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❁ THE O'HURLEYS ❁

NORA ROBERTS



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For my brother Bill.

Thanks for taking me backstage.

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Excerpt from *The Witness*

Prologue

During the break between lunch and cocktails, the club was empty. The floors were scarred but clean enough, and the paint on the walls was only a little dull from fighting with cigarette smoke. There was the scent intrinsic to such places—old liquor and stale perfume mixed with coffee that was no longer fresh. To a certain type of person it was as much home as a cozy fire and plump cushions. The O’Hurleys made their home wherever audiences gathered.

When the after-dinner crowd strolled in, the lights would be dimmed, and it wouldn’t look so grimy. Now, strong sunlight shone through the two small windows and lighted the dust and dents mercilessly. The mirror in back of a bar lined with bottles spread some of the light around but reflected mostly on the small stage in the center of the room.

“That’s my girl, Abby, put a nice smile on.”

Frank O’Hurley took his five-year-old triplets through the short dance routine he wanted to add to the show that night, demonstrating the prissy moves with his wiry body. They were playing a family hotel at a nice, reasonably priced resort in the Poconos. He figured the audience would have a soft spot for three little girls.

“I wish you’d time your brainstorm better, Frank.” His wife, Molly, sat at a corner table, hurriedly sewing bows on the white dresses her daughters would wear in a few hours. “I’m not a bloody seamstress, you know.”

“You’re a trouper, Molly, my love, and the best thing that ever happened to Frank O’Hurley.”

“There’s nothing truer than that,” she muttered, but smiled to herself.

“All right, my darlings, let’s try it again.” He smiled at the three little angels God had blessed him with in one fell swoop. If the Lord saw fit to present him with three babies for the price of one, Frank figured the Lord was entitled to a sense of humor.

Chantel was already a beauty, with a round cherub’s face and dark blue eyes. He winked at her, knowing she was more interested in the bows on the dress she’d wear than in the routine. Abby was a natural. Her amiability. She’d dance because her pop wanted her to and because it would be fun to be onstage with her sisters. Frank urged her to smile again and demonstrated the curtsy he wanted.

Maddy, with an elfin face and hair already hinting toward red, mimicked his move perfectly, her eyes never leaving his. Frank felt his heart swell with love for the three of them. He laid his hand on his son’s shoulder.

“Give us a two-bar intro, Trace, my boy. A snappy one.”

Trace obligingly ran his fingers over the keys. It was Frank’s regret he couldn’t afford lessons for the boy. What Trace knew of playing he’d learned from watching and listening. Music rang out, jump and bright.

“How’s that, Pop?”

“You’re a pistol.” Frank rubbed a hand over Trace’s head. “Okay, girls, let’s take it from the top.”

He worked them another fifteen minutes, patiently, making them giggle at their mistakes. The five

minute routine would be far from perfect, but he was shrewd enough to recognize the charm of it. They'd expand the act bit by bit as they went on. It was the off-season at the resort now, but if they made a bit of a mark, they'd secure a return engagement. Life for Frank was made up of gigs and return engagements. He saw no reason his family shouldn't be of the same mind.

Still, the minute he saw Chantel losing interest he broke off, knowing her sisters wouldn't be far behind.

"Wonderful." He bent to give each of them a smacking kiss, as generous with affection as he'd have liked to be with money. "We're going to knock them dead."

"Is our name going on the poster?" Chantel demanded, and Frank roared with delighted laughter.

"Want billing, do you, my little pigeon? Hear that, Molly?"

"Doesn't surprise me." She set down her sewing to rest her fingers.

"Tell you what, Chantel, you get billing when you can do this." He started a slow, deceptively simple tap routine, holding a hand out to his wife. Smiling, Molly rose to join him. A dozen years of dancing together had them moving in unison from the first step.

Abby slid onto the piano bench beside Trace and watched. He began to improvise a silly little tune that made Abby smile.

"Chantel's going to practice till she can do it," he murmured.

Abby smiled up at him. "Then we'll all get our names on the poster."

"I can show you how," he whispered, listening to his parents' feet strike the wooden stage.

"Will you show us all how?"

