

Live Like Your Head's On Fire

Chapter 1

Maybe we are who we are right from the start. Take me for instance - I came into the world like a bullet, two weeks early, and so fast that if Dad hadn't been at the bottom of the bed to catch me, I'd have gone straight through the window. Maybe there's a seed inside each one of us that's going to grow the way it grows; daffodils can't help being show offs, primroses will always be shy and gentle. I'd love to be the primrose type but I guess that wasn't the seed I got.

But how do you know what kind of seed you are when you're still in the dark fighting towards the light? I'd never even thought about being a dancer until that morning when I went crazy in dance class. And if I'd known then that would lead to me running away from home, I wouldn't have dared take a single step. Maybe that's the point, you can't know beforehand, you just have to follow your instincts and trust the unfurling.

Some plants in Australia need to be burnt alive in forest fires *in order* to grow, others want drowning in cold, dark water for months. There's a rose in our garden called Penelope, same name as me, with squishy, pale peach flowers. Rose seeds have to be scoured and flayed for them to germinate. Maybe that's what it takes to be a dancer; fire, water and your skin scraped over a giant cheese grater – so that only the tough survive.

We always had dance last class before lunch on Tuesdays. It wasn't ballroom or anything awful like that, it was modern dance, you know, making up moves to music. The trouble was - I really liked dancing - and enjoying anything at my school was dangerous.

'Begin.' Mrs Hadley shouted and a high haunting bassoon solo drifted into the silence. Everyone was spread around the edges of the school hall. We were starting a new piece called *First Day*. The idea was that we were curled up like embryos inside eggs and Mrs Hadley wanted us to break out of our shells as if we were seeing the world for the first time.

The music was quiet and tender so I came up onto my knees, keeping my head down and rocking gently. Safe inside my shell I waited. Through the screen of my hair I watched what the others were doing. Next to me, Vivienne, with her mouth open and eyes popping, was dazzled with wonder by the sight of the school chairs stacked into piles on the opposite side of the room. Tamasin, my best friend, was already on her feet. She'd pulled her gym shirt over her head, and with her hands out in front of her was staggering around like a zombie. The girls near her were sniggering. You could always trust Tamasin to take the piss.

I closed my eyes and focused on the music, waiting to see what it suggested. More instruments had joined the bassoon and there was a weird scratchy feeling to the sound. I liked how fierce it was. The wooden floor felt rough beneath my hands and knees. I pushed up into the middle of my back, arching as high as I could, like a cat. The music was seeping into me, filling me right to the skin. As long as the chords remained long and drawn out, I was going to keep stretching, pushing my muscles to their limit.

The tempo changed suddenly and there was an explosion of noise as the whole orchestra roared out together. Inside my body a wild energy was fighting to get out. I tucked my head under and rolled forwards so fast that I came up into a crouched standing position. I didn't stop to consider what anyone else would think I just went for it. The music was harsh and fast and full of fury. I started lashing out

with my arms and legs and jerking my head as I ran, leaping and slashing through the air. As long as I kept moving no one could stop me. I wasn't ever going to slow down. The music had grabbed hold of my will and I had no choice but to run and jump and punch and kick until it let me go. The school hall was barely big enough to contain me.

The music finally slowed into a mournful, messed up lullaby, I sank down onto my knees, rolled over onto my back, and then lay on the floor twitching. My heart was crashing so hard against my ribs I thought it might burst through. Staring up at the vaulted ceiling with the crests of the school houses nailed to the centre beam, I imagined the night sky, galaxy upon galaxy stretching above me. Keeping my head and shoulders on the floor, I turned myself in a circle, using just my feet, as if the world were turning under me and I was floating away into the soft, cool, darkness of outer space.

I was out at the far edge of the known Universe when the bell went for the end of lesson. The music stopped and suddenly I was lying in the middle of the school hall with everyone staring at me. What had I done? I stayed on my back and closed my eyes. I wished I could vanish, pouf, gone.

Tamasin said, 'I think Pen's must have been a dragon's egg.'

