



# ALPHAS

A NOVEL BY  
LISI HARRISON



**poppy**

LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY  
New York Boston

## ALPHA ACADEMY

---

Welcome to the inaugural class of Alpha Academy. Thousands of girls answered the alpha call over the last year. One hundred have been selected. The fittest shall survive.

As you know from my No. 1 best-selling autobiographies, *Watch Your Outback: An Aussie Orphan's Struggle to Endure*, *You Can't Eat Hope*, and *From Roos to Riches*, I have built a billion-dollar empire on nothing but good instincts and sheer determination—or, rather, “Shira determination,” as many Fortune 500 CEOs now call it. My FEWs (Female Empowerment Workshops) have been licensed all around the world and translated into seventy languages. My cosmetics company, X-Chromosome, is the leading manufacturer in beauty products for girls, worldwide. And Brazille Enterprises . . . Well, I'll stop here.

This is about you.

While my legacy will live forever, I may not.\* Should I eventually pass, I will leave behind one hundred girls forever changed by Alpha Academy. Your illustrious class is filled with hyphenates: We have an environmentalist-poetess, a dancer-model-actress, a junior Wimbledon

LISI HARRISON

winner–inventor, a Bollywood film star–cell phone novelist. But a true alpha is more than her résumé. She is more than perfect pitch, a perfect turnout, a perfect ten, or even a perfect IQ. She is a machine with heart. She is the future. She is you.

Survive a year at Alpha Academy and your wildest dreams will roll out before you like a giant red carpet. Orientation begins September 5. Bring your A-game and a toothbrush. Everything else will be provided. Enclosed is an aPod. It will explain the rest. Turn it on.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "shira". The letters are lowercase and written in a cursive, flowing style.

Shira Brazille

President of Brazille Enterprises  
International Alpha Female

\*The status of Shira's mortality at printing time. This may change, as BE Labs gets closer to finding a cure for death.

# 1

WESTCHESTER, NY  
BODY ALIVE DANCE STUDIO  
THURSDAY, JULY 22ND  
11:37 A.M.

There were five Skye Hamiltons in the Body Alive Dance Studio. One on each mirrored wall and one in the flesh. As in-the-flesh Skye step-turn-step-plié-step-fan-step-ball-changed, the reflections followed. So did the nine other girls in Atelier No. 1. Or at least they tried.

A trickle of sweat slithered from the base of Skye's tightly bunned blond waves down the back of her pale blue leo. She drew her shoulder blades back (even more), trying to pinch the salty snake—not because she was embarrassed, but because she could. Her body always did what it was told. All she had to do crank up the music and ask.

“And one . . . twooo . . . thu-hree . . . fourrrr . . . five . . . six . . . seh-vuuun . . . eight.” Madame Prokofiev slow-clapped to the jazzy ooze of Michael Bublé's “Fever” while scanning her students for TICS (Timing, Incongruity, Carelessness, and Smiles). As always, her scrutinizing

brown eyes whizzed past Skye like two bullets aimed at someone else.

“Too wristy, Becca!” She clapped. “Less chin, Reese.” Clap. “Rolllllllll the knee, Wendi. Don’t poke.” Clap. Clap. “And I swear on my tendons, Heidi, if you don’t fix that posture, I’m going to use you as a throw pillow!”

Chignoned and clad in a no-nonsense black cami with matching flare dance pants, the aging brunette looked like a prima ballerina laced up tighter than a pair of toe shoes. Yet she moved like honey and stung like a bee.

Skye loved her.

Charged by Madame P’s silent approval, Skye added a turn before the freeze, then came out of it with hands in prayer pose—a Bollywood Namaste Flower. The routine hadn’t called for it—her instincts had. She’d downloaded the MIA track from *Slumdog Millionaire*, and like some people got songs stuck in their heads, Skye had this one stuck in her body.

“Enough.” Madame P clapped sharply, the frown lines in her passion-wrinkled forehead bunched like loose leg warmers. *Had she gone too far with her flower?*

All nine dancers stop-panted, but Skye’s heart kept hitch-kicking against her rib cage. Finally, she crossed her arms over her B-minus cups and ordered it to take five.

