



TITLE The Dance Club
PRICE: £6.99
ISBN-13: 978-0-9554239-25
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CATEGORY: Women's Adult Fiction
TARGET AUDIENCE: Women (30+)
SPECIFICATION: Paperback, 348 pages,
 129mm x 198mm

AVAILABLE FROM

PUBLISHER: www.indepublishing.com
DISTRIBUTOR: Bertrams Books

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Miranda: an attractive and intelligent 40-something mother of two who has lost direction in life.

Iain: her handsome but defeated husband who can no longer be bothered to complain.

Louisa & Matthew: their children; regular middle-class kids whose lives are filled with skills-enhancing activities.

Lynn: a highly-strung, extremely successful business-woman turned housewife. She is older than the others and feels it.

Christoph: her successful, lawyer husband who doesn't need to work but doesn't know what else he would do if he didn't.

Mariella: their wild and wayward child who pulls an array of attention-seeking stunts.

Katie: Boarding-school-educated eternal earth mother; she is the unmarried mother of a dull daughter and three feral boys.

Charlie: member of the aristocracy, he is completely laid-back and lazy – but a good laugh. Sadly, he remains insensitive to hints about making an honest woman of Katie.

Arabella: their dull daughter who never gets selected for school productions.

The Boys: the three feral boys Katie is raising.

Tina: timid and pretty with a very frail look and demeanour. She is catatonic with misery over her disastrous marriage to Adam...

Adam: a dark, brooding, moody man with flashing eyes and sarky comments, who appears to despise both his wife and her friends.

Emily: their daughter, as pretty and timid as her mother; she loves her father as much as her mother hates him.

Elissia: a most unusual friend and dance teacher who signs them up for pole-dancing and is not backward in telling them some home-truths.

Jonno: her hunky husband who flirts with anything that moves but is clearly devoted to his wife.

Katya: their funky daughter who has life in the palm of her hand.

The Twins: neat little, well-behaved boys with Elissia's dark skin and Jonno's button eyes.

1 WHAT LIFE COULD BRING

“I forgot that I might need What life could bring... Beautiful things” (Beautiful Things - Andain)

Life sometimes takes a sharp right turn, throwing you down a road that you really were not expecting to travel. One moment, the days are rolling into each other, nothing ever changes and you feel numb with its repetition and suddenly, bang, it all changes. Life as you know it becomes unrecognisable. Instead of chugging along in a straight line, you are hurtling up, down and around corners as though you are on a helter-skelter. You know at some point the ride will stop, but where? When? And how will it end? Will you get hurt either along the way or as you skid to a halt?

That is what happened to me last summer. Six months ago. *Only* six months ago! It feels like a lifetime. So much happened and in such a short space of time. I didn't see it coming, but I know the moment when it started, when the indicator was snapped on and there was a brief warning that I was hooking a right and taking a different path.

It began in the gym, where my friends and I were lined up on the running machines and jogging gently to the rhythm of our conversation. This was our thing. We met up a couple of times a week and aired our frustrations about our husbands and children, gossiped about other mothers in the school and their badly behaved children and the awful service we got in shops. I cannot remember missing a single week in the gym since we started meeting up here when our daughters were in Year 2, four whole years ago.

We had already trotted through the usual complaints – Katie's partner Charlie, who was chronically lazy, had left the kitchen awash with a late night feast. Lynn's daughter Mariella was in trouble again – unsurprising as she was twelve-going-on-sixteen and seemed to delight in disappointing her hugely successful parents. Tina said nothing, but her shadowed eyes and dragged-down shoulders needed little explanation. We are all quite wary of her husband, Adam, who is a powerfully built, dark-haired man with a perpetually moody attitude and flashing black eyes. He appears to go out of his way to make Tina unhappy and none of us could work out why she had married him in the beginning. She was so pretty, timid and ethereal whilst he was so surly and solid.

Elissia was not participating in our conversation, having switched her machine onto a high speed and incline and was jogging seriously enough to build up an actual sweat. She was the only one to take the exercise seriously and it showed. She had a fantastic figure, unlike the rest of us who simply got more creative with our clothes. But Elissia was different from the rest of us in many more ways than just fashion. She had moved into Kingston only a few months earlier and had fallen into our group of friends because her daughter and Mariella had become very pally. If it hadn't been for this friendship, I doubt we would have made the effort to get to know her as she had such a different, and much younger, outlook than the rest of us.

As I say, we were half-heartedly jogging on the running machines, gossiping about the trivial matters that fill our lives – a badly behaved child in one of the classes, a teacher who was rude to a parent, a horror story of a woman whose child was lost in the High street for five minutes and, of course, the endless irritations of home-life such as the moody husband, the stropky children, the eternal dullness of housework and cooking.

Finally Elissia pressed the stop button on her machine and came to a halt.

