

HarperCollins E-Books

ISBN 978-0-00-727948-7

# A Girl's Guide to Kissing Frogs



Victoria Clayton

Victoria Clayton

**A Girl's Guide to Kissing Frogs**

«HarperCollins»

## **Clayton V.**

A Girl's Guide to Kissing Frogs / V. Clayton — «HarperCollins»,

A Girl's Guide to Kissing Frogs is a charming, witty book, perfect for fans of Elizabeth Noble and Marian Keyes. A girl may have to kiss a lot of frogs before she finds her Prince Charming but Marigold has found herself a real toad. As a principal dancer at the Lenoir Ballet Company, she is on her way to becoming a Prima Ballerina. But, when a painful fall sends her limping home to Northumberland to recuperate, Marigold fears that this could mean the end to her dreams. Luckily, her childhood friend, Rafe, who is just as delicious as she remembers him, is ready and waiting to sweep her off her feet. But, is there a handsome stranger waiting in the wings?

© Clayton V.

© HarperCollins

## Содержание

|                                   |    |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| A Girl's Guide to Kissing Frogs   | 6  |
| Contents                          | 7  |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 32 |

VICTORIA CLAYTON

## **A Girl's Guide to Kissing Frogs**

 HarperCollins e-books

To Zachary

## Contents

[Title Page](#) [Dedication](#) [Chapter One](#) [Chapter Two](#) [Chapter Three](#) [Chapter Four](#) [Chapter Five](#) [Chapter Six](#) [Chapter Seven](#) [Chapter Eight](#) [Chapter Nine](#) [Chapter Ten](#) [Chapter Eleven](#) [Chapter Twelve](#) [Chapter Thirteen](#) [Chapter Fourteen](#) [Chapter Fifteen](#) [Chapter Sixteen](#) [Chapter Seventeen](#) [Chapter Eighteen](#) [Chapter Nineteen](#) [Chapter Twenty](#) [Chapter Twenty One](#) [Chapter Twenty Two](#) [Chapter Twenty Three](#) [Chapter Twenty Four](#) [Chapter Twenty Five](#) [Chapter Twenty Six](#) [Chapter Twenty Seven](#) [Chapter Twenty Eight](#) [Chapter Twenty Nine](#) [Chapter Thirty](#) [Chapter Thirty One](#) [Chapter Thirty Two](#) [Chapter Thirty Three](#) [Chapter Thirty Four](#) [Chapter Thirty Five](#) [Chapter Thirty Six](#) [Chapter Thirty Seven](#) [Chapter Thirty Eight](#) [Chapter Thirty Nine](#) [Chapter Forty](#) [Chapter Forty One](#) [Chapter Forty Two](#) [Chapter Forty Three](#) [Chapter Forty Four](#) [Chapter Forty Five](#) [Chapter Forty Six](#) [Chapter Forty Seven](#) [Chapter Forty Eight](#) [About the Author](#) [By the Same Author](#) [Copyright](#) [About the Publisher](#)

### 1

How did it happen? After my accident Alex told everyone that it was entirely his fault I had broken several bones in my foot, but then, like all dancers, Alex craved attention. Despite his perfect technique and marvellous legs, Nature had cruelly contrived to prevent the spotlight shining on him as much as he would have liked. So, to please him, when people asked me if he had been responsible for the near ruination of my career, I would reply with a lift of my eyebrows and a cryptic smile.

It may have been the studio stove that was to blame. It was sulking on that chilly February morning and though I was wearing legwarmers my muscles might have begun to stiffen. But in fact I was practically certain that I had lost concentration in that crucial second before springing into a third *sissonne*, one of several in rapid succession, towards the end of Act II of *Giselle*. The lift is not difficult but it is *épaulée*, which means ‘shouldered’ – high, in other words. Obviously it only works properly if Giselle and Albrecht jump and lift at precisely the same moment. I thought I sprang too late, Alex that he lifted too soon. The result was that the *sissonne* was clumsy and I landed heavily amid the dust and rosin on the studio floor with all my weight on the side of my foot.

Madame had an eye as sharp as a knapped flint and usually it flew inexorably to the tiniest error, but on this occasion she was distracted by temper. Orlando Silverbridge, our chief choreographer, had insisted on reviving an *enchaînement* from the original ballet which had been scrapped – and with good reason – from later productions. It was a complicated series of steps weakening the dramatic impact of the pas de deux and demanding more than was kind from the already exhausted dancers.

‘Stop!’ shouted Madame. ‘Zis will not do! *C’est un joli fouillis*. Orlando, listen to me, you crazy *foul*!’ She struck her chest. ‘Either ze *enchaînement* it goes – or I go!’

‘Be reasonable, Etta!’ pleaded the choreographer. Then, seeing her eyes flash, he paled with anger and he too struck his chest. ‘Go, then! It might be that we can manage without you. Yes, go! It will be a breath of fresh air. A new ballet mistress is exactly what this company needs!’

‘*Bête!*’

‘Has-been!’

‘*Oh!*’

‘*Oh!*’

They both prided themselves on being aesthetes with exquisitely tender susceptibilities but at that moment they reminded me of howling monkeys squabbling over the last banana.

Madame threw back her head and hooted mockingly. ‘I see it! I see it! First you will try to take all ze classes your own self and chaos will be ze result! Zen you seek anozzer *maîtresse de ballet*. Mimi Lambert, per’aps, or zat fool, Popova – *zut! tais-toi, imbécile!*’

This last was directed at the pianist, who had continued to play, her eyes fixed dreamily on the racing clouds beyond the window. The pianist stopped abruptly and picked up her knitting. She was used to these rages. Madame clapped her hands. ‘One ’alf-hour for lunch, everyone,’ she called

before returning her attention to Orlando, who stood cupping his elbow with one hand, resting his chin on the other, looking gloomy. I saw his face brighten as his eye fell on the sinewy buttocks of Dicky Weeks. Dicky, who was from New York, had only recently joined the Lenoir Ballet Company but already his elevations were creating something of a stir.

'You're limping,' said Bella in an accusing tone when I joined her at the barre. 'You came down too hard on that third *sissonne*.' She looked down at my foot in its grubby pink satin shoe, then up at my face. Sweat poured down our foreheads and cheeks and dripped from our chins. Her hair, pulled back and fastened into place by a wide band, was as wet as seal's fur. A dark triangle ran from neck to waist of her scarlet leotard. We had been friends, on and off, for twelve years, since the day we had arrived with braces, plaits and flustered mothers at Brackenbury House in Manchester to begin the arduous years of training necessary to become dancers. At this moment the friendship was definitely off.

'No.' I seized the foot that was beginning to throb and stretched up the adjoining leg so that my knee was close to my ear, just to show her that everything was still in working order.

Bella hooked one heel over the barre and leaned forward to put her chin on her leg so that I could not see the hunger in her eyes. 'You'd better get some ice on it.'

'Good luck for this evening, Marigold *darling*.' Lizzie, who had remained a staunch friend despite a stalling of her career due to a wobbly technique and the refusal of her insteps to be sufficiently pliant, put her arms gracefully round my neck. Her fair hair, which escaped her headband to spring into tight ringlets, tickled my cheek. Unlike everyone else in the company, she was not desperately ambitious and was content to remain in the corps de ballet. 'I'll hold my thumbs for you. I know you'll be wonderful.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'I'm going to need it.'

'Bella's a bitch,' she whispered in my ear. Lizzie was as violent in her hates as in her loves. 'Don't let her jinx things for you.'

'It's only a workshop,' put in Bella, who had no doubt heard the whispering though not what had been said.

'Ah, tonight, maybe, but on Friday it's the real thing.' Lizzie executed a hasty *entrechat quatre* to express her excitement, 'and I for one can't wait to see Marigold's name in lights.'

The workshop was in the nature of a dress rehearsal before an invited audience. Had Lizzie and Bella known it, a very great deal rested on this evening's performance and now, when I thought about it, my stomach did a *jeté battu* followed by a *ballotté*.

'Marigold! *Venez ici!*' Madame was beckoning imperiously. 'Lizzie! Zat was an *entrechat quatre comme un* poor old cripple woman wiz ze 'ob-nailed boots. Alex, come 'ere also.'

Alex and I skipped across to the spot designated by her pointing finger. I was conscious of pain rippling up from my foot into my ankle.

'We 'ave decided. At last ze agreement!' Madame spread her fingers and looked heavenward. From the slam of the studio door as Orlando went out, I guessed that agreement had little to do with it. '*Ze enchaînement* we cut!' She made a slicing movement with her hand. 'Instead for five bars we 'ave a pause – when you two act like crazy wiz your eyes. It will be *un moment* of consequence ze most dramatic. You express to ze audience all ze love, all ze regret, all ze sorrow ...'

Alex's face obediently mirrored these emotions while Madame talked. I tried not to think about my foot and instead envisaged the apple, cheese and yoghurt that awaited me. I was absolutely starving. After Madame had decided to her own satisfaction how our limbs should be disposed during this pregnant moment of eye-acting, we were free to go.

'Fancy coming down the Pink Parrot after the performance tonight?' asked Alex as we made our way down the corridor towards the canteen. 'It's Dicky's birthday and he's promised to stand us drinks for as long as his grandmother's cheque holds out.'

'How kind of him. Yes, I'd love to if—'



A hand gripped my shoulder. 'Sorry, Alex, but I've already made plans for Marigold.' Sebastian Lenoir slipped his arm through mine so that he was walking between us. 'And I'm in a hurry.'

Alex slid away up the stairs to the canteen.

Sebastian was the director of the Lenoir Ballet Company, or the LBC as it was generally called. What he decreed, no one even thought of contradicting. Madame was the only person who from time to time stood up to him, but she always had to admit defeat in the end. Sebastian never raised his voice, but he saw no reason to make concessions to anyone. He would wait patiently, impassive faced, while Madame argued, pleaded and occasionally raved, before lifting and dropping his shoulders – a gesture which seemed to say 'tiresomely a ballet company *must* have people in it' – and replying, 'All right. Now we do as I say.'

In many ways Sebastian was an ideal director. He had trained as a dancer, then worked for ten years as a choreographer, so he had a thorough knowledge of the business. It was largely thanks to Sebastian that we were, in the opinions of those who counted, the third most successful company in England. It was not impossible that we might one day improve our rating. His hair, black with a silver streak, was swept straight back from a high brow that looked noble until you came to know him better. Often people suspected him of dyeing it in emulation of the great Diaghilev but, having had frequent opportunities to examine it close to, I thought it was probably natural, since it never showed signs of growing out. On his handsome sardonic face was usually an expression that could scare you half to death. He certainly frightened me, even though I was beginning to know him quite well. For the last twelve months we had been lovers.

'Come into my office.' He steered me through a door into a room that was as elegantly shabby as the rest of the building. The LBC was housed in a row of unrestored Georgian houses in Blackheath. It lacked central heating, but the dancers warmed themselves by their exertions, and in Sebastian's office there was a grate where logs burned through the winter. He had hung drawings by Gainsborough, Lawrence and other eighteenth-century luminaries, lent him by an art-dealer friend, on the flaking walls. Curtains of faded green silk hung at the windows. There was about his quarters a rich beauty which was reflected in all his tastes.

