

The Splendour Falls

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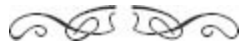
the
splendour
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RHCP DIGITAL

*To Mom.
For a thousand and one reasons.*

Genius is another word for magic, and
the whole point of magic is that it is inexplicable.

- DAME MARGOT FONTEYN, PRIMA BALLERINA



Prologue

For months, I relived the pas de deux in my dreams, in that multisensory Technicolor of a memory I'd much rather forget. Nothing ever changed: the backstage perfume of sweat and hair spray. The heat and glare of the lights. The delicious coil and spring of my muscles as I moved through the choreography as if it were a spontaneous outburst of the joy I felt when I danced. The glorious triumph over gravity as Pasha lifted me over his head, and I was untethered, not just from the stage, but from the earth.

If I could have forced myself to wake up then, it would have been better. Like dying happy. But the dance played out in measured beats, as unchanging as a reel of film.

Pasha set me down, soft as moonlight; the orchestra covered the hollow tap of my pointe shoe on the stage. I balanced on one leg, the other stretched up behind me, prolonging the illusion of flight.

I could never say what went wrong in the next eight bars. The stage was clean, my pointe was solid. It wasn't even a particularly difficult combination. Come down to fourth position, port de bras and *changement* to second position and a quick series of *chaîné* turns.

Right foot, left foot, right . . . then a strange crunching sound that seemed to come from inside my head. Without knowing how I got there, I was facedown on the stage, and the murmurs of the audience were escalating with worry. In my dream - my memory - I tried to get up, but Pasha held me down, lapsing into panicked Russian. I didn't have to understand the language to know that something had gone very wrong.

It's funny how so much can hinge on one missed step.

Not funny ha-ha. Funny that the moment that should have been the pinnacle of my seventeen years on this planet ends up making me famous for the entirely wrong reason.

So I really don't mean funny so much as 'tragically ironic'.

Dancers get injured doing the flashy things, jetés and *échappés*. I mean, who the hell breaks their leg on a turn they teach in the tiny-tots class?

Me, I guess. The month before, I'd gotten a full-page write-up in *Ballet Magazine*. The month after, I was a tragic item in a sidebar to an article on insuring your legs, Betty Grable style, against career-ending injuries.

Sylvie Davis, the youngest-ever principal dancer for American Ballet, suffered a compound tibia and fibula fracture in front of hundreds of horrified audience members during her stunning debut at Lincoln Center.

At least I knew how to make an exit.

Chapter 1

I WANTED TO hate Alabama, and nothing about my arrival disappointed me.

To be fair, there aren't many places that are easy to fall in love with in ninety-degree heat and eighty-five per cent humidity. The bumpy flight from my connection in Atlanta, on a minuscule plane with doll-sized seats, hadn't helped. And that was before some snafu at the gate forced us to deplane on the tarmac and ride a bus to the terminal.

I'd been out of my walking cast for two weeks. My leg throbbed like a sadistic metronome as I limped down the concourse, and the toes of my right foot were swollen like fat pink cocktail weenies. Gigi's carrier bag hung from my shoulder, my fingers white-knuckled on the strap. It's bad enough to dread something; it's even worse when the pain of moving forward is more than metaphorical.

I could rest a minute, sit down between the barbecue restaurant and the souvenir shop with the Confederate flag coffee mugs. For that matter, I was inside the security checkpoint. No one could come in and get me without buying a plane ticket. I could just live here until my mother

and her new husband got back from their honeymoon and reported me missing.

Granted, that wouldn't really help convince them I no longer needed to see a psychiatrist.

Settling for a brief rather than indefinite delay, I ducked into the bathroom. It was empty, so I put Gigi's bag on the counter while I splashed water on my face and reapplied some lip gloss. Makeup has never been a priority with me - at least not offstage, which means all the time now. But whenever my mother was losing a fight, she always took a moment to freshen her lipstick. Eventually I figured out this was how she bought time to think up an irrefutable argument.

I was merely stalling the rest of my life.

Gigi gave a soft yip of discontent. I unzipped the top of her carrier so that she could stick her head out, then filled her travel bowl from the half-empty Evian bottle in my purse. The dog took a few indifferent laps, then blinked at me. Her subtext seemed pretty clear: What the hell is your problem?

