

Foxtrot

Peyton Andrews

Book II of The Dance Series



calibre 0.8.3

Foxtrot

The Dance Series [2]

Peyton Andrews

(2011)

~Foxtrot~

By Peyton Andrews

Copyright © December 2009

Disclaimer: I should be working on a completely separate project, but the muse refuses to turn her attention away from this next story in the dance series. Pray this will get her focused and back on track. If you haven't read Tango, please do, otherwise the beginning of the story will not have the impact it otherwise would. Do I really have to say it? These characters are original and all mine, and I'm very protective of them. Sex? Nah, okay, well yeah, and of the girl on girl variety.

A very special thank you to Fabian Andre, Wilbur Schwandt, and Gus Kahn, the creative team who gave the world the lovely ballad "Dream a Little Dream of Me." Thanks to "Mama" Cass Elliot, wherever you are, for lending your talented voice to this song. Yours is my favorite rendition.

Dedication: To all the other bards that have poured their creativity on the page for us to enjoy. I have been entertained for years by your astounding talents. A big shout out to those folks that took the time to read Tango. A special bow to those of you that have taken a moment to send me an email to express your thoughts on the story. I've discovered the bard in me likes being fed. A brim nod to The Rose and GG for their invaluable suggestions. Last, but certainly not least, a great big world of thank you to my beta Cheri, you rock girl! As always, I can be reached at peyton.andrews@comcast.net

. Now on to the show.

Teaser: A reclusive world renown opera singer finds herself entranced by a wealthy socialite. Does this herald a new chance at a full life or a memorable one-night stand?

Tipper watched unobserved as Clay took Julia by the hand and led her away from the group. Her peripheral vision told her they were climbing the once roped off staircase. It didn't take any special powers of deduction to understand the couple sought privacy, perhaps to steal a few kisses, engage in a bit of touch and feel. She envied Julia. Dancing with Clay was a breathtakingly erotic experience. He moved with her, step for step, synchronizing their bodies in harmony with the pulse of the music. The ardor in his eyes, the way he drew their bodies tightly together, unapologetic of the raw sexuality, the heat of his hands on her body, her naked leg being singed by his fiery palm, skillfully evoked her raw passion. He brilliantly strummed her libido to craft a fantasy of sensual exhibitionism to which she willingly acquiesced. The memory of it still echoed throughout her over sensitized body. She had no idea how long she had been reliving her thoughts, but the reverie was interrupted by the voice of Clay's Uncle Albert, who was engaged in conversation with another somewhere behind her.

"No, I haven't seen her in a while."

"When you do, let her know her father is looking for her." The unknown voice chuckled, "Don's always had a hard time keeping up with her."

"Clay has always been independent."

Tipper tuned out their conversation and stood rooted in shock at what she just overheard. The man that commanded her body, bringing it alive, by sheer force of sexual magnetism was a woman?

“Tipper...Tipper, darlin’ are you still with us?” Justine was concerned at the peculiar facial expression she observed. It was an odd mixture of disbelief and surprise, which didn’t make sense, as the subject they were discussing wasn’t provocative in the least.

Tipper blinked then gave Justine a forced smile, “Yes, I’m fine.” Taking a look at the rest of the group, who were silently watching her, she tried to relax, but it was near impossible as her mind raced with the thoughts of Clay’s deception. It was a masterful use of her obvious androgynous abilities. The masculine costume, the genteel mannerisms, the throaty tenor of her voice, the way she used her smoldering sexuality, all of it expertly packaged to beguile and attract attention. How could she not have seen through Clay’s ruse? Was it just a costume or the quintessence of Clay? Was Julia aware of the subterfuge? Could Julia be in an awkward situation and need help to extricate herself? “I just need some air, if you will excuse me.” Collectively the group nodded their heads.

“Do you want me to go with you?” Lori started to move toward Tipper.

If Julia was in a difficult circumstance, the last thing Tipper wanted was an audience, “No, thank you.” She turned from the group, took a deep breath, and headed for the now open staircase. As she ascended, her thoughts still on Clay, she found herself becoming angry. She had been physically aroused, based on a lie. She felt exploited and taken for a rube. And just why did Clay take Julia away from the group? Did she think Julia was the weakest of them, an easy mark for her to manipulate and take advantage of her sweet nature and naivety?

She stopped at the top of the stairs, momentarily unsure of whether she should turn left or right. A draft of cool wind attracted her attention to an open door, off a small room, ahead of her. Realizing the open door probably meant Clay and Julia had gone outdoors, Tipper headed that

way. Stepping out on the deck she felt the cold air penetrate her light consume, she shivered, realizing she needed to check outside quickly so she could get back to the warmth in the house. Turning right, she walked toward the end of the deck on the East side. Just as she was close to the turn, she noticed a vertical staircase leading up from the deck. Tipper looked up and thought she saw someone standing with their back near the railing, but it was hard to see clearly, between the hanging tree branches and the deep shadows. She was sure that Julia and Clay were at the top of the widow's walk, but who was against the railing and was that someone trapped?

Concerned for her friend, she climbed the stairs quickly, her satin shoes whispering in the night air as they padded the metal risers. The deck's railing came in to view, so she slowed to get a look at the surrounding area from between the bars before she reached the top of the stairs. What she saw caused her forward progress to halt abruptly, coming close to falling, she grabbed edge of the deck railing.

* * *

"Michelle's not here yet?" Dane blew a steady stream of air across her steaming cup of tea.

Dane's assistant, Ellen, smiled, looked up from her computer then out the window to her right, where she could see a young woman pacing the sidewalk out in front of the building.

"Technically she's here, just outside wearing down the sidewalk." Ellen looked at her watch, "Michelle has a couple more minutes of pacing."

Dane rolled her eyes at Ellen's sense of humor. "She has nothing to worry about. Michelle has more than enough talent to audition and get the part, it's her nerves that will be her undoing."

Ellen snapped her gaze back to Dane and emoted, “Tsk. Don’t you remember what it was like at her age?” She theatrically brought her forearm up to her head, “Seventeen with the weight of the world on your shoulders?”

Dane sniffed at the over the top performance, smiled, then became serious. “That’s just it, she doesn’t. She needs to focus on her goal, and move toward it, and the rest will fall in line.”

“Do you really think she’ll get the part?” Ellen looked pensive. She had taken an instant liking to Michelle, with her sweet and unassuming manner, so different from the majority of their other clients. She couldn’t imagine seeing the disappointment on Michelle’s face if she failed to get the part after working so hard.

Dane thought about her answer. Michelle had the vocal range and presence to make a captivating lead. “She would make a wonderful Evita, and I simply can’t imagine anyone better.”

“Why don’t you tell her that? You know how she looks up to you.”

Dane gave Ellen her full attention. “She’s got to know it here,” she tapped her chest, “and here.” She finished by touching her head with her index finger. She turned and carefully made her way back to her office. “Send her to room three, once she decides to make an appearance.”

Ellen gave Dane a good natured huff, then turned her attention back to the window to watch Michelle pace. The young woman had been coming here for a few months, her parents paying a hefty price for private vocal lessons with one of the northeast’s most sought after coaches. Dane Rembert and her business partner, Carter Colton, founded the firm not long after she graduated from the University of Maryland with a Masters in Music Voice and Opera. Carter

and Rachel, his wife of 20-years, met Dane at a charity function to raise money for children with cancer. The highlight of the event showcased three sopranos singing some of the most popular and recognizable arias. Dane's voice, with her Bel canto technique, out shined her counterparts, which brought her to the attention of the society's elite and powerful. Five years later, Rembert and Colton, LLP owned a modest building in the priciest district, several full time employees, state of the art electronic equipment and musical instruments, and a waiting list of private and business clientele, to whom they provided a full spectrum of vocal needs.

Ellen tapped lightly on the door jam. "Michelle is ready for you." She gave Dane a 'be nice' look, turned and headed back to her desk.

Dane gave a big sigh then shook her head at Ellen's protectiveness of Michelle. She had been hard on the girl, at first, to get her to concentrate more on the work and less on the outcome. It was tough working with teenagers, raging hormones and peer pressure had a way of making it difficult for them to concentrate at times. Fortunately, Michelle was easier to corral than most but, still, she struggled occasionally. Dane was confident Michelle's heart cried out for her to vocally express herself, so given enough practice, time and opportunity, she would achieve whatever goals she set. One last look at Ellen, seeing her hopeful expression, she picked up her cane and walked to room three for her hour session with Michelle.

* * *

"Why are you so distracted today?" Elizabeth stared at Tipper, not willing to lose eye contact.

