

Chapter 1

A spotlight, hot white light. The familiar smell of us, together, our sweat, a gasp for more air for enough energy, for that extra effort tonight, that final burst of strength before the climax. His hands around my waist, his breath on my back, on my bare shoulders. The last chord of the music rising, swelling, exploding. Swish. The heavy scarlet velvet curtain plunges down, dragging across the proscenium like a rough anchor chain, muffling the rising applause. He lets me go. It's over. My balance disintegrates and I slip out of the arabesque. Magic suddenly subsides into ordinariness. Our tension loosens into personal pain. Stinging feet, aching muscles, throbbing lungs. Exhaustion. No-one's immune, least of all me.

‘You missed that pirouette.’

‘I made it work!’ Bastard, he knows he lost his grip. Some invisible cue pulls me dutifully back into line beside him just as the curtain divides again, letting in the waves of applause from a darkness spiked with blasts of light, blinding white, pink, yellow.

A young girl comes from side stage, one of the students. A crisp crinkle of cellophane and my own applause, centre stage, applause for me at last. Finally. Recognition and a future. And the sweet smell of these roses. Who's sent me flowers? I'm pulled further forward, my hand's kissed. He's playing the audience. I glance down at the card, see the handwriting.

‘Are you coming to the party?’ he whispers, through a wide set smile as he bows to acknowledge his share of the clapping. ‘Elaine?’

Applause... All this wonderful adulation, loud, warm, welcoming. But suddenly now it's sounding like rain. A deluge. Dull, thudding rain. A drowning. What I want is tea. I don't need any party. No party. All I want is tea and tea and tea, with lots of sugar.....

'Smile, Elaine,' he hisses. 'It might never happen.' But it has.

Where's the cold cream? Wipe away the present, the stage make-up, all the applause and adulation, tonight's success. She's still under there, that old Elaine. I can see her fear mirrored in my eyes. You thought you got away with it, Elaine? You had it all under control, did you? It's a joke, fate is.

'Going to have drinks with them then, love?' The stagehand leans round the door. He's used to seeing all us company girls naked. Reflected all along the mirrors. The men too, come to that.

'No.'

'First night. You can't miss it. Everyone else has gone.'

I shrug. The tissue, thick with cream and ivory pan-stick, thuds into the bin.

'You can have a late car. I can get one.'

How pale my skin seems without the drawn-on face in this harsh light, these rows of naked bulbs.

'Company rules' he says. 'Obligatory, first night publicity parties are. He's gone.'

'Gone? He didn't wait?' Is that why he asked me on stage if I was going? Did he know?

'Said he'd see you there. Go on. Go! Wait till you see the reviews. It'll be your night.'

'Will it?'

The stage hand grins. 'Sure it will! I'll get you that car. Go on! Celebrate! What else?'

What else now indeed.

'I'm boiling a kettle. Want tea?'

'Could I?'

'Sure! Anything.'

'How long have I got to change?'

'Ten minutes or so.'

'Twenty?'

His gaze shifts down and hovers. 'Yeah, okay. Just for you.' Eventually, after an age, an embarrassingly long silence, he uncurls himself from the doorway and goes, padding away in his trainers back towards the stage, leaving me sitting silently in my nakedness.

The soft crepe of the dress, the colour of lapis lazuli, the one I planned to wear, swings on the hanger, drapes cool and smooth against my hand. If this is a set up though, I should wear the other one. Just to prove a point! Red, yes, red. But not earrings - let's not overstate the case. And yet, perhaps those diamantes?

I'm always so obsessive about the impression I make. One thing, my figure at twenty is better than I had at seventeen. It's sleek now, lean, strong, a muscular physique. But real strength? I still search for that in my appearance. And I'm needing that kind of strength right now. Needing it like I used to, even after all this time.

It's funny, I sort of knew. Lately it's been hanging around in my mind that something isn't the same, that things have changed. Elaine... Elaine... Elaine... Had you forgotten?

