

DANCING BETWEEN THE BEATS

Lynn Nicholas, Tucson, Arizona

Chapter 1 — Enter Stage Right

Katherine Carrington

8:05 a.m., Tuesday, 13 October

Key ring dangling from a gloved hand, Katherine hesitated, unwilling to exchange the freshness of crisp, apple-cider air for the re-circulated stuffiness of the dance studio. She snuggled deeper into her soft, cashmere wrap and just breathed. It was a picture-postcard morning. Whipped-cream clouds billowed over the craggy outcrops of Pusch Ridge, softening its jagged silhouette and breaking the endless monotony of Tucson's blue skies. It was so tempting to just...but no, playing hooky simply wasn't within the realm of Katherine's reality. With the sigh of a martyr, she flipped the door key into the palm of her hand.

She inserted the heavy key into the lock and twisted the door handle. No response. Her artfully plucked eyebrows rose heavenward. A whisper of mesquite-scented smoke spiraled under her nose, tickling and teasing, demanding to be noticed.

"Why would anyone build a fire in their fireplace this early in the season?" Katherine muttered. She pressed her tongue hard against the roof of her mouth to avert a sneeze.

She inserted the key again, this time with a little more force, and jiggled the metal door handle. There was no welcoming click to reward her efforts, only a stubborn refusal to budge. Katherine's good mood was fading faster than wood smoke on the wind.

"Damn it to hell," she muttered.

A gust of wind tugged at her coiled chignon, snapping strands of reddish-brown hair across her eyes. Katherine pushed the errant tresses out of her face and, swearing softly under her breath, delivered three rapid-fire kicks to the protective sheet of metal affixed to the base of the door. She jerked again on the door handle, and then banged her fist against the heavy door. She leaned her forehead against the coolness of the thick glass. It was enough to be plagued by temperament all bloody day; she didn't need it from a

stubborn door lock. She shook her head and sighed. She didn't need the unplanned expense of a locksmith either. Holding her hair back with one hand, she jiggled the stainless-steel key back and forth. With a reluctant click, the tumbler gave way and slid into place.

"About bloody time," Katherine announced, enunciating each syllable through gritted teeth as she pushed the door open. As much as her British mother's sayings grated on her nerves, there simply weren't any satisfying substitutes for British swear words in exasperating situations.

Katherine punched the passcode into the alarm keypad. She flipped on the overhead lights, narrowing her corn-flower blue eyes at the sight of her reflection in the lobby's mirror. She pulled the ever-present vial of Visine out of her pocket and blinked back the drops. The effects of stress could be wiped off her face with a high-quality face cream and a professional facial, but the strain in her eyes could not be camouflaged as easily. She couldn't let the pressure from balancing the books get to her. Really, the money game wasn't much different than playing with a child's toy top—one strong pump to the handle was all it would take to stop the wobble and restore balance. She had no doubt she could alleviate the studio's monetary imbalances before anyone was the wiser.

"Enough," she said. There was no space in her life for indulging in self-pity or negative thinking.

Crossing the lobby in three, long-legged strides, Katherine tossed her cashmere cardigan over the reception counter. It landed with one-shot perfection over the back of her young receptionist's chair. Jill would moan and bitch to anyone within earshot about Katherine's "casual attitude about expensive things" and claim she "shouldn't be expected to pick-up after the owner like a slave." Katherine dismissed the thought with a characteristic *whatever* shoulder shrug. Annoyed or not, she knew Jill would hang up the cardigan with care, and that was the point. Besides, she was the boss, so deal with it.

A frown tried to form on Katherine's brow, but it was Botoxed into submission. Her lips formed a tight line. It's too bad she was forced to reinforce an understanding of everyone's place in the hierarchy of the studio. Because of her generous nature, which no one seemed to either appreciate or acknowledge, people could take advantage in a heartbeat, but she stayed ahead of the curve. Katherine's taut face relaxed into a satisfied smile. With a lilt in her stride, she swept down the hall to the main ballroom.