Tipper looked at Elizabeth, but that penetrating stare had a way of making her feel naked. She knew her childhood friend couldn't read minds, but they had known each other for so long that Elizabeth could decipher changes to her mood as easily as a kid could find the candy aisle in a grocery store. She looked down at her cappuccino, watching the wisps of steam dance with the

slight breeze, knowing she couldn't be as open and airy, but rather had to artfully maneuver around the subject that had been plaguing her since the party. She had been sexually attracted to a woman. That realization propelled her do some deep introspection. Tipper remembered having immature crushes on some of her female friends when she was younger, but thought it was a natural reaction to what she surmised, as an adult, as admiration of qualities she would like to possess. Being educated in all girls schools, she had seen female pairings, most given away by body language and gossip, although fascinating, they did not raise any personal interest. Why would it since she had never felt a sexual pull toward any woman? Her crushes never had an erotic flavor to them. They were innocent; to be near, to learn about things that made one happy or sad, to have their full attention, and do things together after school and over the weekend without anyone else intruding on their time together. She particularly enjoyed being hugged when enthusiasm overruled more sedate behavior, which usually involved the object of her crush regaling her with tales involving the opposite sex.

From out of the ether she remembered something from her past she hadn't thought of in years. One weekend, she was at a sleepover at her friend Darla's house and woke up just as the sun was breaking the horizon to find Darla had shifted in the night and was sleeping comfortably on her body. Darla had her face buried in her neck, her arm around her waist, her right leg propped across her left. Tipper remembered the feel of the soft silky hair under her chin and the hot breath tickling her neck, it felt warm, safe, and loving.

"Tipper!" Elizabeth's annoyance at Tipper's lack of attention was starting to frustrate her normally unflappable demeanor.

Tipper raised her eyes up from her cup and gave Elizabeth her full attention. "Excuse me, I've had a lot on my mind recently."

Elizabeth placed her hand gently on Tippers, "Do you want to talk about it?"

Tipper looked down at Elizabeth's soft, unlined hand then away to absently watch people walking by the outdoor cafe where they sat. Some chatted away on cell phones oblivious to those around them, others strolled in pairs talking together, a few power walkers with briefcases, a young boy on a skateboard weaving in and out of traffic; lives moving forward, independent and yet dependent on each other, apart yet together. Individual lives creating the illusion of separateness, but sharing a commonality; to live, be happy, fulfilled.

Tipper felt the hand that covered hers move and knew Elizabeth was watching her and waiting for an explanation. Just as Tipper was turning away from the foot traffic to speak to Elizabeth, she caught sight of a statuesque middle-aged woman who stopped at the shop near the cafe to look though the display glass. Tipper couldn't see her face in any detail, but watched as she moved her sunglasses down her nose to get an unobstructed view of what caught her interest. Her long wheat blonde hair, flowing out from under a brown derby, was knotted midway with the tail thrown over her left shoulder to rest on her full length beige cashmere coat. Tipper's eyes followed the coat down to her brown leather boots. From her vantage point, Tipper knew those boots were no knock-offs, but rather this year's Prada, straight from Italy. Everything about this woman screamed breeding and money. She had been surrounded by these women all her life. Why wasn't she attracted to them or specifically to the woman at the window? This type of woman would be a suitable match to her own upbringing. As if the woman heard Tipper's thoughts she turned and walked straight toward her. Her coat was opened and fluttered in the cold breeze. Her light brown silk top was accentuated by a crème scarf with a long end that framed a small breast like a caress. Tipper's eyes couldn't look away from the captivating earthy temptress and watched as her hips swayed subtly to their own cadence. The woman took off her shades, to reveal dazzling cornflower blue eyes, and returned the stare before she gave a big toothy grin, that would make an orthodontist proud, winked, re-situated her sunglasses then blended into the moving foot traffic.

“Oh my God! She looked like a former runway model. Do you know her?” Elizabeth’s eyes were round as saucers. She moved her head to and fro trying to get another look at the blonde, though the traffic, but was unable to find her. Elizabeth turned her attention to Tipper again, seeing her friend’s face had turned a lovely shade of blush pink.

“No.”

Elizabeth was confused, “But...she winked at you.”

“Obviously.” Tipper gathered her courage knowing that her life long friendship with Elizabeth could weather what she was about to reveal. “Do you remember how many times we faced advances by women in school? I know you were flattered by the attention, but in retrospect do you secretly wish you had accepted an offer?”

Elizabeth interest was piqued and leaned closer to Tipper. “We were quite popular, but no, none of them ever did anything for me. You didn’t take anyone up on their offer, did you?”

“No. I did enjoy flexing my allure, but I didn’t find myself attracted to anyone.”

Elizabeth shook her head in disbelief, “Are you trying to tell me you’ve now discovered a sapphic love interest? After all these years and three husbands later?” She paused as if contemplating her next comment. “Perhaps it was the three stooges that did it.” Elizabeth’s eyes held a twinkle of amusement.

Tipper sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose, "I loved my husbands, for a while, then fell out of love. I really don't want to talk about them right now." She lightly blew out her breath, gathered her courage, then spoke. "I met a woman at the Halloween party last week. At the time, I thought she was a man. She was so handsome and debonair..."

Elizabeth cut Tipper off, "Debonair? Who uses that word anymore, for crying out loud."

"Do you want me to tell you this story or not?" Tipper was beginning to lose patience.

Elizabeth looked properly chastised and nodded her head in agreement. She listened in fascination at Tipper's description of meeting Clay, their sizzling dance together, and the shocking descriptive of Tipper's foray into voyeurism.

"Wow, just wow." Elizabeth was thunderstruck. Not only was Tipper admitting this attraction, but the way she creatively chose her words painted a vivid picture that left Elizabeth wanting more of the story.

Tipper nodded in agreement without saying a word.

"I think you need a vacation."

Tipper immediately felt defensive, "Don't minimize this Elizabeth."

Elizabeth realized Tipper had taken offense to her suggestion and tried to further explain, "I'm not, I promise. I just think you need a break, maybe a change of scenery would do you good,

give you time put this in perspective. Why don't you fly home with me? Thomas is in Hong Kong for the next two weeks and I have tickets to a charity function. You and me together, dressed to kill, money to spend." She wiggled her eyebrows.

Tipper thought about the suggestion and how much she enjoyed visiting the island and having fun with Elizabeth. "Why not?"

Elizabeth's smile of happiness was infectious and in only a few seconds watched as Tipper returned the enthusiasm.

* * *

"God damn it! I told them I wouldn't perform that song." Dane was exacerbated by the lack of cooperation she was receiving from the Worth Avenue Group. As she hit the reply button intent on threatening to leave the production, she felt Ellen come up behind her. "How hard is it to understand? I don't sing La Mamma Morta, ever! They can give it to that fat bitch. I won't do it"

"Stop. Breath. Count to ten." Ellen placed her hand lightly on Dane's shoulder, "Why don't you let me handle this? This is one of the skills you pay me for."

Dane kept her eyes on the monitor. "No. I am perfectly capable of handling these elitist snobs."

"You have to remember these elitists are supporting and championing a worthy cause, even if they have more money than graciousness or sense. They are used to getting what they want, when they want it. They have no idea why you won't perform that aria. They think you're being a temperamental artist." She rubbed Dane's shoulder then peered over at the monitor and read the email. "You can't afford to alienate them."

Dane snapped her head sharply in Ellen's direction, "I most certainly can and will." She turned back around to face the computer, placed her fingers on the keyboard and began typing. Ellen stood silently, knowing that any intervention at this point would be futile. Normally Dane would forward emails to her for a response, freeing her time for other matters. This particular communication had inadvertently touched a raw nerve; the bandaid, a personal response. Ellen continued to follow the words being typed as the semi-tactful reply was being composed, knowing that had she not intervened, the message could have been scathing insults aimed at the director and her lineage. Ellen shook her head, in sadness, as she silently left the office and closed the door behind her. She wondered how long, if ever, it would take Dane to be at peace and able to sing that particular song again.

* * *

Although the flight wasn't long or particularly turbulent, nor was she relegated to commercial transportation, Tipper was thrilled to be exiting the small plane. She and Elizabeth had engaged in comfortable small talk initially, however, after a few adult beverages, found themselves delving into Tipper's newest experience with more detail than either would have normally engaged. Propriety had melted away faster than their cocktail ice and Tipper discovered Elizabeth had developed a voracious appetite for taboo subjects and local gossip. When they arrived at Palm Beach International Airport just after sunset, she was grateful Elizabeth had focused her attention elsewhere, giving her the opportunity to stretch and regroup. Her brief time alone could be counted in the number of feet it took to walk from the plane to the waiting limo.

Once the chauffeur closed the door behind Tipper, Elizabeth slid over to the bar, "Would you like another drink?" She launched a few ice cubes in a glass and with a quick flick of the wrist squeezed out a lime then deftly poured out enough Boodles to level a horse followed by a

splash of tonic.

Tipper stared at Elizabeth, wondering just when her friend had become such a lush. “No, I’ve had enough, thanks.”

Comfortably ensconced in the car, molded to the soft leather seat, drink in hand, Elizabeth watched the passing scenery out of the nearest window, waiting expectantly until they crossed the bridge that would take them to Palm Beach. “Remember when we had to slog through some of the worst areas of the city before we got to the island?”

Tipper chuckled, “No kidding. The changes are like night and day.”

Elizabeth hiccuped and raised her drink, “Thank God.” A few seconds ticked by while she studied her drink, in silent contemplation, then narrowed her eyes, “When the rest of us were being chauffeured by limos with bullet proof glass that combed-over jackass persuaded the town counsel to allow him to fly in by helicopter.” She took a swig of her drink and muttered under her breath, “Bastard.”

