

Read an extract:
An Invitation to Dance
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Prelude

Across snow and ice it came, ruffling the surface of fallow fields and creeping into stark, frost-blighted gardens. It stole along muffled streets and slid beneath doorways. It slithered through thick layers of winter drapes, penetrating the tiniest cracks between wooden skirting and the walls. It blew out candles and unsettled cats. A brooding sense of unease lingered over the houses, an indeterminate restlessness dropping through the chill and frosty air.

Soliloquy

Lola stood at the back of the shrouded, unlit stage, soft glancing shadows settling around her like films of drifting soot. Soon the wall of dense maroon velvet would part with a swish in front of her, but not yet, not just yet. The tabernacle plush of the curtains rippled like water beneath a breeze, like skin rising beneath a lover's touch. She breathed more deeply. Beyond the curtains, she could hear a gathering impatience of voices. A violinist plucked a few strings; somebody coughed. As the rhythms of harp and timpani sounded, the curtains stirred. When the cymbals clashed the drapes divided like the Red Sea parting in front of Moses.

She moved into the light, step by careful step. As if she had never walked before, as if all of her was held caged within each step. Two, three, four, she caught the rhythm of the harp and breathed the gut notes of the double bass. On the ninth note she raised her castanets above her head. As she circled the floor, she wove an intricate web with the undulating movements of her arms, then wrists. In one moment, she was a woman blissfully in love, the next, scornful and proud. She was full of abandon, then rage, then desire - like a flicker book of emotions swirling around the stage. When she performed a drum roll of *zapateados* with her heels, the audience was jolted by the sound. With a bold gaze, she bore down on them, like the most powerful woman in the world.

That night, her performance encapsulated all the great moments of her career. Dresden, Warsaw, Paris, she danced them all again. She was in Berlin, dancing for the King of Prussia and Czar Nicholas 1, the Emperor of all of Russia. In Munich, she conquered King Ludwig once more. She was twenty-three and making her debut all over again, on the stage of Her Majesty's Theatre in London.

When she took her final bow, the audience of the Broadway Theatre in New York rose, stamping and cheering, to their feet. Applause vibrated through her. Every part of her body tingled, from her fingers to the tips of her toes. She opened out her arms in supplication and the air filled with roses. After one kiss, she blew another. When a long stemmed dewy rose landed at her feet, she picked it up and pressed the petals to her cheek. Deepest crimson, scarlet, damson, dusky grape - the buds spread in pools across the boards. By the time the curtains fell, roses clotted the stage. The trampled buds and bruised petals exuded the sweet, oily scent of roses. She began to feel dizzy. She worried that she might fall. The juice of crushed rose petals leaked across the floor.