Was it wrong to have a problem with being shipped off like an unwanted parcel to stay with a relative I'd met only once? I vaguely remembered Cousin Paula from Dad's funeral, pressing my mother's hand in gentle sympathy, even though Mother and Dad had been divorced for three years. But as she'd said on the phone, in her Scarlett O'Hara accent, 'Kin is kin,' and she was happy to have me visit.

Maybe I shouldn't be dreading this. These were my father's family. This was my chance to learn where he came from, because Dad had never spoken much about his background. Which raised the possibility that he might have left Alabama to get away from these people.

A thin blonde wheeled her carry-on into the restroom. Gigi pricked her ears forward adorably, but the woman just shot the dog carrier a dirty look before disappearing with a

sniff into the handicapped stall. It was as though thinking about my mother had invoked her eviler twin.

I should correct that. My mother is not evil. She's merely self-absorbed. I can be, too.

For sixteen years, our self-interests coincided more often than not. I lived to dance, and she loved having a ballet prodigy for a daughter. So her lack of maternal instinct didn't really affect me until The Accident (it was hard not to think of it in capital letters) ended my skyrocketing career right as it left the atmosphere.

The Accident had also turned me into a child again. I'd been a professional dancer. I'd travelled to Europe and Asia with the company. Nine months of surgery, casts and titanium rods later, I was a seventeen-year-old 'unaccompanied minor' - thanks a lot, Delta Air Lines - pawned off on distant relatives to be babysat.

The infuriating thing was, Mother knew very well how self-sufficient I was, because she'd taken full advantage of it while dating her new husband. I think if it had been up to her, she would have left me on my own while she went off on her two-week honeymoon.

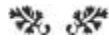
But 'Dr Steve' hadn't considered it an option. I was emotionally fragile, at a crossroads, major cognitive realignment, blah blah blah. God, I hated shrinks.

He wasn't even *my* shrink, just my new stepfather.

So, I couldn't be left alone for two weeks in our Upper West Side apartment with only Gigi, the security staff, the doorman and all the take-out food in Manhattan for company. It would do me good, he said, to get away from the City, the reminders of my old life, and have a change of scenery.

The unspoken thread in this pronounced sentence was that the godforsaken wilderness of the Deep South was the perfect place for me to dry out. A drastic measure, just because I drank myself unconscious at their wedding.

Imagine what he would have suggested if he knew about the hallucinations.



If I hadn't broken my leg, Mother wouldn't have married Dr Steven Blakely. She'd known him casually through one of her arts organizations, and since he was a premier child psychologist, she'd called him after The Accident. Dr Steve had referred me to his colleague one floor down, and asked my mother out to dinner and a show.

They were married while I was still in a walking cast, but Mother insisted that I process down the aisle with the wedding party. That wouldn't have been a big deal if she had gotten married in an intimate little chapel like a normal divorcée of . . . let's just say thirty-nine. But eighteen years ago, she and my dad had eloped; maybe she thought a big wedding would make marriage stick the second time around.

The reception was in the Cotillion Room of the Pierre hotel. The *Pierre*, in May, with three months' notice. Dr Steve had pull. There must be a lot of messed-up kids in Manhattan. No wonder my mother looked so happy.

At least one of us was. After my third or fourth glass of champagne I wasn't any more miserable than usual. Which was actually an improvement over the earlier part of the afternoon. Then my new stepbrother ruined it.

He sauntered up, looking amused and friendly, and said, 'Nice cast.'

John Blakely was in college, a few years older than me. Despite being Dr Steve's son, he seemed almost normal just then, his Ivy League haircut mussed up and the ends of his bow tie hanging loose around his open shirt collar.

'Thank you, Mr Tactful,' I said, giving him the eye.

He shrugged. 'I figured you wouldn't have gotten that colour if you didn't want people to notice it.'

Yes and no. I hated the cast, and I hated that Mother had made me lurch up the aisle like Igor in a Vera Wang bridesmaid dress. So at my checkup, when I learned that I'd still be hobbling through the Big Day, I'd asked the guys in the cast room for Day-Glo orange. Later, my shrink would have a lot to say about that. My mother sure as hell did.

I admired the way the cast clashed with the pinkish mauve of my silk dress. 'It's not like I can hide it.'

For some reason, John took this as an invitation and pulled out a chair, fortunately not the one where I'd propped my throbbing leg, and sat down. 'So you're hiding yourself in the corner instead?'

