifter than a striking scorpion, Sylvie drew back her hand and smacked Tony across the face. His head snapped to the left. Artfully tousled hair flew back off his forehead, revealing a purplish stain close to his hairline where black hair dye left its telltale mark. Tony raised a protective arm. Paige tried to dodge out of the way, but realized too late this gave Sylvie the opening she needed to dart around Tony. Sylvie’s nails dug hard into Paige’s bare arm. Paige yelped, and hot tears of shock trickled from the corners of her eyes.

“Get it off, you stupid bitch!” Sylvie screamed, shaking Paige by the arm and yanking at the clear plastic strap across the back of the delicate costume.

Paige wrenched free of Sylvie’s grip and darted toward the changing screen to wriggle out of the clinging dress as quickly as she could. Sylvie dove after her, catching one long fingernail in the delicate beading of the costume’s bodice. Paige’s stomach dropped at the sickening sound of stitches ripping. Crystal beads clattered onto the hard wood floor, bouncing and scattering.

A dreadful, deafening silence filled the room, only broken by the gasping intake of Paige’s breath, followed by Sylvie’s wounded-animal howl, punctuated by Mr. Machismo’s retreating footsteps.

Marcos Stephanos

1:30 p.m., Friday, 23 October

“To quote your very British mother, Katherine, bloody hell!” Marcos stopped pacing and dropped into the chair opposite Katherine’s desk. He slapped his hands on his thighs and, shaking his head, focused on the opposite wall. He took a deep, steadying breath and turned his gaze back to Katherine. “What was Tony thinking? Thank the gods this fiasco didn’t happen on a busy day within earshot of our clientele.”

“I know. It could have been much worse,” Katherine said, drumming a pen against her cheek. “I had just come in, and I could hear the hullabaloo all the way from the front office. I caught Tony as he was bolting down the hall like the devil was after him. It took me fifteen minutes to calm Sylvie, and, by the time I got everyone’s side of the story, I was so infuriated I sent the lot of them home. I was ready to call you when you walked in the door. Between dealing with Jill and this, my stress level is over the top.”

“Jill? What’s Jill done now?” Marcos asked.

“I really think this marriage thing has derailed her, and I suspect she might be dipping her hand in the till,” Katherine said. She rubbed her lower lip and looked sideways at Marcos.

“Dipping into the till? What the hell are you talking about, Katherine?” Marcos opened his hands in a give-me-a-break gesture.

“We’ll discuss Jill later,” Katherine said, with a dismissive wave of her hand. “For now we have to decide what disciplinary action to take with Tony and Paige. Aside from telling Paige to stay home until I called her, I haven’t decided exactly how to handle this dress situation.” Katherine folded her arms. “Tony is at fault, of course, but he’s a major moneymaker for the studio, as is Sylvie. It’s a

no-contest if someone has to go. You need to understand that.” Katherine leaned forward, resting her folded forearms on her desk. Marcos met her gaze. “We don’t have a huge investment in Paige as yet, and, if the girl is going to be trouble, maybe we should cut our losses now. I need your unbiased input on this one, Marcos.”

Marcos rubbed his forehead. His thoughts were ping-pong like an out-of-control pinball machine. First, Katherine tried to take out a loan behind his back, then insinuates Jill might be tucking cash payments into her pocket, and next talks about letting Paige go. What the hell was happening? Marcos cleared his throat, started to speak, and stopped. Katherine raised an eyebrow. Her scrutiny made him acutely aware of his body language. He shifted in his seat, blinked to control an eye twitch, and forced his shoulders down from his ears. Clearing his throat again, he leaned forward, his arms on Katherine’s polished walnut desktop. His stomach clenched. He badly needed a reboot to this day.

“Okay, here’s what I think, at least for the moment,” Marcos said. “Let’s bring Tony and Sylvie back in on Monday. They can’t lose practice time before the competition. We’ll call Paige on Monday and tell her to come in on Tuesday for a meeting with all parties. This gives us time to get our ducks in a row. Are we agreed on the time frame?”

