

AN ANN KINNEAR SUSPENSE SHORT

# OUR DANCING DAYS

MATTY DALRYMPLE

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:

A hall, a hall, give room!— And foot it, girls.—  
More light, you knaves! And turn the tables up,  
And quench the fire. The room is grown too hot.—  
Ah, sirrah, this unlooked-for sport comes well.—  
Nay, sit, nay, sit, good cousin Capulet,  
For you and I are past our dancing days.

William Shakespeare  
*Romeo & Juliet*

ANN KINNEAR SAT in the empty dance studio, listening to “Cuando Me Enamoro” start up on the CD player. Over the antiseptic smell of heavy-duty cleaner, she could pick up the faint scent of garlic from the pizza shop downstairs.

It was her fifth evening in the studio, but the first alone. The first four had been spent with her client, the widow of one of the seven people who had died here less than a month before.

The studio still bore the marks of the attack. Only fragments of the room-length mirror clung to a bullet-riddled wall. The shards that had littered the floor and created a razor-sharp bed for the people who had fallen had been cleared away once the yellow crime scene tape had been taken down. The wooden floor had been scrubbed, but dark stains remained where the victims had lain. The small refrigerator that once held bottles of water for the dancers stood quiet, its cord unplugged, its door propped open. Only the artificial ferns that decorated each corner of the room appeared untouched by the attack.

The casualties among the dance class students had been five instead of six because Ann’s client, Miranda Gorman, had been home with a migraine that night.

“Alan went to class because he had to return a putter he had borrowed from Travis,” Miranda explained when she booked the engagement with Ann’s brother and business manager, Mike. “Plus, he figured he could get in a couple of turns with Trina—she’s the main instructor—and then teach me when he got home, so we wouldn’t be so far behind. Our daughter’s wedding was at the end of the month, and we didn’t want to embarrass ourselves on the

dance floor." Her voice cracked on the last word.

The casualties among the instructors had been one instead of two because Trina had been spared. Ann had seen two photos of Trina Hochmann in the online coverage of the attack. In one, she spun, graceful and smiling, across a dance floor in the arms of a handsome, dark-haired man, her gown bellling out around her. In the other, two EMTs flanked her, supporting her into the back of an ambulance after the attack. The blood on her hands and clothes had proven not to be hers, but the blasted look in her eyes showed she had not escaped unscathed.

Trina had left town after the attack to escape the media frenzy, and had made it clear that she had no intention of returning to the studio she had founded with her previous partner—the handsome man in the dance competition photo, and the perpetrator of the attack—four years before.

Miranda and Alan Gorman's daughter's wedding had been postponed. Not only was the father of the bride dead, and the mother of the bride barely functional, but six of victims had been on the guest list.

The owner of the pizza shop downstairs owned the building. Not surprisingly, no business had yet expressed interest in setting up shop at the scene of the Dance Hall Massacre, as the more sensational news outlets had labeled it, and he had been willing to give Miranda a key for her evening visits to the studio with Ann. Miranda told Ann that he had also proven to be effective at clearing the building's parking lot of news vans and paparazzi.

"How does he do that?" asked Ann.

"He's ... imposing-looking," said Miranda.

It was Miranda who insisted that they play Latin music. "Alan *loved* the rumba," she said. "He would have been happy if that's the only dance we ever did." She blotted her raw, red-rimmed nose. "He was good at it, too."

So for four evenings, Ann and Miranda had arrived at the studio at eight o'clock—the time when the weekly dance class had begun—and, sitting on the folding metal chairs that lined one wall, listened to one Latin song after the other. Miranda glanced at her watch at least once a minute, and at eight fifty-three each night, she would

give a little hitching breath and drop her head onto her clenched hands.

"Ten minutes later," she said. "Ten minutes later and he would have been gone, on his way home."

"You don't need to be here," Ann said gently. "You could wait outside, and if he shows up, I could call you."

"No, I have to be here," said Miranda. "What if he only shows up for a minute? I might miss him." She twisted the tissue in her fingers. "I was hoping he would have a message for Caitlin."