Prior to the Big Day, John and I had met twice. Once at the Four Seasons, where my mother and his father announced their intention to get married, as if the choice of restaurant weren't a dead giveaway. And again at the rehearsal dinner. Our conversations so far had consisted of: wedding, wedding, weather, wedding.

'Some people would take that as a hint,' I said, because I wasn't in the mood to broaden our established repertoire.

John blatantly ignored the clues, spoken and not, that I was a pity party of one. 'I just thought we should get to know each other, now that we're related.' He set down his drink - soda and something warm and amber. No one had carded me for the champagne, but I doubted I could ask for real liquor and get away with it. Unfortunately.

'Dad told me you were a dancer.'

My face went clammy, then hot again. *You were a dancer.* He said it so casually, so conversationally, and I wanted to scream, *I was famous. Ballet Magazine. Youngest principal dancer ever.*

He kept talking, oblivious. 'Dad says you'll be going to college next year.'

I swallowed my first gut reaction. Then the second. Eventually a civil answer presented itself. 'Your dad thinks

it's a good idea.'

From the way his brows drew down, I hadn't hidden my feelings on the subject - of school, or of his father.

'Why not?' he asked. 'You've got your GED, right? It might be too late to apply for this fall, but you could study for the SAT and try for midterm admission.'

My cheeks began to burn. Pale skin hides none of my emotions, and no one had ever accused me of being beautiful when I was angry. 'Did he tell you to talk to me?'

John's surprise seemed genuine. 'No. Why would he do that?'

'Why are you making like a guidance counsellor?' I could hear the venom in my voice, but couldn't seem to control it.

His tan hid plenty, but my eye spotted a guilty flush on his neck. 'I'm just making conversation.'

'Oh my God.' The realization hit me and I slithered down in my chair. 'You're a psychology major, aren't you? I should have known.'

He stared at me. 'How did you . . .? That's not the point.'

'You're just like him.' I expected a lack of sympathy or imagination from the stepshrink, but not from someone my age. '*His* idea of comfort was to tell me I was lucky this happened while I was still young and could do something else with my life.'

John frowned, like he was searching for the right answer on a quiz. 'Well, I would have said that no matter how old you are, it's not too late to go in a new direction when something doesn't work out.'

His calm ratcheted my anger up another notch. 'It must be easy,' I said, clipping the ends of my words, 'not to be so passionate about anything that you can't change your plan without any trouble.'

Not a flinch or a blink. 'Well, you can't sulk the rest of your life. You've got to find something to do.'

I gaped, stupidly, unable to think of any answer other than 'screw you'. Or bursting into tears, which was *not*

going to happen. Shutting my mouth with an audible snap of my teeth, I manoeuvred my fibreglass-swathed limb to the floor and struggled out of my chair. I wanted to surge indignantly to my feet and storm away, but it's hard to *lumber* off in a huff.

John's voice followed me, carrying something that sounded like regret. 'Sylvie, wait.'

The jazz combo was loud enough that I could pretend I didn't hear him. Mother was dancing with Steve, and she looked so happy that guilt topped off my reservoir of misery. I grabbed a glass of champagne from a passing waiter, then realized I would have to run the gauntlet of theatre and dance people near the ballroom entrance, and I couldn't face their hushed, funereal tones as they asked how I was doing.

Rerouting, I ducked out the service entrance and paused in the hallway between ballrooms to dig in my tiny, spangled bag for the Vicodin I'd slipped into my aspirin bottle, just in case. My leg hurt, but my leg always hurt. At the moment I was only thinking about easing the ache in my heart.

It was a low dose. Half of what I took on the worst days. I downed it with five big gulps of midgrade champagne, set the glass on the service tray and headed for the lobby.

Mistakes are always so clear in retrospect.

John emerged from the door behind me. 'Where are you going?' he asked, taking his new big-brother role much too seriously.

'Away.' I suited actions to words, but moved too quickly, tottering on my one good leg and catching myself on the wall.

John steadied me on the other side. 'How much have you had to drink?'

'Just champagne.' I decided not to mention the Vicodin. It hadn't had time to work yet. And, in my cast, it wasn't as if I needed help staggering.

'I need some air.' It was too close inside, stifling with good cheer. I headed not for the lobby, but for the Fifth Avenue entrance.

John caught up with me as I was looking for a break in traffic. 'What are you doing?' he demanded. Behind him, I saw the doorman staring, like he'd never seen a girl with a broken leg try to cross Fifth Avenue mid-block before.

'I'm going to the park.' I shivered. It was mid-May, and the evening air was still cool.

