"This is completely unprofessional, Max!" Ashley Davis paced restlessly across the slick floor of the dance studio. Her stress level had hit the roof when her partner, Max, didn't show up at the time they had agreed on for the fifth time in a row. Not only did he not show up, but he was also ghosting her. Every call and text Ashley made remained unanswered and unreturned. "Our performance is less than two weeks away, and you continue to miss rehearsals. Where the hell are you?!"

Ashley hung up the phone, barely resisting throwing it across the room. The room was wall-to-wall mirrors. She sure as hell didn't need any more bad luck by hurling her phone and shattering them. Ashley knew in the pit of her stomach that asking Max to partner with her would be a terrible mistake when her coach suggested him. But she gave in when Sergio assured her Max was up to her standards. Now, she was alone in a studio she had rented for the next four hours. Of course, she could just rehearse her part of the routine, but that wouldn't help if Max had completely given up on them. If she hadn't seen his ridiculous posts on social media, she would have been concerned about his well-being.

"You better be concerned about your well-being," Ashley muttered grumpily as her pacing became angry stomping. "If you ever show up, I will kick your ass. And I have dancer's legs. I'll make it hurt."

"Ahem."

Ashley whirled around, startled by the sound of someone else in the room with her. "Son of a bitch! You scared the hell out of me!" Her hand flew to her wildly beating heart as she studied her visitor. The tall brunette was dressed in ripped jeans and a graphic tee featuring some band Ashley had never heard of. The black biker boots were going to scuff the recently waxed floors. And if the woman dropped the motorcycle helmet she was swinging around, it was sure to cause damage. "You're not supposed to be in here. This is a closed rehearsal."

"Yeah, I —"

"You need to leave. My partner will be here any minute, so whatever you're looking for, it isn't in here." Ashley's hands flexed into fists, and she bounced on the balls of her feet. The woman wasn't exactly scary — she was actually quite attractive — but Ashley wasn't used to someone just barging in on her private time. Especially someone who looked like she hadn't seen the inside of a dance studio ever in her life.

"About that —"

"Seriously, I don't want to call security…."

"Lady! Do you ever let anyone talk? Geez. Max was right about you."

Ashley frowned. "You know Max? What do you mean right about me?"

"You're high strung!"

"I — I am not high strung. I'm stressed out because my partner has left me high and dry." Confusion turned to anger. "You don't know me. How dare you come in here and judge me?"

The woman laughed sardonically. "Like you weren't judging me just now when you looked me up and down. What's the matter? Never seen a woman who rides a motorcycle before?"

"I've seen plenty of…Never mind. I don't have to explain anything to you. But you need to explain where your friend is. Why is he avoiding me?"

The woman tucked her helmet under her arm and wiped her palm on her jeans before holding it out. "I'm Nic."

"I didn't ask who you were." Ashley winced inwardly at her haughty attitude, then shook it off. This Nic had no qualms about calling her high strung, so why should Ashley care about hurting this stranger's feelings?

"O-Kay. I didn't want to do this before, but now I think I'm fine with it. Max quits."

"What?"

"Max. Quits." Nic said deliberately. "Meaning, he's not coming back. I don't blame him anymore," she finished on a murmur.

Ashley scoffed — or was it a sniff? No, it was definitely a scoff. She wasn't about to cry over someone like Max. Even if he left her hanging so close to the performance. This was supposed to have been Ashley's comeback into the world of dance. After her injury, everyone counted her out. They said she'd never dance professionally again. Ashley's peers had wanted to say that to her for years. The injury gave them the courage to do so. It wasn’t a secret that she wasn't the most popular person in the dance community. She was a perfectionist and vocal when other dancers didn't match her work ethic. That made her difficult to work with.

Her coach had recommended Max because he was told Max had thick skin and a similar intensity to Ashley's. Truth be told, Max was the only one willing to work with Ashley — with conditions. He did the choreography. As much as it pained Ashley, she agreed because this — and Max — was her last chance for a comeback. And for weeks, they worked. The two of them got along well enough, and Max seemed able to handle Ashley's moods.