“Well, I have worked it out,” she said happily, breathing as evenly as if she had just walked into the gym.

“Worked what out?” we chorused.

“What sexy little outfit I am going to wear on Saturday night.”

We smiled. We should have known that her mind was fretting over the more important things in her life – sexy outfits. She appeared to spend her life shopping, or at least window shopping, having her colours done, doing exercise and having spa sessions.

“I think,” she continued without pausing to see if we were interested, or even listening, “it will be the new silver top with the diamante triangle because it makes my breasts look fantastic, and a little silvery black skirt worn with a large belt on my hips because it looks fantastic when I do pole and lap dancing.”

We frowned in confusion. “Why do you need...?” I began.

“For my birthday party,” she said then looked scandalised. “I hope you haven’t forgotten!”

“About your birthday party? Of course not,” Katie reassured her quickly. “But what’s that got to do with...”

“Pole and lap dancing?” Lynn finished disdainfully.

“Because the place we are going to is a new pole and lap dancing club. Duh!” Elissia shook her head at us irritably.

You could have heard a pin drop in the silence that followed; we were surprised, disgusted, horrified and intrigued. That’s to say, Tina was surprised, Lynn was disgusted, Katie was horrified and I was intrigued. None of us had realised what Elissia’s plan for her party was or where it was being held, and looking back, I think Elissia had been deliberately unforthcoming about her party until the last minute. She knew it would prompt a reaction, particularly from Lynn who launched into a diatribe against the feminist issue of women dancing subserviently for men.

“Why are you being so aggressive?” Elissia asked.

“It is abuse of women, diminishing them to the status of being purely pleasure animals,” Lynn hissed.

Elissia threw her a scornful look. “Chill out, Lynn. It’s just dancing, and if you haven’t been watching, the whole youth culture since the 1990’s has been about the emancipation of women. That’s what the thong-above-jeans look and belly-hanging-out look is all about, if you hadn’t realised, just as all forms of exotic dancing are about women doing it for themselves.”

Lynn stared daggers at Elissia but had no retort to come back with. Academically and intellectually Lynn walked all over the rest of us but she knew nothing about popular culture.

Elissia chose not to be smug about her victory. “So what are you going to wear, Miranda?” she turned to me and I fought back a smile as Lynn was left staring at the back of Elissia’s head.

“I didn’t realise it was a lap dancing club,” I admitted. “But I take it that *we* don’t actually lap dance?”

“You can do any dance you want,” Elissia said.

“Can we just sit and drink?” I asked.

“Come on, stop taking life so seriously. Let your hair down, have fun and put some bounce in your step,” she was urging.

“I have plenty of bounce of my step,” Katie said ruefully, glancing down at her ample bosom.

Elissia rolled her eyes and turned back to me. “Don’t be boring. Be sexy, have some fun, let your hair down... seduce Iain. Shock him.”

I laughed inwardly. It certainly would shock him if I got up and started lap dancing. Not because he’s a prude. God no. We used to have the most wild and fabulous sex, but that was in the past. Life had become a bit more middle-aged and staid in recent years.

“Not quite my thing,” I smiled patiently at Elissia, as though placating a child.

“That’s why you and Iain have such a boring marriage,” she retorted sulkily.

My jaw dropped and I heard both Katie and Tina gasp in shock. “That’s a bit harsh, Elissia, even for you,” I replied, refusing to rise to her bait although her comment cut deep.

“Well. You do.”

“No I don’t.”

“Prove it. Prove to me that you and Iain are fun together and that you know how to give him a good time.”

“I don’t have to prove anything to you,” I countered, an edge to my voice.

“So, prove it to Iain then,” she challenged. “Play with passion.” I eyeballed her back whilst a million different reactions ran through

my mind. Defence, indignation, denial, confusion or indifferent laughter.

“I don’t know what’s bitten you this morning, but don’t take it out on me and Iain. We’re just fine without your advice,” I said finally.

She shrugged. “Really?” she asked airily, and doubt settled silently around my shoulders. Are we fine? I wondered. How are we doing?

I pressed the Cool Down button on my machine, and changed my jog to a walk as I allowed the question to take hold in my head. Iain and I are... well, just the next couple along. We get on with the business of living... eating, talking, sleeping, waking and bickering. Sometimes we feel irritable at each other and occasionally we laugh at a comment the other has said. We’re comfortable with each other. There are no surprises, neither pleasant nor unpleasant, and I think we’re both content with that. I guess to Elissia it may appear boring, but as far as Iain and I were concerned we were fine, and Elissia had no business casting aspersions on my marriage. Anyway, she barely knew us. I shook my head to disperse the niggling doubts that prodded me, and returned to the conversation where they were still bickering about sexy dancing.

“I have listened to you all for months now, whinging about your ‘other half’ instead of actually doing something about your boring marriages and dreadful husbands,” she said before rounding on us in a confrontational way.