And Sadie Thompson, the class bitch and my vowed enemy, answered, 'Well, some kind of reptile.'

Tamasin, annoyingly, laughed, and a few of the other girls giggled.

My heart was going bonkers. I waited for my breath to get back to normal. The room filled with chattering voices and a draft came in through the doors as the class filed out of the hall. I sat up and crawled over to the place where I'd left my bag.

Vivienne was waiting there, grinning at me. I avoided looking at her.

'That was really good, what you did.'

'Yeh,' I picked up my bag and moved away but she walked after me.

'No – honestly, it was amazing, I mean, freaky, but amazing. Everyone stopped dancing and watched you.' Vivienne was dark haired, dark eyed, heavy, and clueless. She really did arrive at school every day as if she were new born. Sadie Thompson was going to crucify me.

'Penny,' Mrs Hadley was calling me. She always wore the most ridiculous outfits. Today she wore a neon pink mini skirt over her dance tights. I don't know where she got her bras from but her breasts protruded like two traffic cones. She turned and they pointed straight at me.

'You put your heart into that Penny, well done.'

My shoulders rose up my neck and I stepped away from her but she moved in after me.

'What made you respond so energetically?'

'Don't know,' I managed, as she stood there with her hands on her hips smiling at me in a determined way, 'the music?'

I tried to squeeze past her but she wasn't going to let me go until I delivered.

'I was thinking about how it would feel to be in your body for the first time.'

'Oooh,' she cooed, her mouth a little round donut, 'I like that, I like that very much. We could work that idea into a solo for the dance show.'

A screeching chord crashed through my head. She had to be joking.

Mrs Hadley carried on smiling as if she'd given me a present. I stared at her face. The mole on her chin had three white hairs coming out of it. Her lipstick frayed at the edges, drifting up the tiny channels that feathered out from her lips. Being in the dance show was one thing - but a solo? The idea was terrifying. Me, on my own

on stage in front of hundreds of people; impossible, crazy, total insanity. I had to say 'no' quickly.

Mrs Hadley was watching me; waiting. The problem was, a part of me had been enchanted by that strange, angry, music. A wave was swelling up inside me and surging forward to break over Mrs Hadley's conical breasts.

'Okay,' I said. And that was that, from then on, I was doomed.

I walked as slowly as I could down the oak panelled corridor towards the changing rooms. We wore our gym kit for dance so I needed to put my uniform back on. The thought of facing Sadie Thompson made me feel sick. The dinner ladies were clattering steel trays in the kitchen and the rank smell of fried mince caught in my throat. On the netball courts outside some girls from 4Z were practising goal shooting despite the rain. I could hang around pretending to watch them and wait until the lunch bell rang. But why should I have to lurk about getting cold? I carried on through the cloakrooms towards the extension where the showers were.

Kings, that's my school, was originally a boys' school but about a hundred years ago they added a girls' school next door. The boys had the old building but ours was nicer with pale coloured wood and huge windows looking out over the playing fields. We're one of the only grammar schools left in the country. You don't have to pay fees to come here you just have to pass a special exam. Because getting in is really difficult most of the girls have private coaching and their parents are mainly lawyers or doctors or company directors; posh types.

As far as I can work out there are only four girls in our class from ordinary families. Julia Worth lives miles away, in the opposite direction from me, and she's unbelievably clever and comes top in everything. Then there's Vivienne and Sadie.

They're both from Kings Heath. I think the school has to take some local girls.

Vivienne's Dad is a window cleaner and her Mum works at the chocolate factory.

Sadie's Dad's the foreman at the car manufacturers in Rubery. The weird thing is that if our class were a wolf pack, Sadie would be the leader and Vivienne the runt. I think most of the girls are scared of Sadie because she's so aggressive. I'm about the only one who stands up to her.