She lined up with the rest of the DSL Daters (they made super-fast connections with boys), Missy Cambridge, Becca Brie, Leslie Lynn Rubin, and Heidi Sprout. Like Skye, her

besties were blond—two in braids, two with ponies—and wore identical pink balloon skirts over gray leotards and tights (BADS Anna Pavlova Collection). Skye had added her signature sleeves—like leg warmers for arms; today’s were black mesh with charms dangling from the wrists: a horseshoe for luck, a dance shoe for love, a pair of lips for kissing, and a locker key for practical reasons. Every time she moved they jingled, adding a little extra something to the otherwise humdrum musical score.

“Flair, ladies.” Madame P heel-toed to the center of the room, clucking her tongue in disappointment. “Dance is not just knowing the steps. It’s interpreting them.” She winked at Skye, releasing her from the scold. “So please try to remember. We’re doing Twyla, not *Twilight*, so stop sucking!”

Some of the girls gasped. Some giggled nervously. Skye pressed her thumb against the sharp grooves of her locker key. The pain kept her from gloat-smirking.

Madame Prokofiev snapped her fingers. “Again! And one . . . twooo . . . thu-hree . . . fourrrr . . . five . . . six . . . seh-vuuuun . . . eight.”

This time, the girls responded like thoroughbreds at the starting bell. Their Capezio’d feet polished the shiny wood floor that the Hamilton family had owned for years. The force of their synchronized movements pumped Skye with energy and made her sweat pride. Not only for the girls who

danced, but also for her parents, who gave them the place to do it.

A thunderous knock interrupted their flow. The door opened just enough for Madame P to see that someone wanted her in the hall. She gave Skye a nod, silently transferring power to her star pupil, and then slipped out.

Skye rolled her neck, then padded happily to the front of the class, pausing only to change songs. "Same routine in triple time." She grinned, her legs twitching, ready for some real dancing.

"*When I grow up I wanna be famous I wanna be a star . . .*" the Pussycat Dolls meowed from the iPod deck.

"Ah-five, six, seven, eight . . ." Skye went hard. The midday light pouring in from the windows found her like a spotlight.

Tutting, waving, popping and locking, she moved faster to the pounding beat than the Tasmanian Devil on *So You Think You Can Dance*. With Madame P gone, she could let go of the traditional dance steps and express herself freely. Borrowing at will, she riffed on a few Bollywood moves, added the punch of Broadway, a dash of Beyoncé hip-shaking, and a sprinkle of ballet scissors from *Romeo and Juliet*. She moved between more styles than a *Moulin Rouge* montage. At the end, she executed a final glissé tour jeté, leaped up, and gave a little bow to the captivated audience that would be there one day. The

charms on her sleeves clanged together. They sounded like applause.

Straightening, she turned to the two rows of four behind her and panted, “Again. Without me this time.”

Skye had set the barre high. Just like it had been set for her by her mother years ago. Leslie Lynn attacked the moves with gusto, but that very same headbanging enthusiasm caused her bangs to wriggle free from her loose braid. Her attempt to sideswipe them during an axel turn dropped her one second behind the other dancers and left her dragging like a piece of toilet paper on the back of a shoe.

Feet turned out in textbook first position—her power position—Skye pursed her lips and channeled her inner Russian dance dictator. “The mirrors are here for us to perfect our form, not our hair,” she announced. Leslie picked up the pace with an embarrassed grimace.

“Chest out,” Skye demanded of Heidi, whose posture had taken another dive. Heidi had sprouted B-plus cups this year, the pull of which she was obviously still having trouble adjusting to. “Own ’em, H!”

Heidi thrust out her boobs while her back arched in protest.

*Note to self, Skye thought. Introduce H to the new line of Martha Graham bust-minimizer tops. Give her the friends-and-family discount if she balks.*

Next to her, Becca spiked up into a high, athletic half

split that was about two centimeters short of a cheerleader hurky. Skye pulled Becca's ponytail down to stop her overzealous bobbing. "Less bounce, more weight."