Katherine nodded at Marcos to continue. She was fiddling with her pen, flipping it back and forth between her index and middle finger.

“Okay.” Marcos took a deep breath. “Sylvie can go back to her normal teaching schedule right away. But Tony...you know Tony is going to be remorseful for about two seconds before he bounces back to being Tony the Superstar. The only way to get through to Tony is to hit him over the head, and that means in the wallet. So, for the next week, he can come in to the studio for run-throughs with Sylvie, but that’s it. Joey, Jackson, and I can cover his students. Tony will lose the income from those lessons. He still has to work

the Halloween party on Friday, though, and lead a workshop.” Marcos leaned back and folded his arms.

“So, what about Paige?” Katherine said. She moved toward the edge of her chair and stared, unblinking, at Marcos. He felt like he was under the vigilant eye of a bird of prey.

“Paige is another story,” Marcos said. “The girl is surprisingly naïve for her age and new to this business. I see her as being as much the victim here as Sylvie, but I’ll think of something appropriate. Paige has to understand the seriousness of what she’s done and also the sheer stupidity of her actions. I’m not in favor of letting her go, Katherine. She has too much potential,” Marcos said, striving to sound firm and unemotional. “Right now Sylvie is our top priority. We have to do whatever it takes for her dress to be repaired as good as new. Agreed?”

“Agreed. But...” Katherine dropped her pen. It rolled across the desktop and fell to the floor. Katherine widened her eyes as she slid her hand across the desk, stopping short of Marcos’s hand. “This debacle has coincided with a tiny, little, cash-flow issue. Nothing to worry about—”

“Please tell me you’re not suggesting we can’t cover the cost of mending Sylvie’s dress? Exactly what do you mean by a tiny cash-flow issue?” Marcos knew from sad experience that the more innocent Katherine’s expression and the wider her smile, the deeper the doo-doo she was about to pile on. And he hadn’t forgotten about his discussions with the bank manager.

“Marcos,” Katherine said. She dragged the syllables of his name out to a lilt, sounding more like *Marr-coossss*. She lowered her chin and looked at him through thick false eyelashes with what he could only construe as an intimate, teasing expression—one he hadn’t seen in a very long time. In spite of himself, he felt his breath quicken. His involuntary salute to her powerful femininity began to muddle his thinking.

“Please don’t blow this cash-flow issue out of proportion. It’s

truly minor and nothing for you to be concerned about.” Katherine spoke with a smile in her voice and a toss of her shiny brunette hair, which she wore loose today. The ripple of gentle waves softened her face, dropping years off her personal calendar. “It’s that, well, I was in such a hurry to clear my desk, I paid several bills at once. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Marcos smiled. When Katherine put her mind to it, she could make herself sound like a maiden in distress in a 1930s film. He sighed. He thought he was long past the sucker stage.

“It’s all a matter of timing, Marcos. I’m waiting on a couple of large payments from students to plump the account. It’s a temporary issue, believe me. Temporary. Do you think you could be our white knight one more time and cover this little expense until we’re clear?” Katherine stood and, leaning on one hand, tugged playfully on Marcos’s sleeve to emphasize her words. “You really will save the day.”

Marcos shook his head and gave in to the smile he’d been struggling to hold in check. The woman knew how to work him. Always had. His defenses crumbled.

“Oh, and I called and rescheduled Paige’s wedding couple, Nikki and Brandon. They’ll come on Monday to work with you. Brandon sounded very pleased at the chance to work with the Dance Master,” Katherine said, radiating flattery.

“Okay, okay, you win. Tell me how much to write the check for to cover Sylvie’s dress, and I’ll give the wedding kids their lesson on Monday.” Marcos said. He swallowed and pulled at the tip of his nose. He’d always given in to Katherine’s pleas, and she knew it. Why should this time be any different? He pushed his chair back to stand and, with a heavy sigh, turned to leave.

“I’m going to walk the half-block to Starbucks, Katherine,” he said, on his way out of her office. “I need the air to clear my head as much as I need one of their double-espresso Americanos.”