“Who are you talking about?”

“Stump.”

Tipper looked thoroughly confused. “Who?”

Elizabeth guffawed when she saw the bewilderment on Tipper’s face. “Thomas doesn’t permit

anyone in the house to use his given name.” She swirled the small amount of clear liquid in her glass, all the while watching Tipper for a sign of recognition. “Reality show, filed bankruptcy, creditor bailout, had an affair with a woman that looked remarkably like a younger version of his wife at the time?”

“Oh, you mean...”

Elizabeth quickly stopped Tipper from continuing on her train of thought, “Shhh...it’s Stump.”

Tipper gave up trying to have a lucid conversation with Elizabeth at this point. She hoped Elizabeth’s need for binge drinking was a reaction to traveling and that once she was settled she would layoff the booze; although she didn’t remember this much imbibing on previous trips. She looked over at Elizabeth who was unfazed by the lack of dialogue, rather enjoying the tinkling of ice cubes as she jingled her glass.

As the vehicle moved from West Palm Beach to cross the bridge, Tipper looked out over the expanse of the Intracoastal Waterway and the vast array of gleaming white yachts either docked along expensive properties or leisurely making their way to and from the bridge. She idly remembered making a similar journey a couple years ago with Elizabeth and Thomas as they started their cruise to the Bahamas. That was a trip designed to get her mind off her impending divorce from Jason, former husband number three, and overall pain in the ass. She found out in confidence from Elizabeth that Thomas wanted to invite one of his business associates along to give Tipper male companionship, to which Elizabeth objected asking Thomas, “What are you, the male Heidi Fleiss?” The trip went ahead as planned with just the three of them.

Polmer Park Court was a short drive from the first bridge and, as the vehicle slowed to a stop

in front of the modest looking home, Elizabeth pulled herself up from the seat and anxiously waited for the chauffeur to open the door. The home, built in 1978, appeared to be the smallest on the block. Tipper was sure this visual deception was in the original plans and masterfully executed. A casual observer would see the front of the house and not realize they were looking at a large foyer as the sides and rear of the home were hidden by some of the most enormously dense hedges grown on the island.

Tipper dutifully trailed behind Elizabeth as she walked through the foyer to stop in front of a slight, dark-haired Hispanic woman. Elizabeth handed her purse to Esperanza, "Thank you. How have things been in my absence?"

"Just fine Mrs. Blackwell. Welcome home."

"It's good to be home." Elizabeth turned to look at Tipper. She watched as her friend took a breath and handed her purse over to Esperanza. "What is Mrs. Sharpe making for dinner this evening? It smells heavenly."

"Duck a l'Orange."

Elizabeth smiled, turned, and continued on her quest for another cocktail.

* * *

The attentive young man opened the door then patiently waited while the woman with the dark gnarled-looking cane walked into the room. With little effort he moved the luggage through the large living area and into the bedroom of the suite. Walking back into the main room, he found

her standing at the sliding glass doors quietly gazing out upon the Atlantic Ocean. “Ms. Rembert.” Silently Dane turned and accepted the key card. She noticed his name tag as she reached into her pocket for a tip, “Thank you, Mr. Elliot, for your assistance.” The young man didn’t look at the money, but slipped it into his pocket, smiled, and said with a slight bow, “Thank you and enjoy your stay with us.”

Dane waited until she heard him leave before she moved closer to the sliding glass door. With a deft slip of a finger she opened the lock, slid the door open and stepped out on the patio. Her corner suite was considered one of the finest The Breakers had to offer. The open expanse of the patio reminded her of pictures she’d seen of a coastal Grecian villa. The white concrete balcony was subdued in the waning light, but the chaise loungers with their brilliant colors and inviting plush cushions beckoned her to relax. To her delight, the hotel designed the front of the balcony with a sheet of glass that came to about mid-waist, which allowed a panoramic view of the ocean when seated. She walked over to the edge and placed her hands on the cool glass inhaling deeply, enjoying the salty smell of the sea as the wind ruffled her short hair, enhancing the serenity of the moment. Her relaxation ended with the chirping of her cell phone. Looking at the caller ID before she answered the phone, “Hello, Ellen.”

“Good evening, Dane. Did you make it there all right?” Ellen sounded like a concerned parent.

Dane teased, “Yes, mother hen, everything is fine.”

Ellen chose to ignore Dane’s response, “Are you on your way to dinner soon? It’s 6 o’clock.”

Dane briefly looked at her watch and marveled at how much time had past. Immediately her stomach rumbled. “I was just on my way to the dining room.” Dane lied.

Ellen was dubious of Dane's answer, "Why don't you order room service?"

"I've been cooped up on a plane for hours. I want to stretch my legs. Maybe take a short walk on the beach later."

Ellen's immediate response was to tell Dane to 'be careful' but decided two verbal acts of parental concern were enough for the evening. "That sounds lovely. Be sure to tell the doctor hello from me."

"I won't over tax myself, Ellen. Stop worrying."

"It's part of my employment contract. Who would sign my paycheck?"

"Uh-huh. Good night, Ellen."

"Good night, Dane."

Dane closed the phone and slipped it into her pocket next to her room key. She turned away from the ocean and walked back in to the main room, leaving the sliding door open, she made her way out of the suite. Everything about The Breakers exuded comfort and style. One of the few times in her life Dane appreciated the upholstered bench seat in an elevator and made full use of it until the car doors opened to the lobby floor. Steadying herself on the cane, she walked out in high style, oblivious of any onlookers, and moved toward the dining room. Before she made it to the large, open, double doors, her peripheral vision spotted a body on a collision

course. She slowed down and turned her attention to the juggernaut. A woman in her mid-sixties wearing a lime green suit and matching heels that looked like they were pinching her feet, sidled up to Dane.

“Ms. Rembert.” She offered her slim hand. “I’m Judith McNamara from the Worth Avenue Group.”

Dane shook her hand, but remained mute. Her hackles were up at the uninvited intrusion of Mrs. McNamara.

If Mrs. McNamara was insulted at Dane’s silence it didn’t show, “Mrs. Kilpatrick, our director, asked me to meet with you to go over the schedule for tomorrow.” She closely looked Dane over from the top of her head to her shoes. “I certainly hope you’ve brought the appropriate attire for the performance.”

“I’m not surprised Mrs. Kilpatrick sent you as our last conversation was anything but genial. Mrs. McNamara, I’m going to dismiss your insult and presume you don’t have the good sense to know better than to think that I’ve never attended a charity function. Now, if you’ll excuse me I wish to have dinner before I retire.”

“Good, we can go over the schedule while we eat.” Judith didn’t wait for Dane’s response as she turned and walked to the dining room. Dane watched the infuriating woman walk briskly away and decided she was not going to chance indigestion; she turned and walked back to the elevator. Room service and dinner on the patio would be just fine.

Dane ordered her meal before she walked to the bathroom for a shower. She had originally

planned to shower after dinner and her short walk on the beach, but the wicked witch of the South had changed her plan. The bathroom like every other room in this suite was gargantuan. Whimsically she wondered if The Breakers had accidentally given her the Playboy suite as the sunken tub could easily accommodate a rambunctious party of five. Turning away from the tub, she started the shower then went to get her toiletries.

The steam in the bathroom was thick enough to fool a Londoner. The moist heat was something she needed at the end of the day to help alleviate aching muscles and ligaments even though her body was now healed. Two years later, after several surgeries and extensive painful rehabilitation, the physical evidence of her ordeal was plainly visible. The doctors said it could have been worse; she could have been relegated to life in a wheel chair or a bed. Her physical therapist called her lucky, Dane called it being alive. During her therapy she was able to gain more mobility than originally predicted, but it was a slow and excruciating process of gain. Even after the exercise, she was left with a weak and easily tired right leg that forced her dependency on a cane. The only ray of light in the fight to take back her life was that she didn't lose her ability to sing. Without it she knew, in her heart, that life wouldn't be worth living. Still, even with the daily trials she was forced to endure, she would look at her damaged body in the mirror every day and be grateful she could reach to the heavens and caress the angels with the sweetness of her voice.

Dane absently soaped her body, acutely aware of the indentations along her right side, lines of healed, jagged, rough skin, once soft and silky to caress, now felt like a relief map of pain and suffering. Even her once flawless face held a crescent moon of scar tissue from the right corner of her mouth up to her cheek bone and into her ebony hairline. People didn't pay any attention to her striking light green eyes or the half grey discoloration of her right iris anymore, they only saw the scar.

Wrapping the tie around the robe, she walked into the bedroom intent on finding a pair of

lounge pants and a tee shirt. Generally when she traveled, she was accompanied by Ellen who took on the role of personal assistant. Ellen would unpack her luggage and place her items in drawers to make it easier for Dane to find her clothing. This trip she was flying solo as Ellen's grown daughter and family were in town from Germany for the holidays. Dane protested when Ellen offered to make the trip. It was during these times she realized just how much she had come to depend on the help Ellen graciously provided.