The problems began when Max couldn't keep up with changes Ashley tried introducing into the choreography. The moves were great in theory, but Ashley couldn't help feeling that the steps were too tight, too robotic. Almost as though Max didn't connect with his own routine. So, when she introduced modifications to the routine, Max became angry and agitated. He kept telling her that his choreography was spot on, and she was complicating things because that's just who she was. Ashley argued that the execution of his own steps was weak at best.

Fast forward to the present when some stranger stood before her telling her that Max had quit. Even his abandonment was weak since he had to send his girlfriend to do it. Ashley frowned. Surely, Nic wasn't Max's girlfriend. She looked too strong for him with those broad shoulders that tapered into a slim waist and long legs. Ashley shook her head. Don't go there. You're in enough trouble. It was then she realized that it really was the end of the road for her career. Everyone who ever wished she'd fall off the circuit would be happy while Ashley mourned the death of her life's work.

"Well, great. Tell him thanks for sending his girlfriend to do his dirty work," Ashley snapped.

"I'm not his…."

"Nobody cares!"

"Wow, he was right about you. You know, maybe if you dialed down the bitch, you'd be able to keep a partner."

To her utter horror, tears began to flow. Great. Not only did she lose another partner, and a chance to do the one thing she loved most in the world, but she also now had to be the villain in this strange woman's story. Ashley just knew this was going to immediately start making the rounds.

"You've done your job. You can go." Ashley turned away from Nic to hide her face, angrily swiping at her tears.

Nic bowed her head. Stupid. Why are you kicking the woman while she's down? "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean…."

"You didn't mean what?" Ashley asked when Nic hesitated. "To tell me Max quit, and my career is over just like that," she snapped her fingers. "Or you didn't mean to throw salt in my gaping wound by calling me a bitch?"

"All of the above?" Nic cleared her throat. "I didn't want to do this, but I knew Max wasn't going to. He was ghosting you, wasn't he?" She waited for a response even though she knew the answer. She knew Max. When Ashley remained quiet, Nic continued. "I thought you should know he wasn't coming back so you could find another partner."

Ashley spun around angrily. "Find another partner? What was your name? Nic? Well, Nic, your, whatever he is to you, decided to fuck up my life by leaving me two weeks away from the performance! How will I find someone to take his place in such a short amount of time? Can you tell me that? Searching for anyone who will even consider working with me will take longer than that because, hey," she threw her arms up in the air. "Like you said, I'm a bitch."

She paced, her brain scrambling to find reasons why this was happening. Was she really that terrible of a person that everyone would rather see her fail? Oh God. Is that what Max had been doing the entire time? Setting her up to fail?

"Was this his plan?" Ashley sniffled as she walked to her gym bag in hopes of finding tissue.

"Huh?"

"Nobody wants me to come back. I'm washed up, injured, old, and bitchy. The others don't think I notice them whispering when I walk by. If this was Max's way of tearing me down and getting me out of the competition, he won." She clapped slowly. "Tell him I fell for it. Good job. Oh, and give yourself a pat on the back for making sure I got the message loud and clear."

"Fuck," Nic muttered under her breath. Damn you, Max. "I'll step in." She heard herself say the words before she could think about the repercussions.

Ashley wiped at her tears. "Excuse me?"

Nic shrugged a shoulder as if the suggestion was perfectly normal. "I'll take Max's place."

There was a snort of derisive laughter. "You have got to be kidding me. Max wasn't the greatest dancer, but at least he was trained."

"You make a lot of assumptions, don't you, lady?" Nic strode over to the edge of the room and set her helmet down with care. She didn't give a shit about the floor, but the freakin' helmet cost her a month's paycheck. She then kicked off her motorcycle boots, glad she had clean socks with no holes. "Let me ask you a question. How strong was Max when it came to leading?"

The question caught Ashley off guard. She hadn't felt secure in his arms which often led to her own uneasiness and stiffness when they should be flowing together. She made changes to the choreography because of Max's lack of strength when it came to most of the transitions.

"Answer something for me first," Ashley demanded. "Who the hell are you?"

"I thought nobody cared?" Nic fired back childishly. She sighed when Ashley rolled her eyes and pivoted away. "My name is Nic. As far as who I am to Max, he's my cousin."

"Your cousin. And that makes you feel like you can just step into his shoes because you've, what, seen him dance? I'm sorry to burst your bubble, but dancing isn't easy. It takes much more than just watching and wishing."