Money was the end to which all Sebastian's efforts were directed. He needed it to entice gifted dancers, choreographers, designers and costumiers. He had to find money for travelling expenses for the touring part of the company, for publicity, for bribes, for paying people off. The acquisition of money was germane to all his decisions. I imagined that he thought of little else by day and probably dreamed about it at night. Yet no one could have accused him of personal extravagance. He wore his father's old Savile Row suits and ate sparingly unless someone else was paying for it. As he seated himself languidly behind his desk and picked up the mother-of-pearl penknife he used to open letters, he had the negligent air of a country gentleman with comfortable estates and an agent to see to the horrid necessities. He tapped on the mahogany surface before him with the closed knife.

'I hear Miko Lubikoff is coming to the workshop tonight.'

'Is he?' I aimed for something between mild interest and surprise in my tone to disguise the apprehension that seized my innermost parts. Miko Lubikoff was director of the English Ballet, the company whose reputation stood higher than the LBC's and lower than the Royal Ballet's. 'Goodness!'

'You didn't know? Everyone else in the company seems well acquainted with the fact. Why should you be an exception, I wonder?'

'Now I think of it, perhaps Alex did mention ...' I sort of hummed the rest of the sentence away.

'Alex?' A slight frown appeared between dark symmetrical brows. 'Don't pretend you think Miko is interested in *him*.'

'Oh, *no*!' In my eagerness to exonerate Alex I was perhaps too emphatic. 'I-I mean, perhaps Miko just wants to see what we're doing – there hasn't been a new production of *Giselle* for ages ... I expect he gets awfully bored with seeing the same old dancers—'

'Miko does not allow himself to be bored. Nor –' he sent me a glance that was distinctly unfriendly – 'do I.'

I folded my hands in my lap and tried to look insouciant, though I was certain that the rapid pulse in the hollow of my throat must be visible from a hundred yards.

He stroked the smooth handle of the knife with long fingers. 'I suspect he's coming,' he put his thumbnail into the slot provided for the purpose and brought out the blade, 'because of you.'

'Me? I don't suppose he even knows who I am. I've never actually spoken to him.'

'Oh? Yet Etta tells me that last week there was a letter from Miko in your pigeonhole.'

Damn and blast and hell! It was well-known that Madame, who would have allowed herself to be chopped to atoms for the good of the company, had extraordinary powers of divination and could detect a disloyal thought the moment it sprang newborn, damp with amniotic fluid, into a person's mind. But presumably she did not have X-ray eyes that could penetrate layers of Basildon Bond.

'Oh, no! That's impossible.'

Sebastian speared a paper polo – one those little rings for reinforcing punch holes – with the blade of his knife. 'Miko's hand is distinctive. And the green ink, regrettably jejune, is a trademark.'

'I remember now,' I blurted out. 'It was a letter from my aunt!'

I realized at once this was a mistake.

'Oh? Your aunt?' He did not bother to hide his scepticism.

I was thoroughly rattled. 'Yes ... she's a terrific correspondent ... she writes every week, sometimes twice ... she lives in the Highlands of Scotland and is awfully lonely, poor old thing ... no one to talk to but her old blind collie ... you see, she's in a wheelchair and can't get out ...' I was supplying too much detail, the common mistake of liars.

'In that case her letters are unlikely to be franked with an NW3 postmark.'

I felt myself grow cold. Everyone knew the English Ballet had their headquarters in Belsize Park. He smiled, much as a torturer might smile on hearing a bone crack. My entire body tensed in a silent scream, but acting is an important part of a dancer's bag of tricks, so outwardly I smiled back. He continued to watch my face. The effort required to look innocent and unconcerned was agony. I was on the point of confessing everything and throwing myself on his mercy, if he had any, when he said, 'Lock the door.'

I leaped up to do his bidding. I had been so distracted by the latent menace in the interview that I was unprepared for the pain that shot from the sole of my foot to my knee. The door fastened with an old-fashioned brass rim lock. It took a little while to persuade the key to turn, which gave me a chance to compose my face. As I walked back to the desk I was relieved to see that a lightning change had taken place. His eyes had lost their coldness, his smile was almost affectionate.

'Oh Marigold! What a little schemer you are!' He laughed softly. 'Take off your tights, my little *amuse-gueule*.'

This was his nickname for me – and no doubt countless others – a play on '*gueule*' and 'girl'. I accepted the sad fact that I was nothing more than a snack. Also that my Dutch cap was sitting on the shelf in my locker. I knew better than to suggest that he might wait while I fetched it. I scrambled out of legwarmers, tights and knickers. Luckily I was wearing the sort of leotard that fastens with hooks and eyes at the crotch so I could keep on my top half, including my cardigan. Despite the fire there was a chill in the air that was more than metaphorical.

'Sit on the desk,' he was unbuttoning his flies as he spoke, 'spread your legs wider ... arch your back a bit ... ah! yes! ... that's better! That's good! ... mm! what a nice little conformation you have ... tight, virginal ... a perfect body ...' He began to thrust with slow strokes, in harmony with our restrained elegant surroundings. 'I could, if I wanted, make you the greatest dancer of the decade ... one of the greatest names of the twentieth ... century ...' As he grew more excited his words came faster and with more of a hiss. 'But if you leave me ... you little... baggage ... I'll make sure you never get another good notice as long as you live ... move that fucking thing.'

I pushed the inkstand to one side and leaned back across the desk. He took hold of my ankles and lifted my legs so that I could hook my feet behind his head. A small, hard object on the blotter pressed into my spine. Probably the emblematic penknife. Was it true that all critics were open to threat and bribery? I had no way of knowing. Surely Mr Lubikoff had as much influence? If not more? But then he might decide that an all-out war with Sebastian did not suit him. Despite the fact that competition, individually and collectively, was fierce – ruthless would be more accurate – a pretence was maintained by all parties that we were above petty rivalries, that the only thing that mattered was the great art of which we were the humble exponents. It was all art for art's sake.

Everything depended on how badly Mr Lubikoff wanted me to dance for him. It might be that he had a partner in mind for me. As with candlesticks, ornaments, occasional tables and so on, a pair was worth more than the sum of its parts. Karsavina and Nijinsky, Fonteyn and Nureyev, Sibley and Dowell, couples who struck sparks from each other's dancing as well as looking good together filled theatres faster than anything. But Mr Lubikoff would not show his hand immediately. For the time being I could not afford to do anything that would make Sebastian my enemy. In my perplexity I almost folded my hands behind my head, the position I generally adopt for serious thinking, but a loud hiss from Sebastian, like a train building up a head of steam before pulling out from the station, prompted me to sigh and look swooningly at his face, now in the grimace of imminent orgasm, the silver lock of hair falling forward across his high bony forehead.

'Be ... good ... and ... you can ... dance with ... Freddy!' Each word was accompanied by a powerful thrust that made the boiler blow.

As he leaned, panting, over me, mission accomplished, I added Freddy to the equation. Frederick Tone, LBC's *premier danseur*, and Mariana Willoughby, both dancing at this moment with the touring part of the LBC in America, had failed to become one of those desirable partnerships. No one could say why, it was just one of those things. Freddy had a virtuosic technique with unequalled elevations. Also he had a perfect physique and was breathtakingly handsome. Poor Alex, with whom I usually danced, had no neck, narrow shoulders, a rugby-ball-shaped head and tiny pink-rimmed eyes like a French bull terrier. And although he was technically first class, he never seemed to catch fire, at least not with me. Alex was a nice boy and I was fond of him, but niceness is irrelevant in a partnership – which was lucky because Freddy was an absolute shit.

Sebastian was already adjusting his clothing. I got back into mine with a feeling of relief that had nothing to do with the act of coitus. Though dancers are usually tremendously sexy, perhaps as an extension of the intense physicality of their lives, and will couple with more or less anyone and anything, I personally could not see what the fuss was about.

I had lost my virginity at the age of seventeen to a sixty-year-old dramaturge who had been working with Orlando Silverbridge on a revival of *Frontispiece*, an eccentric ballet which combined dancing and verse. It had been my first professional engagement in the corps. The dramaturge had seemed very old to me then, almost geriatric. He was well connected, a chum of royalty, with a long and distinguished career behind him, and was feted by everyone worth knowing in the arts. He had a bald head but, as if to make up for it, furry ears and a mass of curly grey hair growing over a stomach distended by good living. I made myself go through what was a ghastly experience by reminding myself of his promise to get Orlando, with whom the dramaturge was having an affair at the time, to kick me out of the corps if I didn't cooperate. I knew he could because Orlando was tremendously ambitious and, despite the furry tum, sat up and begged whenever the dramaturge offered a titbit.

The deflowering had taken place in one of the rooms beneath the stage where props are stored. Princess Aurora's bed had been conveniently to hand. Afterwards I had wept in Lizzie's arms because in those days I had entertained silly romantic notions about love. Unfortunately, when Orlando discovered that I had slept with the dramaturge – I always suspected Bella of sneaking, he had been so annoyed about me poaching on his preserve that it had taken me nearly two years to get back into his good books.

'I'm late for lunch.' Sebastian looked at his watch and spoke with a hint of annoyance in his tone, as though I had detained him. While I was fastening the ribbons of my shoes he consulted his address book, picked up the telephone and dialled a number.

'Hello? Wilton's? Will you tell Lord Bezant I'll be fifteen minutes late. With my apologies.' He put down the receiver. 'It won't do the old skinflint any harm to realize that some of us have jobs to do. I want him to cough up for *Les Patineurs*. I'll see you this evening after the show. We'll go back to Dulwich.'

Dulwich was the location of the beautiful but dilapidated Regency house where Sebastian lived, which contained little furniture apart from essentials. The drawing room was quite empty, apart from the sofa on which he conducted his love affairs when at home, and his one luxury, a magnificent Steinway grand piano. It was sign of extraordinary favour to be invited to Sebastian's residence. I knew for a fact that Sebastian's previous lover had not once crossed the threshold.

'Oh, how lovely! The only thing is ... I expect I'll be rather tired. And there's the problem of taxis.'

I had been invited to Dulwich for the first time after Sebastian's birthday supper at Les Chanterelles. That was two months ago, and when Bella had heard the gossip which had flown round the company about this signal honour, she had given up even pretending to like me. She might have been comforted had she known what a miserable evening it had been. At the restaurant Sebastian had been too busy charming the guests he had earmarked to sponsor forthcoming productions to spare even a glance for me. I had sat between an embittered choreographer who had twice been passed over in favour of Orlando and an impresario whose wife had recently run off with a scene painter. They were glassy-eyed by the main course and sobbing by the pudding. Even the excellent food had not consoled me. Dancers have to be light so they can be lifted easily. I had eaten a few oysters, a small piece of chicken, three lettuce leaves and a slice of pineapple, and looked on hungrily while everyone else made beasts of themselves.

