

*"I see the lost are like this, and their curse
To be, as I am mine, their sweating selves. But worse."*

~ Gerald Manly Hopkins

"And grief itself be mortal!"

~Adonais XXI, Shelley

CHAPTER 1

September 23, 1964...

A cool breeze blew in from the ocean and out across the landscape of Los Angeles in an attempt to chill the heat off the early autumn night. Then, it just died. Dead. Autumn never made it past Highway 101, the road running like a black, glassy snake along California's craggy coast. It, too, was dead on arrival.

When the ocean wind died, the heated damp air was left behind, and floated lazily through the bowels of the Los Angeles warehouse district, like it fell asleep. It managed to stick to everything like flypaper, making any physical activity uncomfortable. One particular warehouse, converted into a dance studio, was lit up at the late hour, the old glass and wooden walls expecting to hear the clunk of ballet slippers across its hardwood floor. A young dancer, sat on a bench in the dressing room, ready to change into her leotard and tights. Sweat began to form in huge beads at her hairline and on her upper lip. She wished that the cool of autumn would finally get the upper hand

and kill its predecessor. Summer should have been finished, should have died, just like the wind, but it hung on, passively suffering in its excessively long-lived existence. Rehearsing in the heat was just one of the sacrifices a dedicated dancer had to make if they were to star in a company like the New York City Ballet. She sighed, and dabbed with the tips of her fingers at the sweat on her upper lip.

She stood, stepped out of her heels, feeling the cool cement on the bottom of her feet, then slid out of her sleeveless Yves St. Laurent dress, hanging it in a locker, along with her stockings. The converted closet was only large enough to accommodate three at-a-time changing out of their clothes. Fortunately, she was alone. She should have been at home packing for her plane trip to New York, but her muscles felt cranky and she needed to stretch, in spite of the sultry air. It would be good to leave Los Angeles behind, with its pitiable peculiarities, and all the emotional entanglements that seemed to be unresolvable. She paused for a moment, thinking, conjuring up a picture in her mind. The future, any further contact, had died away with love unuttered between them. She knew leaving would not solve the break-up. It would only make it more tragic. A tear broke free and traveled down her cheek, joining with the sweat already gathering for a full scale assault. Even her tears weighed in, knowing intimately the inconsolable grief of unrequited love. She must learn to live with it, however painful it was, and focus on her fledgling career in New York.

She brushed the thoughts from her mind and quickly slipped on her tights and leotard, then she lowered herself to the bench and laced up her toe shoes. The picture in her mind returned, and she sat immobile, fixed to the bench. Curiously, she could hear someone walking across the boards toward the men's dressing room; a hurried, uneven step, someone probably more interested in a quick workout, rather than mastering a movement. Disappointment traveled through her, and she stared at her hands, laying like two limp fish in her lap, her shoulders slumped forward.

She assumed the studio would be empty, that it was late enough at night that no one else would be there. With the summer workshop ended, classes wouldn't begin for another month. She had already stayed several weeks beyond the workshop to study with the teacher, one-on-one, in order to learn what Ballet Master Balanchine expected of her upon her arrival in New York City. The only sound she wanted to hear was the thud of her toe shoes when they hit the floor, the steady rhythm of her breathing, and the tympani of her heart, while she mastered her technique. All emotion would disappear in her movements, and she could lose the consciousness of that monster... time.

Dancing cleared her mind. Dancing helped her breathe. Dancing sorted, categorized, and filed all the craziness into neat little compartments, minus all the passion.

And things need sorting in her life. Everything had gone wrong this summer. Absolutely everything. Except Balanchine's invitation to dance in the New York City Ballet Company. Dancing was the only thing that made any sense. And she had been so hopeful about her move to LA.

She sat immobile, listening to whoever was out there, as they tinkered with items on the shelves outside her dressing room door. Then, she heard music begin. A Beatles song, *Hard Day's Night*. It blasted through the doldrums in a burr, igniting the air with its relentless drumming.

Rising to her feet, she stepped toward the door, and turned the knob. It wouldn't budge.

"How stupid," she said.

She unlocked the door and pushed, but it had swelled in all the wet heat, and it wouldn't open.

"Hello? You out there," she called, raising her voice over the din of the song. "Could you help me out? The door's stuck." No one answered. "Pull on the knob, while I push." Silence.

"Hello?" She put her ear to the wooden panel. Something was wrong. A definite smell of smoke wafted into the room.

"Hello?" Her voice rose while she beat on the door. "Whoever is out there, this is not funny." She beat on the door, again.

The music started over, "*It's been a hard day's night, And I've been working like a dog...*"

"Whoever you are, you better open this door," she demanded, pounding and kicking with her fists and feet. "Open this door, now!" She paused to listen. "What's going on?" she said. Banging one more time on her wooden trap, she felt fear cover her like a thick wool blanket. This time she would appeal to their humanity. "Help me! Please, help me!" But her voice seemed to hang in the thick air, making no progress from the room, no matter how loud she yelled, as if it hit a huge, humid wall, imprisoning her pleas in that closet dressing room.

She stopped to listen for footsteps. She could hear nothing but the music blaring.