Just as the shirt was settled, she heard a knock on the door. Thinking it was her dinner she quickly walked to the door and opened it without looking in the peep hole. To her unhappy surprise, she was greeted by the sight of a clearly irate Mrs. McNamara, who moved around Dane and entered the suite. "It would have been polite to inform me that you weren't going to the dining room."

Dane could feel the anger building, but in a flash her mind's eye saw Ellen's compassionate face and found herself slightly calmed. She massaged her eyebrows with her right hand, turned and looked at Mrs. McNamara, breathed deeply, then with measured words, "Mrs. McNamara, there seems to be a bit of miscommunication. I am here to perform at a charity function, not dine with the help. Now, please leave the schedule and leave me in peace."

Judith's lip turned in up in a sneer, "Young woman, I am not the help." She stared hard at Dane. Dane thought the facial appearance looked like a mixture of shock from her words and pain from the tightness of the matronly woman's shoes. "I am a resident of this island, you are an outsider, and unaware of my social standing in this town. The gall, speaking to me in such a manner."

Dane had had enough of the snob standing before her, "I don't give a shit if you are Jesus jumped down from the cross. I am here, at my own expense, for the benefit of children that are

less fortunate than either you or me. So, you will leave the schedule, now, otherwise I'll arrive when I damn well feel like it, then you will haul your over privileged carcass out of my sight."

* * *

They met in the hallway each eyeing the other. Elizabeth spoke first, "I love that dress on you."

Tipper was delighted and turned in a small circle to allow Elizabeth the full effect of her choice for the evening. She wore a long black evening dress tailored to accentuate her curves. A modest tapered cut just above the knee allowed full mobility and revealed a teasing glimpse of perfect skin. Elizabeth was slightly dubious of the deep neckline, but Tipper had complemented the dress and style with a midnight black mink shawl and an exquisite string of pearls. Her naturally blonde hair coiffed in a perfect chignon added a classic appearance, reminiscent of styles flaunted in the '50s by Hollywood actors. It was at times like these that Elizabeth remembered why she envied Tipper while growing up. Although Elizabeth's family had more money than Tippers, Tipper was the one bred to the mantle.

The de Clares were from old money, old French money, who demanded their children be educated and socially responsible. To that end, she was sent to the best private schools, inculcated in the ways of business, and expected to earn a living. Tipper did enjoy the benefits of a small allowance from a trust, but wouldn't receive full benefits until she was older or incapacitated and unable to take care of herself financially. She had never been resentful of this restriction and was grateful her family had the foresight to ensure a lack of dependency on her inheritance. She was sure the previous spouses would have tried to bleed her dry by this point in her life otherwise.

Tipper complemented Elizabeth on her fashion as well and, without further fanfare, led them out

the front door to the waiting limo.

“Esteban will return with the vehicle when I call him, so let me know when you’re ready to leave.”

Tipper nodded her understanding, leaned back, and quietly waited to arrive at their destination. She and Elizabeth had shared a leisurely morning sunning themselves by the pool. Although it was too cold to wear a bathing suit, they sipped mimosas and chatted while the heat of the sun warmed their faces and the cool breeze kept them refreshed. Later, they enjoyed a light lunch followed by an afternoon at the spa. Dinner was a private affair delivered to their rooms, after which each napped in preparation for their late night.

Their car became lost in a sea of limousines as the event had drawn the expected socialites, local political figures, power brokers from across the bridge, and wealthy patrons from the tri-county area. Their limo had barely come to a complete stop when a gentleman dressed in a black tuxedo opened the door presenting his hand to assist their exit. Once they were sufficiently away from the car, Elizabeth hooked her arm through Tipper’s and both strolled past the guarded gate to the red carpeted path. As they walked toward the pristine white building, Tipper saw the museum staff had decorated the portico’s long white columns with greenery flecked with tiny white lights in a swirling design resembling the pattern of a candy cane. It was understated but a marvelous effect which complemented the beauty of the building and the landscape. The walkway to the museum was flanked on either side by tall majestic palms whose leaves tapped out a slightly wooden sound as the breeze caught and struggled to move past the long spidery green fingers. Even the marble benches on either side of the walkway had an immaculate glow in the setting sun. It was all so beautifully magical. Their forward progress slowed as they neared a line of half a dozen other attendees, but the wait wasn’t long as the Flagler’s staff worked efficiently to exchange invitations for programs and kept the line moving at an easy clip.

They had both been inside the Flagler Museum for other events, however the elegance and splendor of the converted home was never diminished over time. From the beauty of the multi colored marble floor and priceless works of art to the stately grand staircase, the home was a living legacy of money and grace of a bygone age. As quickly as proper etiquette would allow, Elizabeth led Tipper around milling couples, up the stairs to the open French doors and into an intimate courtyard where a large group had congregated around the only bar inside the museum.

* * *

Tipper looked at the program not recognizing one of the names; Celeste Porter, Stephanie Darnelle, Dane Rembert, Joseph Ventimiller. Her education in opera was severely lacking as what little she had been exposed to sounded more like ghastly shrilling than singing. Her upbringing, along with the nature of the event, prevented her from denying Elizabeth's plea to attend. She intentionally schooled her face to appear neutral and silently suffered through the first two songsters; however a young woman appeared next in the presentation that caught her attention. Remarkably, she didn't wear excess weight like a badge of honor as had the two who preceded her. In contrast, her body appeared thin with a sharp, but strong, angular face. Her clothes were a complete opposite of the long floor length dresses. This woman, Tipper looked at the program to see which woman, Dane Rembert, wore flat black shoes, starched charcoal pants and a long black brocade jacket buttoned to the neck. Her appearance was deliberately dark and swarthy, creating a haunting aura, from her short black hair that failed to hide the deep scar on the right side of her face down to the swirled wood cane she held in her left hand. Before Tipper had time to give more thought to the woman in front of her the orchestra began a soothing introduction to which the singer softly and effortlessly blended her voice. Dane caressed the words as a lover, pleading, building up to a crescendo, then slowly backing away, a voice rich and evocative, peaking and ebbing, coaxing the listener to a grand finale only to be denied in the end by a lightly tormented supplicating voice. Tipper was astonished by what she

had just heard. Sympathetic tears traced lazy trails down her cheeks, which she unconsciously wiped away with her hand. Her eyes remained riveted on Dane as she listened to her extraordinary voice. Her body feeling alternately soothed and inspired and, when Dane hit and held a high note, she could feel her skin responding as gooseflesh rose in tempo.

At the conclusion of Dane's performance, Tipper felt emotionally spent and realized she had not been able to contain her tears throughout Dane's arias. She again dried her face and watched as Dane bowed then skillfully used her cane to navigate away from her position and disappear behind a shimmering gold curtain. Tipper closed her eyes and turned her thoughts inward replaying Dane's bewitching offering. Her reverie was squashed by the sound of a male voice. Tipper focused again on the front of the room to see a portly gentleman standing in the very spot Dane had vacated. In comparison to Dane's passionate and heart stopping performance, his projection seemed unrefined, a cacophony of troubled notes. Tipper reasoned Dane's talent was so extraordinary that no one should follow in her wake lest they drown in a sea of mediocrity. She again closed her eyes and tried to recall the sweet music until she felt Elizabeth lightly nudge her with an elbow. Tipper realized the program had concluded by the enthusiastic applause. To her delight all the singers walked to the front of the room, including Dane. Tipper was giddy with excitement to see her siren again and rose to show her appreciation, not caring if anyone else followed her lead. As Tipper was the first to stand, Dane's attention was riveted to the tall blonde and she found herself making eye contact with the stunning beauty. The rest of the room took Tipper's lead and stood as well. The applause was nearly deafening. Dane looked away from Tipper, but not before giving her a slight nod of appreciation, then panned the audience and bowed, as did the other performers. Once the applause died down, all four made their way behind the curtain.

"That was marvelous. I don't know how they were able to snare Ms. Rembert. What a spectacular voice."

“I agree. Her performance was sublime. Why would they have a difficult time getting her to perform?”

“She’s been out of the circuit for a couple years. Having the opportunity to hear her sing is the only reason I came to the benefit.”

“Why hasn’t she been on stage in all that time?”

“I don’t know, but I’m sure it has to do with her scars. Did you see her face, not to mention her use of a cane? When I first saw her perform Tosca at the Met a few years ago, she was unmarred. She was dynamic and performed with such passion. It was truly amazing. I was absolutely spellbound and went back for several more performances; I couldn’t get enough of her. I wonder if she’s going to stay and meet her adoring public.”

The thought was intriguing to Tipper. Would the elusive Ms. Rembert participate in the rest of the evening’s festivities; the continuing silent auction followed by ‘Midnight in the Garden of Pan?’ If the event surrounding the pagan god was anywhere other than here, she would not attend. It was safe to assume the Flagler would not be exhibiting large phallus’ and masturbation exhibits set to flute music. A wisp of a smile came to Tipper as she thought of the horror on the faces of the Palm Beachers at having to witness such depraved behavior. In private was one thing, public was another. She was sure there were a number of doors behind expansive estates that catered to eclectic tastes never spoken of in public.

Elizabeth, again, slipped her arm through Tipper’s as they made their way out of the grand ballroom. A few steps from the courtyard door, Elizabeth removed her arm from Tipper and embraced a roguishly handsome young man that had emerged from the bar.