“We don’t have dreadful husbands,” Lynn and I both retorted angrily, and even Katie’s usually congenial expression looked horrified. In the short time we had known Elissia, we had quickly learned that she was blasé about her opinions, arbitrarily insulting or praising without so much as an acknowledgement. But if you reacted angrily to an insult, she was often surprised, claiming that she didn’t mean it as an insult but as an observation that you may wish to consider. As if she was doing you a favour pointing out a shortcoming you might have!

“Pah!” Elissia jerked her head in disagreement. “Tell me you all have perfect marriages, then.”

“Equally we never said they were perfect!” I argued. “Christ, I’m fifty percent of my marriage and I know I’m not perfect.”

“Anyway, it’s not *de rigueur* to wash your dirty linen in public,” Katie explained in a more patient tone.

“You usually do! Every week in fact,” retorted Elissia quickly.

Katie frowned. “But that’s just... petty complaints. It doesn’t mean anything...” she said uncertainly.

“I definitely do not have a perfect marriage,” whispered Tina in her timid voice. “My marriage is on such a fast downhill that I don’t know if I can even jump off without serious injury in the process. I don’t think Adam would let me go without a fight, anyway.”

We looked at poor little Tina pityingly whilst Katie leaned across and hugged her. “We’ll look after you, little one,” she said.

“You have enough children to look after,” Tina replied with a weak smile on her face.

Lynn made an indignant noise, looking at Elissia challengingly. “Well, I have a perfect marriage,” she said firmly. Elissia arched an eyebrow at her and smirked, clearly cooking up a cutting answer.

“There is a middle ground, you know, between awful and perfect,” I interrupted.

“But why accept average? Why not go for brilliant? Why do the British fear being the best? You get to a point and say ‘*oh, it’s okay how it is*’ but it’s not. You should be striving to have fantastic marriages, to love and be loved fully. It’s so much more rewarding.”

“I think you’ll find that all of our complaints about our husbands are little more than petty irritations rather than signals our marriages are failing,” I said, casting aside Tina’s concerns for a moment.

“It’s what you don’t say, rather than what you do say,” Elissia countered, giving me a penetrating look.

I couldn’t be bothered to fight anymore and neither, it appeared, could the others. We all seemed to droop as we stepped off our running machines and stooped to collect up our hand towels. It was as though Elissia’s words had completely deflated us.

“I think I’ve had enough for today,” I said spiritlessly.

“I certainly have!” snapped Lynn.

Katie and Tina stood back uncertainly with an air of dejection and sadness respectively. Elissia had just successfully taken the fun out

of our pretence at exercise whilst we all gossiped and gave vent to our daily frustrations.

Elissia sighed heavily, stopping her running machine. "I guess you lot are right. You barely understand the politics of your own marriages, let alone the politics of dancing," she said, stepping off her cross-country machine. "Well, I'm going shopping," she continued. "If any of you want to release that young, sexy minx inside you, call me on the mobile. I'm going into Kingston to get some shoes to go with my outfit."

I watched her slim figure saunter out, admiring how great she looked even jogging pants and sweaty top. I doubted I could ever look like that, and wondered why. After all, she was forty as well. Age hadn't stopped her.

"Politics, my foot!" exploded Lynn. "What she knows about politics could be written on a postage stamp."

Katie and Tina giggled, but a little part of me had left with Elissia. I made a feeble excuse about having to get on, and rushed out. Elissia had aroused my curiosity, prodding at a vague doubt or desire that lurked in the back of my mind. I called her on the mobile and suggested I meet her in Kingston.

"I knew you'd come," she smiled as I walked up to her ten minutes later.

"You provoked me," I conceded as we fell into step. "Why are you being horrible about me and Iain?"

"Don't take it like that," she said neutrally. "All I am saying is that you two seem to be out of step with each other, and you need to free your mind up to find new ways of communicating with each other, to get a good and positive vibe going."

"I don't understand."

"Nobody can from the outside. You have to jump in feet first in order to feel it and therefore understand. But sadly most people don't trust themselves to jump, and have stopped feeling with their hearts."

"And you think we have?" I asked curiously. She nodded. "Why?"

"You're not at ease with each other. You seem to be constantly pushing against him."

I opened my mouth to deny this but she got there first.

"It's just an observation," she said before dragging me into Zara.

I was therefore in a curious mood when I got home after my shopping trip with Elissia. Her 'observation' bothered me and it rattled around in my mind as I unpacked the outfit she had encouraged me to buy.

It was a fairly classical Chanel fitted black number with an inbuilt breast enhancer. In fact, my breasts were virtually spilling out and Elissia said the combination of classic and sexy would definitely make Iain gibber with desire. I had acted indifferent to her claim at the time, but inwardly it made me realise that Iain had long stopped acting as though I was the sexiest and most amazing woman he had ever met. Suddenly, I was looking forward to her pole dancing 40th birthday party.