After several gruelling hours, Sebastian had grabbed my arm, shoved me into a taxi and swept me off to Dulwich. I had had little time to admire the beauty of the house. Sebastian had removed my coat and pointed to the sofa. Sex burns up a lot of calories. Throughout the lovemaking I thought about the dish of *pommes frites* the weeping impresario had left untouched. I could have eaten the lot without putting on an ounce. When Sebastian had satisfied himself, he helped me into my coat, conducted me to the front door and closed it firmly behind me. It was two o'clock in the morning and not a cab in sight. I had spent a grim three-quarters of an hour in a telephone box which stank of pee until I found a minicab to take me home.

'You can stay the night,' said Sebastian. I must have looked amazed for he added, 'You won't disturb me. You can sleep on the sofa.'

'Thank you,' I said humbly, well aware that this was largesse almost without precedent.

He looked at his watch again. 'Scoot.'

I scooted. The canteen was full. I had to eat my apple and cheese – there were no yoghurts left – standing up.

'Where've you been?' Lizzie came over to join me.

'In Lenoir's office, fucking, probably,' said Bella, who was sitting at a table nearby. Her companions laughed with detectable hostility. Since I had become Sebastian's mistress, and especially since I had been given the role of Giselle, my friendships had evaporated with a speed that would have alarmed me had I not seen it happen to others in the same circumstances. Should I become tremendously successful they would come crowding back. Meanwhile I was in an unhappy limbo, no longer one of the crowd nor yet one of the gods. It was wretched but there was nothing I could do about it.

I ignored the sniggers and assumed an air of calm superiority. 'I've been breaking in a pair of shoes actually.'

‘Really?’ Bella spoke scornfully. ‘Then why have you got paper polos stuck all over your back?’

I waited, hidden from the audience, inside the wooden construction that was painted outside to represent the cottage where Giselle lived with her mother. Behind me in the wings, the corps, dressed like me as village maidens, were stretching and flexing, preparing themselves for their next entrance. My heart beat so hard it seemed to vibrate against the boned bodice of my tutu and my bare arms broke into goose pimples. Tears of excitement filled my eyes. Now I knew that the tremendous, relentless effort to fashion my body into the perfect instrument – the aching muscles, the strains, the sprains, the bruises, the bloody toes, the starving, the rotten pay, the rivalries, jealousies and disappointments – had been worth it. From the age of six when I had been told to run round the village hall pretending to be a butterfly, my life had been directed towards this aim, to express with my body beauty, fear, love, grief, joy, hope, despair, evil, apotheosis.

The percussion struck the notes that mimicked the knocking of Count Albrecht on the cottage door. The stage hand who was waiting with his hand on the latch to open it for me wished me luck. I heard him as though in a dream. Already I was a peasant girl in a state of tremulous expectation, sighing for her mysterious lover whose wooing had transformed her humdrum rural existence into a life of transcendent bliss. I burned to see him, to feel his arms about my waist, to look into his eyes, to marvel at his beauty, to express my gratitude for his love, to share with him a glorious vision of future happiness as man and wife. The music slowed, anticipating Giselle’s entrance. The door opened, I counted the beats, drew in my breath, rose to *demi-pointe*, and launched myself into a world of sound, light, colour and intoxication.

## 2

Daylight crept through the gap in the curtains that hung round my bed. Out of the confusion of sleep emerged one clear idea, a craving for a glass of water. My eyes and mouth were dry and my skin felt splittingly tight. I barely had time to register these discomforts before a flame of pain in my left foot banished all other sensations. I opened my eyes and lay still, concentrating on not tensing the muscles in my left leg, hoping to lull my foot to a tolerable ache. Siggy, the darling, stirred, stretched and rolled on to his back, snoring faintly.

After five minutes or so the searing seemed to cool a little. I stared at the canopy of gold sateen above my head. The sateen had cost less than a pound a metre and was meant for lining things, but when gathered into a sunburst of pleats with a lustrous crumpled fabric rose in the centre to hide the stitching, you really couldn’t tell how cheap it was.

When I was eight my mother had taken my sister and me to Newcastle to see *The Sleeping Beauty*. The moment the lord chamberlain in his full-bottomed wig had come mincing on to the stage in high-heeled red shoes, I had been ravished from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet by the beauty of that sparkling, starry, fairytale world. I had made a secret resolution, so thrilling I had hardly dared to acknowledge it even to myself, that I was going to be a famous ballerina.

A little later in the performance I had also resolved to have a red and gold bed like Princess Aurora’s. This was much easier to achieve. I had spent many enjoyable hours with a hammer, nails, scissors, glue and a needle and thread. The crimson velvet curtains that hung round my four-poster had once separated the stage of the Chancery Lane Playhouse from its audience before the theatre closed for good. The gilt cord, stitched into triple loops at each outside corner of the tester and ornamented with gold tassels, had trimmed the palanquin of King Shahryar in *Scheherazade*. However tired I was, however discouraged by a less than perfect performance, however tormented by Sebastian’s demands, my beautiful bed embraced me, soothed me and cheered me. Every night, unless the weather was really sweltering, I drew the curtains all the way round so that Siggy and I were warm and safe inside our little red room with the critical, competitive world shut out.

I stroked Siggy’s chin gently. He stirred and stuck out the tip of his tongue. He was incontestably my favourite bed companion. But why was I at home? Why was I not even now basking in the perquisites of director’s moll, lying on the hard little sofa in the unheated drawing room at Dulwich,

my already shattered frame having been probed, impaled, bounced on and generally misused? Then I remembered the extraordinary events of the day before.

At first Fortune had seemed to be on my side. I had been spared the customary two hours of *répétition* after lunch. Madame had decided to devote the afternoon to rehearsing the corps since they had, she asserted, 'ze elegance of a 'erd of cattle. You 'op about as zo you are being prodded in ze rump by ze cow'and. Togezer!'

A free afternoon was a rare luxury. I had gone back to the flat I shared with Sorel and Nancy, also dancers in the LBC, to wash my tights – frequent washing was the only way to get rid of wrinkles which were so obvious on the stage – and break in an extra pair of pointe shoes. A virgin pair clacks as loudly on the stage as the husks of coconuts imitating a trotting horse. The second act of *Giselle* calls for feather-light landings. I had already broken in three pairs for that evening's performance but, with the state my foot was in after that unlucky *sissonne*, I thought it might be wise to have a fourth. Once the box – the hard section your toes fit into – becomes soft through wear your foot isn't supported properly. I was worried but not despairing about the injury sustained that morning. Dancers spend practically all their professional lives in pain. Often our feet are soaked in blood. They have to be wrapped in bandages and lashings of antibiotic ointment. The rest of our bodies are tortured by strained muscles and ligaments and the overuse of joints. Perhaps the undeniable romance of suffering for one's art helps to make the agony bearable.

Each dancer has her own method for breaking in new pointe shoes. Some people smash them on the floor, some shut them in doors, but I always used a rubber mallet. A few judicious blows weaken the brittle layers of hessian and glue that the toe box is made from. Having moulded them to the shape of your foot so they fit like a second skin, you paint them with shellac which hardens to preserve the exact shape. Then the tips have to be darned to give a good grip and the ribbons sewn on. It was a process with which I was so familiar that it always acted as a tranquillizer for mounting nerves.

When I had prepared the shoes to my own satisfaction, I examined my body for hair. Dancers have to be perfectly smooth. Everything except eyebrows and eyelashes must be plucked away. This was no problem for me as my body hair was fine and easily discouraged, but girls with dark hair spent hours each week painfully engaged with tweezers and hot wax. Then I sat by the window and contemplated a fading photograph of a woman wearing a long tutu with a garland of flowers round her skirts and more flowers in her hair, *en arabesque penchée*. Dancers are a superstitious lot and before performances they resort to whatever sympathetic magic they've convinced themselves will help them to give of their best – invoking saints, lighting candles, hiding amulets in their underwear, or in my case attempting to commune with the spirit of Anna Pavlova. Pavlova had weak feet, poor turn-out, a scrawny physique and bad placement, yet she was one of the greatest ballerinas of the twentieth century. She was famous for the power and passion of her dancing which she combined with a delicate expressiveness. Technique alone does not make a good dancer. I always reminded myself of this before I went on stage.

*Giselle* was due to start at half-past seven. I arrived at the theatre at six. An enormous bouquet of dark pink lilies, pale yellow roses and green hellebores took up much of the valuable space in my dressing room. I looked at the card. *With respect and admiration, Miko Lubikoff*. I almost screamed aloud. Who else would have read it? Certainly Annie, my dresser, and Cyril, the stage-door keeper. Like everyone else they were gossips. The arrival of the flowers must be all round the theatre by now, which presumably was what Mr Lubikoff had intended. Sebastian was too lofty for mundane conversation, but Madame would lose no time in letting him know. I cut the card into tiny scraps with my nail scissors and threw them into the bin. I would have to tell a lie and it ought to be a good one.

'Hello, darling.' Lizzie was wearing a mauve quilted dressing gown full of holes. Her face was covered with Max Factor pancake. Her ringlets had been temporarily tamed by a hairnet and her round brown eyes had been extended with black lines almost to her temples. 'Just came to wish you

good – my God! When Annie said it was a enormous bunch she wasn't exaggerating! Lubikoff's serious then? You sneaky thing! I *do* think you might have told me.'

'The flowers, you mean.' I tried to look unconcerned. 'They're from my godmother, actually.'

Lizzie snorted. 'You're going to have to do better than that if you don't want Sebastian to rend you limb from gorgeous limb. That bouquet can't have cost less than twenty pounds. Everyone knows that godmothers are mean as hell.'

It was certainly true that mine was. For my last birthday she had sent me a card with a 'reduced to half price' label on the back and a cookery book which was clearly second-hand as half the pages were stuck together. As I cannot afford to be wasteful, I had hollowed out the middle, carving my way through splashes of bygone soups, kedgerees and charlottes to make a cache for valuables. It would come in very useful when I had any.

'Oh, Lizzie! I've hated not telling you. But there isn't actually anything to tell. I got a letter from Mr Lubikoff last week saying that he was coming to the workshop and was hoping to be able to talk to me alone afterwards. That's all.'

This was not quite true. He had gone on to say that he considered me a fine classical dancer with extraordinary vitality and a magnificent line. He was anxious that because of my undoubted fitness for the ballets *blancs* – things like *Swan Lake*, *Giselle* and *La Bayadère* in which the girls wear white tutus – I might be denied the chance to interpret contemporary works. He thought the role of Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, which the EB were putting on in a few months' time would be perfectly suited to developing my range of dramatic expression. I knew this paragraph by heart. Everyone is hungry for praise but I believe dancers are more famished than any other group of artists. During classes we receive a continual flow of negative criticism which, although intended to be constructive, lowers morale. Even after a good performance there is always a painstaking analysis with emphasis on improvements that could be made to the curve of a wrist here, the turn of a head there.

However, modesty forbade taking Lizzie fully into my confidence. Besides, words cost nothing, and in the theatrical world are flung about like autumn leaves.