It's years since Elaine had her recurring dream. She's little. She's in a car, a dusty old blue estate, travelling along in the middle of the night. It's hot, that Australian night, still full of leftover heat-wave, and there's a velvet-thick wind blowing over her...me... through the window, with a strong smell of bone dry grass in it, and camphor-pungent oil. Melting eucalyptus.

She's...I'm...let's get this right...it was my dream... I'm this child, and I'm on two cushions so I can just see over the dashboard but the road ahead is pretty much deserted. My Dad is driving, maybe a little too fast. I've had some sleep so I'm not tired. I'm in that awake, elated-kid state, middle of the night wide-eyed. It's no time since my mother woke me up and helped me dress. We're moving, she says. Moving? People change, people change houses, new people come, she says. At night? It's safer, she tells me, safer to travel at night, cooler. What's travelling, I want to know? Going, Mum says. Her fingers fumble with each button on my dress, as if she expects any one of them to fly off and hit her in the face. Why do I think that?

Going? Going where?

Leaving, she says.

The fly screen over the back door is propped open with cases, so there are loads of little moths inside, fluttering on the ceiling, excited by their unexpected access to the indoor lights. Mum, with the baby against her shoulder, is still gathering last minute things into a bag with her free hand, and looking over her other shoulder as if she'll be caught out any time now. Gathering, snatching, not tidying. Not tidying. I can't understand why my mother's leaving the house in such a mess. Won't the new people mind? I ask. If they're changing houses, won't the new people mind? She doesn't answer. Instead when Dad appears, Mum suddenly grabs my hand and

hurries me out to the car and puts me in the front seat and takes the back seat for herself and the baby.

‘I won't be able to see.’

‘It's dark, Elaine,’ Mum says, but she goes back inside and fetches cushions. Then as soon as we're driving, immediately we're moving, she seems to be asleep in the back with baby Jonty. She's put her feet up, has her eyes shut, but is she asleep? I'm four, I'm sure, possibly five. Why am I in the front, awake? I feel I'm awake for a reason, I've been put here for a reason, it's important.

The road ahead seems only as wide as the headlights and straight and flat and empty, and there's nothing much to pass along the way. My Dad is tired. He's worked all day, now he's driving all night. There's a weird feeling of danger in the air. A tingling. And no talking. Nobody's saying anything. I know something of what's happening though, what little my mother told me as she threw all the coat hangers on the bed and stuffed clothes into a bag...

‘We're leaving,’ she says, fighting with the zip. ‘Heading for Sydney airport. We're going to be London people. In my mother's house.’ A grandmother is news to me. Now on the car seat behind me my mother's shifting around. She turns over, turns her back. All I can see of her is her auburn hair straying out of its clips, and the angle of her shoulder, the dip of her waist and the slim curve of her hip. There's no room for her feet on the floor because of the bags, so she's lying, with baby Jonty tucked in between her and the seat where I can't see him. And there's a kind of exhaustion about her, about the way she's lying I can't ever remember seeing before. I want to ask her things. I want to ask what's wrong, but I think she really might be asleep. So I can't. Instead I'm next to my father and listening to the sound of the road humming the miles away under me, a low rhythmical hum,

sometimes broken by the rip and bounce of a pothole, or the rasp when the tyres stray off into the dust along the edge of the tarmac.

When the moon comes out it's full face, surprised and bright. The milky highway starts to zigzag upwards through the ghost gums, up into the darkness of the Blue Mountains. Against the black of the night sky the stars seem large and pulsating, as if they can breathe, in and out. Breathing. In and out. As the car climbs higher they come closer. They're so near now I can almost hear them sighing, and feel their breath on my hair. I lie back and watch them.