"I don't think it's always possible for them to communicate. Sometimes they don't ... hang around."

"He was so excited about the wedding," said Miranda, seeming not to have heard Ann. "Walking Caity down the aisle, the father-daughter dance ..." She blew her nose. "They were going to dance to 'My Girl' by The Temptations."

"Rumba?"

Miranda shot Ann a look and, evidently deciding Ann's question was sincere, nodded.

"Yes. I saw them practice once—they looked so ..."

She kneaded the sodden ball of her tissue.

Then, each night at nine o'clock, Miranda snapped her purse closed and stood up. "Looks like it won't be tonight."

"I could stay a while longer," said Ann the first night.

Miranda shook her head. "No, we always left class on the dot of nine. I think he'll come between eight and nine. Same time tomorrow?"

The dance studio was in Gaithersburg, Maryland—almost three hours from West Chester, Pennsylvania, by back roads, a theoretical two-and-a-quarter by 95, but that route cut right through Baltimore and was no doubt liable to delays. It seemed too long for a daily commute to and from West Chester, where Ann had grown up and where her brother Mike still lived, and too short to ask Ann's occasional charter pilot, Walt, to come down from the Adirondacks to fly her back and forth. She could have hired a pilot in West Chester, but it seemed an unnecessary extravagance to ask Miranda to foot that bill.

Miranda was, however, happy to pay for lodgings at the

Gaithersburg Courtyard, so Ann was finding ways of killing the twenty-three hours a day she wasn't spending in the dance studio with Miranda. One day she drove into Washington and, unable to find a parking space, drove back to Gaithersburg. Another day she drove to Seneca Creek State Park and took the unofficial *Blair Witch Project* self-guided tour. She saw no spirits. The other days she spent most of the time in her hotel room, binge reading Stephen King.

On the fifth night, Miranda was stricken by a migraine again, and Ann went to the studio alone. She dutifully inserted a CD into the venerable multi-CD player—she was relieved to find a box of CDs helpfully labeled “Rumba”—and wandered aimlessly around the room. There wasn't much to see. She entered the small office and stepped to a bulletin board with a patchwork of papers thumbtacked to it, including a printout of an online article from a site called *The Town Courier*. It was another photo of Trina dancing, her smile not the false accessory of a well-trained performer, but a genuine expression of joy, her eyes locked on her partner's. This one was a different partner than in the photo the media had used—a younger man with unruly red hair who returned her joyful expression.

Ann read the caption: *Our own Dancing Star, Trina Hochmann, competing at the Mid-Atlantic Ballroom Competition finals with new partner, Travis Burch.*

Ann glanced through the other items on the board—another article about Trina and Travis, this one from an actual print newspaper, a list of class fees, a diagram of pre-dance stretching exercises—then wandered back into the studio.

She glanced at her phone: eight twenty-three. If she followed Miranda's schedule, thirty-seven minutes to go.

She resumed her seat on one of the folding chairs. After a minute, she glanced at her phone again, then, a bit guiltily, opened the ereader app: *The Stand*. She couldn't imagine that her reading would keep Alan from appearing if he wanted to. And she was at an exciting part.

Some time later, deep into King's description of the ravages of Captain Trips, she became aware of a light tapping noise. She glanced at the time: nine-oh-three. The time of the attack, eight-fifty-three, had come and gone unnoticed.

She put her phone aside, but the tapping had stopped. She resumed reading, but a minute later became aware of the tapping once again. She crossed to the CD player and turned the volume down on Santana's 'Primavera.'

After a moment, she heard it again. It seemed to be coming from the stairway that led to the front door.

She went to the top of the stairs and looked down. All she could see through the glass front door was a small square of concrete walkway.

"Miranda?" she called.

There was no answer.

Ann descended the steps slowly. When she reached the bottom, she peered out of the locked door. The light in the entryway cast onto the walkway a backwards shadow of the script on the glass: "Sentimental Journey Dance Studio."

"Miranda?" she called again.

Still no answer.