John's fingers gripped my arm above my elbow. 'You can't wander around Central Park after dark by yourself.'

That my plan seemed perfectly reasonable should have been a sign I was a lot more drunk than I thought I was.

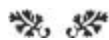
'It's barely dusk.'

'Your leg is in a cast.'

I looked down, not in surprise, exactly. The throb of my leg was constant, blending into the background of my misery. Then something would remind me, *Sylvie, your leg is broken*, and the ache would come flooding back.

Maybe I had reached that point with my emotions, too. I'd ground through the whole day, and now self-pity and passive-aggressiveness weren't enough to distract me any longer. 'I want to go to my dad's bridge.'

Something must have shown in my face. Tightening his jaw in decision, John stuck out his arm and hailed a cab. He had the knack of a native New Yorker, but I think it may have been my Day-Glo orange cast that got results so quickly on a Saturday evening.



Technically, my father's bridge was called an arch, not a bridge, and it wasn't 'his' to anyone but me. The directions I gave the cabbie were to Greywacke Arch.

The trip was longer than it would have been by foot. By feet, rather, if I'd had two working ones. The driver took

the East Drive and I had him stop before reaching the stone arch that bridged the path from the Ramble to the Great Lawn.

It was a struggle just to manoeuvre my cast out the door. I left John to deal with the cab and limped to the side of the drive. The ground fell away steeply to the path below; covering it was the pointed arch, like something from a Moorish temple. The striations of its stone were still visible in the dusky light.

A million familiar city noises covered John's footsteps, but I felt his approach - body heat, a change in the air pressure. Sensing people behind me was a skill I'd developed in dance; it's handy to know who's upstaging you.

'I can only keep the cab waiting for five minutes.'

Kicking off my shoe, I thrust my beaded evening purse into his hands and stepped onto the grass. 'There's forty dollars in there.'

'Not really the point. Where are you going?' He nervously positioned himself between me and the drop-off. 'Let's not risk life and remaining limb, OK? My dad would kill me if he knew I was . . .'

'Knew you're what?' I challenged. '*Enabling* me?'

'Yeah. That.' From the corner of my eye, I saw him slip off his jacket. He settled it, the fabric warm from his body, on my shoulders, defrosting my skin and, unexpectedly, something deeper inside me, too.

'Thanks,' I said softly.

'Don't mention it.' He gestured to the bridge. 'What's the connection? Your dad was a landscaper, right?'

'Landscape architect,' I corrected, automatically, but the distinction seemed important. 'The arch was originally built a hundred fifty years ago. Restoring it was Dad's first big job.'

I pointed westward, through the trees. 'He worked on the reconstruction of the lawn and Turtle Pond, too.'

'I remember that. Big project.'

'Yeah. This arch is my favourite, though.' The slope to the tunnel was a tangle of lush plantings and tumbled boulders. Like the rest of Central Park, it was an artful illusion of random, natural beauty - exactly like ballet.

'My father would have understood.' The words slipped out on a sigh, surprising me. I hadn't meant to say them out loud. My head was spinning; the whole night seemed to be alive, and moving in strange ways.

'Did he get to see you dance as a soloist before he died?'

'Yes.' A shrink-type question, but I found myself answering anyway. Stupid self-medicated truth serum. 'He was already sick, but I didn't know it.'

I kneaded the toes of my left foot into the grass, with the strange feeling that it connected me to Dad, through this ground that he loved so much. 'He worked until the very end. He said getting his hands in the dirt energized him, like a plant in the earth.'

I was the opposite, a cut flower without roots, no longer attached to the nourishing soil. Melodramatic, yes. But that's how I felt not being able to dance.

John was watching me, but not with a shrink's critical neutrality. Maybe he wasn't completely ruined by the training yet. 'Did you get his green thumb?'

'I don't know. Dad always sent me potted plants instead of bouquets, and I managed to keep those alive.' I didn't quite smile. 'Mother used to get so angry that he wouldn't spring for a couple dozen roses.'

John echoed the humour in my voice. 'I'll bet. That reception alone must have cleaned out a couple of hothouses.'

I might have laughed, if I were the person I used to be. Instead, I pulled the pin from the boutonniere on the lapel of his tuxedo jacket and let the flower drop into my hand. 'When I was a kid, and saw Dad transplant cuttings, it

looked like magic. You put this little sprig of green in the ground, and it takes root – keeps growing instead of dying.’

