

What if?

Howard's phone vibrated and let out a gentle hoot. A distinctive sound, so he could recognise his phone, but subtle enough to not draw attention. An incoming message. He glanced at the screen, though he already knew it would be his twin sister. It was always Andrea.

Howie! Let's change things up and eat at the club on Wednesday night. I've heard the food is great and they have a band and a free dance class! Girls love guys who can dance!!!

Howard's grip tightened around the glass screen. A dance class?

I step into the club and scan the dimly lit room for a familiar face. I'm twenty minutes late. On purpose. Surely, she'll have arrived before me? A sudden movement in the far corner captures my attention. Andrea. I don't wave back, I just walk, pull out the chair opposite her and sit.

"Howie! How are you!"

I can hear the exclamation points. It's not really a question. It's her attempt at a polite intro. The bit she always throws in first so she can cover off on me and get to her own drama.

"Fine. You?" I indulge her. It's always easier to do that. She doesn't really want to know how I am. And anyway, my week was boring.

She natters on. I smile and nod and think about what to order for dinner. The chef's special is written on a blackboard near the bar in bold white chalk. Pistachio crusted chicken. It sounds delicious. My mouth waters. Then my tongue fills my mouth. My lips swell. My throat closes over. I can't breathe. Pistachios are nuts. I've never actually had an allergic reaction to nuts, but there's a first time for everything. And I'd rather not have a first time for anaphylaxis. I retrieve the menu from the middle of the table and look for the plain chicken schnitzel with chips. Most places serve that.

"I already ordered for you," Andrea says.

I raise my eyebrows.

"Well, you *were* twenty minutes late and I'm starving!"

Fair point. "What did you order me?"

"Schnitty and chips. Tomato sauce on the side."

We both smile.

The meals arrive. I cut my chicken into two-centimetre cubes and chew each mouthful twenty times. As we eat, the band sets up. A drum kit, a keyboard, a double bass, a saxophone, a trumpet. Jazz? I like jazz. A few odd notes ring out over the DJ'd music as the band tune up.

The music from the speakers fades away and the band strikes up the first song of the set. It's a catchy tune. Familiar, but not something I've ever heard on the radio. The kind of song you'd hear in the background of a black and white movie. My thumb taps on the table.

People gather in pairs on the expanse of timber floor between our table and the stage. Hand in hand, they begin to dance. They step, they glide, they twirl. The dance moves appear intricate and unpredictable. How do they know what the other person is going to do? What if he steps forward at the same time she does? What if I trip over my own feet and knock them all down? I clamp my left hand over my right, stilling that wayward thumb.

As I turn away from the dance floor, a woman catches my eye. She stands alone, leaning against the wall. A deep red dress hugs her curves, flaring out around her knees. It swishes in rhythm as she taps her foot. Her curly black hair is swept off her face, held back with a large white flower. She seems mesmerised by the music. I'm mesmerised by her. Slowly, she turns. Her gaze locks with mine. Her ruby lips lift at the corners. I reach up to loosen my collar, but my grey t-shirt doesn't have one.

Andrea kicks my ankle under the table. "Go and talk to her."

I grab the half-empty glass in front of me and gulp the icy water. "Nah. She doesn't want to talk to me. She's waiting for someone to ask her to dance."

"Well, ask her to dance, then."

And look like a fool when I catch my left foot on the heel of my other left foot and end up sprawled in the middle of the dance floor? Or even worse, walk away alone when she rejects me? "I don't know how to dance."

"The lesson will start soon, then you *will* know how."

My throat feels raw. I grab Andrea's water glass and down the contents. It prickles and burns all the way down. "I don't want to. I don't like dancing."

Andrea grins. "You love music. You love dancing."

"Maybe when we were five but not anymore." I glance at my watch. Quarter past seven. Fifteen minutes until the class starts. Fifteen minutes to escape. "I have a big day at work tomorrow. I really should head off now."

“Give me your keys. You’re not driving anywhere.”

“What?” I demand.

Andrea holds out her hand, palm up. “That’s what you get for stealing my drink. And for being too much of a scaredy-cat to go for your license when we were 18. If you weren’t still on your P’s, you could drive with half a vodka and lemonade under your belt.” Andrea smirks, her hand still outstretched.

Vodka. Damn. I thought it was just my nerves that made the water feel strange.

It will kick in soon. It doesn’t take much alcohol to lower my inhibitions. That’s why I never drink. I need to be in control. If I’m not in control...

I might say something stupid. I might do something stupid. What if I try to dance?

People might—no—people will. They will laugh. Silently, behind my back. In my face. At me.

Nope. I can’t face being trapped in this nightmare. Never going to happen.

Howard refocussed his gaze on the small screen. The little dots bounced as an incoming message prepared to arrive.

So??? What do you reckon???

Howard typed his reply.

Nah. Let’s just eat at my place, like usual. I have chicken schnitzel and chips in the freezer.