


Girlfriend *fiction*

STEP UP AND DANCE

Thalia Kalkipsakis


ALLEN & UNWIN

CHAPTER 1

It was the letter of my dreams – a Valentine’s letter, wrapped in a blood red envelope, leaning against the soy sauce on our kitchen table.

I picked up the envelope, flipped it over and dropped it beside my plate because just then I was more interested in the soy sauce. Mum’s sushi rolls after a late dance class are *to die for*, like Tim Tams at the right time of the month.

‘Don’t get that sauce on your tights,’ Mum scolded as I tucked in to my third roll. She hovered behind one of the chairs, eyes twinkling so that her crow’s feet were almost beautiful. ‘Well, Saph, who’s it from?’

‘It’ll just be from Summer,’ I sighed, mouth full, pulling my tights away from a blister on my big toe.

My best friend Summer is the kind of person who hands out millions of cards on February 13 in the hope that she’ll receive just as many back the next day. Last year she made

all the cards herself and decorated them with her own red lipstick kisses. (A tad corny if you ask me.) When I gave her a hard time about spreading her love so far (fourteen cards and forty two kisses!) she just shrugged and said, ‘Well, practice makes perfect.’ That’s my Summer.

It’s not every day that a girl receives a Valentine, even from her best friend. But I was putting off opening it because right up until the moment when I opened the envelope and actually saw Summer’s name scribbled at the bottom of the card, I could hang onto the hope – microscopic, amoeba-sized, but still a sweet sparkle of hope – that it could perhaps be . . . *from him*.

When I finally slid my finger into that red envelope and pulled out the paper inside, Mum had given up waiting for me to open it and was watching TV with Dad.

I could hear the hum of the dishwasher and the quiet ting of glasses inside. The letter felt cool in my hands. Carefully, I unfolded it.

The first thing I noticed was the number of words – way more than the *Love your work!* that Summer might write. It was typed and printed on a plain A4 page. Not Summer’s style *at all*.

I skimmed down the page until my eyes fell on the only hand-written words. And there it was. His beautiful, bold, sporty name – *Damien Rowsthorn*.

Damien, Damien, Damien . . . When I saw those words my heart seemed to stop and then begin again to the beat of his magnificent name.

No one has any idea what Damien means to me. To most

people he's just an NBL basketball player. But to me . . . well, seeing his name written carefully, lovingly, at the bottom of a heartfelt letter was better than receiving a bunch of red roses from Orlando Bloom. It was like Minnie Mouse getting a giant cheese-wheel from Mickey. Damien, without a doubt, was the man of my dreams. His handwriting wasn't too bad either.

He had signed his full name. How cute! *It's not like I don't know who you are, Damien!* (I never sign emails Sapho Thespina Giannopoulos, life's too short for a start.) And he'd typed *from your secret admirer* at the bottom of the letter, as if he'd had to work up the courage to sign his name. Damien was so confident on the basketball court, I couldn't believe he was sweet and shy in real life!

I ran to my room, shut the door, and fell into his words – reading backwards and upwards and all the wrong ways, trying to read them before they disappeared like a daydream, starting to believe that this really was a letter from Damien to me.

To Saph,

I have watched you dancing for a year. The things you do with your legs! And your body. You dance like a goddess. I can't get you out of my mind. Do you ever notice me?

Happy Valentine's Day from your secret admirer.

Damien Rowsthorn.

Ah, my dear sweet Damien. He clearly had brains as well as supremely sexy legs. He'd work out a way to get around the ban.

Last year, one of the girls in our cheerleading troupe went to a nightclub with a basketballer after the game. A photographer caught them pashing on the dancefloor and a newspaper ran the headline Sports Star and Cheerleader in Drunken Embrace. Very bad for the family image of the Magic Charms. (Not to mention the number of calories in three lemon vodkas and a cocktail with a name that made even Lesley's cheeks go pink.) Lesley is our choreographer, and jeez was she furious. After that, two big rules were introduced for all Magic Charms – guys and girls.

1. NO DRINKING IN PUBLIC.

(Fine with me – I'm underage anyway.)

2. NO SOCIALISING WITH BASKETBALL PLAYERS.

(*Not remotely* fine. I mean, stopping basketballers and cheerleaders from going out? That's against the laws of nature.)