“Julian, it so good to see you.” He gave her a kiss on either cheek. “When did you get back from Amsterdam?”

“Last night. Muffy and I caught a headwind.” He winked.

“Is she here?” Elizabeth looked toward the bar unable to find his vertically challenged other half.

“Most certainly. You think she would miss the Garden party?” He laughed heartily.

Elizabeth smiled, “Julian, I don’t think you’ve met my friend, Catherine.”

Tipper looked puzzled at Elizabeth’s use of her proper name, but quickly turned her attention to Julian. “A pleasure to meet you.”

With his right, Julian grasped Tipper’s hand, while his left warmly clasped her forearm, “The pleasure is all mine.”

Tipper turned curious eyes to Elizabeth. Elizabeth knew more explanation was needed. “Julian and Anne,” Elizabeth saw Julian’s brows come together in annoyance. “‘Muffy’ are our very own artists in residence.”

Julian interceded, “Currently, we are the flavor of the year for these events.”

“Modesty doesn’t become you, Julian.” They both laughed.

Tipper found she was becoming impatient standing here listening to old friends catching up and exchanging inside jokes when she could be looking for the mysterious Dane Rembert. Her insides clenched in pleasure just at the thought of her name. She turned her attention to the pair, “If you’ll excuse me.” Not waiting for an answer, she turned and made her way down the hall, past the West room cum silent auction, and through the museum store to the outside air.

The sun had long set and the cool air chilled her skin. She breathed in deeply then repositioned her shawl to cover more of her neck. To her right was a large glass and metal pavilion, artfully designed to show case Henry Flagler’s private railcar. A few men, with drinks in hand, stood in the grass pointing at the glass, exchanging conversation on what Tipper surmised was the car itself. The vast grounds to her left housed a long canopy covered in hanging vines and ivy with twinkling lights. The sound of flute music wafting on the chilly air caused her to chuckle as she was reminded of her original thoughts on the Pan exhibit. Undaunted by the number of people milling in and around the structure, Tipper glided down the few steps and walked parallel to the crowd, paying attention to the faces of each, hoping to catch a glimpse of Dane.

* * *

Dane did a fair impersonation of the Jack Russell terrier in ‘His Master’s Voice’ upon hearing the noises emanating from Mrs. Kilpatrick’s throat which, intentional or not, sounded remarkably like the Queen of England. An interesting analogy considering she had several staff members buzzing around doing her bidding, including the court jester, Judith McNamara. It was clear Judith had related her earlier meeting with Dane to ‘Her Majesty’ in an almost assuredly exaggerated fashion, coupled with Dane’s last email communique, left their personal meeting and interaction considerably strained. Now that her obligation to the Worth Avenue Group had officially ended, the only reason to stay in the immediate area was that she was waiting for one

of the supplicants to bring her chilled grape juice. Dane saw the assistant bearing toward her with a wine glass half full of purple liquid. Without a departing word, she met the woman halfway, thanked her for her kindness, took the glass and walked away. As she had never been to this museum before, she decided to have a look around. She cleared the grand hall with little disruption and moved toward the library. A few people did congratulate her on the performance, as she slowly toured the former home, but most left her alone. The splendor of the gilded age was everywhere; moulded ceilings with gold leaf inlays, a music room housing paintings collected from several generations of former residents, antique clocks, polished wood and marble, hidden doorways, a billiard room complete with cuspidors, opulent light fixtures, crystal and leaded glass, rooms devoted to sleeping, eating, reading, and relaxing, everything the home of a former tycoon would demand. Cautiously she moved around a crowd at the front of the grand hall and moved outside to enjoy the fresh salty scent of the brisk evening air.

“Excuse me, Ms. Rembert.”

Dane turned to see a young man with dark hair looking at her with mooning eyes. “Yes, may I help you?”

The well dressed youngster, who Dane imagined was about fifteen years in age, held out his program, “Would you autograph this for me?”

His innocent smile warmed her heart. “I’d be delighted, but I don’t have anything to write with.”

His eyes flicked to the left staring out in space for a split second, “Could you wait for a moment?” Before Dane could acknowledge his question, he took several quick steps to a small stand the museum staff had used to collect the invitations. Dane could see him asking the

attendant for a pen and, once in his hand, made his way back to stand in front of her. He anxiously thrust the writing instrument toward her.

Dane chuckled at the boy's enthusiasm. She handed the young man her drink and took the pen and program, "What is your name?"

"David Thornhill, ma'am." Dane scribbled a short note and her signature on the paper before exchanging it for the drink David held. He took the treasured item folded it and placed it in his front pocket along with the writing instrument.

"Did you enjoy the program?"

David's eyes brightened, "Sure. You were brilliant."

"I wasn't the only one on stage David, but thank you."

"You might as well have been. None of the others could sing compared to you. I sing in the church choir and I'm trying to get on the glee club in school. But boy, I've never heard singing like you did."

Dane couldn't stop from smiling at the boy's praise and enthusiasm. "You like to sing, huh?" He didn't answer, but shook his head rapidly up and down. "Do you take voice lessons?"

David's face fell, "No ma'am, we can't afford it. It's just me and my mother. She works at Dino's as a waitress and helps at my aunt's catering company. That's how I was able to listen to you

sing tonight.” He looked around then slightly leaned forward and continued, “I kinda snuck around the hallway and stood at the door.” His face flushed pink in embarrassment.

Dane guffawed at the boy’s response. “Sounds like something I would have done at your age.” Dane leaned her cane against her leg, transferred her drink to her left hand, then held out her right, “David, you keep singing and if you make the glee club you pester that teacher into telling you how to practice using your voice. Even if you don’t make it, don’t be discouraged. Keep singing.” David took her hand and gingerly shook it thinking her body was fragile.

“Thank you.” The boy on the verge of manhood took off at rapid speed down the stairs and around the North end of the building and out of sight. Dane’s eyes followed him, delighting in his zest, envious of his age, knowing life was a banquet and he’s just pulled out a fork and plate, ready to dine. She knew the odds of him being able to realize his dream of making a living from his love of singing was slim, but not impossible. There were other kids just like him, wanting the chance to live the dream, but economically unable to afford the types of services she provided her clients. Finding a way to help these children was something she was going to have to investigate once she returned home. She chuckled thinking how excited Ellen would be at the news. Dane shifted her drink again to her right hand and walked to the stairs that led off the porch.

Rounding the corner, the large festive canopy met Dane’s line of sight and the throngs of people crowding around both entryways. Here was the crème de la crème, dressed in their finery, sporting drinks, and engaging in all subtle manner of one ups man ship. The wrought iron torches added a flickering surrealism to their collective self importance. Staff and hired body guards were also in abundance and easily identified by the way they either rushed to fulfill needs or stood stone-faced, eyes constantly snapped to and fro ever watchful of their masters and mistresses.

This level of social strata and beyond were the people Dane's company catered to. Money flowed from their bank accounts faster than rushing water when it came to building up their grandiose egos. While less than two miles west, prostitutes roamed the streets selling their disease to feed their drug addiction amid the detritus of a crime riddled community. Dane felt no shame at the disparity of the classes and her role in the play of life. She used her talents and abilities to gather the best employees in the field and paid them significant wages and benefits unheard of in companies of comparable size. Her rare public performances to promote causes she felt passionate about was another way she attempted to bring balance to the lives of others. She again thought of David and expanding her services on a more personal level to help underprivileged youth.

A small commotion brought her out of her thoughts. Dane turned her head to the right to catch a glimpse of a couple standing under an ill lit arbor who appeared to be having a slight disagreement. It wasn't until the woman took a step back, which allowed the flickering torch light to illuminate one side of her face, did Dane realize it was the beautiful woman who took no notice of convention and rose to applaud her performance earlier in the evening. The sounds of the garden revelers masked her approach, but she stayed in the shadows to get a better understanding of the situation. When she was a few steps away she discovered the young woman was being cornered by an obviously inebriated gentleman making unwanted advances. Dane took another step closer. Then she saw the cad bring his hand up and attempt to touch the woman's backside. Dane narrowed her eyes at the man's loutish behavior. She lifted her cane and forcefully brought it down on his wrist. The crack and resulting yelp of pain stopped his libidinous thoughts along with the cessation of slightly slurred speech. He turned in her direction, almost too quickly for his pickled brain to catch up with the motion, and teetered for a few seconds. When he regained a modicum of balance, which still resulted in a slight lean, his good hand reached and held on to his damaged wrist, "What the fuck?"

Dane leveled a stony stare but held her ground preparing to defend herself if necessary. "Piss off." Preparing for the worst she tossed her empty wine glass in to the nearby shrubs.

He looked at Tipper, who was staring at Dane, then his eyes slowly cruised Dane. "She should have told me why she wasn't interested."

Dane continued to watch the man, waiting for any sudden movement, "She shouldn't have to tell you anything. Now, since your brain is addled from alcohol consumption, I'll make this real easy for you...get lost."