Now I knew it wasn’t magic. Some things could be replanted, or even grafted onto something new. Some wouldn’t take. What I didn’t know was which type I was.

‘Back then,’ I continued, while I peeled the florist tape from the boutonniere, ‘I thought that worked on anything. That it would fix toys, china, dolls . . .’

John sounded amused. ‘That could have been grim, if you’d experimented on a house cat or something.’

‘No kidding.’ He watched, obviously curious, as I lowered myself on one leg, sliding my cast out to the side. I was still impressively limber, and I think the Vicodin was starting to work, making me feel loose in body, and in mind. Because I didn’t know why else I was telling him this, or why I was even going through these motions.

‘I came up with this sort of spell of my own.’ Working my fingers through the webbing of grass roots, into the sod, I made a little hole. ‘If there was something important that I wanted to take root, metaphorically speaking, I would plant it. Like this.’

I dropped the boutonniere – a miniature calla lily that echoed the big ones in Mother’s bouquet – into the ground.

‘That’s kind of sweet,’ said John. ‘I thought you hated my dad.’

With a sigh of reluctant admission, I folded the sod over the lump of the flower. ‘I can’t hate anyone who seems to be making my mother happy.’

John laughed. ‘Now I know you’re drunk.’

I chuckled slightly, mostly at my own whimsy. He must be right. I was never whimsical. Not since The Accident.

Still squatting on one leg, I laid both palms on the bump in the grass and pressed it down. A tingle ran up my arms and back down again. I seemed to see – or sense, rather – a wave rippling out from under my hands, like I’d dropped a rock in a pond.

The world tilted, off-kilter for a moment, and I lost my balance, my arms windmilling to catch myself. I fell onto my butt and things righted themselves with a thump. 'Whoa.'

'Nice one, Sylvie.' John bent to pick me up under the arms. 'Way to use that dancer's grace.'

I was too flabbergasted to retort. 'Did you see that?'

'What?' he asked, setting me carefully back on my feet. 'Your magic spell?'

My mouth opened to say 'Yes!' when I realized that he was being sarcastic. Because magic spells were crazy. And I was just superstitious. And probably drunk.

'I don't feel so good.' My stomach fluttered and twisted, though the dizziness came and went.

'I'm not surprised.'

The cabbie honked his horn. John turned and marched me - figuratively speaking, hobbled as I was by the cast and all - back to the taxi. He had the big-brother thing down. I wasn't sure I liked it, but at that moment, I wasn't sure I didn't.

'My shoe,' I said, when my bare left foot hit the pavement.

He grumbled but made sure I had my feet under me before heading back for it with a curt 'Stay here.'

Of course I didn't. I limped past the taxi, to the other side of the bridge. In the wintertime, I would have been able to see clearly to the Great Lawn - the big swath of level ground where, during the day, dogs would chase Frisbees and kids would play baseball. It was May, so my view was interrupted by the new foliage, but not blocked like it would be in summer. That, plus the moon and the ambient light from the city, left me frowning at the scene.

John came up behind me again. 'Hey. I thought you were going to get in the cab.'

'I was, but . . .' The vista wavered as I stared. 'Are they doing some sort of historical reenactment?'

‘What are you talking about?’

I pointed through the trees. ‘The village of cardboard lean-tos out on the lawn.’ I tried to remember the last time I’d been in this area of the park. I’d been lost in self-pity for a while, but this was something even I would have noticed.

John glanced towards the lawn, his brows drawn in confusion. ‘You mean, like a Hooverville? The ones built during the Depression?’

That was what I meant, but I didn’t understand his confusion. Then I realized, he didn’t see it. But the people who moved through the tumbled huts cast shadows in the moonlight. I could see the glimmer of a lantern, hear the crackle of a campfire. The evening chill carried the damp-earth smell of cooking turnips and the mournful whistle of someone trying to cheer himself up after another long day of fruitless searching for work.

I stared at the shades in the twilight, all silhouette and gloom, and the trees around me swayed. No . . . that was me. I was swaying. Was this what being wasted felt like? I was dizzy and confused and somewhat judgement-impaired, but I still felt in control of my faculties. Certainly not so far gone as to be hallucinating in Central Park.

‘Sylvie.’ John caught me by both shoulders and bent to look into my eyes, blocking my view of the town and the sad people in it. ‘Level with me. How much did you have to drink?’