Nic shook her head and seriously contemplated leaving this arrogant, patronizing woman to solve her shit on her own.

"You really are something. Look, I'm not going to insult you again. I have a feeling, though, that doesn't go both ways. So, let me get this out before you start throwing more barbs out at me. I am a trained dancer. I've been dancing for more than two decades in over a dozen styles, from ballroom to ballet and hip hop to tap. There's nothing you can throw at me that I can't do or can't learn." Nic hesitated.

If she kept going, she would essentially throw Max under the bus. Could she do that to her cousin? It didn't matter that he had used Nic to get ahead for most of their lives. She had been happy to help Max reach his dreams when dance was no longer her dream. When he told her Ashley Davis was looking for a partner to make a comeback, he begged Nic to toss his name in the mix. Max said he would be a shoo-in because no one else wanted to work with the diva. All he needed was for Nic to teach him some moves, demand creative control, and ride the coattails of one of the best performers of their generation. Because reputation aside, that's exactly what Ashley was.

But when Ashley began making changes, Max couldn't keep up with the charade. He would blame Ashley's attitude for his bad moods. And he expected Nic to speak with Ashley's coach to reiterate Max's creative control. The problem was, Nic couldn't fault Ashley's need for changes. No matter how much time she spent with Max, his soul wasn't in the routine. Hell, he only wanted to be a dancer because the women wore skimpy outfits, and he'd be able to touch them without them complaining. Nic was

sure he also hoped it would make him the next Channing Tatum.

"Let's circle back to my original question, shall we?" Nic said. "How strong was Max when leading you?"

Ashley frowned. The information that just flooded her brain was sitting there, waiting to sink in. This…biker chick was a dancer? Of course, Ashley knew she was being judgmental and ridiculous. This profession drew all types of people. That was one thing Ashley loved about it. The freedom to be unapologetically who you were. Most of the time.

"He wasn't," she revealed finally. "There were times when I felt he'd be more comfortable if I was leading."

"Hmm." Nic picked up the remote to the audio system, instinctively knowing that a pro such as Ashley would have her music cued up and ready to go. She pressed play before tossing the remote aside and walking toward the middle of the room. As Nic passed Ashley, she grabbed her hand. She pulled Ashley against her, resting her hand on Ashley's small hip.

With each beat of the music, Nic swayed with Ashley, guiding her, leading her into the next step, the next dip, the next twirl. She led Ashley with grace and ease. Nic's arms tightened around Ashley when she was close, loosening when Ashley needed to be fluid. To Ashley's credit — or professionalism — she never missed a step. Confusion may have set in on her face, but her feet, hands, and body did what came naturally.

And oh, what a body it is. Nic tried to push that thought out of her mind, but her brain wasn't relaying that message to her own body. As the rhythm increased, so did Nic's heartbeat. The feel of Ashley's breath each time their bodies collided was fanning the flame that was building inside of Nic. This is not what you're supposed to be thinking! It's just a freakin' dance!

Little did Nic know that Ashley's thoughts veered on the same path. Ashley had had many dance partners in the past. All male. And all entirely not her type. Her body had never felt this alive before. No one had ever made her feel this secure — or intimately connected. For the first time in her long career, Ashley was…enjoying herself. Maybe a little too much if the tingle she felt in areas she shouldn't be tingling meant anything. And if Nic didn't stop smoldering at her every time Nic held her tight against her body, Ashley was going to embarrass herself.

The song was coming to an end, and Nic lifted Ashley in the dramatic conclusion. As the music faded, Nic let Ashley slide down her body until they were face to face. Their heavy breathing mingled together as they stared into each other's eyes.

"Max never lifted me," Ashley panted. She nearly groaned at the stupidity of her words. This gorgeous woman was holding her close, and her first words were about Max. And, yes, Ashley could admit that her initial judgment may have had a little to do with the instant attraction she felt.

"I never lifted him, either," Nic murmured, her lips inches from Ashley's. "Are you convinced?"

That you could rock my world? Oh yeah. "Um. About?"

"My abilities."

Ashley's hand squeezed Nic's arm where it rested. She knew what Nic was asking. Now all she needed to do was get her damn mind out of the gutter. Though, she wouldn't mind a demonstration of Nic's other abilities.