When I notice where we are my ears are popping, the stars are drifting upwards and we're going downhill, down the other side of the mountains, down towards Sydney. And the lights laid out below are like stars too, and the road is wider, dipping down through the folded foothills. An occasional lorry passes; strange glaring pairs of white eyes loom out of the blackness, dazzle, roar by and leave trails of dust behind them lit up by red brake lights. Road carriers chugging, muttering past us through the night air, and then whistling off into the darkness. My Dad is driving through all this without a word. None of his usual swearing. Just silence. Driving as if he's in a dream, his eyes fixed on the road ahead, his strong hands sweating, clasp and unclasp the steering wheel. I watch that. I'm glad to see it. It's the only real sign that he at least is awake like I am. Now there's a van on the road in front of us, its red rear lights shrouded by dust and weather and age. We're closing on it and my Dad leans outwards a little, to see if he can overtake. His expression doesn't alter. He pulls out.

There's a shrill shriek of horn, a flash of bright oncoming lights. Our car swerves in again, screaming back under me so fast that I have to grab the edge of the seat and hold tight. There's a gush of air and engine noise and

lights shoot past and the horn sound drops an octave. I don't dare let go - the wheels under me are veering off the road, on a roll. The van in front may be speeding away..... but our car's rushing sideways towards the verge. Dad's hands are fighting the steering wheel, he can't control the swerve. His knee lifts and he slams his foot down hard on the brakes. With a screech the car skids to a halt throwing me forward violently against the belt, then pressing me back hard into the seat.

There's dust rising in the moonlight and an evil burn-ey kind of smell. Then silence.

'Strewth!' Mum's clutching Jonty and shaking.

'Shut up.' Far ahead in the distance the red lights of the old van disappear away over the hill.

'Kill us all! Why not?'

'For Christsakes, Kath.'

Dad takes a deep breath and with trembling hands reverses back onto the tarmac and then we carry on as if nothing has happened, but now I don't feel safe. I feel stretched and heavy and frightened. My fear makes me chatter, about the house, the one we've left behind in such a state, and then what will it be like in London? Is it very far now? Will I go to school there, and what is school exactly? No-one tells me. They're all in their trances again, my mother curled up on the back seat, the baby whimpering softly, Dad clenching and unclenching his hands on the steering wheel. I keep talking though. Maybe it's what keeps Dad awake enough to go on driving. Maybe if I hadn't...

It wasn't a dream of course, but I kind of remember it that way.

I remember Dad carried the bags inside and up the two flights of steps in the airport terminal. Then he went collect the tickets. When he returned

Mum snatched them from him. 'I hope you've organized immediate finance,' she said.

'Figure you're due it, do you?'

'Yes.'

He looked down at me and patted me on the head. Then he went back down the steps. I thought he was bringing up another case. We found seats and for a while I was fascinated by luggage trolleys, the noise, the announcements echoing, the crowds of people. Then I began to scan the faces. And the longer we sat there the more anxious I became, and the more the question became too terrible to ask.

'Stop fidgeting, Elaine,' Mum said. 'Sit still.'

An hour and a half later we went on the plane to London without my father. It always worried me that after that I couldn't visualize what he looked like. Okay, his hands, but not his face. I couldn't conjure up his features and see his expression. There was a photograph of him somewhere, but I couldn't remember for myself.

Chapter 2

The London house was very disappointing, with small windows, and dark, in a dead end street near the Thames, a grimy brick mini terrace in a row of others just like it. Furnished but not like back home. Television and ordinary things, nicer quality than we'd had before, but nothing with an old scrubby comfortable family look about it. No clattery old fly screen door with night-flowering jasmine growing beside it. No fig tree or the smell of the eucalyptus. No sudden screech of pink parrots punching into the morning air. Nor the infinite silence and shimmering afternoon heat of the bush under an arc of cobalt sky. No garden at all in fact. Not even a back yard. And not much left of the bedridden grandmother either. In my remembered few seconds of meeting, I was sure I could see something eating away at those blue thread veins and tissue thin skin. Bright glass eyes noted me and then Jonty. A smile which seemed too small for its teeth followed an acrid smell like vinegar.

‘Out!’ Mum said, shutting me into a forbidding, unfamiliar hall.