He blinked slowly, turned to give Tipper one last look, then tottered off toward the tent. As he passed Tipper he slurred, "Fuckin' dyke." Tipper's eyes grew wide then looked at Dane to see if she'd heard his rude comment, but Dane didn't appear aware of the man's parting snipe.

Dane stepped closer to Tipper and lightly placed her right hand on her forearm, "Are you all right?"

Tipper was grateful to Dane for the rescue and placed her hand over Danes, "I am now. Thank you. He wouldn't take a polite rebuff or a blatant no for an answer. I was just getting ready to show him my patented backhand move if you hadn't knocked some sense into him." Tipper smiled as she watched Dane's eyes drop in modesty. Dane moved her hand away from Tipper's arm and nervously fiddled with a button on her coat.

Tipper was flattered by the nervousness Dane was exhibiting. This woman, for all the self confidence she possessed on stage as she enchanted all with her immeasurable talent, appeared out of her element now. "Ms. Rembert."

Dane stopped tugging at the button and looked up at Tipper's smiling face. "Dane, please."

Tipper moved closer and grasped Dane's warm palm. "My hero. Who knew a cane could come in so handy?" She watched as a grin began to form then grew into one of the most beautiful, heart stopping smiles she had ever seen.

"Just so you know, I'm not able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, even with my trusty wooden sidekick." Dane lifted her cane so they could both briefly acknowledge the all purpose item. They simultaneous broke out in laughter. "May I know the name of the rescued damsel?"

"Catherine, but everyone calls me Tipper."

"You don't look like a Tipper. I bet there is an interesting story behind the name."

"Nothing exotic I'm afraid. My uncle Barrett coined the phrase when I was first learning how to walk. One day at a family gathering he said I wasn't a 'nipper, but a tipper' because I fell over so much. A few days later he died of a massive coronary. The family started calling me Tipper as an homage to his memory."

"It's actually very sweet."

"I've learned to live with it. When someone calls me Catherine, it sounds strange to my ears."

They heard clapping coming from the canopy and turned their attention in that direction hoping they could see what caused the reaction. Too many bodies had gathered around, blocking any attempt at finding out what was so interesting.

“May I be a fawning fan for just a minute?” Dane gave Tipper a slight nod. “I have never heard a voice as beautiful as yours. The first song was so passionate and touching that I had to remind myself to breathe. It brought me to tears.”

“That is the highest compliment I’ve ever been graced with. Thank you. O Mio Babbino Caro is one of my favorite arias.”

“I’ve steered as clear from opera as possible. From my limited experience and untrained ear it just sounds like singers showing off their range. You bared your soul for us to hear and feel the passionate heart of the music. Truly amazing. I would venture to guess you started singing not long after you learned to speak.”

The angle of Dane’s body hid the blush that suffused her face. “I honestly can’t remember a time I wasn’t singing. It’s in my blood. It is my life...especially now.” Their conversation had flowed so naturally Dane slipped and let her guard down, opening a door she had always kept securely locked. She closed her eyes momentarily weighing how much she wanted to reveal, if anything, of the nightmare; a once full life, cruelly snatched away in one perfect pitch of agony, weeks of excruciating pain, debilitating fear, months filled with anger and helplessness, days of languishing in a dark void, gaps in memory, followed by the fall out of self pity and insecurity.

Tipper watched as the conflicting emotions raced across Dane’s features and quickly reached out to give comfort. Dane was a tortured soul trapped in a hell from which she had yet to break free. Elizabeth had suspected her absence from the stage was a result of the scars Dane was

forced to wear, Tipper now had to agree. She moved her hand up to gently stroke Dane's small bicep. Once Dane compartmentalized her dark thoughts, she realized Tipper was softly touching her damaged arm. She fought her immediate reaction to withdraw, but found she didn't mind this woman's attentions and uncharacteristically drank in the solace. Apart from Ellen, the last woman to touch her like this was her ex-girlfriend.

Since Dane remained silent, Tipper thought it was time to move the conversation to safer ground. "Is this your first time to Whitehall?"

"Whitehall? Is that the name of this museum?" She watched Tipper nod. "Yes, this is my first time. It's a bit ostentatious for my tastes. Do you come here often?" Dane started to chuckle, "Wow, that just sounded like an insult and a god awful pick up line."

Tipper stepped back and laughed, "I knew what you meant. The only time I visit Whitehall is when Elizabeth drags me to these functions."

Dane's curiosity was piqued, "Is Elizabeth your sister?"

"Elizabeth is my oldest and dearest friend who persuaded me to fly down this weekend." Tipper was grateful to Elizabeth for the invitation, otherwise she wouldn't have met the fascinatingly mysterious woman who stood before her. Tipper took a chance and moved closer to Dane, "She has no idea how much this trip has meant to me." She reached down to brush Dane's hand with hers as her eyes begged Dane to recognize her words carried a deeper meaning.

"I..." Dane was flummoxed by this attention. She felt the heat rise to her face and a small shiver of excitement race through her body. She cleared her throat, "I have found this trip to be full of

surprises.” Dane marveled at the idea that Tipper was expressing a physical interest in her. The idea of pursuing a romance scared Dane to her foundations, even the idea of a one night stand held no comfort. Her body was horribly mangled and hadn’t felt the touch of a lover since her harrowing journey in the fight for her life. Thinking about her damaged flesh caused her to focus on her aching leg. The tour of Whitehall and walk about the grounds had over taxed her limb. “Tipper, I don’t want to cut our evening short, but I really need to sit and rest.” Dane held back a grimace but unable to hide her discomfort.

Tipper was concerned, “There are marble benches at the front of the house. Would you like to sit there and rest? Perhaps it would be better for you to return to where you are staying? Where are you staying?” Tipper unconsciously looped her arm in Dane’s and slowly walked her toward the benches.

Dane was warmed by Tipper’s gentle support. “I would enjoy visiting with you more. Why don’t we try for the benches?” With each step they took Dane was acutely aware of the building pain in her right leg and the resulting limp. “I’m staying at The Breakers.”

Tipper could feel Dane’s arm stiffen while her gait slowed as the limp became more pronounced. Once they passed the arbor, they could see both marble benches were occupied. “I have an idea.” Tipper peered out in the darkness. “Do you think you can walk to the parking lot?”

Dane looked past the benches and judged the distance she would have to traverse, “Yes.” She kept her answer short as all her reserves were focused on keeping the worst of the pain at bay. Tipper reached in her clutch, pulled out her cell phone. “Esteban, please bring the car around.”

Whitehall was only separated from The Breakers by a lush golf course. The trip was brief, for which Dane and Tipper both were immensely grateful. As the car pulled to a stop, a valet opened the door.

“I had a lovely evening, but I think I’m done in for the night. Thank you for the pleasure of your company.” Dane tried to smile, fighting through the building agony.

Tipper looked at Dane in disbelief then said with a twinkle in her eye, “I do believe my knight needs the ever present, trusty sidekick and a squire for this journey.” She slid out of the car and allowed the valet to assist, but moved in front of him and held her hand out to Dane.

Dane guffawed, picked up her cane, then stretched out her right hand to grasp Tipper’s palm. “Very well steward, lead on.”

Few people were in the lobby of the hotel, but those present watched as a stately well dressed woman with a cane walked on the arm of an equally statuesque, sophisticated, elegant blonde. Step for step, one dark and one light, two separate ends of the color spectrum.

Tipper heard Dane’s audible sigh as she took a seat on the elevator bench. She took a seat as well and looked at Dane in earnest. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

Dane massaged her leg. “Not really. I just need a couple Advil and a hot shower.” She looked at Tipper and saw the concern, “I’ll be fine, truly.”

Fortunately, the walk to Dane’s room was short and both were relieved to cross the threshold. Without asking, Tipper moved through the suite toward the bathroom. Dane could hear the rush

of water as the shower was started and groaned in sheer anticipatory pleasure. As she limped toward the bedroom, she was met by Tipper with a glass of water and two pills. Dane unceremoniously threw her cane on the bed and popped the pills in her mouth, followed by every drop of water from the glass. She drank the water so quickly she had to inhale deeply before she could speak. "Thank you."

Tipper took the glass and placed it on the nightstand. She turned to leave the room to give Dane privacy, but out of the corner of her eye saw her fumbling with the buttons on her coat. "Please let me help."

Dane looked up in surprised irritation. "No. I am perfectly capable of undressing myself."

Tipper was nonplussed, "I am sure you are, but the quicker you get out of that heavy coat the sooner you can get in the hot shower and ease your tight muscles." Not hearing an argument to the contrary, Tipper stepped over to Dane and gently moved her trembling fingers away and efficiently unhooked each button. Once her task was done, she lightly patted Dane's chest, "I will leave you to the rest."