Sometimes kids at school ask me for gossip about the Magic players, as if we're all sitting around together before each game, sharing game plans and heat rub. But in reality, the players have nothing to do with the cheerleaders. Their job is the game, and ours starts when a time-out is called. We don't even train at the same time.

So you can see how clever it was for Damien to send me a *secret* letter – *all* our time together would have to be secret. He'd even gone to the trouble of finding my address, which

was just short of amazing since we're not listed. Brains, wit and a sweet hook shot – clearly the perfect man.

I lay on my bed, chin in hand, smiling at the back of my closed door. Damien stared back at me – light bushy hair, well-muscled shoulders, broad cheeks, even his eyebrows were cute. If he was going to be my boyfriend I'd probably have to take his poster off my wall – he might think it was a bit weird.

So, Damien, we were meant to be together after all.

I rested my head on my arm, closed my eyes and let the daydreams come thick and fast. Hiding in the back seat of Damien's car as he drives me to the games. A wink or secret signal between us each time he scores a basket. Fussing over him after a hard game, smoothing heat rub over his sore shoulders . . .

My eyes flew open. Omigod, the next time I saw him we'd actually speak to each other!

Yes, Damien of my dreams, I do notice you. Every game, you're all that I see – you and your gorgeous legs.



'See you at ten thirty,' said Dad, after I had kissed him on the cheek and winced at his gross spiky beard.

He was gripping the steering wheel with both hands even though we were safely parked in the loading bay of the basketball stadium. Drop-off time is always a nervous moment for Dad. When I had first asked if I could join the

Magic Charms cheer squad, Dad stared at me as if I'd asked to become a stripper. (*Jeez, thanks, Dad.*)

Then the lecturing had begun. *No daughter of mine . . . You're too good for that, Saph . . .* and a heap of other phrases that made me think he had time-travelled from the 1950s with the sole purpose of torturing me.

Of course, I hadn't given up that easily. It had taken three weeks of *Basketball's a family game . . .* and *This is a dream chance for any dancer . . .* from me and Mum before we wore him down to a growling *okay then*. But somehow I still felt like I was letting him down each time I went to a game.

'Actually, we'll be finished half an hour later tonight,' I said, smiling as if it was no big deal. Before he had time to stop me, I slid out of the front seat, grabbing my pompoms, costume and make-up bag. (It takes a lot of stuff to look like a Charm.)

'Wait, Saph! Why?' Dad's voice had a deep growl to it – calm, but not for long.

With arms full, I leaned back into the car. 'There's this . . . ah . . . peewee basketball demonstration before the main game. You know, the little kids?' I said with my eyebrows raised. 'They're really cute, on the big basketball court and all.' I shrugged. 'Anyway, that's going to push the main game back half an hour. Maybe more!'

To be honest, I had never lied to Dad before. I mean, I'd stretched the truth about Summer's birthday party last year, and forgotten to mention the flasher at the Harrison St bus stop, but I'd never told a bold bad lie like this one. There was

a good chance he would see straight through me. After all, he was *my dad*—my stubborn, overprotective, devoted Greek dad. Maybe he had already spotted the pile of nonsense as it came out of my mouth.

I held my breath, trying to look like a little girl begging for a new doll, but feeling more like I was auditioning for the role as Izzy from *Neighbours*, or as some other TV bad girl.

Dad's face was in shadow so I couldn't see his expression. But finally he just sighed and shrugged at the steering wheel.

I started breathing again. He'd bought it!

'Do you want me to catch a lift back with Megan?' I asked, not wanting to keep him out of bed any longer than I had to. 'She keeps offering.'

'No, Saph. I'll pick you up.' Then Dad actually took one hand off the steering wheel and blew me a clumsy kiss.

I wanted to crawl back into the car and throw my arms around his neck, like I used to when I was little. *Daddy I love you . . . I love you . . . I love you . . .* But this was just a normal goodbye, like any other. Or at least, that's how it had to *seem*. So I only let my voice soften a bit. 'Thanks, Dad.'

After one last glance at the station wagon as it drove away, I pushed open the heavy delivery door, ran down the corridor and banged up the stairs. I stopped off in the change-rooms just long enough to drop my stuff and change into dancing shoes. It was bright in there, warm and messy with eight other sets of pompom bags and performance stuff. I was clearly the last of the troupe to arrive.