We'd arrived so early it was dark and I didn't see the bridge from my room to start with, though somehow I felt its shadow, and heard the frightening roar of a train setting out across it. After my mother dragged the zip bag in and left me to pull out its rumpled contents, I searched vainly for my old teddy bear, hoping that the picture in my mind of him still lying among those abandoned crumpled sheets back home wasn't true. But it was and I wept, knowing he would never forgive me for forgetting him. What did come out of the bag I smelled and held close for a long time, burying my tear-stained face in those few familiar belongings. Then I stuffed them all into the cupboard, and while along the hall baby Jonty slept in a makeshift hollow of

pillows, and my mother lay back in a chair next to the grandmother's bed waiting and staring vacantly into space, I stood looking out of the window of my new bedroom at the great gravitational heaviness of that railway bridge, half hidden by a thick pylon of supporting stone which bronzed as the morning sun rose and the light increased. And in this unfamiliar world which suddenly no longer contained my father, between the buildings there was a glimpse of the river, just a narrow vertical strip like a phial of golden liquid. Gradually, as the hours passed and the sky clouded over the English day, it turned silver, then into grey, and on into inky shadowed indigo.

Let's cut my father out of this. He cut himself out. Never sent my bear. Never said goodbye. Never wrote or anything. Why should I be the one to include him?

Besides back then is not what I'm talking about. No. That's the little kid. What I'm on about happened only three years ago. Everything was so essential by then, all so vitally necessary, so powerfully intense.

In my opinion, there are only two kinds of dancers - ethereal, long legs, the earsplitting arabesque type, the obvious romantic ballerina, and the other, the petite quicksilver dancer, pirouettes and elevation galore. I had a great longing to be one or other. Instead at middle height I'd lost out somewhere in between. Perhaps I should have thought of myself as versatile. There is one thing I had though - have. Perseverance. And with a big capital P. It's why that night I was standing backstage in the Kings Theatre, amid the clayey smell of stage make-up, and the heat and colour of the footlights, smoothing out the stiff red tulle of my tutu, the adrenaline stinging through my veins, and feeling connected, powerful. There was a sense of twitching excitement out in front too, out there in the audience, as I flexed the arches of my feet

inside my pointe shoes. It was me they were waiting for then, you know. Me. It was my big moment.

But I'm jumping forward now. A lot happened before that, before I was seventeen. And built up to that moment. But good things, like bad, come in runs. Just because you've been happy you think it's going to go on. You never expect to be kicked in the teeth.

My mother was always saying you could only be good at English or Maths, not both. One of her theories.

‘Why?’

‘It's just true.’ No explanation. No discussion, never any conversation about it. That was Kath Higham....

‘Stay and talk to me,’ she says, switching across the channels on the television. The room smells musty. Nothing ever disturbed. The cushions, crushed, lifeless. The curtains, half closed. Miss Haversham, for God's sake. The cups pile up but otherwise everything remains the same day after day. Once she was tidy. I want to ask what happened.

She doesn't look at me, my mother, when she's speaking. She doesn't look at her own teenage daughter. What she means when she says stay and talk is she's waiting to know what you might sit down and watch with her. What's the point? That's not talking. She doesn't listen to me and she never tells me what she feels.

But back to that idea of hers. That saying justified my failing in maths all through school. I never did see the point of numbers. Could anything really worthwhile ever be reduced to them? My settling for her theory may have proved her point, but it did nothing to improve my grasp of realism, and certainly didn't dampen down my exotic romantic attitudes, my vivid

imagination. When I was a kid, like my brother I bunked off school. Not from English though - even if the women who were teaching that were idiots and didn't see half the meaning of the beautiful language they made us study - except for one supply teacher who came in covering for some monster teacher who was having a nervous breakdown from being bullied. This supply one was pretty monstrous herself, but I can remember her now reading passionately in a low resonant voice from Romeo and Juliet.... stony limits cannot hold love out: And what love can do, that dares love attempt....

'If you're not going to watch, make me a cup of tea?' My mother holds out an empty cup and begins another channel search with the remote. How many million times in my past does that scene occur?