As an old man of ten, Trace was amused by the way his little sisters stuck together. He'd have gotten the same response from any of them. "I just might."

Content, she settled back against his shoulder. Her parents were laughing, enjoying the exertion, the rhythm. It seemed to Abby that her parents were always laughing. Even when her mother got that cross look on her face, Pop would make her laugh. Chantel was watching, her eyes narrowed, experimenting a bit but not quite catching the movements. She'd get mad, Abby knew. But when Chantel got mad, she made sure she got what she wanted.

"I want to do it," Maddy said from the corner of the stage.

Frank laughed. With his arms around Molly's waist, the two of them circled the stage, feet tapping, sliding, shuffling. "Do you, now, little turnip?"

"I *can* do it," she told him, and with a stubborn look on her face she began to tap her feet—heel, toe, toe, heel—until she was moving center stage.

Caught off balance, Frank stopped on a dime, and Molly bumped heavily into him. "Look at that, will you, Molly?"

Pushing her hair out of her eyes, Molly watched her youngest daughter struggling to capture the basics of their tap routine. And she was doing it. Molly felt a mixture of pride and regret only a mother would understand. "Looks like we'll be buying another set of taps, Frank."

"That it does." Frank felt twice the pride and none of the regret. He released his wife to concentrate on his daughter. "No, try this now." He took the moves slowly. Hop, shuffle, stamp. Brush, step, brush, step and step to the side. He took Maddy's hand and, careful to keep his steps small to match hers, moved again. She moved right with him.

"Now this." His excitement growing, he looked at his son. "Give me a downbeat. Listen to the count, Maddy. One and two and three and four. Tap. No body weight here. Toe stab front, then back. Now a riff." Again he demonstrated, and again she imitated the steps.

"We'll put it all together now and end with a step slide, arms like this, see?" He brought his arms

out to the side in a sharp, glitzy move, then winked at her. "You're going to sell it."

"Sell it," she repeated, frowning in concentration.

"Give us the count, Trace." Frank took her hand again, feeling the pleasure build as she moved in unison with him. "We've got ourselves a dancer here, Molly!" Frank hefted Maddy into his arms and let her fly. She squealed, not because she feared he wouldn't catch her but because she knew he would.

The sensation of dropping through the air was every bit as thrilling as the dance itself had been. She wanted more.

Chapter 1

Five, six, seven, eight!

Twenty-four feet hit the wooden floor in unison. The echo was wonderful. Twelve bodies twisted, swooped and plunged as one. Mirrors threw their images right back at them. Arms flowed out on signal, legs lifted, heads tilted, turned, then fell back.

Sweat rolled. And the scent was the theater.

The piano banged out notes, and the melody swelled in the old rehearsal hall. Music had echoed there before, feet had responded, heartbeats had raced, and muscles had ached. It would happen again and again, year after year, for as long as the building stood.

Many stars had rehearsed in that room. Show business legends had polished routines on the same boards. Countless unknown and unremembered line dancers had worked there until their muscles had gone stringy with fatigue. It was a Broadway that the paying public rarely saw.

The assistant choreographer, his glasses fogging a bit in the steamy heat, clapped out the beat constantly as he shouted the moves. Beside him the choreographer, the man who had sculpted the dance, stood watching with eyes as dark and alert as a bird's.

“Hold it!”

The piano music stopped. Movement stopped. The dancers drooped with a combination of exhaustion and relief.

“It drags there.”

Drags?

The dancers, still a unit, rolled their eyes and tried to ignore their aching muscles. The choreographer studied them, then gave the signal to take five. Twelve bodies dropped against the wall shifting together so that heads fell on convenient shoulders or abdomens. Calves were massaged. Feet flexed, relaxed, and flexed again. They talked little. Breath was an important commodity, to be hoarded whenever possible. Beneath them, the floor was battle-scarred, covered with masking tape that had set the marks for dozens of other shows. But there was only one show that mattered now: this one.

“Want a bite?”

Maddy O’Hurley roused herself to look down at the chocolate bar. She considered it, coveted it, then shook her head. One bite would never be enough. “No, thanks. Sugar makes me light-headed when I’m dancing.”