She flipped the lock and stepped outside. There wasn't a soul in sight, and nowhere a prankster could be hiding. Mike's Audi, which Ann had borrowed for the trip, was the only car parked in front of the pizza shop. Maybe she would call it a night and stop by for a slice.

"I'm glad you're—" she heard from not more than a couple of feet away.

There was probably more, but it was lost in her startled shriek. She jumped back into the entryway, pulled the door closed with a bang, and flipped the lock.

After a few moments, as the pounding of her heart slowed, she inched toward the door. She almost shrieked again when a round, concerned-looking face appeared at the window.

"You okay in there?" the man called through the glass.

It was definitely not the voice she had heard a moment before.

"Yes, I'm okay," she said loudly. "Who are you?"

"Tony. From the pizza place. Are you that psychic lady?"

She flipped the lock and eased the door open, her foot planted behind it to prevent any uninvited entry. "Yes. Ann Kinnear."

"Pleased to meet you." He was about the same height as Ann,

but about twice as wide, and all muscle. His neck was a mere suggestion, the muscle running straight from his earlobes to the tips of his shoulders. The bulk of his biceps cantilevered his arms out from his barrel-like chest. Each of his thighs was the size of Ann's waist. He held out his hand and she shook it through the narrow opening, grateful that he kept his grip light. "I heard Mrs. Gorman hired you. Poor lady, what a thing to go through."

"Yes, it's pretty unimaginable," said Ann, relaxing her hold on the door.

"Guess it was even worse for Trina. Probably feels responsible, in a way, although of course it wasn't her fault. Just bad luck who she fell in with. And then fell out with, I guess."

"Yes."

"And then to be up there for ten minutes with him—just the two of them and those bodies on the floor. Gives me the heebie-jeebies to think about it." He shuddered. "But I guess they're both luckier than the others who were here that night." He shook his head. "You okay? I thought I heard a scream."

"I saw a mouse," said Ann.

"Mouse?" said Tony, his face blanching. "Where?"

Ann waved vaguely in the direction of the parking lot. "It was headed that way."

Tony shook his head. "Little bastards." He glanced at her. "Pardon my French."

"No problem."

"Well, if everything's okay, I better get back." He turned toward the pizza shop.

"Hey," said Ann, stepping out onto the sidewalk, "were you here that night?"

"Sure was," said Tony. "Just about this time." He glanced at his watch. "Well, a little earlier. Fortunately we didn't have any customers right then—it was just me and Freddy in the shop—but I heard the shooting and screaming. I locked the door and turned off all the lights so it would look like no one was home, and called 911. A couple of cop cars got here fast, but they had to wait for backup. About ten minutes after the first shooting, while they were still trying to figure out what to do—and trying to talk to the guy—there

was one more shot, and they went in."

"That was when he killed himself?"

"Yeah. I say good riddance. Saved all those poor families from having to go through a trial."

They were silent for a moment, then Ann said, "Thank for checking on me."

"Sure," said Tony. He hesitated. "You, uh ... you seen anybody? Heard anybody? You know, anybody dead?"

"Not here," she replied, although she was pretty sure that wasn't true.

"Well, good luck," he said. "Stop by for a slice when you're done. On the house."

They shook hands again and Ann watched him disappear into the pizza shop.

She looked carefully up and down the walkway, then said, "Hello?"

"You're not going to scream again, are you?" said the voice.

She did let out a little yelp, then tried to disguise it by coughing into her fist.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"You're looking for Alan Gorman, right?"

"Yes."

"Let me in and I'll talk. I have lots to say."

"Great." She started through the door, relieved that she would have something to report to Miranda.

"You'll need to hold the door open for me," he said from behind her.

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

She eased the door open and stood back. She tried to sense some movement, but could perceive nothing. In a moment, though, she heard the voice from the entryway.

"Okay, I'm in. Let's go upstairs."