'Mind you don't accept less than twice what Sebastian pays you.' Lizzie giggled. 'Oh, my! Won't he be hopping mad!'

I felt my stomach lurch at the idea of Sebastian's rage.

'Marigold! *Darling!*' Bruce Gamble, who was dancing the *caractère* role of Hilarion, had stuck his head round the door. 'Who's a lucky girl then? I know for a fact that when Lubikoff wooed Skrivanova he only sent horrid pink carnations.' He sucked in his cheeks and lowered his eyelids to express disgust. 'Nasty vulgar things that never die, fit only for cemeteries.'

'You mean these?' I pointed to the lilies, roses and hellebores. 'My uncle sent them. Wasn't it kind of him?'

Bruce pursed lips blood-red with rouge. 'I'm afraid you'll never get on if you can't lie better than that, my pet. Only people on the make send expensive flowers. Now the person to whom you represent money at the moment is Sebastian. But he's already got you signed up professionally and he's fucking you. We all know he's too stingy to spend as much as a ha'penny on his spunk-buckets.'

I considered, then abandoned, the idea of taking issue with this graphic description of my status in Sebastian's life. Scabrous language was Bruce's only vice. Temperate in all his appetites, he ate only nuts, fruit and sprouting things, drank nothing but tisanes, eschewed sex of any kind and devoted himself, mind and body, to dancing.

'But of course if Miko Lubikoff is thinking of you as his dear little honey-pot—'

'Aie! It is true!' Irina Yzgrouchka pushed past Bruce and went to bury her face in the flowers, breathing in their delicious scent with a moan of pleasure. She was dressed in a dark blue riding habit and a lavishly plumed hat for the non-dancing role of Bathilde, Count Albrecht's fiancée. Irina's age ... forty-two ... and an accumulation of injuries had put paid to her suppleness. 'How I will miss you, my own sweet Marigold!' Irina put her arm round my neck and shed a few tears. Emotions are always

near the surface in any ballet company, and illusion and reality are inextricably mixed, but I paid us both the compliment of believing that some of the tears were genuine. I was no threat to her now.

'They're from an unknown admirer,' I said, blushing a little beneath the gaze of Bruce and Lizzie.

Irina looked at me from beneath false lashes clotted with mascara. In accordance with the almost universal practice, she had put a red dot in the inner corner of each eye to make them appear more open, but it looked very odd close to. 'Darlink, the poor little falsehood is stillborn, no pathetic infant cry, not even a gasp. Admirers send red roses or some such *gaucherie*. Only a queer sends flowers so beautiful as these. Besides, at least ten people read the card before you arrive.'

It was some comfort to know that Sebastian never came backstage before a performance. Afterwards he made a point of doing so, to give the company his opinion of our achievements, which ranged from mediocre (which meant very good) through pretty poor (good) to atrocious (some careless *port de bras* in the corps). I put on my peasant girl dress – white blouse, green laced bodice and scarlet knee-length skirt for the first act, wondering how I could manage to have a private conversation with Mr Lubikoff afterwards. Human traffic flowed continuously in and out of my dressing room. I could hardly lock myself in with him. That would be the same as hanging a sign on the door saying 'Marigold Savage is negotiating a new contract with a rival company.'

Annie came in to plait my hair and tie it into coils with scarlet ribbons. Because my hair was such a distinctive colour, I rarely wore a wig. Dancers, particularly dressed in white with their hair fastened into chignons, look very much alike from the back of the auditorium. Though it was tiresome always to invoke the spirit of Moira Shearer in the minds of the critics, it was an advantage to have a physical characteristic that made one instantly recognizable.

'Is he coming tonight?' Annie mumbled through a mouthful of Kirby grips. She indicated the flowers with a jerk of her head.

There was no point in pretending not to understand. Many years ago Annie had danced in the corps herself so she knew what was at stake. I don't know why I felt so guilty. Sebastian would not have hesitated for one solitary second to replace me with a better dancer. Or a more desirable lover.

'He said he would. But you know ...' I shrugged.

'I know all right. When my bones ache and I can't afford a packet of fags, I thank my lucky stars my next month's salary doesn't depend on the fancy of some self-obsessed old faggot.'

The first act went as well as anyone could have hoped. When we danced together I forgot about Alex's resemblance to a French bull terrier. As Loys, my mysterious suitor, he became handsome and charming. I was astonished and elated that he had chosen to love me. I responded with a passion I didn't know I was capable of feeling because my life until that point as a simple village girl had been so ordinary. When Loys admitted that he was really Count Albrecht in disguise and already betrothed to the beautiful, blue-blooded Bathilde, I could not at first understand it. Surely there had been a terrible mistake? The pitying glances of his courtiers assured me it was true. My love was a poisoned apple. I had been deceived, my dreams were dust and ashes and there was no peace for me in the world but death. And die I did, after a fit of madness that demanded tremendous technical skill.

The part of Giselle is one of the greatest tests for a ballerina. It is not only extremely difficult technically, but it requires a great range of expression. The ghost of the second act must make the strongest possible contrast with the simple red-cheeked village girl of the first. Because every gesture is minutely circumscribed, it tests one's ability to communicate to the utmost. I barely noticed the applause as I came off the stage in the interval because I immediately began to think myself into a state of ethereal otherworldliness. Pavlova always danced the dead Giselle in burial ceremonies, but I had been given the more usual romantic tutu. It was only as I was struggling into the basque which holds the costume together that I noticed that my foot was hurting. As soon as I thought about it the pain increased to something that approached but was not quite agony.



Annie came to hook up the bodice of white slipper-satin covering the basque that held the tutu together. A pair of delicate gauzy wings was attached to my shoulders.

'You danced well, dear. Those *ballottés* with the *jetés en avants* straight after are pigs to get on the beat and you were spot on.' Annie had seen Fonteyn, Markova and Barinova dance, so praise from her was worth having. 'Lubikoff'll be pleased.' Annie bent to smooth out the three layers of snowy tarlatan that finished at mid-calf. 'You don't want to let Lenoir bully you into doing just as he likes.' She fastened a silver girdle round my waist and brought me a new pair of shoes while I removed trickles of sweat and mascara and powdered my face, neck and arms. 'I know you've got to get on, dear, and goodness knows we've all done it, but he's such a cold stick, such a brute of a man. I hate to think of you having to let him ... whatever's wrong with your foot?'

'It is a bit swollen.' I flexed it and winced. 'Be an angel and tie it up for me.'

Annie's experience with dancer's feet was second to none. She tsk-tsked volubly when I took off my tights to disclose the hot, reddened flesh of my left foot but, after she had bound my instep and ankle, it felt almost comfortable again. I pulled on my tights, fastened my shoes and kissed her gratefully before running down to the basement, known as 'hell', to take up my position on the little platform which at the appropriate moment would shoot me up to the stage as though I had risen from my grave.

I adored the thrilling moment of stepping into the blue starlight and bourréeing towards the centre as though I weighed less than a mote in a moonbeam. Annie's bandages held my foot in a secure yet flexible grip and at first all went well. Then it came to the moment when Giselle hops *en pointe* on her left foot, traversing half the stage, which is difficult to do gracefully in the most favourable circumstances. I found it doubly hard when each hop sent a thousand volts from my toe to my knee. An expression of mournful tenderness was called for. The pain forced me to grit my teeth and it was all I could do not to grunt with pain. During the pas de deux with Myrtha, the Queen of the Wilis, the throbbing and stinging was nothing less than excruciating. I seemed to be dancing on white-hot knives. Perhaps something of the agonizing struggle to control my arabesques may have been interpreted by the audience as passion and pity for the distraught Albrecht. Anyway, the clapping, whistling and stamping of feet as I sank back into my grave was terrific.

'You look terrible!' said Bella, Queen of the Wilis, who was waiting with me in the wings while the corps de ballet took their curtain call. 'That foot's playing up, isn't it? Bad luck!' Bella's words were sympathetic but I saw excitement in her eyes. The first night was only five days away and Bella was my understudy.

'I'm all right.' I grabbed a towel to mop the sweat from my neck and shoulders. 'You were wonderful.'

Bruce, as Hilarion, scampered on to the stage and received measured applause. It is not much of a part.

'Thanks.' Bella ran gracefully into the spotlight and curtsied to a lively reception. She was considered an exceptional dancer with tremendous precision and serenity, but unfortunately one critic had labelled her cold and the epithet had stuck. The part of Myrtha suited her admirably, but I knew she longed for the chance to refute this and show a greater emotional breadth as Giselle. I didn't blame her one bit.

Smiling beatifically, Bella took her place among the line of soloists in front of the corps. Alex a.k.a. Albrecht came on to an enthusiastic response which he received with elegant bows. When the audience began to tire, he flung out one arm towards the wing where I was standing and I tripped across as lightly as I could, considering my foot was on fire, to take his hand.

I was startled by the roar of appreciation. Alex stepped back to let me take the call alone. I smiled and tried to look as though I was gratified without actually purring. Some dancers make a great play of kissing hands and gesturing from the heart to the audience, which I think is irritating as it smacks of spurious humility. I stepped back into the line as a bouquet of flowers – oh dear,

chrysanthemums again, well, the LBC was hard up – was brought on by the conductor, darling old Henry Haskell. More clapping. The curtain came down. As I was looking directly at it and no one could see, I allowed myself to pull a face of hideous suffering. The curtain rose again. Henry led me forward for further congratulation. I gave them a serene, Buddha-like smile, though my whole leg felt as though it was being flambéed on a spit. Another curtain. I was on the point of weeping.

‘One more! One more!’ cried the stage manager.

‘Come on! We’ll take it!’ said Alex, his eyes shining.

‘They’re still clapping like crazy!’ Annie, who had been watching my terrific reception from the wings, took the chrysanthemums from me. ‘Go on. Just one last curtain, dear.’

‘Not if it’s my last one ever,’ I said, lifting my foot and only just managing not to howl like a wounded dog.

I reached my dressing room, pressed my face against my dressing gown which was hanging on the back of the door and screamed into its folds. Then I hopped over to the mirror and sank into the chair before it. I knew it would not be long before the room was crowded with a mingling of friend and foe and I had to get myself in a state to receive them. I took two painkillers with a glass of Lucozade and then, as an afterthought, swilled down two more. I examined my foot. The flesh was protruding either side of the ribbons. Hang the expense, I would order a taxi. While I was framing excuses to avoid going to Dulwich there was a tap on the door and Mr Lubikoff came in.

‘Let me be the first to congratulate you.’ He closed the door firmly behind him.

