Chapter 1

Monica Thornton

‘Balance step to the left. Then to the right. Midnight…la la…sleeping…’ Clarissa’s shrill voice is amplified by her radio mike. Her lyrics are fragmented and lag slightly behind those of Shakin’ Stevens’ ‘Green Door’. She gives a flick of her hand towards me.

‘Good evening, Monica.’

Damn. So much for creeping in unseen.

I nod. Head down, I hurriedly change into my jazz shoes.

I hate being late. Ruby and I usually arrive at least fifteen minutes early. We help Clarissa to set up: plug in the sound system, turn on the spotlights, the air con – that sort of thing. Normally Clarissa tells us how Hazel’s treatment is going as we prepare the studio…Normally – Ha. Things will never be normal again. I swallow hard.

Clarissa changes direction. The dance ladies behind her – clad in black leggings and the black floaty tops I designed – are reflected in the full-length wall mirrors. They follow her every move.

‘Join us when you can, Monica…dum dum dum…’ Her tone and smile are friendly, not critical. Ruby has covered for me, thank goodness.

A sharp pain flickers across my forehead. I can still barely believe it.

Ruby briefly turns my way. Her eyes say, ‘You can do this.’

I nod, giving her a weak smile before joining the end of the row at the back. I quickly get into step with the others, moving with the heavy beat.

Concentrate!

‘Now triple walks. Come on, arms up in a Vee. Bonnie, get your arms higher. Da-de-da…green…no, even higher…’

I glance critically at my reflection in the mirrors as we leap in unison. I am relieved to see I look better than anticipated. The bright lights blot out some of the puffiness, so I just look a little tired and it is not obvious I have been crying. Waterproof mascara works.

‘Box step left. Dum dum…Same to the right. Da-da door…flick kick and turn. Dum dum…’

Ruby winks at me in the mirror. She frequently impersonates Clarissa mumble-singing out of time and out of tune. In the fleeting glance we know we are thinking the same, Ruby taking Lady C – as she has dubbed her – off to a tee. A loud snort bursts from my nose. It takes both Bonnie, who is dancing next to me, and me by surprise. I bite my lip and look apologetic. Bonnie merely shrugs it off, smiling in her usual dreamy way.

My emotions are swinging wildly out of control. I need to fix my thoughts on the music, the beat.

Shaky sings out about the secrets the door has been keeping as Clarissa calls, ‘Reach out to each corner and kick…’

We follow Clarissa’s exaggerated moves.

Secrets. All those ones you’ve been keeping…I kick sharp and high.

‘Come on now, practise those winning smiles. Dum-de-dum…da-da…Reach to the right – now the left…Ladies, swing those arms.’

I imagine swinging for Vince.

He had tried to phone me as I had hurried from my car to the studio. I had dismissed the call, stabbing a finger on his details and hitting edit. With a flourish, I changed his name to *Cheating Bastard*, shoving the phone back in my bag with a small degree of satisfaction.

Now I veer from a righteous fury to utter dismay and back again, like a yo-yo.

‘Cross through…No. Janine! Wrong way – dear oh dear. Pay attention. La – la – la door…’

I force my focus on the other women. They smile as we thread in and out of each other before returning to our original places.

Ruby gives my hand a glancing squeeze as she passes.

When I had called her earlier, I barely managed to stammer out my words.

‘Monica, what the hell’s happened? Talk to me.’

‘Vince…he…for years…he has been…’

‘What?’

‘…with other women…’

‘What the…? Look, Monica, skip dance. I can come over afterwards.’

‘No, not here. Not with the twins in earshot.’

‘OK. Are you up to dancing?’

‘I need to do something, or I will go mad. Besides, Lady C has gone to a lot of effort to fit in this extra practice. Expression Paris is only two weeks away.’

‘Well, get to the studio when you can. And when you do, give that dance floor hell.’