It used to give me a great feeling of freedom flouting school rules, pushing my luck, sneaking off, concocting stories about why I hadn't done this piece of work or that. Good at inventing, I was. Boringly I didn't smoke or do drugs like Jonty, nor did I hang around with anyone then who did. They didn't invite me of course, but who would have wanted to go off with any of those dull girls who popped pills anyway? They were too busy blowing what brains they had to be anything like imaginative. No, the time I spent out of school was mine. On my own. Walking. Thinking. Dreaming. Sometimes in the streets. Often in the park watching the rooks soaring above the trees. They're never just one, you know, rooks. Always in pairs, shadowing each other, dramatically riding on the wind. Dipping, gliding. Using the wind. Embracing it. Interpreting its hidden rhythms. Part of the elements. I've always wanted to be visually passionate like that. Seen. On display. And more. I wanted... I wanted to be loved. I wanted it, wished for it, craved it. And not just in any old ordinary way either. I wanted the kind of passionate love you could kill for, that you'd die for. All or nothing.

In retrospect, perhaps my mother knew me better than I realized because that's how it is with me. One thing or the other. I have never bothered to learn any in-betweens. Fractions, percentages, grey areas, all that sort of thing? What does that matter? Anymore than partial success. No - friends or enemies. Win or lose, I believe.

But when I was seventeen....that was the year. A lovely age they said when anything was possible. A dangerous age, when you have to cut your way into life. With a machete if necessary....

So Elaine is seventeen.... and she...I...have been applying that principal of win or lose to myself willy-nilly. I've never been what I deem pretty, so I've lost out there. My brother Jonty is the better looking one. My skin is pale. My snub nose is conspicuous where his is nice and straight and normal. His wavy chestnut hair always vied with my unruly curly. Okay, so I know I'm not the typical classical heroine. Even my name I consider a bad choice. Elaine Higham. Jonty at least got 'Jonathon'. And that's High-am, thanks. Not Higgg-ham. Elaine's bad enough, and don't say it with an Australian accent either - it sounds even worse. That sets me apart too, my accent, though secretly I quite like it. Because my father was Australian, and my mother speaks a bit that way after spending nearly a decade out there, I do as well. All through my awful school days in London - at the odd times I actually attended, I was taunted about that. I didn't care though. The school part of my existence was an unnecessary diversion from my true direction in life, something to be endured and got through as quickly as possible so I never bothered with the people there. None of them. It didn't seem important. I have always been an outsider.

‘Stay and talk to me?’

One Christmas, which registered another year without word from my father - I was nearly thirteen - I remember that because I considered it would be an unlucky year.... anyway that Christmas was about the only time I ever settled down with my mother and watched television. I had no particular friends - as usual, and I was totally bored. Some life! Aimless days, evenings destructively idling the hours away in my bedroom, tearing paper, pulling threads from the bedcover. So Christmas - and the only girl who might, might have done something, gone for a walk or something, was away. Spain or somewhere. I didn't like her much anyway. Outside the frosty daylight was already disappearing. And Jonty was out, who knew where.

For once the remote was lying out of Mum's reach on the floor. I sat down disgruntled, irritated that I was reduced to watching television. I flicked around. News... or... From the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, a production of Sleeping Beauty.... boring. But with nothing much else on, it began and I watched for two hours transfixed and I'm telling you it was like a revelation, a vision. I realized I was looking at my future - because suddenly I knew. All that grand romanticism.... that grace. That was it. I wanted it, the display of it. Classical ballet. And I knew absolutely nothing less would do.

My mother dismissed the idea as stupid of course. ‘It's a whim! After seeing just one ballet? It takes years of dedication.’

‘And you'd know all about it, wouldn't you!’

How I convinced her to let me take ballet lessons I'll never know. But otherwise what would she have done with a rebellious teenage daughter? She had no ideas. And this way I wasn't going to interrupt her viewing if I

was out and about. And surely she had some conscience about sitting there doing nothing herself. Maybe it was me saying: 'Why not? At least I'm prepared to put some effort into my life,' and adding accusingly what was family allowance for then and anyway didn't my father send money for us as well?

'What do you think keeps us, Elaine? He owes me.'