‘Just some champagne and . . .’ I stopped before mentioning the Vicodin. Or, maybe more important, before confessing that I was seeing images he wasn’t, some strange five-senses film reel from one of the Park’s major moments. And while this seemed surreal but reasonable to me in my buzzed state, I could see where such a confession could lead to a seventy-two-hour hold for observation at some nice private hospital upstate and away from gossip.

Drunk was better than crazy, and as John’s face dipped and swam in front of me, I wasn’t faking anything when I

answered, 'Maybe more than *some*. I lost track.'

He blew a short strand of hair off his forehead. 'Great.'

Darkness crawled in from the edges of my vision. 'I think I'm going to pass out.' Considering how my brain was whirling, my voice sounded weirdly matter-of-fact. I had to warn him, because he was going to have to catch me. 'Don't tell your dad, OK?'

My knees went limp just as he pulled my arm across his shoulders. 'I won't.'

He'd been so nice to me that I actually believed him. But I'd forgotten: shrinks always stick together.

Chapter 2

A GROWL BROUGHT me back to the present; Gigi had discovered her reflection in the mirror. I heard the toilet flush, and figured I'd better make an exit before Cruella de Vil came out of the stall.

Besides, I'd procrastinated long enough. Cousin Paula might be the type to send airport security to look for me. The public story was that I was visiting my father's family to give Mother and Steve a chance to honeymoon and set up house. But I didn't doubt for a moment that the stepshrink had told Dad's cousin that I was some kind of teen-starlet substance-abuse cliché, and needed 'special handling' while I 'worked through some things'. Which was Upper West Side speak for 'sobered up'.

I checked my reflection - a matter of habit before going onstage - smoothing back a few pieces of mousy brown hair that had slipped from my bun, checking my teeth for lip gloss. My skin was pale and the fluorescent lighting emphasized the purple shadows under my eyes. Lovely.

My eyes continued downward, over my girly T-shirt and jeans. They were a little loose; I'd kept the weight off, even though I'd never have to worry about lifts again. Just to

delay leaving, I moved my sweater from tied around my waist to draped over my shoulders, not because I was cold, but because the pale pink colour made my face look less like the walking dead. It was all about the costuming.

'In the bag, Gigi.' The dog obediently tucked her front paws into the carrier. Feeling rebellious, I let her ride with her head sticking out so she could watch the world go by. At least one of us should be having fun.

By the time I reached baggage claim, the arrivals had thinned out. I cast my eye over the remaining people, looking for Paula. Unfortunately, I wasn't sure I could pick her out of a lineup, let alone a crowd.

I didn't see anyone searching for me, so I headed for the baggage carousel. Unlike Dad's cousin, my fuchsia suitcase was easy to spot. No porters, though. I scanned the area, trying to look like a big tipper, but realized I was on my own.

Switching Gigi to my right shoulder for counterbalance, I grabbed the handle of my suitcase as it came by. The trick was keeping the majority of my weight on my left foot; the orthopaedic surgeon had declared my right leg healed - finally - but its muscles were still weak. I had physical therapy exercises to do while I was here, and a referral to a Montgomery specialist if I had any trouble. I didn't intend to have any trouble that required a specialist. Not for my leg, *or* my head.

I managed to lever the suitcase onto the edge of the carousel, and stood in an uncomfortable arabesque while I tried to figure out how to pull it down without knocking my good leg out from under me. That would be an awkward headline: *Ex-ballerina flattened by actual baggage. Overdose of irony suspected.*

'Careful there.' The masculine voice startled me, but not nearly as much as the arm that wrapped around me, bracing the heavy suitcase. My normal instinct - the one that told me when someone was coming up behind me, the

one that told me to scream 'fire' instead of 'rape' if someone grabbed me - all short-circuited with a tangible fizzle so strong that I was surprised I didn't smell smoke.

My inhale of alarm carried in a whiff of herbal soap, but it was the scent of clean air and damp earth that filled my head and took me to a strange place, so I seemed to be simultaneously standing in an airport in Alabama and someplace wild and wet and green. The only constants were the steadying arms around me, and the feeling that my heart was going to beat out of my chest with anticipation, or fear, or both.

It was dizzying, unnerving, like confusing a memory with a dream. For an instant - the nanosecond between information coming in and my brain processing it - I was certain that if I turned round, I would *know* this guy.