“I need a lift.” The woman, her skin as dark and rich as the candy, took a huge bite. “Like now. All that guy needs is a whip and a chain.”

Maddy glanced over at the choreographer as he bent over the accompanist. “He’s tough. We’ll be glad we’ve got him before this is over.”

“Yeah, but right now I’d like to—”

“Strangle him with some piano wire?” Maddy suggested, and was rewarded with a quick, husky

laugh.

“Something like that.”

Her energy was coming back, and she could feel herself drying off. The room smelled of sweat and the fruity splash-on many of the dancers used to combat it. “I’ve seen you at auditions,” Maddy commented. “You’re real good.”

“Thanks.” The woman carefully wrapped the rest of the candy and slipped it into her dance bag. “Wanda Starre—two *Rs* and an *E*.”

“Maddy O’Hurley.”

“Yeah, I know.” Maddy’s name was already well-known in the theater district. The gypsies—the dancers who wandered from show to show, job to job—knew her as one of their own who’d made it. Woman to woman, dancer to dancer, Wanda recognized Maddy as someone who hadn’t forgotten her roots. “It’s my first white contract,” Wanda said in an undertone.

“No kidding?” White contracts were for principals, pink for chorus. There was much, much more to it than color coding. Surprised, Maddy straightened to get a better look. The woman beside her had a large-featured, exotic face and the long, slender neck and strong shoulders of a dancer. Her body was longer than Maddy’s. Even sprawled on the floor, Maddy gauged a five-inch difference from shoulder to toe.

“Your first time out of chorus?”

“That’s right.” Wanda glanced at the other dancers relaxing and recharging. “I’m scared to death.”

Maddy toweled off her face. “Me, too.”

“Come on. You’ve already starred in a hit.”

“I haven’t starred in this one yet. And I haven’t worked with Macke.” She watched the choreographer, still wiry at sixty, move away from the piano. “Show time,” she murmured. The dancers rose and listened to the next set of instructions.

For another two hours they moved, absorbed, strove and polished. When the other dancers were dismissed, Maddy was given a ten-minute break, then came back to go through her solo. As lead, she would dance with the chorus, perform solo and dance with the male lead and the other principals. She would prepare for the play in much the same way an athlete prepares for a marathon. Practice, discipline and more practice. In a show that was slated to run two hours and ten minutes, she would be on stage about two-thirds of the time. Dance routines would be absorbed into the memory banks of her mind, muscles and limbs. Everything would have to respond in sync at the call of the downbeat.

“Try it with your arms out, shoulder level,” Macke instructed. “Ball change before the kicks and keep the energy up.”

The assistant choreographer gave the count, and Maddy threw herself into a two-minute routine that would have left a linebacker panting.

“Better.” From Macke, Maddy knew that was praise indeed. “This time, keep your shoulders loose. He walked over and laid his blunt, ugly hands on Maddy’s damp shoulders. “After the turn, angle stage left. I want the moves sharp; don’t follow through, cut them off. You’re a stripper, not a ballerina.”

She smiled at him because while he was criticizing her, he was massaging the exhausted muscles of her shoulders. Macke had a reputation for being a grueling instructor, but he had the soul of a dancer. “I’ll try to remember that.”

She took the count again and let her body do the thinking. Sharp, sassy, acerbic. That was what the part called for, so that was what she’d be. When she couldn’t use her voice to get into the part, she had to use her body. Her legs lifted, jackknifing from the knee in a series of hitch kicks. Her arms ranged

out to the sides, contracted to cuddle her body and flew up, while her feet moved by memory to the beat.

Her short, smooth crop of reddish-blond hair flopped around a sweatband that was already soaked. She'd have the added weight of a wildly curled shoulder-length wig for this number, but she refused to think about that. Her face glowed like wet porcelain, but none of the effort showed. Her features were small, almost delicate, but she knew how to use her whole face to convey an expression, an emotion. It was often necessary to overconvey in the theater. Moisture beaded on her soft upper lip, but she smiled, grinned, laughed and grimaced as the mood of the dance demanded.