The heavily draped ballroom was cave dark. Katherine felt for the line of switch plates and ran her hand down the rows. One by one the banks of fluorescent lights brought the ballroom to life. The wood floors gleamed their greeting, announcing the official start of the day. She panned the room with the possessiveness of a mongrel dog with a bone. This studio was her heart and soul, and disregarding a few minor technicalities, it was essentially hers alone.

The scent of freshly brewed coffee drifted down the hall, pulling Katherine back to the reception area like the business end of a bungee cord. Caffeine was a cheap, legal drug, essential to keeping the staff's energy levels high.

"Ahhh. Thank God for small favors like automatic timers."

There was a ubiquitous Mr. Coffee and generic ground coffee in the employees' breakroom, but for clients and for Katherine, the lobby featured a dual-burner Krups, designed to grind fresh coffee beans. Beside the container of freshly ground coffee was a box of assorted organic tea bags. A tray of cheap, colorful ceramic mugs, displayed on a tiled, Mexican table, completed the small vignette. The scenario imparted a homey feel to the studio's reception area. As she tried to instill in her staff, first impressions were everything.

Katherine retrieved her personal coffee mug from under the high top of the reception counter. It was a Vestal Alcobaca mug from Portugal, hand-painted in shades of lavender and pale green. She hand-washed this mug herself. No one else dared touch it.

Katherine poured her first cup of the day, carefully sipping the hot brew as she strolled back toward the reception desk to scan the appointment book. From the edge of her peripheral vision, the blinking red light on the answering machine signaled a silent alert.

"When the hell did a call come in?" Katherine grumbled. "Must have been when I was in the ballroom."

"You have two messages," the machine's nasal voice intoned. "To hear your messages, hit Play."

"Hi there, it's Jill. Whoever gets this message, please tell Katherine that I won't make it in today. I'm pretty sure I'll be in tomorrow. I'll explain later. Thanks." Jill's words faded into a girlish giggle.

The machine's digitally enhanced voice added, "Eight-thirty-five a.m.," before it played the second message.

"This message is for Katherine Carrington. Katherine, this is Felicia from New Haven Adult Care. I do apologize for calling you on your office phone, but I've already left two, unreturned messages on your cell. It is imperative that we speak at your first opportunity. There seems to be an issue with your mother's last check. Again, I'm sure you can clear this up quickly, but I do need you to call me back as soon as you can."

"Eight-forty-two a.m.," the machine stated.

Katherine's eyes flattened like a cat poised to pounce. Her fingertip hovered above the number seven on the keypad for a brief few seconds before she compressed the key.

"Message erased," the machine confirmed.

Katherine leaned against the edge of the raised reception counter. She stared out the glass front door, her eyes focused on nothing. She pursed her lips and squared her shoulders.

“Cripes,” she said, picking up her coffee cup. The sharp sound of her own voice brought her focus back to the business of ballroom. She opened the appointment book and traced one long, perfectly manicured red nail down the hourly schedule.

Almost everyone was booked for at least four lesson hours. Katherine nodded in satisfaction. Running her finger down the roster, she noted a full schedule for her bread-and-butter teacher, Joey. She needed three more like him. Joey was background noise, the chorus line to the rising stars, but the show couldn’t go on without him. The charm he oozed captivated and kept clients, and his clients kept the heat lists filled for studio events and studio showcases. Joey was a prime money maker. And then there was Paige. Time to turn the new kid on the block into a money maker. The hours Marcos put into Paige’s training were bordering excessive.

Katherine tat-tatted her bright acrylic nails on the equally high-gloss reception desk. She stared into space. The working man’s bible played up the tenet that, in time, effort pays off. She shook her head. That was a myth force fed to the peons to keep them plugging away. What pays off is being shrewd and fearless. Katherine knew in her bones that her success came from being observant, and from recognizing opportunities when they presented themselves.

She sipped mindlessly, her thoughts wandering. The formats and procedures she instigated when she opened Desert DanceSport might have been recycled concepts—and the word was *recycled*, not stolen, as her ex-boss mistakenly tried to contend—but it was her spin on them that sealed her success. She shrugged. Stolen has such a negative connotation. One simply takes inspiration from wherever one finds it. Clothing designers do it all the time. Such a fuss over nothing.