Leaving the door unlocked on the slight possibility that Miranda would decide to show up, Ann climbed the stairs slowly, anxious not to walk into the space of a spirit she couldn't see. If he couldn't pass through a closed door, could she bump into him? The question

was a new one for her, since she had never encountered a spirit who seemed to be bound by the rules of the physical world. She had also never encountered a spirit whom she could hear so clearly, but see not at all.

She got to the top of the stairs and looked around, hopeful that the bright fluorescent lights of the studio might reveal something, but the room appeared empty.

"Alan?"

"I'm here."

Fortunately, the voice wasn't right next to her, otherwise she might have risked a start and a tumble back down the stairs. It sounded like he was standing near the line of folding chairs.

"How are you doing?" she asked after a moment.

"Well, you know," he said, a trace of a smile in his voice. "Dead."

"Yeah." She moved toward the chairs. "Why can't I see you?"

"Haven't a clue. Why can you hear me? No one else can."

"It's an ability I have."

She sat down on a chair a couple of yards away from where the voice was emanating.

"Miranda wants to talk with you," she said. "She's been here with me every night, but she has a migraine and couldn't come tonight. Can I call her and tell her you're here?"

"No," he said. "I don't have anything to say to her."

They sat in silence for a minute, then Ann said, "You said you had lots to say ..."

She perceived no indication of movement, but when he spoke next, his voice came from near the door to the office.

"Have you ever been in love?"

Ann hesitated. "Yes."

"Now?"

"No."

"What happened?"

How much was she required to reveal about her personal life as part of a consulting engagement? At least it wasn't likely he would be gossiping about it with anyone else.

"He didn't believe I could do what I do," she said.

"Talking to dead people?"

"Sensing them. He thought I needed psychiatric help."

He snorted out a brief laugh. "Sometimes people think the damnedest things."

"Yes."

"When I fell in love," he continued after a moment, "I fell in love with the whole woman. Not part of her. I didn't hope in the back of my mind that I could fix her flaws. As far as I was concerned, there were no flaws."

Ann hoped Alan was talking about Miranda, otherwise the debrief of the evening's events with her client was going to be somewhat awkward.

"You're an insightful man," she said. "She was a lucky woman."

"Well, I thought so."

"She obviously loved you, too," she said. "I think it's safe to say she still loves you, since she hired me to communicate with you."

"We were together for so long. We were perfect together. We could finish each other's sentences. And the dancing—the dancing was sublime."

"The rumba?"

He laughed. "All of them."

A half minute ticked by, then she heard the whir of the CD player spinning up.

"Care to dance?" He was right in front of her.

She stood and reluctantly held out her hand.

He took it and pulled her toward him.

"Have you ever danced?" he asked.

"Not real dancing."

"It's easy if you just follow," he said, and she jumped when she felt his hand on the small of her back. "Relax," he said soothingly.

He began to move, and to move her with him, smoothly correcting her stumbles, and she realized that the song wasn't a rumba, but rather the sultry strains of a tango.

She caught occasional glimpses of herself in the fragments of mirror still clinging to the wall, the vision of herself moving with an invisible partner freakish and unsettling. But there was something seductive, too, about the experience—as she listened to the music

and she began to understand the movements and rhythm of the dance, she did relax into it.

After a minute, he spoke softly. "You know, when you make a commitment to someone, it's for life. It doesn't matter if you have a ring to prove it, or if it's just a promise between the two of you. It's forever. Until death do you part."

"Sometimes not even then," she said gamely.

His arm tightened around her waist. "Exactly. Exactly! That's what I want to tell her."

"I can tell her for you."

They were moving more easily now, and he laughed—a light, gay sound. "I'm so glad I found you." He twirled her out, and then pulled her back against his body. "You're a natural."

She laughed uncomfortably. "Not so much. Are you sure you don't want me to call Miranda?"

The push when it came was so unexpected that she went sprawling onto the ground.

"No, I don't want you calling Miranda," he said, his voice taut with anger. "Why do you women always have to do that? Why do you always have to bring someone else into it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Miranda. Travis. *Trina and Travis*, for God's sake. It sounds like a bad sitcom."

Ann felt the blood drain from her face. "Who are you?"