Without makeup her face was attractive—or cute, as Maddy had wearily come to accept—with its triangular shape, elfin features and wide, brandy-colored eyes. For the part of Mary Howard, alias the Merry Widow, Maddy would rely on the expertise of the makeup artist to turn her into something slick and sultry. For now she depended on her own gift for expression and movement to convey the character of the overexperienced stripper looking for an easy way out.

In some ways, she thought, she'd been preparing all her life for this part—the train and bus rides with her family, traveling from town to town and club to club to entertain for union scale and a meal. By the age of five she'd been able to gauge an audience. Were they hostile, were they laid-back, were they receptive? Knowing the audience's mood could mean the difference between success and failure. Maddy had discovered early how to make subtle changes in a routine to draw the best response. Her life, from the time she could walk, had been played out onstage. In twenty-six years she'd never regretted a moment of it.

There had been classes, endless classes. Though the names and faces of her teachers had blurred, every movement, every position, every step was firmly lodged in her mind. When there hadn't been the time or money for a formal class, her father had been there, setting up a makeshift *barre* in a motel room to put his children through practice routines and exercises.

She'd been born a gypsy, coming into the world with her two sisters when her parents had been on the way to a performance. Becoming a Broadway gypsy had been inevitable. She'd auditioned, failed and dealt with the misery of disappointment. She'd auditioned, succeeded and dealt with the fear of opening night. Because of her nature and her background, she'd never had to deal with a lack of confidence.

For six years she'd struggled on her own, without the cushion of her parents, her brother and her sisters. She'd danced in chorus lines and taken classes. Between rehearsals she'd waited tables to help pay for the instructions that never ended and the dance shoes that wore out too soon. She'd broken through to principal but had continued to study. She'd made second lead but never gave up her classes. She finally stopped waiting tables.

Her biggest part had been the lead in *Suzanna's Park*, a plum she'd relished until she'd felt she'd sucked it dry. Leaving it had been a risk, but there was enough gypsy in her to have made the move an adventure.

Now she was playing the role of Mary, and the part was harder, more complex and more demanding than anything that had come before. She was going to work for Mary just as hard as she would make Mary work for her.

When the music ended, Maddy stood in the center of the hall, hands on hips, labored breathing echoing off the walls. Her body begged to be allowed to collapse, but if Macke had signaled, she would have revved up and gone on.

"Not bad, kid." He tossed her a towel.

With a little laugh, Maddy buried her face in the cloth. It was no longer fresh, but it still absorbed

moisture. “Not bad? You know damn well it was terrific.”

“It was good.” Macke’s lips twitched; Maddy knew that was as good as a laugh for him. “Can’t stand cocky dancers.” But he watched her towel off, pleased and grateful that there was such a furnace of energy in her compact body. She was his tool, his canvas. His success would depend on her ability as much as hers did on his.

Maddy slung the towel around her neck as she walked over to the piano where the accompanist was already stacking up the score. “Can I ask you something, Macke?”

“Shoot.” He drew out a cigarette; it was a habit Maddy looked on with mild pity.

“How many musicals have you done now? Altogether, I mean, dancing and choreographing?”

“Lost count. We’ll call it plenty.”

“Okay.” She accepted his answer easily, though she would have bet her best tap shoes that he knew the exact number. “How do you gauge our chances with this one?”

“Nervous?”

“No. Paranoid.”

He took two short drags. “It’s good for you.”

“I don’t sleep well when I’m paranoid. I need my rest.”

His lips twitched again. “You’ve got the best—me. You’ve got a good score, a catchy libretto and a solid book. What do you want?”

“Standing room only.” She accepted a glass of water from the assistant choreographer and sipped carefully.

He answered because he respected her. It wasn’t based on what she’d done in *Suzanna’s Park*; rather, he admired what she and others like her did every day. She was twenty-six and had been dancing for more than twenty years. “You know who’s backing us?”

With a nod, she sipped again, letting the water play in her mouth, not cold but wonderfully wet. “Valentine Records.”

“Got any idea why a record company would negotiate to be the only backer of a musical?”

“Exclusive rights to the cast album.”