“The crew ought to be straggling in at any moment.” Katherine said as she caught sight of the brass wall clock. There was an odd satisfaction to filling the well of silence with the sound of her own voice.

Coffee mug in hand, she slipped down the short hall past the practice rooms and her private office, unlocked the back entrance, and stepped outside. The wind was much stronger, flipping the eucalyptus tree’s silver-dollar leaves, exposing their whitish undersides like Victorian ladies showing their petticoats. Katherine laid her head back against the wooden doorframe, lost for a moment in memories. It had been a crisp, windy, October day like this when, forty-three and newly divorced, she opened the doors to Desert DanceSport. How could twelve years pass so fast? Back then it was just her and Marcos running the whole show. Marcos was just a baby back then: thirty-seven.

What a day that had been. They drank too much champagne and ended up...well, perhaps that was best forgotten. Katherine smothered a Cheshire Cat smile. She remembered raising an almost empty champagne bottle and declaring her emancipation to the world. She promised herself and anyone within earshot that she would never, ever be under a man’s thumb again. No one would get the best of Katherine Carrington,

especially not in the Queendom of her own dance studio. And Marcos, to his credit, has never infringed on her reign.

Katherine took a deep breath and let it out with whoosh. There was no time to linger and luxuriate in reminiscing. Fall heralded the start of snow-bird season. Winter visitors would soon be signing up for lessons. Maybe, for a change, her young instructors would step up to the plate, stop expecting time off, and buckle down to upsell contracts like the pros they were supposed to be. Katherine shook her head. Everything fell on her shoulders. Nothing got done if she didn't keep an eagle eye on "the kids."

She took one last deep breath, squared her shoulders and willed an aura of authority to permeate her being. Game face on, she blocked out the tantalizing scents of fall and turned back to the more familiar scents of the studio—coffee, waxed wood floors, and the light undertone of locker-room sweat fused with a layer of citrus air freshener.

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Marcos Stephanos

9:00 a.m., Tuesday, 13 October

"Where in the hell are those damn gloves? Why aren't they where they're supposed to be?" Marcos' voice rose in direct proportion to his impatience. He detested being late. Twenty minutes ago, he'd backed his roadster convertible out of the garage, but the unexpected snap to the air had sent him back indoors for his treasured driving gloves. They were lambskin, made by Fratelli Orsini, in the classic, open-back European style. They were supposed to be in the top right drawer of the tall mahogany chest of drawers.

"So much for getting to the studio early," he grumbled, as he rummaged through the dresser drawer. To catch Katherine for an uninterrupted chat, his best bet was to get there early before her day spiraled out of control. He had to get her on board with continued training time for Paige. If he could finagle a few hours a week for the next couple of weeks, he could test Paige out of the Bronze teaching level and into Silver. Thanks to the girl's dance background, she'd caught on to the basics of ballroom very quickly. At least Katherine agreed that Paige had made great strides, and the mentoring process was going well. With a little more time, he could polish Paige to a shine, and besides, he genuinely enjoyed the one-on-one time with her.

Marcos rubbed his temples. He found a missing silver cufflink and a twenty-dollar bill, but no gloves. He worked his way through the lower drawers, eyes focused but mind wandering.

Lately it was difficult to gauge Katherine's mood. She seemed to be on some kind of emotional teeter-totter—one minute too preoccupied to engage, the next in-your-face intense. The woman could be intractable as hell, but he'd never seen her quite this volatile before. He was concerned but.... If he asked her what was up, she might tell him, and then he'd have to get all involved in her stuff, and that could get complicated. Maybe it

would be smarter to let sleeping dogs lie. Women had a tendency to make life messy really fast if you let them, and Marcos's life was happily uncomplicated and unencumbered.

"Ah, there they are." The gloves were nestled in a protective tissue-paper nest in the bottom drawer of the dresser. Marcos slowly pulled them on, luxuriating in the softness of the leather against his skin. It amazed him that something as simple as the feel of these gloves could completely change his mood.