Dane shed the remainder of her clothes behind the closed bathroom door. Naked she limped over and sat on the closed toilet seat and massaged her throbbing thigh. The misery was ebbing, the combined cocktail of pills and self manipulation providing much needed relief. As the roiling pain clouds drifted away, the brilliance of Tipper broke through to illuminate her deeply scarred and troubled psyche. Dane never thought of herself as a sexual creature. Her existence fueled by music, her voice the high powered instrument through which she propelled herself forward in this life. Intimacy wasn't something she craved or sought out. Sex was thought of as a secondary form of fulfillment, a poor substitute for the purist form of release. Touching the face of God came not from between the sheets, but by raising her voice to seduce the

ethereal beings. Perhaps Tipper was one of those heavenly spirits harkened by her call, unafraid to answer her fervent petition? No. Tipper was an earthly, but attractive, creature of this world who didn't see her as an anomaly or worse a walking deformity. She possessed a great gift, her spirit free, a delicate soul, unfettered by the obvious chains of her cultured upbringing. A woman who made Dane feel that forgotten part of herself which had been cruelly snatched away by unexpected violence sparked by mindless hate. She felt normal. Dane realized with startling clarity how it felt to be normal again. Her breath caught in her throat from the truth of it and saw her vision blur with unshed tears. Saddened by her thoughts, she sought to wash away her melancholy, along with the strain of the evenings activities, down the drain.

Dane held herself under the pounding water, both hands on the wall, allowing the heat to penetrate her body. She wondered what she should do with her newly found knowledge and where it would take her from here.

Tipper ushered the young Hispanic woman in, standing back with the door, watching as she deftly maneuvered the cart into the room. "Please set up outside." The woman nodded and moved the cart to the balcony where she began to place the items on the glass table that sat between two chaise lounges. By prearrangement, Tipper paid cash for the service; not wanting the items on Dane's final bill. Once completed, Tipper handed the woman the money and walked her to the door and locked it once she was alone.

Tipper hoped Dane didn't think her idea was too forward. She just couldn't end the evening yet, even though it was becoming late. With a start she realized Elizabeth didn't know she had left the museum. She walked over to her purse and pulled out her cell phone.

"Where the hell are you? I tried your cell, but you didn't answer."

Tipper grimaced then tried to act nonchalant. "I'm helping a friend. I don't expect to be back for a while."

Elizabeth was confused, "A friend? Tipper you don't know anyone here." Realization dawned on her and her voice lowered, "A friend. Ah. So, is SHE being friendly?"

Tipper could hear the mirth in Elizabeth's voice, "Don't be crass, Elizabeth."

"Crass my ass. You're one drink away from a labrys tat or is it tit?" Elizabeth laughed at her own joke. Tipper could hear Elizabeth cover the phone, but in her inebriated state didn't effectively shield her from hearing Elizabeth order another drink.

Tipper spoke up, "Elizabeth, I don't think you need another drink."

"That's probably true. Perhaps you should have one. Loosen you up for what's coming."

Elizabeth giggled. "Coming, yeah, that's what you'll hope to be doing soon." Elizabeth took a sip from her drink. "The only woman I think I could muster up an orgasm for is the fabulous Ms. Rembert. I wonder if she sings through her climax?"

Tipper rolled her eyes in annoyance. "Elizabeth, you need to put down that cocktail, call Esteban, and go home. I'll call him when I'm ready to leave." Tipper didn't wait for Elizabeth's response, she shut the phone and slipped it back into her clutch. She was going to have a serious talk with Elizabeth about her drinking.

Tipper walked out to the balcony, gathering her shawl around her neck, girding herself from the chill in the air. The sky was peaceful with stars glittering like white diamonds against black satin. The quarter moon hung high in the sky playing peek-a-boo with the agitated ocean, the sea showing its disfavor by lashing out at the sand. It begged for calm, wanting the full favor of luna, a soothing influence. A memory of her mother crept to mind. When she was a little girl and unable to sleep her mother would sing her a song that always calmed her restlessness. She hadn't thought of the tune in years and, with a smile, she began to hum it.

"What is that piece of music?"

Dane's voice had startled Tipper out of her tranquility. She turned to see Dane's curious eyes watching her. She blushed at being caught, "A song my mother used to sing to me when I was a child."

Dane gave a wry smile and moved to stand beside Tipper, her face to the dark horizon. Her voice started to sing softly, "Stars shining bright above you. Night breezes seem to whisper 'I love you.' Birds singin' in the sycamore tree. Dream a little dream of me." Her voice gained power and she turned to Tipper, "Say nighty-night and kiss me. Just hold me tight and tell me you'll miss me. While I'm alone and blue as can be, dream a little dream of me." Dane saw Tipper's eyes become smoky as they gazed upon her lips as she sang, "Stars fading but I linger on dear, still craving your kiss. I'm longing to linger till dawn dear, just saying this." Her voice dropped in pitch and Tipper involuntarily reached out and ran a feather light touch over Dane's scarred cheek, "Sweet dreams till sunbeams find you. Sweet dreams that leave all worries behind you. But in your dreams whatever they be, dream a little dream of me."

The words wrapped around Tipper like a sensual caress. Her body now craved a more tactile experience and stepped up to wrap her arms around Dane's slim waist, laying her head on

Dane's shoulder. She immediately felt Dane tense but, to her credit, she never stopped singing and, within seconds, her body relaxed. She felt Dane tentatively move her arms to lie loosely around her own. As Dane continued to sing the sweet ballad, they both started to sway together. Tipper loved the warmth of Dane's body and the feel of the deep vibrations as she sang. The song came to its natural conclusion, but neither woman broke the embrace, content to enjoy the closeness.

Tipper lifted her head, brought her face close to Dane's and whispered on her lips, "So beautiful." She leaned in slightly and brushed their lips together. Slowly, she pulled back and watched as Dane's eyes studied hers, flicking from one to the other. Her nervousness was palpable and she seemed lost, out of her element, but didn't pull away. She brought her hand up to caress Dane's face, "Relax. How about we sit and have a bite to eat?" She watched as Dane vigorously nodded. Tipper smiled, took Dane's hand and led her over to one of the chaise lounge chairs.

"I didn't know if you liked coffee or tea so I ordered both."

Dane looked over the tray marveling at the thoughtfulness. "Tea, thank you." She watched as Tipper set about preparing a hot cup of herbal tea. "This is wonderful. I'm glad you thought of it."

"A few years ago I read an article, on whom I can't remember, but what stuck with me was no eating would occur at least two hours before a performance. I think it had to do with not wanting to get sick and making a spectacle. I don't know if that's a prevailing attitude, but thought it might be the case."

"I can't speak for other artists, but I don't eat anything four hours before I take to the stage. I get butterflies before a performance, even to this day." Dane laughed at the incredulous look from

Tipper. “Truly.” Dane looked at the tray deciding on what morsel looked tempting enough to eat first. She pointed, “Is that mango?”

Tipper watched Dane’s delighted expression, “Yes, it is.” She passed a plate and small fork which Dane anxiously took and began spearing mango onto her plate. Tipper chuckled at Dane’s enthusiasm. “You really like mango.” She picked up her own plate and chose some of her favorites.

With a mischievous twinkle in her eye, Dane replied, “Oh, I’m sorry, did you want some?”

“No, you enjoy it. You may find yourself speared if you go after the strawberries with that much gusto.”

Dane was about to take another bite of her mango, but her fork stopped mid-movement. She flicked her eyes up to Tipper. “Just be sure to stab the right one.” She nodded toward her scarred hand then placed the fork with the uneaten mango down on her plate.

Tipper’s innocent comment touched a raw nerve. She felt horrible for unintentionally hurting Dane’s feelings. “Oh, Dane, I’m so sorry.” She reached for Dane’s right hand, which now rested on the table and held it between hers. “When I look at you, I don’t see scars. I know they are there, but they are secondary to who you are. I see an extraordinarily talented woman with the heart of a lion. You are charming and gallant...a beautiful woman, Dane, inside and out.”

Dane searched Tipper’s eyes for untruth, but could find no dishonesty. “Thank you.” Dane blew out her breath, “I don’t know why I overreacted. You have never shown me pity or treated me like an invalid.” She paused to look intently at Tipper, “You allow me to feel normal and it scares

the hell out of me.” Dane looked out toward the ocean. “I was normal until it happened.”

Tipper entwined her fingers with Danes, “Do you want to talk about it?”

Dane was silent for a few seconds thinking about whether she wanted to recount the traumatic events that drastically changed her life. “Yes, but I’m feeling a bit chilled. Would you like to move to the living room?”

Tipper nodded, released Dane’s hand, picked up their cups of tea, and followed Dane to a sofa. Tipper placed the cooled tea cups down on the coffee table and sat close to Dane.

“I was in London on a holiday. Kara...” Dane looked up to meet Tipper’s eyes, “my ex-girlfriend had never been to England.” Dane saw no censure and continued, “We went on tours to all the landmark sites, shopped at Harrods, ate at pubs.” That last admission brought with it a shiver of revulsion. “That was disgusting.” After a nervous chuckle, “Anyway, one day Kara was feeling a little run down so she decided to rest at the hotel. We had been there a week and the weather was overcast most of the time, not to mention the relentless drizzling rain. It was practically maddening. It was little wonder we didn’t come down with the flu. I remember Kara lying in the hotel bed relaxing and watching some God awful comedy sketch. I just had to get out of that room. I was restless and needed to expend energy and told her I was going for a walk.