“You catch on.” He crushed out the cigarette, wishing immediately for another. He only thought of them when the music wasn’t playing—on the piano or in his head. Luckily for his lungs, that wasn’t often. “Reed Valentine’s our angel, a second-generation corporate bigwig, and from what I’m told he’s tougher than his old man ever thought of being. He’s not interested in us, sweetheart. He’s interested in making a profit.”

“That’s fair enough,” Maddy decided after a moment. “I’d like to see him make one.” She grinned. “A big one.”

“Good thinking. Hit the shower.”

* * *

The pipes were noisy and the water sprayed in staccato bursts, but it was cool and wet. Maddy propped both forearms against the wall and let the stream pour over her head. She’d taken a ballet class early that morning. From there she’d come directly to the rehearsal hall to go over two of the songs with the composer. The singing didn’t worry her—she had a clean voice, excellent pitch and a good range. Most of all, she was loud. The theater didn’t tolerate stingy voices.

She’d spent her formative years as one of the O’Hurley Triplets. When you sang in bars and clubs

with faulty acoustics and undependable audio equipment, you learned to be generous with your lungs

She had a pretty good handle on her lines. Tomorrow she'd be rehearsing with the other actors—after jazz class and before dance rehearsal. The acting itself gave her a few flutters. Chantel was the true actor in the family, just as Abby had the most fluid voice. Maddy would rely on the character of Mary to pull her through.

Her heart was in the dancing. It had to be. There was nothing more strenuous, more demanding, more exhausting. It had caught her—mind, body and soul—from the moment her father had taught her, her first simple tap routine in a dingy little lounge in Pennsylvania.

Look at me now, Pop, she thought as she shut off the inconsistent spray. I'm on Broadway.

Maddy toweled off quickly to avoid a chill and dressed in the street clothes she'd stuffed in her dance bag.

The big hall echoed. The composer and lyricist were performing minor surgery on one of their own tunes. There would be changes tomorrow, changes she and the other vocalists would have to learn. That was nothing new. Macke would have a dozen subtle alterations to the number they'd just gone over. That was nothing new, either.

Maddy heard the sound of dance shoes hitting the floor. The rhythm repeated over and over. Someone from the chorus was vocalizing. The vowel sounds rose and fell melodically.

Maddy swung her bag over her shoulders and descended the stairs to the street door with one thing on her mind—food. The energy and calories that she'd drained after a full day of exercise had to be replenished—but replenished wisely. She'd trained herself long ago to look at a dish of yogurt and a banana split with the same enthusiasm. Tonight it would be yogurt, garnished with fresh fruit and joined by a big bowl of barley soup and spinach salad.

At the door she paused a moment and listened again. The vocalist was still doing scales; piano music drifted, tinny and slight with distance. Feet slapped the floor in rhythm. The sounds were as much a part of her as her own heartbeat.

God bless Reed Valentine, she decided and stepped out into the balmy dusk.

She'd taken about two steps when a sharp jerk on her dance bag sent her spinning around. He was hardly more than a boy, really—sixteen, seventeen—but she couldn't miss the hard, desperate look in his eye. She'd been desperate a few times herself.

"You should be in school," she told him as they began a tug-of-war over her bag.

She'd looked like a pushover. A hundred pounds of fluff to be tossed aside while he took the bag and fled. Her strength surprised him but made him all the more determined to have whatever cash and plastic she carried. In the dim light beside the stairs of the old building, no one noticed the struggle. She thought of screaming, then thought of how young he was and tried reason instead. It had been pointed out to her once or twice that not everyone wanted to be reformed. That never stopped her from trying.

"You know what's in here?" she asked him as they pulled and tugged on the canvas. He was running out of breath more quickly than she was. "Sweaty tights and a towel that's already molding. And my ballet shoes."

Remembering them, she held on tighter. A pro, she knew, would have given up and looked for an easier mark. The boy was beginning to call her all sorts of names, but she ignored them, believing that he was entitled. "They're almost new, but they won't do you any good," she continued in the same rational tone. "I need them a lot more than you do." As they scuffled, she banged her heel against the iron railing and swore. She could afford to lose a few dollars, but she couldn't afford an injury. So he didn't want to be reformed, but maybe he'd compromise.