So the die was cast. Elissia had successfully thrown doubt on something that I had always been so sure of. Were Iain and I fine? Were we having fun? Were we having sex, come to think of it? Not often, if truth be told. And did I ever make him gibber with excitement, or did he even desire me?

When Iain came home from work that evening, I found myself looking at him critically.

"Hi," he greeted me as he made his habitual dive for the fridge.

"Hi," I smiled at his back.

"Drink?" he said glugging some wine into a clean wine glass. I indicated my already-used glass.

"Good day?" I asked him, trying to catch his eye.

"Same old," he shrugged as he filled my glass then put the bottle of wine back in the fridge on his way out of the kitchen. I didn't want him to habitually vanish into his study. I wanted his attention.

"I crashed the car today," I called out. He shot back into the kitchen.

"Did you?" he asked in wide-eyed surprise. "What happened?"

"I didn't actually. That was just a call-back comment."

He frowned. "A what?"

“A call-back comment. I wanted to see you for more than the two seconds it takes you to pour a glass of wine and exit the kitchen. The car’s fine. You just walked past it five minutes on your way into the house.”

Iain stood in front of me doubtfully. “Are you alright?” he asked, peering at me.

“I’m fine. I just wanted some company.”

“You’re being odd.”

“Why? Because I want to talk to you before you disappear onto the computer or in front of the telly for the evening.”

He nodded indifferently. “Okay. What do you want to talk about?” he asked, propping himself against on the work top near the door.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “What about you? Any excitement from your day? Read any interesting snippets in the newspaper? Anyone crack a good joke today?”

Iain looked at me with a confused smile on his face. “You’ve gone mad, haven’t you?”

“Do neither of us really have anything to say to each other at the end of the day?” I asked, deliberately injecting a light note, as though observing a passing curiosity. But I could see as soon as I said it that Iain had taken it completely the wrong way.

The smile disappeared from Iain’s face. “If I bore you, please tell me and tomorrow I will scale at least one crane and save one person in distress, all because the lady loves conversation at the end of the day.”

“Don’t get huffy,” I approached him and pulled gently at the lapel of his jacket but he remained stubbornly unmoved. “Maybe just the box of Milk Tray will be nice.” I kissed his wooden cheek.

“All this, for some chocolates?” he asked, throwing back the last of his glass of wine. “Milk Tray it is then.”

I watched as he poured himself another glass of wine, fighting back some words of retaliation at his dismissive bluntness.

“I will search for some interesting conversation on Google and try to have something ready by dinnertime,” he added as he left the room. I rolled my eyes, both frustrated yet unsurprised that he had chosen to take my question personally. I guess this was part of the

tension that Elissia mentioned, although I had always put it down to having been married for so long. Like most twelve year old marriages, we tended to bicker in-between domestic conversations. But I had never considered this to be an issue until Elissia’s accusatory words today.

Another curious fact about life is that when a topic has been introduced into your life, suddenly it is everywhere. Every hoarding, poster, side of bus, page advert and radio channel is fixating on that one subject. They say it is because you have always previously ‘zoned’ the topic out because it wasn’t a part of your life, but once introduced, you become sensitive to it. Suddenly it appears to be everywhere you look. The truth, allegedly, is that it always was there; you just never saw it before.

So I should not have been surprised the next morning to open the magazine up at an indeterminate page in the middle, to see the headline “*Bored? Or just married?*”

The first paragraph made the claim that research recently conducted discovered that the majority of couples choose to stay together, irrespective of how miserable they make each other, for the sake of the children. The article went on to say that eight times out of ten, they still ended up divorcing many years later, having merely dragged the children through a very unhappy, tense five or so years. The journalist therefore concluded that it would have been better for the couple to have divorced at the point they chose to stay together for the wrong reasons.

I shrugged indifferently. This article was not about Iain and me. We had never contemplated parting. We were not unhappy. We were fine. I cast my eye over a list of facts printed in bold in a box, pretending to myself that I was merely interested in such social statistics.

- ❑ 153,500 marriages in the UK ended in divorce in 2004
- ❑ 69% of divorces were between first-time-married couples
- ❑ The average age of divorce was 36-40 years for women; 39-42 years of age for men

- ❑ The average length of marriage for divorcees were 11.5 years
- ❑ 69% of the divorces were granted to the wife, of which, 52% were granted based on the husband's behaviour

Okay. It was a bit closer to home. Iain and I were first-time married. I was 40 years old, he was 42. We have been married for 12 years and his sulky behaviour last night was destructive, albeit not grounds enough for divorce. But still... these two events and thoughts converged and it got me thinking. The rest, as they say, was history. I was provoked, and I reacted.