My heart squeezed with real fear then, at the thought that reality was going slippery on me. Again. But before panic could do more than flex its claws, the moment ended. The eerie feeling of recognition vanished, leaving just a perfectly normal rush of *Wow, someone smells really nice* in its wake.

A calloused hand covered mine on the suitcase handle. 'I have it. You can let go.'

I couldn't place the accent. Not the expected drawl, but a rounded, liquid slurring of syllables. Vaguely British, but too soft to be Scots or Irish. A tiny echo of remembrance tingled down my neck, but that might have merely been the musical inflection of his voice so close to my ear.

Belatedly, I snatched back my hand and took a discreet step out of the way while he, whoever he was, got the luggage under control. I covered, hopefully, my lapse in composure by checking on Gigi - who had prudently retreated into her carrier during the suitcase wrangle.

I can be very pragmatic about personal space. Doing lifts and holds with a partner, you don't have the luxury of modesty. I'd probably had more guys' hands on my no-

touch zones than any other virgin in America. Yet there I was, flustered and blushing, tingles zipping over every point where our bodies had touched. This, at least, was normal, even if it wasn't exactly normal for me.

Jeez, Sylvie! Stop being such a girl. He could be hideous, or old, or have three eyes. And it wouldn't matter, because he was a random Good Samaritan whom I would never see again.

'Sylvie Davis?'

Or he might be a stalker. A crazed ballet-fan stalker. Stranger things had happened. It figured they would happen to me. It had been that kind of year.

'Hello? Miss?'

Gigi prairie-dogged up from her bag to acknowledge the greeting. I steeled myself and turned, clamping the carrier securely against my side in case I had to run.

A tall young man stood holding my suitcase. Not hideous. Not old. The normal number of eyes, at least where I could see. They were unusual, though, an earthy sort of green that darkened around the edge of the iris. His hair was brown, curling where it touched the top of his ears and the edge of his rugby collar. His face was handsomely chiselled, with the clean, symmetrical lines of classical art. The Romantic period - strong brow, straight nose, firm jaw. Gainsborough, maybe. There was a rustic look to the fall of his hair and in the way his cheeks and nose had been painted warm by the sun.

He didn't look much older than me; I guessed twenty or so, the same age as John the fink. But much more . . . just *more*.

'You *are* Sylvie Davis, yes?' He waved a hand in front of my face. Gigi lunged playfully, a mile off the mark, but the stranger drew back his hand anyway.

I blinked, and shut my gaping mouth. It was a little harder to get my thoughts back into line.

'Do I know you?' It was a rhetorical question. Momentary weirdness aside, I knew I would have remembered if I'd met him before.

'No.' The word was blunt, but not unfriendly. 'I'm Rhys. Rhys Griffith.' He pronounced it like 'Reese', but with a tiny flip of the *r*. 'Your cousin Paula sent me in to fetch you.'

I hardly knew Paula, but that didn't seem right. I was 'kin', after all. 'Is there something wrong?'

He smiled, slightly. Apparently I was easier to read than I liked to think. 'She's waiting with the car in the loading zone. Not to worry.'

That was more in keeping with the woman I'd spoken with, albeit briefly, on the phone. It didn't explain this guy, however.

'Is it only the one case?' he asked, while I tried to fix my mental bearings.

'No. There's a smaller one for the dog.' I pointed out Gigi's suitcase on the conveyer belt, and he grabbed it and set it down in front of me, giving my brain a chance to catch up a bit.

'How did you recognize me?' I asked.

He looked me over, teasing, I think. 'Skinny girl, hair wound up tight in a bun, posture like the Queen of England? There's really no mistaking you, Miss Prima Ballerina.'

Now my native suspicions kicked in, and I narrowed my eyes. 'How do I know Paula really sent you?'

'She said you'd be prickly, and likely too stubborn to admit you needed help with your baggage because of your leg.'

I tightened my jaw - stubbornly. 'The whole world knows I broke my leg.'

'Maybe.' He telescoped out the handle on the suitcase with an efficient twist, then raised one expectant black brow. 'But who knew you and your designer-purse dog would be in Birmingham, Alabama, today, princess?'

With that sally, he headed towards the exit, wheeling my big fuchsia suitcase behind him. He moved with an easy gait, comfortable in his own skin. I stared stupidly for a moment, then realized he was leaving with all my clothes.