He glanced at the Baume & Mercier wristwatch he bought on his last birthday: nine-fifteen. Now he really was running late and he'd have to rush. Marcos hated to rush. He dashed downstairs, reset the alarm code by the garage door, clicked open the silvery-gray roadster, and slid into a cocoon of leather. The new-car smell still clung to the interior—a scent more enticing than the French-press coffee he treated himself to every morning. Marcos was the first to admit that he loved luxury, and he was unapologetic. Life was too damn short.

He hit the power button to raise the lowered hardtop and glanced into the rear-view mirror. The fits of wind had undone his carefully coiffed "do." His one vanity—if he was honest it wasn't his *one* vanity as much as his main vanity—was his full head of thick, silver-threaded, black hair. At forty-nine he had as much hair, if not more, than he had as a twenty-something young stud. This drove his balding buddies crazy. Marcos grinned. His hair insinuated virility and vitality; their lack thereof screamed Viagra. With one hand on the steering wheel, Marcos backed the car down the driveway; with his free hand he reached for the emergency supply of personal care items in the armrest console. A quick touchup with the comb and a spritz of hair spray—unscented to not compete with his signature fragrance, Gucci's *Guilty pour Homme*—had him back in perfect form in a matter of seconds.

Marcos pursed his lips. It was interesting that hairspray could make or break a guy's career. He'd never forget the Latin dancer, a picture of sleek-haired perfection, who loaned him his non-aerosol, Clinique hairspray in a rare moment of warm-spirited camaraderie. It was at the Emerald Ball in Los Angeles. Marcos had arrived in the dressing room with bedhead hair and no hairspray. A quick combing and a lung-choking amount of his competitor's hairspray saved him from the judges' wrath. Appearing on the dance floor with undressed hair would have won him disapproving looks from the judges and would have cost him points. With all factors equal, a professional couple's final placement can come down to costuming and grooming—a direct reflection of their respect for the sport.

Marcos' car zipped down the saguaro-lined roads that wound from the foothills to Sunrise Road. The Mazda Miata MX-5 handled well, and it was neither pretentious nor ostentatious. It was just snazzy enough to bolster what Marcos hoped was an image of urban élan and sophistication. As Katherine once told him, ballroom is a superficial

business. It's all about appearances, and no one gives a rat's ass about intellectual expertise.

A dust devil tossed a brittle tumbleweed into his path. Marcos swerved with the skill of a racecar driver to avoid catching this bit of desert debris in the Miata's undercarriage. As the wind picked up, the potential of rain looked more like a promise than a threat. Marcos shook his head. This time of year in the desert, the weather can change as swiftly as a woman changes her mind.

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Paige Russell

9:45 a.m., Tuesday, 13 October

Paige cupped her hand protectively around the lit match. The feeble flame arm-wrestled with the wind, fighting for its few seconds of life. Cigarette clamped between her teeth, Paige increased the shield, tightening the curve of her hand and bending her head until her nose twitched from the pungent scent of phosphorous. She, by God, needed this cigarette, and right now. Damn this wind anyway and the neighborhood idiot who was stinking everything up with mesquite-wood fumes. If she wanted smoke in her lungs, she would smoke.

Paige leaned against the old Eucalyptus tree in the corner of the back parking lot. The wide trunk made a great windshield. Her pale cheeks hollowed as she dragged hard to light her cigarette, pushing the tip deep into the base of the flame. The delicious scent of tobacco filled her nostrils and a gentle stream of smoke swirled through her fingers. She'd started smoking only two years ago, but the habit was so embedded, it was as though she was born with a cigarette clutched in her tiny baby fist. Without her smokes, she was a bundle of hot-wired nerves. She hated herself for her weakness, even as she closed her eyes in pleasure. Smoking brought her back from the brink of insanity but landed her on the ledge of despair.

"I'm such a mess," Paige muttered, shaking her head. There were still too many mornings when her mother's face was the first image that popped into her head. Sometimes she would wake up thinking she heard her voice. Grief doesn't march through five neat stages. That's complete bullshit. Grief spirals and turns back on itself. It hides, and then springs out at you like a lunatic ghost in a not-so-fun Halloween corn maze.

