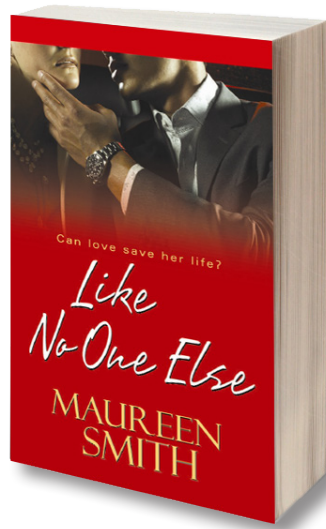


MAUREEN SMITH



AN EXCERPT FROM **LIKE NO ONE ELSE**

Fifteen young girls clad in pink leotards and matching tights formed a line at the wooden barre backed by a long wall of mirrors. The dancers' faces were a study of concentration as their ballet instructor walked the length of the studio floor, inspecting postures and manually correcting positions. Her rare nods of approval elicited smiles from the lucky recipients—smiles that evaporated the moment another rapid-fire command was issued.

“*Adagio*, ladies! Release on one, *demi-plié* on two, *pas de bourrée* on three, close on four!”

Dressed in a black leotard, a sheer black skirt and black leggings, with her long dark hair pulled back into a severe ponytail, Tommie Purnell watched as her students executed the steps with fluid, graceful movements.

“Good,” she called above the music flowing from a baby grand piano tucked into a corner of the room. The pianist, a stout, elderly black

woman with skin the color of almonds and a tight cap of gray curls covering her head, had been hired shortly after Tommie opened her dance studio six months ago.

“And now for the *petit allégro* combination,” Tommie announced, facing the class as she prepared to demonstrate. “Stand in first position, *demi-plié*, straighten the knees—” she broke off suddenly, her gaze snared by a darkly handsome Hispanic man who had appeared in the open doorway of the studio. A battered leather jacket clung to his broad shoulders, and black jeans hung low on lean, narrow hips. Dark, penetrating eyes met and held Tommie’s in the mirror.

Her pulse thudded.

Abruptly the music stopped, and in the ensuing silence, one last dissonant chord rang out.

Tommie spun around in her pointe shoes to face the newcomer. “What are you doing here?” she demanded.

Paulo Sanchez inclined his dark head. “Hello to you, too, Miss Purnell.” Even from across the room, his deep voice made Tommie’s stomach clench, a familiar reaction she didn’t care to explore.

Seized by a sudden, terrible fear, she stared at him. “Is it my sister? Or Marcos? Did something hap—”

“Francesca and your nephew are fine,” Paulo assured her. “And so are your parents and Sebastien.”

Tommie inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. She didn’t think she could handle another crisis, not after everything she and her family had already been through. Besides, she’d had no reason to panic. If there *had* been a family emergency, someone would have called her immediately, black sheep or not.

Belatedly she remembered her students poised at the barre. They were staring at Paulo, undoubtedly struck by the incongruity of the good-looking, dangerous-edged man who seemed as out of place in that bastion of femininity as a Spanish conquistador at a tea party.

Tommie glanced at her watch and saw that the hour was up. After she issued a stern reminder to her class to practice what they had learned that afternoon, the students, in keeping with ballet tradition, clapped for Tommie and the pianist before they were formally dismissed. Chattering amongst themselves, the girls stuffed their pointe shoes inside duffel bags, gathered their belongings and filed out of the room to meet their mothers, who were patiently waiting in a small observation area separated from the main studio by a glass partition. Normally the parents lingered after class to talk to Tommie. Today they departed with raised eyebrows and demure smiles directed at Paulo.

Scowling, Tommie stalked across the room toward him, her ponytail swinging from side to side. “I hope you have a damned good reason for interrupting my class,” she grouched.

A faintly mocking smile curved firm, sensual lips. “And if I don’t?” Paulo challenged.

Tommie’s temper flared, even as she silently cursed herself for allowing him to get under her skin. Not that this was anything new. Paulo Sanchez had been getting under her skin ever since she met him four years ago at her sister’s wedding rehearsal dinner. From the moment Tommie and Paulo locked gazes, the chemistry between them had been powerful, sizzling with electricity. But Tommie, who had just gotten out of a bad relationship, knew the last thing she needed was a rebound romance. Still, it had taken every ounce of willpower she possessed to resist Paulo, to ignore the way her pulse raced as he’d escorted her down the aisle at the wedding ceremony, to ignore her throbbing breasts and her aching loins as they’d slow danced

together at the reception. By accident or design, Tommie had caught the bride's bouquet while Paulo came away with the garter belt. To this day, she still remembered the wicked gleam in his eyes as his big, callused hands had slowly traveled up her thigh to secure the garter, leaving a trail of scorched nerve endings.

That, finally, had been her undoing.