I pulled out the handle on Gigi's case - it held her collapsible crate, her toys and all her food - and hurried after him, gritting my teeth against the hitch in my step. I didn't always limp, but it had been a long, tiring day. The physical therapist said it was unreasonable for me to expect bone and muscle to rehabilitate overnight. Obviously she didn't know me very well. I was used to expecting unreasonable things from my body.

Fortunately, Rhys wasn't walking very fast. I was able to catch up without too much effort or embarrassment. Gigi, happy to be moving again, gazed around avidly. Airports were full of interesting people - and smells, I suppose, from the canine perspective.

'She's *not* a designer-purse dog,' I said, panting only slightly.

'No?' He glanced down at me, and slowed his steps a little more. I'm tall enough that I can look most guys in the nose, if not the eyes, but my head barely reached his chin. 'What's her name?'

I clenched my teeth and answered. 'Gigi.' He laughed and I bristled defensively. 'It's short for Giselle.'

Actually, she came with the name Gigi, and I'd decided it was short for something less ridiculous. I'd gotten her from a socialite who didn't want her when she - the dog, I mean - turned out to be inconveniently large. That is to say, too big to fit into Prada's new 'it' bag.

'She's a secondhand reject dog, and she's quite vicious. She'll bite you if you're mean to me.'

The vicious dog had propped her front paws on the bag, her ear fluff blowing in the breeze, like she was joyriding from my shoulder in her own mini sports car.

Rhys looked us both up and down. ““Though she be but little, she is fierce.””

Humour broadened his accent, exaggerating the roll of the *r* and the length of the vowels until it was almost unintelligible.

‘You’re not from around here, are you?’

‘What was your clue?’ he asked, smiling in profile.

I skirted around a woman with a cell phone and hair like a helmet. ‘The accent. And insulting me with a Shakespeare quote.’

He slanted me an unrepentant look. ‘Is “fierce” an insult on this side of the Atlantic? My apologies.’

‘I meant the “little” part, if you really mean skinny.’ He didn’t answer, which I took for an affirmative. I switched the hand pulling Gigi’s suitcase and shifted the carrier to my other shoulder. ‘How do you know Paula?’

‘My father and I are staying at your cousin’s place while Dad does some work in the area.’

I wrestled with the logistics of that, since *I* was staying there too. ‘Is her house particularly large?’

‘Large enough.’ He glanced at me. ‘We won’t be getting underfoot, if that’s your worry.’

‘No.’ By which I meant yes, because the other thing in my suitcase besides clothes was books. I intended to park myself on the veranda or under a magnolia tree or whatever they had here and read until it was time to return to civilization. ‘Just worried about bathroom space.’

My steps slowed as we reached the exit – a revolving door flanked by two sets of regular ones. Airports were transitional, an extension of the plane that got you there, and a link to the place you came from. Stepping outside and putting my feet on the ground – the real ground, not the tarmac – somehow seemed a bigger commitment than getting on the plane in New York.

Rhys straight-armed the crossbar and held open the door, standing back to let me pass. With Gigi’s carrier over

my shoulder, I had to edge through sideways. I held my breath, not because the fit was so tight, but to avoid the possibility of another head trip. Imagining things while I was drunk was one thing. Weird déjà vu with a stranger in the airport, on the other hand . . .

I chanced a quick peek up at Rhys and found him studying my face as if there would be a pop quiz later. It was a serious expression, and when my eyes met his, he didn't look away or apologize for staring. He merely raised his brows from their scowl of concentration, and gave me a quick, rueful smile that stopped me in the doorway.

The sounds of the busy airport retreated. Behind him, I could see the steady spin of the revolving door, people coming and going, while I stood on the threshold with Rhys, neither in nor out. The heat and humidity bathed one half of me; the air-conditioning chilled the other. And from the guy sharing the doorway, a different sort of warmth entirely.

'Don't look like that, love.'

The endearment startled me, but he said it like an American guy might say 'dear' or 'honey' - if a guy could manage to say it without sounding patronizing or sexist. Rhys managed to make it merely a friendly word, like buddy or Mac.

'Look like what?' I tried to sound normal, which was a trick, when I hardly remembered what normal was.

'As if you're walking into the lion's den.' He nodded towards the outside, both punctuating his statement and gesturing for me to get on with it. The intimacy of the moment was gone. 'Chin up. I'm sure you'll feel at home in no time.'

I wasn't sure I had a home any more. It wasn't merely about Mother and me moving in with Steve. The ballet studio had been where I lived. The sweat-soaked air, the squeak of rosined toes on the floor. Our apartment had only