"How can I miss my mom so much," she said to the wind, "and still be so damn confused and mad at her all at the same time?"

Paige felt angry tears damning up behind her eyes. She blinked rapidly to stop them from spilling over. She wound another loop of her knit scarf around her throat and pulled her wide Mexican poncho closer. It felt colder than when she left her mid-town apartment forty-five minutes ago—more like Flagstaff than Tucson. The quickly moving clouds almost obscured the blue desert sky she'd come to love. Dirt-filled dust devils ripped

hidden bits of litter from under the bushes, creating a careless collage of rubbish, only to dump the discards helter-skelter. The exposed litter brought back an old saying of her mother's—something about not airing your dirty laundry in public.

Paige's shoulders slumped, and a familiar hollow bubble formed in the pit of her stomach. She had to stop thinking about herself as dirty laundry—someone's dirty secret. Paige ached to confront, and cry, and scream, "Why, Mom? What was so bad that you couldn't tell me?" But you can't ask a dead person questions.

She rubbed the back of her neck and lifted the strap to reduce some of the weight of her heavy, hand-tooled leather bag. She'd kept the bag only because it was her mother's favorite, but it was cumbersome. Paige sighed. Mad or not, she just plain missed her mom. Twenty-two is too young to find yourself alone in the world. Her mom kept her grounded, and now she felt untethered—a Mylar balloon, adrift and buffeted on the breeze. Paige took a deep drag of her cigarette, willing herself to relax.

A blasting shotgun sound broke through the quiet. Paige jerked around in time to see an overloaded, old pickup truck backfiring its way down the street. The truck bed was piled-up with who-knows-what kind of junk, concealed under a dirty beige tarp. She bit her lip. Her emotional stability these days was like that bulging pile of crap restrained under the tightly stretched tarp. If the tarp's bindings came loose, and all the junk underneath it sprang free, it would be impossible to ever get it all under control again.

The wind teased Paige's hair away from the restraints of a knotted bun. Her thick, almost black mane flew free, dancing a street salsa with the wily, westerly wind. Clamping her cigarette between her teeth, she scooped her hair back with both hands, twisted it into a knot, and secured it as best she could with a long hairpin. Here she was, trying to cultivate a professional demeanor, and instead she looked like a disheveled gypsy. Her hair would need some serious pinning and spraying before Katherine caught sight of her.

Paige shifted her position against the tree, hoping her new dance pants weren't picking up grit from the bark. She wasn't ready to go inside just yet, even knowing that time with Marcos was on the schedule. Being able to work so closely with him was more than she'd hoped for when she signed on with Desert DanceSport. Every day she felt she knew him a little better.

She extinguished her cigarette, finally ready to head inside, and there was Marcos, waving as he walked across the parking lot, cigarettes and lighter in hand. With the rueful laugh of someone caught with his hand in the cookie jar, by someone who already has a cookie stuffed in her mouth, he joined an ally in addiction.

"Ever wonder why so many dancers smoke?" Marcos said, shooting Paige a companionable sidelong glance as he lit up. "The dance community is comprised of smokers, with the exception of Katherine. I'm sure you've heard her warning that smoking will create wrinkles around your mouth." Marcos paused to inhale.

Paige nodded. That phrase was one of Katherine's mantras.

"I actually gave up smoking once," Marcos continued, exhaling a greyish stream. "When you give up smoking, you never get over the feeling that a part of you is missing. It's like wearing your right arm in a sling. You don't realize how much you need that arm until you suddenly can't use it. Know what I mean?" Marcos tilted his head.

Paige didn't have a clue what he meant but nodded anyway.

"After I quit smoking, I'd find myself not knowing what to do with my hands. When I was out with my smoking friends, I'd lean in to get a whiff of tobacco. I so missed the smell, the taste, the way I stood with a cigarette between my fingers. Smoking was part of my demeanor."