'Why?' Predictably no answer. I pushed harder. 'What do you contribute?' But that didn't prick her conscience, not one bit. She didn't even blink. She gave in though. Well, no, she didn't. What she did was she didn't say I couldn't. The money came from a little bit my grandmother had left me and the shopping fund and though sometimes Mum enquired vaguely where I was going, she never stopped me. I started off at an Academy of Dance in Hammersmith. It did give me a beginning, I suppose. And what a discovery! I loved having to force my body into new and difficult positions, and the feeling that suddenly I'd found a direction for myself. Exciting. And all so close too! Just over the river in the bus. Hammersmith's a dangerous place to cross the road, where the buses speed past towards the flyover, unless you use the underpasses. Sometimes I did cross the road though.

I worked hard. And I practiced and practiced at home what I was shown. Monkey see, monkey do. I'd come to ballet very late. Most people there had started much earlier and were far better than me, I could see that. But after three years of Hammersmith Broadway and passing exams 'Commended', I finally had the sense to realize that if I really wanted to get anywhere, there was no more time to waste. I was nearly sixteen. If this was the career I wanted, I had to work a million times harder and get myself into somewhere much more up-market. And fast. As a springboard for the theatre and company schools, Orlando's in the West End was the best. If I could get in.

If! But it would cost much more and I'd have to be out later each night doing classes.

I tried explaining all this to my mother as she watched her usual early evening soap. Saturday morning classes too, I told her, but it would all be worth it. I would get a better grounding and have more of a chance in my chosen career.

Her finger flicked restlessly across the channel numbers. 'What about homework? The exams?'

I was surprised she'd noticed I had any.

'I can do that too.'

'You need your A Levels.'

'I can do it.'

When it came to it later, I did too, surprisingly. Perhaps not surprisingly having said I would. Miss Perseverance, that was me. I scraped through French and History and I got very high marks in English. And funny how by then it mattered, because I was busy proving myself.

My mother's gaze had drifted back to the television.

'So can I?'

'Can you what?'

'Go to Orlando's?'

'If you go out so much, will Jonty do my shopping?'

I nodded. Bargain. Compromise. Anything. Of course Jonty would take some convincing. And what about her doing it? What about her? You'd think just going to the supermarket, wandering past the shelves might be some sort of outing...

No, not the time for that one. Jonty had better co-operate though, it was definitely time he took his turn.

Her attention was wandering again. I fought to get it back. If I took a part-time job to pay for my own pointe shoes and practice clothes? Of course if I did that, maybe I could do it on my own anyway, without any assistance from her, but with school as well that would take up so much time...

‘Do what you want,’ my mother said, and gave her concentration over properly to the remote control.

Jonty was furious. ‘You've got a nerve plonking the shopping on me.’

‘What about me? I've done it for years.’

‘So you've always done it! Why should I?’

‘Little sh...!’ I bit my tongue. ‘Go on,’ I pleaded. ‘It's only up the road and we could work out a basic list.’ I opened one of the kitchen cupboards to demonstrate.

Jonty frowned. ‘Why doesn't she do it? Nobody else's mother lazes around like she does.’

It was true. She never went out. And nobody ever came into that house to see her either. I thought of her sitting on the shabby sofa in the other room in her creased skirt and woolly cardigan; a bit overweight, bored with all life except what was fed into her head on that screen. Nothing special in the looks department, except Jonty's straight nose and chestnut hair and she might even be quite attractive if she would just stand up and get on with her life.

But for some reason I defended her right to sit there. ‘She's unhappy.’

‘Aren't we fucking all,’ Jonty said, fiddling with the loose handle on the cutlery drawer.

I knew I should hug him, cheer him up somehow, but we didn't have that kind of relationship. It wasn't a tactile household. I resorted instead to

blackmail which pleased him better. He capitulated when I promised I'd buy him a new pair of trainers.

Little creep took the trainers I parted with my precious pointe shoe money for, and promptly used the list we worked out to make arrangements with a local shop to deliver weekly so he didn't do it anyway.