Miko Lubikoff had been born plain Mike Lubbock and at the age of fourteen had been selling cabbages from a barrow; he was an example to us all of how hard work and perseverance in the teeth of all odds will pay dividends. He had put the money he earned from the cabbages into ballet classes and, though it was late to begin, talent and diligence had earned him a place in the corps of a fourth-rate company. From this modest beginning he rose rapidly. Though without an extraordinary technique, his strong personality and musicality, particularly in the caractère roles, brought him to the notice of the cognoscenti. Here luck played a part for, whereas Sebastian had an appetite only for young girls, Miko’s taste was for sodomy – preferably with angelic little boys, but he was not fussy. Sebastian’s nymphets rarely had enough money for the bus home, whereas Miko rolled happily about in bed with any balletomane with a large bank balance. Pillow talk bought him partnerships, investments, even a theatre, and currently he was one of the biggest cheeses in English ballet.

He was now past the age of dancing and had grown corpulent with rich living at other people’s expense. His face was round and his nose was fat. His head was a naked dome above two stiff triangular wedges of hair, dyed bright gold so that he looked like a cherub whose wings had mysteriously risen from his shoulder blades to above his ears.

‘My dear Marigold!’ He bowed as low as his stomach allowed. ‘Permit me to say how awed I feel at finding myself in the presence of the outstanding artist. My fingers and toes still tingle from the stimulation of your performance. What attack! You snap from the ground in the first act and in the second you float. Superb! Exquisite!’ He kissed his fingertips.

Rumour said Miko had been born in Stoke Newington, but now he spoke with an interesting mixture of dramatic inflections, trilled consonants and stilted constructions that could have passed for Slavonic. I did not despise him for this. Illusion and invention are the lifeblood of ballet.

‘Thank you so much for the flowers. They’re beautiful.’ A wave of pain from my foot made me feel sick.

He shook his head, smiling. ‘A paltry tribute to one who will go down in the history books with Pavlova, Karsavina, Kchessinskaya, Ulanova and Fonteyn.’

For a moment I wondered if it could be true. In which case ‘Savage’ would sound rather discordant in this catalogue of greats. Then common sense asserted itself. There were plenty of dancers as technically competent as me. Some were better. It would take a piece of extraordinary good fortune to persuade people that I had something special that merited a place in the exosphere

of stardom. So far critics had been content to call my performance 'fiery', probably because of an unconscious association with the colour of my hair.

'You have received my letter?' Miko continued. 'You understand that I would like you to come to work for me? I can offer you the great classic roles and besides them the exciting new ones, which you can make your own.' He smirked a little. 'But there are some sweets that, alas, I cannot promise.' He pretended to look sorrowful while keeping his merry little eyes fixed on mine. 'I am told on the good authority of the ladies who have been favoured – and there are so, so many of them – that Sebastian is inimitable in the bedroom.' He need not have stooped to be catty. For me Miko's sexual orientation was not the least of his attractions.

'Naturally I'm terrifically honoured to be asked to join the English Ballet,' I began, 'but my contract with—'

Miko held up a stubby finger. 'Let us leave the business details for now. It has been an evening of the consummate delight. We do not want to spoil it with the ... how you say, nitty-gritty? Come and see me in my office at six o'clock on Monday evening.'

I hesitated. If I kept that appointment it would be the end of my career with the LBC. News of my visit to enemy headquarters would fly back to Sebastian as fast as Miko could send it. My goose would not only be cooked but eaten and digested. This left me with almost no bargaining power. How could I be certain that Miko would offer me a principal and not a soloist contract? Miko smiled winningly. My thoughts flew about *en gargouillade*, that is, *a double rond de jambe en l'air, en dedans* with the first leg, *en dehors* with the second, all in the course of one leap and really tricky.

'It's a little awkward.' I pulled a face to express the delicacy of the situation, and also to relieve the emotion caused by a throbbing so bad that I wanted to clutch my foot and yell. 'You see—'

'Hello Miko.' Sebastian had entered as quietly as a cat, which was his habit. 'Come to see how *Giselle* should be done?'

They gave each other tigerish smiles.

'I congratulate you, Sebastian. A superb production. Rarely have I seen one that was superior. Not for three years that I can remember.' The last production of *Giselle* had been the English Ballet's, three years ago almost to the day. 'And Giselle herself ... no, I have not seen a better. Certainly not Skrivanova. By the end of the second act, that one, she land with a thump, like a tired horse.' This was generous, as the rustling and whispering from just outside the door, which Sebastian had left a little ajar, testified to a larger audience than us three. Skrivanova, his prima ballerina, was bound to hear of this disparagement. The intense interest created abroad by this discussion was not just idle inquisitiveness. If I joined the English Ballet, there was a chance that someone in the LBC, probably Bella, would get a principal contract. All the coryphées – the dancers in the corps who had shown promise and who were under consideration for a soloist contract – were hanging on every word.

'Skrivanova. Yes.' Sebastian lingered in a hissing way on the last consonant. 'Naturally I don't blame you for wanting my dancers for yourself. There isn't another company in the world that has such a flair for discovering talent.'

I felt a stab of guilt, for this was true. Though I had worked insanely hard, it was Sebastian who had promoted my career

'Ah yes. The men, no, there we have the edge, but when it comes to the ballerinas, my dear Sebastian, you have an exceptional success. Almost, one might say, you are a Svengali. You take over their minds and bodies until they become an extension of your artistic vision.' I understood that Miko was making an appeal to my pride and independence.

Sebastian raised an eyebrow. 'I don't sleep with them all, if that's what you're suggesting. Only the desirable ones. Skrivanova has a face like an amiable frog and the brain to match. It never even crossed my mind to take her to bed.' Another appeal to my pride and also a stab in the traitorous Skrivanova's back.

Miko shrugged. 'With make-up she looks all right. But I agree with you, old fellow, she cannot hold a candle to Marigold.'

They looked at each other with a man-of-the world cordiality which hid honed steel, and then at me, much as two hungry tigers might contemplate a fresh kill.

'So,' Sebastian was unable to conceal another hiss, 'let's not beat about the bush. This isn't a social call. You want to lure yet another of my pretty birds into your net. And you think that Marigold will betray her old friends for money. Isn't that rather insulting to her?'

I wondered if it was. Certainly I was awfully fed up with having to scrimp and make do. I was prepared to be insulted if it meant I need not worry about the rent and could afford to wash my hair with shampoo instead of washing-up liquid.

Miko laughed and spread his hands. 'I come clean. I want Marigold to dance for me. And naturally I pay her more because I can afford to.' How much more? I longed to ask. 'But it is you who insult her if you think it is only money which will make her come to me. She will be a fool not to do so. It will be the making of her.' He hesitated, then brought it out in a rush. 'A principal's contract with the second finest company in Europe is not so easily come by.'

There was a crescendo of muttering and whispering outside and the door creaked open a fraction wider. Despite my agony I felt a surge of joy. Sebastian, intentionally or unintentionally, had forced Miko to show his hand.

'Yes. I admit she *would* be a fool, if no other consideration came into it. But you see –' Sebastian also hesitated for a moment, then walked over to the door and closed it – 'it's not just a question of her career.' He shot a glance in my direction. Never had those Atlantic grey eyes looked colder. 'You're the first to be let in on the secret, Miko. I've asked Marigold to marry me.'

Miko was clearly taken aback, in fact he practically rocked on his heels, but his astonishment was as nothing compared with mine. No word of marriage, love or even mild affection had ever crossed Sebastian's rather thin lips. I realized that my mouth was hanging unattractively open. He came over and put a proprietorial hand on my shoulder.

'I know Marigold too well to believe that she would put ambition before my – our happiness.'

The idea was preposterous. This must be a trick, invented on the spot, to put a spoke in Miko's wheel. Miko's little eyes were still twinkling but a frown puckered the cushions of fat above them.

I felt Sebastian's hand tighten on my collarbone. 'Marigold?' he said softly.

I stared up at him, trying to fathom his mind. Could it be ... that he really wanted to marry me? If there was even the smallest possibility that he was sincere I could not decline his offer abruptly and callously in front of Miko. It would be discourteous, even cruel. Even as I thought this I chided myself for a fool. Sebastian had never given me a moment's thought except as a potential money-maker and – how had Bruce described me? – a spunk-bucket. God! What ought I to do? My whole future might depend on my present answer and my entire leg was pounding, bursting with pain. For a moment I thought I was going to be sick. Perhaps that would be the best thing. Though it would be embarrassing it would save me from having to make a decision. In the event I did something less messy and more serviceable. I fainted.

### 3

'This is *so* kind of you,' I said to Sebastian the following day. 'I've never had so much luxury.'

Things had taken such a dramatic turn for the better that I had to pinch myself several times for reassurance. On my way to class that morning, getting downstairs and crossing Maxwell Street had hurt so much that I had groaned aloud. I had fainted in the bus queue and been rushed by ambulance, with flashing light and wailing siren, to hospital. Once there all sense of urgency seemed to evaporate and I had sat in A&E in great pain, ignored by everyone for at least a couple of hours until it occurred to me that I ought to find a telephone and let the LBC know I probably wouldn't be coming in that day. Sebastian's sudden appearance among the bored staff and grumbling, impotent patients was as

galvanizing as a lion's among grazing wildebeest. I had been taken by wheelchair to a waiting taxi and driven to the Wyngarde Private Clinic.

Now I had a room all to myself which looked like a set in a Doris Day film. The bed had a pink velvet quilted headboard, there were curtains with roses on and two pink wing chairs for visitors. An enormous television stood at the foot of the bed. I had my own pink bathroom complete with bathrobe and the end sheet of the lav paper folded into a point.

'Proudlock-Jones is the best man in the business for feet,' Sebastian wandered about the room, inspecting the view of Wimpole Street from the window, the telephone, which he unplugged, the arrangement of artificial roses – pink, of course – on the bedside table and finally my cotton nightgown which the pretty nurse had brought me. 'Unfortunately he doesn't work on the NHS.' Sebastian put one knee experimentally on the bed.

'Ow-how!' I yelled.

'All right, no need to make a fuss,' he said rather grumpily.

The pretty nurse came back just then, wreathed in smiles and bearing the ubiquitous kidney-shaped dish. It seems a peculiar fetish of the medical profession. After all, it must be comparatively rarely that they actually have a kidney to put in it. I saw to my dismay that it contained a syringe with a needle as thick as a pencil. 'Here we are, Miss Savage. I'm just going to pop in your premed. If you'll wait in the corridor, sir, for one minute ...' The nurse dimpled in response to Sebastian's dramatic good looks as she held up the syringe and squirted out some liquid.

'I don't see why I should leave,' Sebastian protested. 'I'm not squeamish.'

'Ah, but I'm going to put it in her derrière.' She gave him an arch look. 'And you can take away that champagne. She's on nil by mouth until after her op.'

'All right, I'll come back later. Don't do anything stupid, Marigold,' he added by way of valediction.

'Your boyfriend's awfully handsome,' said the pretty nurse. 'Just a teeny prick.' I bit back the obvious retort. It was actually quite a large prick but as nothing compared with the agony of my foot. 'Well done!' The nurse patted my arm sympathetically. 'You'll start to feel woozy very soon. Nothing to worry about, dear. Mr Proudlock-Jones is a wonderful surgeon. You couldn't be in better hands.' She tapped my cheek with her finger, then went away. I felt comforted by so much kindness. My mind began to unravel as whatever had been in the syringe swirled in my bloodstream. It was a glorious feeling.