“Look, if you’ll let go a minute I’ll give you half of the cash I have. I don’t want to have to bother changing my credit cards—which I’ll do by calling that 800 number the minute you take off. I don’t have time to replace the shoes, and I need them tomorrow. All the cash,” she decided as she heard the seam in her bag begin to give. “I think I have about thirty dollars.”

He gave a fierce tug that sent Maddy stumbling forward. Then, at the sound of a shout, he released his hold. The bag dropped like a stone, its contents tumbling out. The boy, not wasting time on a curse, ran like a rocket down the street and around the first corner. Muttering to herself, Maddy crouched down to gather up her belongings.

“Are you all right?”

She reached for her tattered leg warmer and saw a pair of highly polished Italian shoes. As a dancer, she took a special notice of what people wore on their feet. Shoes often reflected one’s personality and self-esteem. Polished Italian shoes meant wealth and appreciation for what wealth could provide to Maddy. Above the exquisite leather were pale gray trousers that fell precisely to the middle of the foot, the legs creases perfectly aligned. An organized, sensible man, she decided as she gathered the loose change that had spilled from the bottom of her bag.

Looking higher, she saw that the trousers fit well over narrow hips and were buckled by a thin belt with a small, intricately worked gold buckle. Stylish, but not trendy.

The jacket was open, revealing a trim waist, a long torso smoothed by a light blue shirt and a dark tie. All silk. Maddy approved highly of silk worn against the body. Luxuries were only luxuries if they were enjoyed.

She looked at the hand that reached down to help her up. It was tanned, with long, attractive fingers. On his wrist was a gold watch that looked both expensive and practical. She put her hand in his and felt heat and strength and, she thought, impatience.

“Thank you.” She said it before she looked at his face. From her long visual journey up his body, she knew he was tall and lean. Rangy, not in the way of a dancer but in the way of a man who knew discipline without the extremes of sacrifice. In the same interested way she’d studied him from shoes to shoulders, she studied his face.

He was clean-shaven, and every line and plane showed clearly. His cheeks were slightly hollow, giving his otherwise hard and stern look a poetic hint. She’d always had a soft spot for poets. His mouth was in a firm line now, signaling disapproval or annoyance, while below it was a trace, just a touch, of a cleft in his chin. His nose was straight, aristocratic, and though he looked down at her, she took no offense. The eyes were a dark, flinty gray, and they conveyed as clearly as words the message that he didn’t care to waste time rescuing damsels in distress.

The fact that he didn’t, and yet had, made Maddy warm toward him.

He brushed his fingers through his burnished blond hair and stared back at her and wondered if she was going into shock. “Sit down,” he told her in the quick, clipped voice of a man accustomed to giving orders and having them obeyed. Immediately.

“I’m okay,” she said, sending him an easy smile. He noticed for the first time that her face wasn’t flushed or pale, that her eyes weren’t mirroring fear. She didn’t fit his picture of a woman who’d nearly been mugged. “I’m glad you came along when you did. That kid wasn’t listening to reason.”

She bent down again to gather her things. He told himself he should go and leave her to pick up her own scattered belongings, but instead he took a deep breath, checked his watch, then crouched down to help her. “Do you always try to reason with muggers?”

“Apprentice mugger would be my guess.” She found her key ring where it had bounced into a deep crack in the sidewalk. “And I was trying to negotiate.”

He held up Maddy's oldest practice tights, gingerly, by the backs of the knees. "Do you really think this was worth negotiating over?"

"Absolutely." She took them from him, rolled them up and stuffed them in her bag.

"He could have hurt you."

"He could have gotten my shoes." Maddy picked up her ballet slippers and stroked the supple leather. "A fat lot of good they'd have done him, and I only bought them three weeks ago. Hand me that sweatband, would you?"

He retrieved it, then grimaced. Dangling it by his fingertips, he handed it over. "Shower with this, do you?"