More heavy doors, another wide corridor, and then I burst into the massive, empty heart of the building, the main basketball stadium.

Dotted along one long side of the court were eight bodies stretching like cats in the afternoon sun. As always, Gino and Andrew were laughing together about something. Megan was my only real friend in the troupe, but I knew the bodies of the other dancers like I know my own. We had spent so much time together – pushing and pulling, matching position, puffing and sweating.

I didn't know what most of them did during the day (only that Megan worked in a bank), but I knew the shape of each thigh, the strength of each set of stomach muscles and the extension of each leg. They were my dancing comrades, my body brothers and sisters.

'How's the ankle?' I asked Megan as I slid onto the floor next to her and started reaching to the side. It felt good to stretch out the past few days, and wake my muscles for work.

'Ankle's okay, but my calves are killing.' She made a crazy face that didn't match her perfect make-up. Then she reached over her leg, revealing the lovely curve down her side. Megan is gorgeous.

'Tell me about it.' I pulled my feet back, feeling the pang of week-old pain. 'That new half-time routine –'

'Speaking of which,' Megan butted in. She nodded towards the rustling and bluster coming from behind me.

I didn't have to turn around to know what was coming. Lesley was here. My peaceful warm-up was over.

‘Right, people! Hope you’re all warm and toasty,’ Lesley called. Her CD player and a collection of bags landed by the side of the court with a dull thump. Then she straightened up, holding her back as if she were pregnant. ‘We’re starting right into the half-time number, then I want to run through the time-outs in order. No time for chatting, people. Up, up, up!’

We all ran to the side, in perfect order and position for the start of the half-time routine. I managed to fit in some extra stretches and warm-up moves, the bare minimum to get through. But I didn’t have time for much else. No more talking, no more thinking, just the routine.

As I leaped and kicked, taking care to be perfectly in line, I felt a quickening in my chest, a secret dance in my heart. I just had to get through rehearsal and the game itself, then I would finally get to talk to Damien.



‘Ooooooh yeeeeeeeah!’ The cry echoed through the packed stadium.

A three pointer from Damien! I jumped up, kicking and shaking my pompoms with the girls, while Gino and Andrew did back flips. We were minutes away from a win.

I kept my eyes on Damien as I kicked and jumped, hoping for a secret look between us. Had he guessed that I planned to find him after the game? *Would he try to find me?* But he was busy doing high-fives with his team mates and shaking a victory fist at the crowd, so he didn’t look my way.

Soon the cheers calmed and I sat cross-legged again, feeling the faint vibrations in the floorboards as the players ran back to their starting positions. Being a shortie, like Megan, I'm in the front, which can have its advantages. Trust me. Who wants luscious long legs like the other dancers when they get stuck up the back, leaving us shorties with the best view.

And what a view it was.

By now, the players were sweating. *Oh Damien . . .* I sighed and smiled, feeling closer to him than ever before. Back came the ball to our end and my eyes wandered up the length of Damien's legs.

But I had to be careful not to let myself stare at him too much. When you're sitting in front of a packed house, you never know who might be watching. Besides, I had to keep my mind on the job. A time-out could be called any minute.

Like right now! In a flash the music started and the troupe sprang into life. The nine of us fanned out and took control of the basketball court. In this dance we were a line leaping forward up the court, folding in on itself in swirls and patterns.

It felt awesome, like being a petal in a moving, growing flower.



As the final siren blared, I jumped and screamed with the crowd.

‘Magic! Magic! Magic!’

My heart was racing and my throat was strained, but I wasn’t just cheering for the win. After two days of planning, I was *heart-stoppingly* close to speaking to the man of my dreams.

Back in the changerooms, I slipped into my clothes – black pants and a wraparound top, plus black high heels.

‘Want a lift?’ asked Megan, just like always.

And, just like always, I shook my head and shrugged. ‘No thanks, Megan. Dad keeps saying no.’

Megan blew me a kiss as she walked out.

After she had gone, I walked out the delivery entrance and hid my bags behind a skip. I pulled a piece of paper and pen from the side pocket of my make-up bag, then I dashed back inside.