'Hello, darling,' said Lizzie's voice what seemed like five minutes later.

'Oh, Lizzie,' I said sleepily. 'Thanks ... coming ... see me. Going ... have operation ... soon.'

'You've had it,' said the pretty nurse, beaming over Lizzie's shoulder. 'It's all over, dear, and it went very well. Mr Proudlock-Jones is very pleased with you.'

'Oh, good,' I said, though I couldn't think why he would be. I hadn't actually done anything, as far as I was aware.

'Would you like to sit with your friend for a while?' said the nurse to Lizzie. 'I'll pop back later. Press the bell if you want anything.'

'I say,' said Lizzie. 'This place is utter bliss, isn't it? Fancy a chocolate finger biscuit?'

'Not ... just now.'

I must have dozed again, for when I came to Lizzie was deep in the copy of *Tatler* that came courtesy of the Wyngarde Clinic. 'How are you feeling?' Lizzie leaned forward sympathetically. She had quite a lot of chocolate at the corners of her mouth.

'Okay. No pain. Thirsty.'

'Nurse Thingummy's been back and she said to give you little sips of water if you wanted it.' The water was iced and deliciously refreshing. 'Marigold, do you think I could possibly have a bath in your wonderful bathroom? Ours is heated by the range and Granny always lets it go out during the day to save coal. I haven't had a hot bath in years.'

'Go right ahead.' I waved my hand in a lordly way.

I woke up again a little later to hear the sound of splashing and lots of oohs and aahs.

'Crikey!' said Lizzie through the open door. 'I didn't know water could be this hot.'

'You'd better not faint,' I said, 'because I'm in no state to fish you out – oh, hello!'

'I'm Anthony Proudlock-Jones.' A middle-aged man with a pinstriped suit stretched over his corpulent form strode into the room and seized my hand in his plump smooth one. 'We've met before but you were unconscious.' He chuckled throatily in a way that suggested whole humidors of cigars. 'I'm sure they've done a good job of plastering you up.' He lifted the bedclothes to look at my leg. 'Yes, very nice. You had a nasty comminuted fracture of the metatarsals. I oughtn't to blow my own trumpet, but I think it's true to say that in any hands other than mine you'd be waving goodbye to your career.' He rubbed sausage-like fingers together. 'But I'm reasonably confident it'll heal all right. Take it easy for the next six weeks, then we'll take the cast off and have another dekkko.'

*Reasonably* confident? I felt perspiration spring out on my forehead at the suggestion of a doubt.

'Remember, no gymnastics! You can wriggle your toes but that's all. Patience is a virtue, virtue is a grace and Grace was a little girl who wouldn't wash her face, ha ha!' He breezed out to dispense healing and wisdom to the next patient.

'Help!' called Lizzie as soon as he'd gone. 'I didn't dare move. I've probably given myself third-degree burns. I had to suck the flannel to suppress bloodcurdling screams. I'll just put in some cold.'

Mr Proudlock-Jones had put paid to sleepiness for the time being. While torrents of water flowed into the bath, I asked myself what I would do if his confidence proved for once to be unjustified. No course of action occurred to me. If I could not dance I could not live. Of course it would be all right. It had to be.

'This is the most sensual experience I've had in years.' Lizzie's voice, floating through the open door, had gone down several tones and was gravelly with relaxation. 'Much better than sex. And no evil consequences.'

Six months ago, Lizzie had fallen insanely in love with a Russian guest artist who, when wearing a wig and full make-up, looked slightly like Rudolf Nureyev. Certainly from behind the resemblance was remarkable. He had stayed only three weeks before being recalled to Leningrad and, two months after that, the company had a whip-round to pay for Lizzie to have a termination at the handy little nursing home in Southwark where all the female dancers in the company went when self-control or rubber failed. Since then, Lizzie had been much less keen on sex.

'And generally much less worrying,' I said, sitting up and helping myself to a biscuit to begin the process of repair. It was the first thing I had eaten for thirty-six hours and it tasted extraordinarily delicious. 'No fretful evenings waiting for the bath to ring. No need to agonize over whether the bath thinks you were insufficiently enthusiastic and imaginative. One good thing about making love with Sebastian is that he's so self-absorbed one might as well be an inflatable – Hello, Sebastian,' I said loudly as he walked into the room. A violent splash came from the bathroom followed by silence.

'Well! You're looking quite a lot better already.' Sebastian picked up the bottle of champagne, untwisted the wires and popped the cork. He picked up my glass and chucked the iced water over the artificial roses. 'We'll have to share this.'

'I probably oughtn't have alcohol so soon ...'

'Oh, rubbish! It won't hurt your foot. Drink up.' He held the beaker-full of foaming liquid under my nose. 'It'll relax you.'

Actually I was feeling quite relaxed already, but Sebastian was forking out zillions for my operation and my room so I could refuse him nothing.

'Go on,' he said, 'finish it.'

The chocolate biscuit was powerless to counteract the effect of the champagne when it hit my otherwise empty stomach. When it combined with the remainder of the anaesthetic that was still in

my bloodstream, I felt as though I had been shot into outer space in a large pink rocket. The world grew distant and all the consequences thereof.

He stroked my bare arm. 'Mm. You've lost a couple of pounds.' Sebastian was as obsessed with body shapes as the rest of us. 'Don't overdo it. You'll start losing muscle.' I wanted to say that it was nice of him to care but whatever part of my brain was in control of my tongue seemed to be paralysed. 'It's not unattractive, though.'

I set off on an orbit of the earth and very colourful it was, too, just like those photographs in the *National Geographic* magazine.

'Marigold.' Sebastian was bending over me. 'You're giggling like a schoolgirl. Just be serious for a moment. Shall I tell Miko to get lost?'

I bared my teeth in a grin as in the intervals between him talking to me I found I was flying over snow-sprinkled mountains and deep dark lakes.

'Stop giggling.' Sebastian sounded annoyed but I didn't give a damn. 'Move over. I want to fuck you.'

I thought I heard another splash from the bathroom and what might have been a stifled cry.

'Now?' It sounded a strange thing to want to do when one could soar like a bird over oceans and continents. '... nurses? ... Lizzie?'

'I've locked the door. Lizzie can wait outside.'

I wanted to explain that Lizzie was already inside but his hands were pulling up my gown. Too late his body was on mine, in mine.

'I don't know what's so funny,' he said afterwards in a slightly offended tone.

'Neither do I.' My voice boomed and in the distance someone cackled like a hen. Could it possibly have been me?

I spent two more enjoyable days in the clinic, warm, fed and practically killed with kindness, before Sebastian visited me again and said I must go home as it was costing a hundred pounds a day which the company could not afford.

'As much as that?' I flung back the covers and threw my good leg over the side, almost crushed by a terrible weight of guilt. 'I had no idea. Of course I'll leave at once. Oh, thank you, Sebastian, for paying for me.' I seized his hand. My gratitude was so tremendous I felt I quite loved him.

Sebastian's eye fell on several inches of naked thigh below my crumpled nightdress. 'Mm. There's no immediate hurry. I'll just lock the door.'

'Oh, yes, *do!*'

'Your enthusiasm makes an agreeable change,' he said after a while. 'Of course I'm perfectly aware that the motive is mercenary.'

An increase of guilt encouraged me to submit willingly to a predilection of Sebastian's I hated, the details of which I'd rather not go into.

'You needn't feel overburdened by indebtedness,' said Sebastian as he rolled away from me, elegantly pale with effort and, one hoped, thoroughly sated. 'I shall deduct the four hundred pounds from your salary in instalments over the next year.'

As I lay mute with indignation he laughed long and low.

4

'Marigold! It's me,' called Lizzie, coming in through the front door of the flat accompanied by the most delicious smell of vinegar. 'How are you, darling? Have you been horribly bored?'

I had been taken by ambulance back to 44 Maxwell Street that morning. The flat was up four flights of stairs and our miserly landlord had set the timer switch so that you had to run like mad, taking three steps at a time, to get from one landing to the next before the light went out. The ambulance men, manoeuvring the stretcher with difficulty round the narrow bends, had complained volubly about being plunged into absolute darkness every eight seconds while comparing the stink unfavourably with a ferret's cage. I explained that the pungent smell was due to the third-floor lodger

treating the stairwell as his own private pissoir. After that they advised me to throw myself on the mercy of Social Services and plainly disbelieved my protests that I was actually quite fond of the place. Because Nancy and Sorel were in America with the touring part of the company, I could only afford to heat my bedroom, and the temperature of the rest of the flat struck cold as a tomb. The men looked at my extravagant interior decorations with expressions of wonderment not unmixed with derision, but they had been sympathetic and friendly and I was sorry to see them go.

I had spent the intervening hours between their departure and Lizzie's arrival shivering and dozing. 'A bit. What's in those parcels?'

'Fish and chips! Isn't it utter bliss?'

I agreed that it was but habitual caution could not be entirely suppressed. 'Should you be eating a zillion calories, dear girl? For that matter should I?'

'Oh, who gives a damn! You need nourishment and I need cheering up. Let's for once just forget about our waistlines. Want a plate?'

'Certainly not.' I opened the newspaper on my knee. 'Oh, the smell of ancient reheated fat! So sinful yet so delicious! Why do you need cheering up?'

Lizzie tucked her springing blond hair behind her ears and looked at me regretfully. 'Oh, you know ... I cocked up in the rehearsal today ... So what's the verdict on the leg, then? I asked Sebastian but he wouldn't tell me.'

'Cast off in six weeks. No dancing for two months.'

'Darling, don't worry. The six weeks will go in a flash and then after a few weeks of class you'll be dancing as well – in fact better – than ever. Does your leg hurt very much?'

'It's okay when no one's crashing it against banisters. I'm going to be pretty much marooned up here until the cast comes off.'

'Oh dear.' Lizzie looked anxious. 'Six whole weeks! It couldn't have happened at a worse time.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well ... it's so cold ... and Nancy and Sorel are away ... I know! I've got something that's going to cheer you up.' She took a newspaper from her bag. 'Take a look at this!' She turned to a page on which she had outlined a paragraph in red. 'It's by Didelot!'

I screamed and grabbed the paper. 'I'd no idea he was there. I'd have been a hundred times more nervous if I'd known. Does he say terribly cutting things? I hardly dare look.'

Didelot was the nom de plume of a ballet critic with a formidable reputation, an unforgiving eye and a pitiless pen. Tales of careers ruined by his caustic criticisms abounded. It was enough for him to point out that a dancer had dropped an elbow or had landed one fraction of a second behind the beat or had 'spoon' hands for that dancer to feel that they might as well pack their bags. In his favour he would not allow himself to be courted, refusing all invitations to fraternize with directors, dancers and choreographers. Apparently, when approached by an interested party, he would give them a blank stare and turn on his heel, disdaining even to notice their greeting. Sebastian had once pointed Didelot out to me as he sat in the audience taking notes, an insignificant figure with a bald patch, a fringe of grey curls and a large black moustache. It was widely acknowledged that his judgement was as much to be respected as it was feared.