Becca sucked in her already concave stomach on hearing the word *weight*. Skye sighed. Becca wasn't the brightest beta on the barre, but she was sweeter than Splenda and shadowed Skye with the dedication of a choral swan in *Swan Lake*. Those who can't lead follow. And as long as they followed Skye, everything was perfect.

Next, she circled Missy. Each strand of her hair was in place, just like her steps. She strung together the exquisite sequences with technical perfection: Her toe was pointed at a forty-five-degree angle, her shoulders parallel to the floor, and her leaps timed to a millisecond of the driving beat. But she was full of more lead than a Chinese toy.

The song ended and the dancers stopped. Missy blinked up at her friend, eagerly awaiting her notes. It was like a sadist's Hallmark card; when you care enough to be insulted by the very best.

"Watch me." Skye launched into a perfect piqué turn, arms wide, hands clasped, as if hugging Kevin Fat-erline. "You want to be solid and liquid at the same time, like an unopened juice box on a whirling merry-go-round," she instructed, borrowing a line from her mother and passing it off as her own.

One . . . two . . . three . . .

After the third revolution, the door creaked open and Madame P glided back in.

On the fourth turn, Skye saw her parents, dressed in matching gray-and-white *après-dance* warm-ups, her mother waving a piece of gold paper over her head.

And on the fifth—wait, was that a *camera crew*? Skye slowed, then settled on the balls of her feet. Lithe waitresses dressed in white BADS unitards and silver tutus wheeled in tray after tray of dim sum followed by Skye's favorite cake, Payard's *pont neuf*. It was a veritable port-a-party. *But why?* Food was never allowed in the studio. Or in the dancers, for that matter.

Missy and Leslie widened their glitter-dusted eyes at Skye, who shrugged in return.

“Congratulations, my darling!” Natasha Hamilton shouted in her faint Russian accent. Her moonlit whitish-blond hair was clipped in a low ponytail. But the rest of her moved with uninhibited joy. She waved a gold-glittered envelope in the air. “You have been accepted to Alpha Academy!”

The back eight squealed in envy-delight.

“*What?*” Skye's Tiffany box blue eyes searched her mom's identical ones for an explanation. A retraction. A punch line.

But the pride on her mother's face was as genuine as it was rare.

The last time Skye had seen it was seven years ago, when she'd told her mother she wanted to become a professional ballerina, just like her. Months later the studio had been built, instructors had been imported, and training had begun. But no matter how hard Skye danced for it, that proud expression had never returned. Until now.

Eccentric billionaire entertainment mogul Shira Brazille had announced the school's opening on her show, *The Brazille Hour*, last spring, and Skye had been desperate to attend ever since. The Aussie expat had founded the exclusive boarding school to nurture the next generation of exceptional dancers, writers, artists, and inventors because she was—in her and everyone else's estimation—the final word in all things alpha. CEO of AlphaGirl International, acclaimed entrepreneur, fashion guru, Shira was *everywhere*. She was more respected than Martha, more revered than Michelle, and more liked than Oprah.

Skye threw up her arms and spun in a perfect pirouette. "I'm in!" She tapped her toe on the floor, her breath catching in her throat. This was it. Her big break. The gateway to more stages, more solos, more standing ovations, more proud expressions, more chances to be at the center of everything.

A brunette reporter with a chin-butt that rivaled Demi Lovato's stood in front of a one-man camera crew. She forced a wide grin on her powder pink lips. "This is Winkie Porter from

Westchester News 1, reporting from Body Alive Dance Studio in Westchester, New York?” Winkie’s voice went up at the end of every sentence, making even her name sound like a question. “Eccentric billionaire entertainment mogul Shira Brazille announced the opening of Alpha Academy last spring to, and I quote, ‘nurture the next generation of exceptional talent without distractions from our mediocre world.’ And our very own fourteen-year-old Skye Hamilton, dance wunderkind, is one of the lucky one hundred to secure a coveted spot!”