Now for the tricky part. I knew that the players often had drinks in the bar after the game. But would Damien be there tonight? For all I knew, he might be sneaking around the stadium corridors, trying to find me! *Ah Damien . . .* But the bar was the smartest place to start. I sneaked through a back corridor, not wanting to bump into anyone on the way.

At the bottom of the steps leading up to the bar, I stopped and clutched the cold rail. My throat was suddenly tight. My heart pounded in my chest. I had planned this moment so carefully – but now I was terrified.

I took a big breath. Then another. And started up the stairs. ‘Saph? What are you doing here!’

I froze. Then forced myself to breathe. ‘Oh. Hi, Lesley,’ I said, as if this was a normal place for me to be.

Lesley glanced at my high heels and frowned. ‘What are you *doing* here?’ she said again, serious this time.

I held up the piece of paper and pen. ‘An autograph,’ I said quickly. ‘My friend wants an autograph.’

Lesley tilted her head to one side, studying my face. She was wearing a flowing black dress that seemed to float about her and make her look bigger than she really was.

I smiled and raised my eyebrows hopefully.

Then Lesley nodded. ‘Okay, but don’t you DARE tell your father I let you come into the bar!’

‘Thanks, Lesley!’ I gave her a quick hug and bounded up the stairs. I could hear her thumping up behind me. Was she going to keep an *eye on me*?

As soon I pushed through the bar door, the hot smell of alcohol hit me. For a moment I just stood there, surprised at the sights and sounds of this strange world. Then Lesley came up behind me.

‘Whose autograph do you want?’ she asked, slinging her arm over my shoulders.

‘Um, Damien Rowsthorn?’ I answered, strangely glad to have Lesley with me.

For a moment she scanned the room, then pointed. ‘There.’

And there he was. So tall. So beautiful. So close to being mine.

With Lesley close behind me, I made my way across the

crowded room. Everyone in here was tall – adult-sized and more. Sometimes it was difficult just pushing past them, as if they were too big to even see me.

Then, at last, I was standing in front of the man of my dreams. He was drinking a beer and chatting to a tall woman in a long, backless dress. I glanced back at Lesley, who had stopped to talk to someone. Somehow she already had a glass of wine in her hand. She smiled and winked.

I turned back to Damien, feeling tiny. He was even taller than he seemed from the side of the court. *Hugs are going to be awkward*, I thought. But hugs suddenly seemed a long way away. I just stood there like a puppy dog, waiting for Damien to notice me.

After an embarrassing eternity, he glanced away from the tall woman.

Our eyes met.

I waited for the moment . . . the connection between us that I had dreamed of. But Damien just raised a bushy eyebrow and tilted his gorgeous head to one side.

‘Can I help you?’ he said.

A rush of fire burned on my neck. ‘Um . . .’ I held out the piece of paper and pen, wishing I could turn and run.

‘Autograph hunter, eh?’ said the tall woman beside Damien. She was almost as tall as he was. Even their shoulders seemed to match.

‘Who should I make it out to?’ asked Damien. His voice was higher than I expected. As he took the paper and pen, our fingers didn’t even touch.

‘Um . . . Saph,’ I managed to whisper.

Part of me still hoped he was acting, pretending not to know me. *Maybe he would write a secret message on the paper, or just his phone number – anything to prove that the letter really had been from him.*

But when the paper came back all it had was *Cheers, Saph! Damien Rowsthorn*, scrawled across it in messy handwriting. Handwriting that I had never seen before.

‘Thanks,’ I managed. Then turned with my head down and my lips pressed tight. *Don’t cry in here. Not here, Saph. Just get out.*

I lost Lesley then, dodging the bodies and brushing past a fat man in a way that would normally make me squirm. I made it out the door before a sob escaped my throat. The first meaningful relationship in my life had begun and ended in the time it took to raise an eyebrow.

I ran down the bar steps and out to the back entrance of the stadium, hoping that Dad would already be waiting for me.

But the loading bay was empty and dark.

I pulled my bags from their hiding place and stood in the shadows, tears sliding down my cheeks. *Where are you, Dad?*

After a while, my tears slowed and the night breeze cooled my cheeks. Then I frowned, suddenly thinking of another question – the real question of the night.

If the Valentine’s letter wasn’t from Damien, then who *had* sent it?