I read the review carefully. *Marigold Savage gave us a refreshingly different Giselle. In Act I the shyness, the sensitivity, the innocence were there as the role requires, but there was a waywardness in the extension of the arms, a suggestion of abandon in the épaulement which satisfactorily prefigured the descent into madness. When Albrecht's treachery was revealed, Savage's dancing expressed anger as well as pathos. When she lifted the sword it was a matter for debate whether it was intended for Albrecht or herself. She was triumphant as well as tragic. This brought into sharper contrast the ethereal, intangible spirit of Act II who is permanently either en l'air or sur les pointes. Here Savage's unusual colouring, her startlingly red hair and alabaster skin served her particularly well. Her dancing*



*was unearthly, as transparent as a skeleton leaf. Alex Bird was an imperfect Albrecht, however. His tours en l'air were almost faultless but his performance was undermined by his inelegant port de bras ...*

There was more in this vein.

Though naturally indignant on Alex's behalf, I was thrilled by Didelot's praise of my own performance. When I looked up, having committed every plaudit to memory, Lizzie was smiling at me. I thought, as so often before, what a good – what an exceptional – friend she was to delight in my success. All the same, so she should not think me conceited, I tried to conceal my elation. 'One's only as good as one's last performance in this game.'

'Yes, but this might persuade Sebastian to give you an increase in salary to stop you signing up with Mr Lubikoff. Of course it's incredibly selfish of me but I *dread* you going. We'd hardly see each other.' She patted my hand. 'But naturally you must make the best decision for your career. I shall completely understand if you opt for the EB.'

For a moment I was tempted to tell her about Sebastian's offer of marriage. But since he had not mentioned it again and continued to behave with the same offhand un-loverlike impatience, without a single word of tenderness, I was beginning to think I must have hallucinated the whole thing. Or else that Sebastian had never for a moment dreamed I would take him seriously. He probably assumed that I would understand he was playing some sort of game with Miko. In which case I would look an awful fool if I mentioned it to anyone. Lizzie was a darling and absolutely my best friend but discretion was not her strong suit.

'I don't even know if he'll want me now I'm injured. It's easy to get a reputation for unreliability.'

'You've never had to pull out before. Nobody could be so mean as to hold one injury against you.'

'No.' I attempted to put on a bright face. 'I'm just feeling a little bleak. But it's unfair when you've struggled all the way over here and brought me these heavenly chips. Sorry. I promise not to be glum any more. I'm so grateful – and you've got to flog all the way back to Brockley—'

'Well, actually, no. I left my suitcase in the hall – oh God, I'm so sorry, I feel as though I'm letting you down ... The thing is –' Lizzie looked apologetic – 'I'm on my way to Heathrow. One of the corps in the touring company has pulled a ligament and Sebastian insists on me replacing her. I tried to tell him that you'll need someone to bring you food and things but he just walked off ... you know what a beast he is. I'm catching a plane in three hours' time.'

I tried to prevent my dismay from showing on my face. 'How long will you be away?'

'The tour ends in three weeks.'

'What about your grandmother?'

'She's going into a residential home for the time I'm away. I've brought you the entire contents of our larder. I'm afraid it's mostly brawn which is Granny's favourite.'

'How delicious! Thank you.'

'Do you think so?' Lizzie looked surprised, which proved I was a better actress than I'd thought. 'I never eat it for fear of finding bristly hairs. There are some tins of frankfurters as well. Oh, Marigold, I feel awful about leaving you.'

'You can't help it. Don't worry. I'll be fine. At the dentist's the other day I read this article in a magazine – hang on, I've got it somewhere,' I opened the drawer in the table beside my bed, 'I sneakily tore it out: here it is. *The Art of Making Conversation*. "*Do you ever feel at a loss for something to say at parties?*" Well, I always feel a complete dunderhead unless I'm with someone to do with ballet. "*Ever embarrassed by an inability to make witty incisive remarks?*" I should say so! I've never made a witty incisive remark in my life. "*Do you find yourself resorting to banal topics like the weather and your children's schools?*" Well, not the latter obviously. Apparently, good conversationalists talk about ideas, the second rate talk about things and the third rate talk about people.'

'Okay, so I'm third rate,' said Lizzie. 'There's nothing I like better than gossip.'

'The article says in order to be an interesting dinner-party guest you have to have a cultivated mind. It gives a list of the hundred most essential books one ought to have read. I've bought copies

of the first five books on the list and now's my opportunity to read them. I shall begin with Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.'

Lizzie's eyes widened. 'Jolly good luck.'

'So you see I'll be as merry as a grig – whatever that is.'

We smiled bravely at each other.

5

The winter of 1982 was the coldest on record. I read in the newspaper Lizzie had brought the fish and chips in that they were restoring the hothouses at Kew and one of the rarest plants, a Chilean palm, had been wrapped in a polythene tower through which warm air was pumped to keep it alive. I envied it. Shortly after Lizzie left, the boiler that provided hot water for the bathroom and heated the tiny radiator in my bedroom broke down. In the morning there were frost patterns all over the window and my breath curled up like a whale spout into the crimson canopy.

The hours went by at the pace of an old woman crawling on arthritic hands and knees. My spirits drooped but I told myself not to be so self-indulgent, hopped over to the bookcase and found the first volume of Gibbon. I managed to read for ten minutes before sleep overwhelmed me. I awoke with a dry throat and a feeling of loneliness so acute that even Siggy in all his transcendent beauty could not console me. I read more Gibbon. Gibbon-lovers I had met always held forth in a lofty way about the elegant simplicity of his prose. Probably you have to be in a cheerful mood for it to do you any good. After three-quarters of an hour I was ready to throw myself out of the window.

I had a jolly good cry for about five minutes which made me feel marginally better. I mopped my swollen lids with a hanky soaked in cold water and stared through the grimy window at the darkening sky bisected by pigeons and starlings. If I could not show more strength of mind than this I deserved to fail. Emotional resilience is not the least of the requirements for a dancer. From the moment training starts at the age of ten or eleven, there is a high possibility of failure. At the end of each summer term, weeping girls are driven away, never to return. If you are one of the lucky ones chosen to go up to the next level, your elation is moderated by the knowledge that the following summer it could easily be you packing your suitcase in tears because you are too tall, too fat, too heavy-footed or not strong enough. Or you might lack the right temperament, be unable to take instruction fast enough, have a muted personality, be unmusical or simply not please the eye. After six years of gruelling work, if you meet the requirements of the selection board, you graduate into the upper school and become a student. But this is not a guarantee that you will get a place in a company. Even those who attend ballet schools that feed specific companies have only a small chance of a contract. Perhaps half a dozen a year are taken into the corps.

When I showed an aptitude for ballet my parents sent me to Brackenbury House in Manchester. The teaching was excellent but we girls always felt ourselves to be provincials. At the age of sixteen, five of us, considered the best dancers in the school, were determined to come to London to audition for the Lenoir Ballet Company. We chose the LBC because it had no feeder school of its own. Bella, Lizzie and I got in. The other two, good though they were, had to face the fact that their careers in ballet were effectively over. One went into musicals and the other became a PE teacher. That's how hard it is to get anywhere.

I had to convince myself that this injury was a temporary blip on the upward trajectory of my career. The gods had been with me so far. I would earn their respect by maintaining a positive cheerfulness in the face of this minor disaster.

I put on a hat and gloves and tried to read more Gibbon with nothing but my watering eyes over the bedclothes before giving in and shivering with Siggy in the darkness beneath the blankets, popping our heads out at intervals for oxygen. I had never thought about it before because I had been too busy, but now I realized that happiness, my happiness anyway, depended on structure and order. From the age of ten almost every minute of my life had been organized. A dancer's body is like a fine instrument that needs delicate tuning. After even a few days' rest, one's muscles become stiff and

uncooperative. However tired we were, however bad our headaches or colds, six days out of seven we went to at least one class a day. On Sundays, Nancy, Sorel and I exercised for several hours in our sitting room, which had a barre and a large mirror that we had fixed to the wall ourselves. Now the hours stretched ahead of me, blank, frighteningly empty.

I was roused from a state of semiconsciousness by a knock on the front door. I looked at my clock. Half-past seven in the evening of the longest day of my life. The knock came again. Pulling the eiderdown round me, I limped into the hall. I lifted the letterbox flap. A delicious and reassuring scent drifted through the draughty rectangle. I opened the door.

‘Marigold! Thank ... goodness!’

‘Bobbie! How wonderful! But you’re almost the last person in the world I expected to see! I thought you were in Ireland.’

‘I am ... usually. Can ... come in? ... as ... physixiating out here.’

‘Of course!’ I embraced her enthusiastically. ‘Oh, sorry, I probably stink to high heaven. I haven’t been able to have a bath today and you smell gorgeous.’

‘Luckily ... bottle of scent to ... drown myself ... might not ... made it ... top.’ Bobbie was puffing like one of those little funicular trains that run up cliffs. ‘... going to see ... *Giselle* ... last night but you ... not dancing ... rang the company ... at home ... broken leg.’ She hugged me again then held me at arm’s length. ‘... look at you.’ Her eyes took in my cap, my gloves, my cast and my shivering state. ‘Marigold! ... mauve ... cold! Bed ... at once!’

I was too weak to do other than obey. Bobbie brought a chair up to the bed and sat panting for a while, holding my hand and chafing my back.

‘All right, I’ve got my breath now. Why is this place colder than a polar cap?’

I explained about the boiler. She went away and came back with the blankets from the other two beds. She piled them on my recumbent form, keeping one to wrap round herself. ‘That’s better. Now tell me about your poor leg.’

‘Foot actually. It’s a comminuted fracture but the surgeon thinks it’ll mend all right. I’m starting to feel warmer already. I don’t know why I didn’t think about Nancy and Sorel’s bedclothes.’

‘I expect you’ve got mild hypothermia. The mind is the first thing that goes, apparently.’

‘Oh, Bobbie!’ I looked at her with pleasure. Even had she been as ugly as a warty old crone I would have been thrilled to see a fellow human being, but she happened to be remarkably beautiful. ‘I hope you aren’t a dream. I couldn’t bear it if you vanished now.’

‘I’m here, darling, and I’m not going to leave you until I know you’re all right. Why aren’t you being properly looked after?’

‘Sebastian told the clinic I was going to a nursing home so they’d let me out early, but it would have been too expensive. And everyone in the company’s either away or too busy.’ I brought Bobbie up to date with the events of the past week, feeling warmth return to my extremities and optimism to my powers of reasoning. ‘I don’t need looking after, really. I can hobble about. It’s just that it’s so difficult to get up and down the stairs.’

‘I’ll find something for us to eat and then we’ll think what’s the best thing to do.’

‘There’s a tin of frankfurters.’ I pulled a face. ‘Otherwise it’s brawn, I’m afraid.’

Bobbie picked up a pale green carrier bag with ‘Fortnum and Mason’ written on it. ‘I stopped on my way to pick up a few bits and pieces. I won’t be a minute.’