Laughing, she took it and dropped it in with the rest of her practice clothes. "No, it's just sweat. Sorry." But there was no apology in her eyes, only humor. "Dressed like that, you don't look as though you'd recognize the substance."

"I don't generally carry it around in a bag with me." He wondered why he didn't simply move by her and start on his way. He was already five minutes late, but something about the way she continued to look up at him with such frank good humor kept him there. "You don't react like a woman who've nearly lost a pair of tights, a faded leotard, a ratty towel, two pairs of shoes and five pounds of keys."

"The towel's not that ratty." Satisfied she'd found everything, Maddy closed her bag again. "And anyway, I didn't lose them."

"Most of the women I know wouldn't negotiate with a mugger."

Interested, she studied him again. He looked like a man who would know dozens of women, all elegant and intelligent. "What would they do?"

"Scream, I imagine."

"If I'd done that, he'd have my bag and I'd be out of breath." She dismissed the idea with a graceful shrug of strong shoulders. "Anyway, thanks." She offered her hand again, a delicate one, narrow and naked of jewelry. "I think white knights are lovely."

She was small and completely alone, and it was getting darker by the minute. His natural instinct for noninvolvement warred with his conscience. The resolution took the form of annoyance. "You shouldn't be walking around in this neighborhood after dark."

She laughed again, the sound bright, rich and amused. "This is my neighborhood. I only live about four blocks away. I told you the kid was green. No self-respecting mugger's going to look twice at a dancer. They know dancers are usually broke. But you—" She stepped back and took another long look. He was definitely worth taking the time to look twice. "You're another matter. Dressed like that you'd be better off carrying your watch and your wallet in your shorts."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Deciding one good turn deserved another, Maddy merely nodded. "Can I give you directions? You don't look as though you know your way around the lower forties."

Why had he been the one feeling responsible for her? In another minute that kid might have planted a fist in her face, but she didn't appear to have considered that. "No, thanks. I'm just going inside here."

"Here?" Maddy glanced over her shoulder at the ramshackle building that housed the rehearsal hall then looked at him speculatively. "You're not a dancer." She said that positively. It wasn't that he didn't move well—from the little she had seen, he'd looked good. He simply wasn't a dancer. "And not an actor," she decided after only a brief mental debate. "And I'd swear ... you aren't a musician, even though you've got good hands."

Every time he tried to walk away from her she drew him back. "Why not?"

“Too conservative,” Maddy told him immediately, but not with scorn. “Absolutely too straight. I mean you’re dressed like a lawyer or a banker or—” It struck her, clear as a bell. She positively beamed at him. “An angel.”

He lifted a brow. “You see a halo?”

“No, I don’t think you’d be willing to carry that kind of weight around. An angel,” she repeated. “A backer. Valentine Records?”

Yet again, Maddy offered her hand. He took it and found himself simply holding it. “That’s right. Reed Valentine.”

“I’m Merry Widow.”

He frowned. “I beg your pardon?”

“The stripper,” she said, and watched his eyes narrow. She might have left it at that, just for the possible shock value, but then he *had* helped her out. “From *Take It Off*. The play you’re backing.” Delighted with him, she covered his hand with her free one. “Maddy O’Hurley.”

This was Maddy O’Hurley? This compact little urchin with the crop of disheveled red-blond hair and the scrubbed face was the same powerhouse he’d watched in *Suzanna’s Park*? She’d worn a long blond wig for that, an *Alice in Wonderland* look, and period costumes of the 1890s, but still ... Her voice had boomed out, filling every crack in the theater. She’d danced with a frenzied, feverish energy that had awed a man who was very difficult to impress.

One of the reasons he’d been willing to back the play was Maddy O’Hurley. Now he was face-to-face with her and swamped with doubts.

“Madeline O’Hurley?”

“That’s what it says on the contract.”

“I’ve seen you perform, Miss O’Hurley. I didn’t recognize you.”

“Lights, costume, makeup.” She shrugged it off. When there weren’t footlights, she prized her anonymity and acknowledged her own unremarkable looks. She’d been born one of three—Chantel had gotten the heart-stopping beauty, Abby the warm loveliness, and she’d gotten cute. Maddy figured there were reasons for it, but she couldn’t help being amused by Reed’s cautious look. “Now you’re disappointed,” she concluded with a secret smile.