“I had gotten about two blocks from where we were staying when the clouds parted, the rain stopped, and the sun came out. It was glorious. I remember thanking the heavenly Father for the small reprieve and happily turned my face to the sky.” Dane’s smile dimmed and her brows knitted as her mind replayed the next part in the story. She reached up and massaged her eyebrows. Tipper, seeing Dane’s discomfort, placed her hand on the small of her back and

began gently rubbing. "I remember several things happening all at once. There was an explosion as the world around me turned a fiery yellow and red. It was so hot. I couldn't breathe, it felt like my lungs were seared. I knew my body had caught fire. I wanted to move, but I couldn't will myself to do it. I didn't know what the hell was going on and thought for sure I was going to die. There was screaming. It might have come from me, I don't know. The last thing I remember was excruciating pain and my vision becoming blurry as things moved by me incredibly fast."

Dane's voice shook as she retold the story. "When I finally managed to regain consciousness, I was in the hospital wired up and bandaged suffering through the worst pain I'd ever felt in my life." Dane paused to pick up her tea cup and sipped the tepid brew to moisten her parched throat. "Seems I chose the wrong time to go for a walk. A terrorist cell had decided to send a message to the government. They had rigged a double-decker bus to explode during the lunch hour. The only reason I'm alive today is that a large panel of the bus was wrenched free and flew through the air hitting my body, creating a shield and a tormentor. You see the metal protected me from the worst of the flames by hurdling me through the air only to slam me against a building like a rag doll."

Tipper was amazed, "It's a wonder you're still alive."

Dane's laugh held no mirth, "That's what the doctors said. Believe me when I tell you that several times during recovery I had wished I had died."

Tipper's hand stopped rubbing Dane's back, brought both her hands up to cup her cheeks and moved close, "Don't you ever say that, Dane. You are a gift to the world...to me." She leaned in bringing their lips firmly together. Dane moved slightly away then cautiously brought her lips back, gently gliding them along Tippers. Lingered. Tremulous. She moved away, her eyes fixed on the swollen pink lips then brought her finger up to trace their silkiness. Her eyes flicked up to see Tipper's dilated eyes keenly watching her. Her finger traced the unblemished skin, feeling the softness and warmth. So beautiful and fair. The backs of her fingers moved across

Tipper's check to brush light blonde hair, traveling to the knot that held her locks prisoner. She carefully pulled out a pin and watched as Tipper's hair tumbled around her fingers. She heard Tipper's light moan as she splayed her fingers through the luxurious tresses. Dane focused again on Tipper's kissable mouth and used her hand to gently bring Tipper's head forward. The kiss was possessive and passionate. Dane had gone years suppressing her baser needs, instead pouring her essence into her voice. She realized that without ardor, her life continued to be only half lived. Tipper had awakened physical desire and, although she was nervous about revealing her nakedness, she was willing to accept rejection from this gentle woman. As her hunger for physical release deepened, so did her kiss.

Tipper matched Dane's appetite and welcomed her warm tongue. She couldn't get enough of Dane's attention and raised herself slightly, pulled her dress up enough so she could situate herself in Dane's lap. Dane understood what Tipper was going to do and pulled her legs in, but unfortunately she didn't position herself well as Tipper brought her knee and weight down on Dane's damaged right thigh. Their kiss abruptly stopped as Dane pulled away and sat ramrod straight in pain. Tipper jumped up realizing what she had done, "Oh Dane, I'm so sorry." She was rooted in place as she watched Dane rub the meaty part of her leg.

"S'okay." Dane could feel the sharp pain receding under her ministrations. She looked up to see Tipper's worried expression and gave her a slight smile. "It's better, now." She watched as Tipper knelt in front of her and placed either hand on her knees. Slowly she used her hands to kneed the flesh through the silky lounge pants. Dane's nerve center stopped registering her leg and focused itself on the tingling at the apex of her thighs.

Tipper was reluctant to touch Dane after her failed attempt to get closer, but her overwhelming urge to taste Dane's blooming passion pushed her forward. She hesitantly moved her hands up to massage both of Dane's thighs as they gazed upon each other. Dane's pupils had enlarged

and threatened to blot out the stormy green of her irises. She watched as Dane's head dropped back, her lips slightly parted as a throaty groan escaped her throat. Tipper felt that guttural expression snake around her and settle deeply in her trembling groin. Wanting more of that heady sound, she slowly moved her hands up higher to massage the tops of Dane's thighs, feeling the heat of her center each time her thumbs came close to the seat of her desire.

Dane looked down to see Tipper's thumbs coming close to her need then, unexpectedly, Tipper boldly rubbed the seat of her pants. Dane fell bonelessly against the back of the sofa as her hips involuntarily moved up, seeking more attention. She groaned low and long. Her body was on fire; every pore, every nerve ending singing in praise of the intensity of the flood of feelings. She felt Tipper's hands move away from where she needed them most, opened her eyes, looked down to see Tipper gazing at her with a longing that stole her breath. Her eyes flicked to Tipper's cleavage and groaned again at the thought of seeing and feeling those full breasts. She brought her hands up to grasp Tipper's shoulders and pulled herself up to meet waiting lips. Tipper carefully moved her weight to settle on Dane's uninjured leg, reveling in the feel of her soaked center against the satiny feel of Dane's clothes. Dane felt the wetness on her leg and moaned in approval. She brought her hands around to Tipper's back running them over the material, enjoying the feel of the dress and the body it concealed. As her hands moved lower, Tipper broke the kiss then lifted herself, giving Dane freedom to slide her hands under the dress to feel the warm tight skin of her exposed bottom.

Tipper's body quivered in pleasure at the feel of Dane's hot hands on her naked skin. When she felt a warm mouth kissing the top of her cleavage she nearly crumbled in Dane's arms. Dane slid one of her hands up the back of the dress grasped the zipper and slowly pulled it down. The exposed skin pimpled under her touch as she moved her hand up to Tipper's shoulder and gently pushed the material down. The dress had become too loose to stay up so Tipper lowered her arms and let it pool around Dane's lap.

Dane sucked in her breath at the breasts on display. Full and magnificent with the largest aureolas she had ever seen. She moaned in delight and with no preamble latched on to a very aroused erect nipple. She worried the hard pebble in her mouth, encouraged by how tightly Tipper pressed her head to her breast. After a slight nip, she moved her mouth to the other breast, favoring it with her attentions.

Tipper was delirious with pleasure, “Dane, please...I need more.”

Dane in a thick haze of lust used the hand massaging Tipper’s sculpted bottom to pinch the flesh followed by a light swat. Tipper reared, “Oh my God.....more.” She had never felt anything so electrifying in her life. Her body broke out in gooseflesh as she felt Dane’s firm hand again spank her backside. She shuddered in pleasure when she felt Dane’s hand reach further down to move the tiny bit of fabric of her thong to caress the swollen wet folds of her sex. The pleasure was overwhelming and her need to connect on a deeper level made her pull Dane away from her breast and move in to claim her mouth for her own. Those strong, relentless fingers teased her velvety slick skin as her tongue rhythmically danced with her own. Her body involuntarily jerking when questing fingers stroked her inflamed clitoris. Tipper could feel the snake uncoiling in her belly, nerve endings on fire, desiring to be rubbed to the pinnacle of release. Breathlessly, she left Dane’s mouth, sitting up, she moved back and forward in an attempt to find the orgasm she so desperately craved.

Dane was in awe of Tipper’s unabashed display of passion. Her face turned to the ceiling, her blonde hair scattered about her face and shoulders, rocking on her hand, her breasts moving to and fro, sweat glistening from every pore. Not wanting to deny this beautiful creature any longer she plunged three long fingers into her hot wet depths.

“Oh, Fuck!” Tipper exclaimed at the intensity of the intrusion. Her weight pushed down further in

Dane's lap as her hips began a slow circular motion. "Soooo good..." She hissed between clenched teeth. She felt Dane slightly curl her fingers to press on a hyper sensitive spot which created a delicious feeling of swelling pressure. She rocked faster on the hard digits, feeling her sensitive nipples rake across the cotton of Dane's tee-shirt when she pushed forward. It was building, the glorious tension, the racing of hot blood charged with passion, as her hips continued to gyrate faster and faster, "I'm going to cum." Tipper felt her lower back tingle just before a sweeping arc of electrical impulses burst in the hardest and longest orgasm she had ever experienced. She cried out in ecstasy as her body released a torrent of fluid around Dane's fingers. She collapsed against Dane's chest, her panting breathes tickling her neck. Dane brought her free hand up to gently massage Tipper's back. It wasn't until she felt the hot tears of Tipper's release on her neck did she move her head and kiss the damp hair at Tipper's temple.

"Rest now." Dane continued to sooth Tipper's tired body as she gently laid her head next to Tippers. In her post coital bliss Tipper nodded off to sleep never hearing Dane's breathing slow as she too followed Tipper in slumber.

Fin

Author's Note: I realize I left you all hanging at the end, again. I'm not a sadist, really, but there is a method to my madness. I'm sure I will pick up these characters, as well as Clay and Julia, in the future. In the interim, you, the reader, get to imagine what happens until I revisit them.

I was thinking about another short story in the dance series, but it would either be a period piece or a ghost story. What do you think? Weigh in, I'd love to hear from you.