"Who do you think I am?"

She hesitated. "Edward?"

"That's me," he said, and a hysterical lilt had crept into his voice.

So the visitor to the studio wasn't Miranda's husband. It was Edward Lester, the man who a month before had climbed the stairs to the studio and raked the room and its occupants with gunfire before turning the gun on himself.

"I thought you were Alan Gorman," she said weakly.

"I never said that. You assumed."

She was silent.

In a moment, he spoke again. "Trina and I had it all. We had the studio. We had the competitions. We had a shot at the big titles. And, most important, we had each other. And then she decided she

didn't want it. I want to know why she didn't want it."

Ann began to stand up.

"Sit down!" he said sharply.

She lowered herself back onto the floor, her heart pounding.

"What do you want me to do about it?"

"I've got to talk to Trina. She hasn't come to the studio on her own, and I can't go to her—it seems like I can't leave here. And even if she did come, I don't know if she'd be able to hear me. But," he said, closer, "you could get her to come, and if she can't hear me, you can tell her what I'm saying."

"I don't even know how to get in touch with her," she said, struggling to keep her voice steady. "She went into hiding."

"You could find her if you wanted to."

"I don't think I could. And even if I could, I wouldn't try to bring her back here."

"Why not?"

Ann paused a beat, but anger began to push aside her alarm. "You killed her partner and five of her students."

"That little bastard deserved it."

"Nobody deserves that!" she shot back, her own voice rising. "And the other ones were just innocent bystanders. In fact, it seems like one of them had exactly the kind of relationship with his wife that you wish you had with Trina. Because his widow is paying me to sit in this room and try to communicate—"

Her head rocked back with an invisible slap.

"Shut up!" he yelled.

She scuttled back on her hands and feet.

"No, wait!" An invisible hand clamped onto her upper arm. Hard. "Please!" She could hear tears beneath his strident voice. "I need you to bring Trina to me."

"Let me go!" she yelled.

"You don't know what it's like to be powerless," he yelled back. "If you won't help me, I'll show you! I'll make you as powerless as I am! I'll—"

"Rats!" she screamed.

"What the hell?"

"Tony! Rats!" She twisted her arm, and his grip tightened

further.

He grabbed her other arm and shook her, her head snapping back and forth. "Stop it! Stop it! I need you to help me, I need you to bring Trina to me!"

"Tony! Rats!"

The door at the bottom of the stairs banged open.

"Rats?" His squawk echoed up the stairwell.

"There are rats up here, Tony! Rats!"

"Come on out of there," Tony yelled as he pounded up the steps.

"Rats is nothing to be fooling around with!"

Ann felt the grip on her arms relax fractionally, and she wrenched herself free and scrambled to her feet just as Tony reached the top of the stairs.

"Let's get out of here," she gasped.

Tony took her arm. "You okay? Where are they?" he asked, his gaze shooting around the seemingly empty studio.

"Back there. Let's get out of here."

With Tony's hand steadying her, she stumbled down the stairs. At the bottom, she turned.

She couldn't see him, but she could sense him, standing at the top of the stairs, that dark, handsome man who had spun Trina Hochmann across a dance floor, and had later gunned down her new partner and a roomful of students.

"Please," Edward Lester called down the stairs, almost sobbing. "Please, I need to talk to her, and you're the only one who can help me."

"I'll call the exterminator tomorrow," said Tony as he led Ann out onto the sidewalk. "Rats—I can't believe it."

\* \* \* \* \*

The exterminator searched the studio the next day, and reported no sign of rats.

Mike Kinnear notified Miranda Gorman that, in Ann's professional opinion, if Alan were still around to be contacted, he would have shown up by now, and ended the engagement.

Ann returned to West Chester, her shirt sleeve covering the bruises on her arms—the clear impression of four fingers and a thumb.

Caitlyn Gorman rescheduled her wedding for the following year, with a reduction in headcount of seven.

And three months later, a new business, Tony's Toning and Muscle Center, opened in the space previously occupied by Sentimental Journey Dance Studio.