She returned with a tray piled with good things.

‘Smoked salmon!’ I cried. ‘Oh, the luxury! A whole camembert! Tomatoes and olives! Cold chicken!’ I felt my mouth fill with saliva. ‘And little fruit tarts! You angel!’ I winked away tears of gratitude.

She had also brought a bottle of claret that tasted deliciously of raspberries and liquorice. While we ate and drank we talked as easily as though we had met yesterday, though in fact it had been two years since we had last seen each other.

I had known Bobbie all my life. Our mothers had been at the same boarding school. As a homesick new girl, my mother, who was much given to hero-worship, had developed a crush on Bobbie's mother, who was several years her senior. She had run errands for her and written her passionate notes and spent all her pocket money on presents of chocolates and bath salts. To judge by her adult personality, Bobbie's mother, Laetitia, had been a good-looking but reserved and probably rather friendless girl. It must have suited her to have an acolyte.

Somehow the relationship had lasted beyond school and even after marriage. Laetitia was invalidish. My mother spent weeks with the Pickford-Nortons in their large, gloomy house in Sussex, surrounded by dripping trees and sodden shrubberies, cooking little delicacies, running baths, fetching books from the library, a willing slave. After she married my father the visits became much less frequent, but once a year my mother, my sister Kate and I made the long journey from Northumberland to the south coast to stay for a week or two at Cutham Hall.

Given the eight-year age gap, it would have been quite understandable had Bobbie chosen to ignore me altogether during these visits, but she had been angelically kind and looked after me like a mother – which was just as well as my real mother was too busy to have time for me. Laetitia became more demanding with age. She had to have shawls, spectacles, hats and pills fetched, and constant cups of tea and cakes made while she lay either in bed, on a sofa or in a deckchair in the garden. Her cook and her daily gave notice almost hourly and had to be cajoled into staying. During the sulking periods, my mother had to vacuum acres of carpet, polish her way through cupboards of silver and rustle up lunch and supper for Major Pickford-Norton, a small man with a peppery temper and a selfishness quite as colossal as his wife's.

Bobbie had taken us for walks and helped us make daisy chains and grass whistles or collect conkers, depending on the time of year. Sometimes we went to the beach. Bobbie would give us piggybacks down to the place where it briefly became sand and we'd make mermaids with shells and bladderwrack and skate's-egg cases and she would plait my hair so that it wasn't torture to brush afterwards. On wet days she took us in turn on her knee and read us stories and played Happy Families and Ludo. I thought her the most beautiful creature in the world, with her long fair wavy hair and eyes that were the colour of the sea. Despite my dislike of Cutham Hall and my fear of Major Pickford-Norton, it was a huge disappointment when Laetitia wrote to say that her indifferent health precluded any more visits.

'How's your mother? Is she managing without your father?'

Bobbie's father had died two years ago.

'Very well. She has a companion called Ruby who's a dear and looks after her brilliantly. She's put on two stones since my father died. The marriage wasn't a happy one, you know. How's darling Dimpie?'

Despite being very different kinds of people, Bobbie had always been very fond of my mother. Most people were.

'All right, I think. She came backstage after a performance of *Swan Lake* when we toured the north last year. We had supper together.'

'And Kate? And your father?'

'I haven't seen either of them for ages. We only have a few days off at Christmas and it's too far to go home. Tell me about Ireland. What made you rush back there so suddenly? Are you really going to live there permanently?'

Bobbie's life had been interwoven with mysterious comings and goings. I had received several enigmatic notes from her over the last few months postmarked Eire.

'Oh, yes.' Bobbie stretched out her hand to show me a wedding ring. 'Finn and I were married six weeks ago.'

'*Married?* Bobbie, you *might* have told me! And who is Finn?'

'I know it was bad of me but truthfully we didn't tell anyone. We married in the register office in Dublin with two colleagues from Trinity College as witnesses and afterwards we went out to dinner, just the two of us, and that was it. He has three children, you see, by his first wife, and we didn't want to make a fuss. Most people in Connemara – that's where we live – wouldn't even consider that we *are* married. Divorce isn't recognized in Ireland, though Finn went to a lot of trouble to get his first marriage annulled. I wouldn't have minded living in sin for the rest of my life as long as I could be with him.'

'Tell me about Finn. It's a beautiful name.'

Bobbie smiled. 'Oh ... he's very clever. And very good ... though he'd laugh if he heard me say that. He's very handsome, very Irish, though that could mean any number of things. He's writing a biography about Parnell – the Irish politician – and he's an advisor to the government on education. Does that make him sound dull? He certainly isn't that. I only have to see the back of his head and I get butterflies.' She was silent for a moment, thinking. 'He's in everything I do, in everything I see, in every thought, in every hope, every dream. Yet I don't really know how to describe him.'

I laughed. 'Well, the picture so far is encouraging. Tell me about the children? How do you get on with them?'

'I love them. And I hope they love me. It would take too long to tell you the whole story now and I want to hear about you, but Curraghcourt – that's Finn's house where his family have lived for centuries – is the most wonderful place and we've opened it to the public to help pay for repairs. And I've started an antiques business. That's why I'm here, looking up dealers, people I used to know when I worked for the auction house. Finn and I never have a minute to call our own, except sometimes after dinner we sneak off alone together and then – well – it's paradise.'

I tried, but failed, to imagine wanting to be with someone that much. This was worrying. Was I a cold heartless person, incapable of love? I had no time to answer this question because Bobbie was asking me about my leg.

'I've got an appointment in six weeks.'

'And how long till you can dance on it?'

I looked down at my glass. 'About two months. That's if ...' Despite my best intentions my nose began to prickle and my throat became tight. Tears began to well. 'Bobbie, I'm terrified ... if it doesn't heal properly I may never be able to dance again.'

'Oh, darling!'

'And the awful thing is, life without dancing seems ... utterly pointless. If I try to imagine myself not dancing – I don't even know who I am!'

After this confession I broke down completely. Bobbie got up and put her arms round me and I sobbed hard on her shoulder. At last the storm of weeping blew itself out. I mopped my face on the handkerchief she offered. 'Thanks. I never seem to have one. I'll wash it and send it back.'

'Keep it. I really am sorry to have touched such a tender place.'

'I needed to say it. It's something we're all so frightened of that it's like a taboo. But it's been in my mind all the time, haunting me like something terrifying you think might be under the bed only you can't bring yourself to bend down and look in case it's staring at you with glaring red eyes ...'

'Your problem is you've got so much imagination. Don't you remember, when you were little, that story about a scarecrow who came alive? Kate thought it was funny but you woke screaming for several nights after. Not that imagination isn't generally a good thing, and you wouldn't be such a good dancer if you didn't have it.'

'If I can't dance again I've just got to try to face up to it. I certainly won't be the only one. It happens all the time. Mostly feet but sometimes backs and knees – then it's goodbye career, hello teaching, reviewing, whatever you can get.' I was annoyed to hear my voice wobble pathetically. 'When you think how few opportunities there are to dance the principal roles and how many good

dancers there are I ought to be grateful that I've had the chance to do *Lac* and *Giselle* and *Manon* and all those brilliant parts.'

'What you need is—' Bobbie broke off with a little yell as Siggy poked out his head from beneath the eiderdown and bared his incisors at her.

'It's all right, it's only Siegfried. He's hungry, I expect.' I leaned over the side of the bed and put a morsel of chicken on his saucer. He pushed his head out further, looked at Bobbie with unfriendly eyes and hopped down to the floor. Siggy was possessive and jealous, but his marked preference for me above all other beings was good for my morale.

'A rabbit!' Bobbie laughed and bent down to stroke him.

Too late I cried, 'Look out, he bites!'

Already his head had flashed forward. For a slightly overweight creature he could move fast when he wanted. She drew back her hand with a cry of pain. A drop of blood burst out on her finger.

'I'm *so* sorry,' I said. 'Please don't feel hurt. He bites everybody but me.'

'It's all right. I like animals – even savage ones.' Bobbie really was an exemplary guest. She sucked the wound, then examined it. 'It's all right. Just a tiny puncture. He's certainly a very good-looking rabbit.'

Most people were insulting about Siggy after he had bitten them. Though I deplored his character, I could not help feeling proud of him. He had lovely orange eyes, neat little ears and a beautiful fluffy coat of thundercloud grey.

'I've had him a year now. I found some children trying to push a sack down the culvert at the end of the street. I asked them what was in it and they said it was a rabbit which bit them all the time so they'd decided to drown it. Of course I took the sack away from them. Immediately they all ran off so I was lumbered, really. He's never once bitten me. It's as if he knows I rescued him from a horrible fate and he's grateful.'

'A very intelligent rabbit.' Bobbie looked kindly at Siggy. I felt the sort of glow parents of an infant prodigy must enjoy. 'Marigold, do listen to me a minute.' Bobbie offered her camembert crust to Siggy who chomped it down, making a mess of his whiskers. 'I don't think it's good for you to stay here. You're lonely, freezing and semi-starving. People who are recovering from operations need warmth and good food and fresh air.' She looked apologetic. 'I can smell the stairs a tiny bit in here. You mentioned someone called Sebastian. Who is he and why is it up to him whether you go into a nursing home or not?'

'He's the director of the Lenoir Ballet Company. And my lover ... sort of.'

'Sort of?'

'Well, strictly in the physical sense. Not in the sense of loving each other. Though we might be engaged to be married. I'm not really sure.'

Bobbie took away our plates and refilled our glasses. Then she lay on the bed next to me and rearranged the blankets to cover both of us. 'That's better. I can feel the blood returning to my feet. Now, tell me all.'

I was entirely frank and did not bother to garb the relationship with spurious romance. Bobbie listened intently, putting in the occasional question which I answered truthfully.

When I had told everything there was to tell she said, 'I see. Now I feel more strongly than ever that you ought, for a time at least, to have ... a little holiday. If you could contemplate the journey to Ireland, Finn and I will be absolutely delighted to have you to stay. You never saw such wonderful countryside and you'd love Patience, his sister who lives with us and ... why are you shaking your head?'

'Thank you so much, darling Bobbie, for asking me, but I should be conscious the whole time that I was yet another person requiring attention and taking up your time. You said it yourself. It's paradise when you can be alone with Finn. It's enormously kind of you to offer and perhaps when

you've become used to him and are content just to rest your eyes on him across a crowded room, I'll come willingly.'

Bobbie laughed. 'I'd love to have you. Truthfully.'

'Thanks. But I'd be a martyr to guilt the whole time.'

'Well, then, the alternative is—'

'All right! I know whither this is tending. You want me to go home.'

'Just for a few weeks.' Bobbie looked at me pleadingly. 'Dimpie's such an angel and she'd love to have you. Think of the scenery and the clean air. Proper food, relaxation, new horizons. You might even enjoy it.'

'I might,' I replied rather glumly.

Less than twenty-four hours later I was standing on the platform at King's Cross with Siggy in a travelling basket and a one-way ticket to Northumberland.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.