“You did it, Skye-High!” Her dad scooped her up into a lift, and she giggled on the way down. Even though she landed perfectly, she still felt like she was floating.

“Are we getting this?” Winkie asked her stubbly-but-cute camera guy. When he shook his head no, she said, “Mr. Hamilton, could you do that again?”

The dancers scuttled behind Skye and her father in an attempt to get on camera. They moved in a tight tangle, like a clump of hair coasting toward the shower drain.

Skye shrugged and nodded at her dad, whose hazel eyes moistened with pride as he whirled her again. He set her down gently, his full head of dark blond hair slightly tousled from the spinning. She patted it down like he was her very large obedient poodle.

“Did you ever think your daughter would be sought after by the most influential woman in the world?” Winkie stuck a microphone under his strong chin.

“Of course.” Geoffrey smiled at his daughter.

Winkie rested her frosty hand on Skye’s shoulder. “We heard there was a little mishap with your essay and that it was lost in the mail. Did you stay up all night rewriting? Take us through your ordeal.”

Skye adjusted her sleeves. How did Winkie know about that?

She’d had received word that the essay portion of her application has been misplaced last month, but hadn’t bothered to write another. She’d been too busy pursuing her other favorite pastime: boys. Skye had been hoping to discover whether surfer hawttie Dune Baxter’s lips tasted like saltwater taffy, but he’d turned out to be interested in eighth grader Kristen Gregory, instead.

“It was really stressful,” Skye lied. “Let’s just say I have calluses on my hands to match the ones on my feet.”

Winkie laughed with her mouth closed.

Behind the camera, old instructors, school friends, and neighbors were starting to arrive. Greeting one another with hugs, they stuffed dumplings in their mouths and then chew-nodded their delight in this local success story.

Winkie stuck a microphone under Skye’s barely glossed lips. “Tell us how it feels to be chosen by Shira Brazille, entertainment mogul. Icon. Alpha.”

Skye reached up and pulled a silver chopstick from her artful bird’s nest, releasing a cascade of blond wavelets for

the camera. “Shira’s a real hero of mine,” she said confidently. “Her outback-to-riches story is such an inspiration. It shows what a girl can do when she applies herself. And now to give back in this way—wow!” Skye inflected as if all this had just occurred to her and she hadn’t practiced a million times with her mother over the summer before the essay was lost.

“And for those of us unfamiliar with the term, what exactly is an ‘alpha’?” Winkie asked through her pasted-on smile, air-quoting with her microphone-free hand.

“If you have to ask, then you’ll never know.” Skye didn’t have an edit button. Girls like her didn’t need one.

Winkie’s eye twitched but she moved effortlessly onto the next topic. “Skye, you are the only girl chosen from New York state. Are you nervous about no longer being a big fish in a small pond? Do you feel ready to leave this all behind?” She licked her lips, as if she’d hit her Barbara Walters cry-inducing question.

Was Skye ready? She looked around at BADS, where she was the best dancer they’d ever had, and at the DSL Daters, who had been nothing more than well-dressed Nutcrackers before she brought them to life. Skye pinched her mini lips charm between her thumb and pinkie. She’d already kissed all the Best Westies (Westchester boys). She’d always suspected she was destined for bigger things.

Natasha’s bony fingers reached for her daughter’s hand.

A cue to return to the script. “My mom taught me that success is like ballet. You work until your feet hurt, until your muscles ache, until your body knows the steps without thinking. You challenge yourself every day to dance harder, better, longer. So when the lights come on and the performance begins, it looks effortless.”

Her mom’s round mouth and full lips moved along with her own. After a career full of interviews and TV appearances, Natasha always knew what to say. But Skye could never put her feelings into words. She was the type who had to get on her feet and show them.

“Well, you’re certainly ready.” Winkie’s voice didn’t go up that time—there was no question about it.

“Thanks for the party, Mom.” Skye followed Natasha to a pair of chairs in the corner once everyone had gone. “And for rewriting my essay.”

“I didn’t write it.” Natasha crunched down on a piece of celery. “I added a few lines here and there, but you did most of the work.”