"It seems you're, uh, quite talented. Sadly, I don't think the judges are ready for a same-sex partnership." And there's where the 'most of the time' came in. You could be gay in the dancing world. But actually doing competitions with same-sex partners had yet to make it to the mainstream. If Ashley wanted this comeback, she couldn't risk it by doing something so taboo.

"Right." Nic was disappointed, but she understood. This was one of the reasons she left the profession. Dancing with dudes wasn't what she wanted to do, but it was what was accepted. Nic retired, not needing anyone else in her life telling her who she could or couldn't pair with. However, she wouldn't begrudge Ashley for wanting everything she'd probably worked her entire life for. "I could, um, help you find someone else. I know some good dancers who could quickly catch onto this routine."

But they wouldn't be you. It was a ridiculous thought since Ashley had met this woman less than thirty minutes ago. What the hell did she know about her besides how well she glides across the floor? You know that she stayed and offered to help you despite your horrible attitude. You dismissed her with disdain and arrogance, but she still wanted you to have your dream.

"I don't want another partner," Ashley confessed.

"But your performance…."

"I've worked so hard to get my career back after my injury," Ashley interrupted. "But if I'm miserable, what does it matter?"

"I don't understand." Nic's arms involuntarily contracted, cocooning Ashley in their strength.

It didn't escape Ashley that they were still clinging to each other. Or the thrill she got when Nic automatically held her tighter when Ashley admitted to being miserable. "I've never felt so safe in someone's arms than I did — do — with you. I've found my partner, and if they're not ready for that, I'm not ready to hand my soul back over to them."

Nic's eyebrows twitched. "Well. This is certainly a change in moods from earlier. I didn't want to be here, and I probably have your footprint on my ass from you trying to kick me out."

"And now?" Ashley asked, ignoring Nic's overly dramatic recall of events.

"Now, I can't seem to let you go. Tell me you feel this, too." Nic's head lowered slightly as she waited for Ashley's response.

"I do." Ashley rose to her tiptoes, her mouth mere centimeters from Nic's. Attraction was a curious thing. Though it had been a while since Ashley went out on an actual date, she couldn't remember a time when she felt this animalistic pull towards someone. It wasn't the fantasy 'love at first sight' nonsense. Hell, it could be a simple case of needing to get laid and then being over it. The trick was not to analyze it but to feel it. Like the music they danced to. The more you stopped trying to pick apart lyrics and melodies, the more you enjoyed the sounds. Once you stopped counting the steps, that's when the magic began.

The room was suddenly filled with soft, rhythmic music and their bodies instinctively followed the beat. Nic kept one hand at Ashley's waist, bringing the other up to the tight bun in Ashley's hair. Nic brushed Ashley's lips with her own as she worked on releasing that bun — and hopefully Ashley's inhibitions.

Ashley gasped lightly, her own hands creating their own map of Nic's torso. She leaned in to return the soft kiss but pushed Nic away instead.

"Oh my God! You're Nicole Miller!"

Nicole Miller was once one of the most sought-after dancers on the scene. Broadway, concerts, international television. Everyone wanted her, including Ashley. Oh, she had the biggest crush on Nicole, and she tried many times to get on the same circuit. But it was never meant to be. One day, Nicole just vanished, never seen dancing again. Ashley never knew what happened.

Nic shook her head. "Nicole Miller went away a long time ago, Ashley." Nic chuckled lightly at Ashley's surprise. "Did you think I didn't know who you were? I've followed your career for a while. I felt your devastation when you got injured, mostly because I

was going to miss watching you move."

Ashley felt the heat rising and bowed her head to hide the blush. "Why did you quit? You dance so beautifully."

"Because they wouldn't let me dance with someone like you. Maybe we should show them what they're missing. We could make this comeback together." Nic stepped back slightly and held out her hand. "May I have this dance?"

Ashley smiled genuinely for the first time in what felt like decades. "It would be my pleasure," she answered with a small curtsy. She could go back to worrying about her career later. Right now, Ashley was giving herself permission to enjoy the moment with Nic and dance the way she always dreamt about.

Rumor has it, though they've long left the dance circuit, the two women are still dancing together.