Marcos' black, raised eyebrows made him look like a romance-novel pirate. Paige stifled a giggle with a throat-clearing cough.

"I'd been clean for a couple of years," Marcos continued his monologue. "I was at a dance competition when my partner came out of a spiral on the outside edge of her foot and snapped a tendon. It was horrible. She actually hit the floor. I took her to the ER right away of course. I was so distraught; the fall cost us a shot at a championship. Dancer's priorities, right?" Marcos laughed as he gave Paige's shoulder a little shake. "I hit the first cigarette machine I could find, and that was that. I've been smoking ever since."

Paige hung on to Marcos' every word like he was a revered East Indian guru. He seemed to enjoy having an audience. She noticed that he pulled himself up a tad taller under her gaze.

"Yeah, I get it," Paige said, finally finding her voice. It was the most erudite response she could muster. She hated feeling so flustered. Marcos spent time with her teaching and coaching, but not chatting. Paige's mind rapidly shuffled memories to share to keep this going.

"I never smoked in my life until my mother got sick," she said. "Wanna hear the story? It's good one." Paige lit another cigarette.

"Sure. All of us addicts have our justifications. I will gladly play the priest and hear your confession." Marcos bowed, hands palm-to-palm, in a Namaste pose.

"It was about two years ago. I'd just learned that my mother's cancer had metastasized." Paige cleared her throat, took a long drag, fixed her eyes on some unknown spot on the horizon, and continued. "Mom finished her second round of chemo and radiation, but a PET scan showed hot spots. The cancer was alive and well. I went outside to be alone. Mom was at St. Joseph's hospital in Phoenix. They have a meditation garden. I was crying, trying to find a private corner, when I literally stumbled over a young ICU nurse, who was hiding out on a small bench behind a hibiscus bush."

Paige stopped for a minute to take a thoughtful, slow drag. She didn't look at Marcos. She'd retreated into the past.

"I didn't even see this nurse. I crashed right into her. Joan—her name was Joan—was also crying. She was about my age. I apologized all over myself, but she grabbed my hand, pulled me down beside her, and apologized herself. She was embarrassed being at

caught looking so unprofessional. She told me that nursing school never prepared her to deal with the patient's grieving families. Trying to maintain emotional detachment was too draining, and she'd finally hit a wall. I told her that my mother was on the cancer ward. This nurse was smoking like crazy all the time she was talking to me. She offered me hugs and my first cigarette, "to calm my jitters" was what she said. I gulped in the calmness and never looked back."

Paige dropped the half-finished butt, crushed it with the toe of her boot, and picked it up to put in the trash. Marcos was looking at her with raised eyebrows.

"So...your mother? You've never said much about your mother before."

"She didn't make it."

Marcos shifted, but Paige ducked out of his reach before he could place a comforting hand on her shoulder. She knew she would split wide open at the slightest touch.

"My Mom had esophageal cancer." Paige said. "The survival rate is very low. By the time you're diagnosed, it's usually too late. It's a bitch. She died a few months after that PET scan. She was sixty-three." Paige felt tears welling and ran her index fingers roughly under her lower lids. "If you don't mind, I'd rather not talk about this anymore, and I need to get inside anyway." Paige gathered the softness of the multi-colored poncho around her shoulders, slipped the shoulder strap of her purse around her neck, and walked briskly toward the building.

Behind her she heard Marcos mutter, "When will I ever learn to keep my mouth shut?"



About the Author

After a long stint at technical editing, Lynn's focus shifted to creative writing. Inspired by the drama of everyday life as it unfolds around her, her creativity is nourished by solitude, her garden, two companion dogs, and a supportive husband. A black cat keeps everyone in line.

Online and print publications of short fiction and poetry include: *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*, *The Wild Word*, *SandScript Arts and Literary Magazine*, *Every Day Fiction*, *Wow! Women on Writing*, *The Storyteller*, *Rose City Sisters*, and several other e-zines.

Her novel, *Dancing Between the Beats*, is in the final stages of revision. Lynn is actively evaluating publication options and hopes to have a book launch in the fall of 2019.