Skye studied her mother’s pronounced jaw. It was pulsing from chewing, not tension. She lifted a silver box out from under her chair.

“Hmmm.” Skye looked up at the track lights. Maybe the essay had been found after all? Or maybe when the

Alpha Academy admissions committee saw her video audition, they realized she didn't need one?

Natasha handed her daughter the box and Skye slowly untied the white bow.

She lifted a pair of lavender toe shoes from the tissue paper, their worn silver satin ribbons trailing behind like smoke from a blown-out candle. They had hung over her mother's vanity forever. Like stamps on a passport, the scuffs, scrapes, and frayed silk told the story of her mom's career: from *Swan Lake* at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, *Coppélia* at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, and *Sleeping Beauty* at the Royal Opera House in London, where a grand jeté gone wrong had landed her in King's College Hospital with a torn meniscus and a fractured career.

"They're too big for me," Skye said, hoping for a new pair. Maybe something in a soft gold. "Besides . . ." She searched the box for the other shoe, but the tissue was empty. "There's only one." Skye furrowed her brow, not sure what she was supposed to do with one big used shoe.

"This slipper is special," Natasha whispered. "It will fit your hads."

"Huh?" Skye blinked. Her mom had been in the country for eighteen years, but every once in a while something got lost in translation.

"It will fit your HADs," Natasha repeated. "Your Hopes And Dreams." She flipped open the tip of the shoe. "You

write what you wish for for and hide it in the shoe. When the time is right, it comes true.”

“Really?” Skye leaned in closer. “What did you wish for?”

“Meeting your father,” Natasha mused, untucking Skye’s hair from behind her ears. Skye knew the story well. Her mom—the original DSL Dater—had come to America when she was seventeen to perform at Lincoln Center. After one dance onstage, she’d landed a marriage proposal from Skye’s dad and defected. “This dance studio,” Natasha continued. “And you.”

Her mother’s words filled her muscles with the kind of warmth that comes after a good stretch. They softened and strengthened her at the same time. Who cared how her application had landed on Shira’s desk? All that mattered was that it had.

Skye glanced around at the place she’d learned to dance, suddenly feeling too big for the small studio. The leaded windows, the track lighting with special bulbs that flattered blondes, the nick in the doorjamb where she’d spun and whacked the frame with her Tinker Bell wand when she was six. They were part of her past now, destined to shrink into wallet-size snapshots in her memory. Images that she’d flip through when she needed to remember where she came from.

Weaving the shoe’s silk straps through her fingers, Skye

glanced at her mom's cheekbones. Her pale skin covered them like white tights over smooth stones when she smiled.

"You will be the best dancer at Alpha Academy." Her mother pulled her to her heart, like their hug was choreographed. The jingle of charms made her homesick even though she was still there. "What are you going to wish for first?"

Skye opened the secret compartment, discovering neatly folded squares of blank, lavender-scented paper. They smelled like home.

"I dunno," Skye lied. The truth was, she knew exactly what she wanted. She had hoped and dreamed for it her entire life.

HAD No. 1 was to make her mother proud.

Copyright © 2009 by Alloy Entertainment

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

“When I Grow Up,” by Rodney Jerkins, James Stanley MacCarty, Smith Paul Granville Samwell, Theron Makiel Thomas, Timothy Jamahli Thomas (Rodney Jerkins Productions, Inc., Glenwood Music Corporation/EMI Music Publishing, Inc., Universal Music Corporation).

All rights reserved.

Poppy

Little, Brown and Company

Hachette Book Group

237 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017

For more of your favorite series, go to [www.pickapoppy.com](http://www.pickapoppy.com)

First Edition: August 2009

Poppy is an imprint of Little, Brown and Company  
The Poppy name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Cover design by Andrea C. Uva and Tracy Shaw

Cover photos by Roger Moenks

Author photo by Gillian Crane



alloy**entertainment**

Produced by Alloy Entertainment

151 West 26th Street, New York, NY 10001

ISBN: 978-0-316-03579-8

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CWO

Printed in the United States of America