“I never said—”

“Of course, you wouldn’t. You’re much too polite. Don’t worry, Mr. Valentine Records, I’ll deliver. Any O’Hurley’s a wise investment.” She laughed at her own private joke. The streetlight behind them flickered on, signaling that night was coming, like it or not. “I guess you’ve got meetings inside.”

“Ten minutes ago.”

“Time’s only important when you’re on cue. You’ve got the checkbook, Captain, you’re in charge.” Before she stepped out of his way, she gave him a friendly pat on the arm. “Listen, if you’re around in a couple of days, come by rehearsals.” She took a few steps, turned and walked backward, grinning at him. “You can watch me bump and grind. I’m good, Valentine. Real good.” With a *pirouette*, she turned away, eating up the sidewalk with an easy jog.

In spite of a penchant for promptness, Reed continued to watch her until she disappeared around the corner. He shook his head and started up the stairs. Then he noticed a small round hairbrush. The temptation to leave it where it lay was strong. Curiosity was stronger. When Reed scooped it up, he noticed that it carried the faintest scent of shampoo—something lemon scented and fresh. He resisted the urge to sniff at it and stuck it in his jacket pocket. Would a woman like that miss a hairbrush? he wondered, then shrugged the thought away. He’d see that she got it back in any case.

He was bound to see Maddy O’Hurley again anyway, he told himself. It wouldn’t hurt to do one

more good deed.

Chapter 2

Nearly a week passed before Reed managed to schedule another visit to the rehearsal hall. He was able to justify the trip to himself as good business sense, but just barely. It had never been his intention to become directly involved with the play itself. Meetings with the producer and sessions with the accountants would have been enough to keep him informed. Reed understood balance sheets, ledgers and neatly formed columns better than he did the noises and the scents inside the decaying old building. But it never hurt to keep a tight rein on an investment—even if the investment involved an odd woman with a vivid smile.

He felt out of place. He was a twenty-minute cab ride from his offices yet was just as out of place in the rehearsal hall in his three-piece suit as he would have been on some remote island in the South Seas where the natives wore bones in their ears.

He would never have considered his life sheltered. In the course of his career he'd visited some seamy areas, dealt with people from varied backgrounds. But he lived uptown, where the restaurants were sedate and the view of the park out his apartment window was restful.

As he started up the stairs, Reed told himself it was natural curiosity that had brought him back. That coupled with the simple matter of protecting his interests. Valentine Records had sunk a good chunk of capital into *Take It Off*, and he was responsible for Valentine Records. Still, he reached into his pocket and toyed with Maddy's hairbrush. Going against his natural inclinations, he headed toward the sounds of music and talk.

In a room wrapped with mirrors, he found the dancers. They weren't the glittery, spangly chorus one paid to see on a Broadway stage, but a ragtag, dripping group of men and women in frayed tights. To him they were a helter-skelter mix of faded, damp leotards without any hint of the precision or uniformity expected of professionals. He felt uneasy for a moment as they stood, most of them with their hands on their hips, and stared at the small, thin man he knew was the choreographer.

"Let's have a little more steam, boys and girls," Macke instructed. "This is a strip joint, not a cotillion. We've got to sell sex and keep it good-natured. Wanda, I want a hesitation on the hip roll, then make it broader. Maddy, raise some blood pressure when you step up in the shimmy. Bend it from the waist."

He demonstrated, and Maddy watched, considered the move, then grinned at him. "I saw the design for my costume, Macke. If I bend over like that, the boys in the front row are going to get an anatomy lesson."

Macke looked her over. "A small one, in your case."

The dancers around her snorted and cackled. Maddy took the ribbing with a good-humored laugh as they moved back into position to take the count. They moved, with gusto, on eight.

Reed watched with steadily growing astonishment. Over a floor shiny with sweat, the dancers sprang to life. Legs flashed, hips rolled. Men and women found their partners in what seemed to be a riot of churning bodies. There were lifts, jumps, spins and the soft stamp of feet. From his vantage

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