And finally there's me, Penelope Fairweather, but most people call me Pen. We're not poor but we're not rich either, my Dad sells insurance and he's a deputy-manager now. I have no idea how I managed to pass the entrance exam. Dad practically died of happiness. He goes around saying 'my daughter at Kings' until I want to duct tape his mouth shut. Sometimes I wished I'd gone with my mates to the local school in Harborne.

As I came round the corner from the cloakrooms, the door to the changing room closed. Inside I heard Sadie shout 'Assume Positions!' and there was silence. The door was painted a pale butter colour. Julia Worth came out, not a hair of her blonde bob out of place. Her satchel of books, balanced on one hip, was so heavy she had to lean over to the opposite side to stay upright. She kept her eyes down as she passed me. Julia never opened her mouth in class. She had a magical capacity for invisibility, sometimes I forgot she existed. Her instinct was to stay out of trouble. Unfortunately I had the opposite instinct. Trouble tracked me down. I caught the door with my foot before it swung shut and looked through.

I could see Daisy Morris and Fiona Coles getting dressed innocently at the far end of the room. That didn't mean anything as they wouldn't get involved in any rough business. The door didn't seem to be booby trapped - so I stepped inside.

The moment I walked into the room Sadie leapt off the bench on the sidewall and ran in front of me jerking her arms and legs. Sonia followed doing the same stupid movements, and then Razi and the others in their gang. I walked over to my peg and started getting changed. A shout of laughter bounced around the tiled room and I turned. Sadie was hanging out her tongue and shaking all over. She started twitching as if she were having a fit and collapsed on the floor. People were darting sneaky looks at me. I should have carried on ignoring them but I couldn't stop myself.

'Gosh, Sadie, I'm sorry, I didn't know you were epileptic - watch out you don't bite your tongue off.'

She kept jerking about on the floor. Her chorus of supporters were falling about laughing. I turned back to the wall and started to pull my tights on, putting a fingernail through the nylon and laddering them. I hated the way the shower room always smelt of wet mouldy towels.

Something hit me on the back, a trainer, but when I spun round I couldn't tell who'd thrown it. I carried on dressing and more shoes flew over. Most of them missed but one got me on the back of the head. It really hurt and that was it - I went molten - I picked up the trainer and threw it straight back at Sadie as hard as I could. She ducked and it missed her but for a moment she looked scared. There was buzzing in my ears. I heard Tamasin shouting.

'Bad Weather alert! Storms ahead!'

Tamasin was always making fun of my name. I glared at her. Why was she joining in with Sadie? Why wasn't she on my side? I felt wound up and I wanted to lash out. But I managed to catch hold of myself and stood there fixing Sadie with my

eyes, daring her, or any of that gang to throw another shoe. Sadie looked away first. She muttered 'Bitch' and picked up her bag and walked out. The rest followed.

Once they'd gone Tamasin pulled a freaked out face, grinning at me as if it was all a joke. She didn't wait for me to finish changing, saying that she needed to get in the lunch queue. She had school dinners but I brought my own sandwiches.

Sitting on the bench, in just my tights and shirt, I took as long as I could to tie the laces of my brogues. I bit the inside of my cheek.

Vivienne was the last to leave. She hovered by the door.

'You ok?' she asked.

'Fine,' I stood up to put my skirt on, turning away from her. The lunch bell was ringing. I heard the door close. School was hard enough already without getting stuck with Vivienne.

When classes finished I couldn't face the bus queue so I walked up to the High Street to get on the bus before the others. Being on the High Street is a fifth form privilege but I don't see how they can enforce that. There's no law that says I can't walk up Kings Heath High Street. As a privilege it's not up to much. There's a Poundland, a WH Smith and a Boots and that's about it, not even a McDonalds. Anyway I didn't go for the shops but just to be on my own for a while.

There were two sixth formers eating ice creams at the bus stop. They ignored me and before long the bus came. I sat downstairs near the front next to an old lady with a plastic checked shopping bag on her knee. She must have had leeks in there because their oniony stink was even stronger than the petrol fumes. Outside the street lamps had come on and the sky was already turning inky. The bus pulled up at the stop opposite the school gates and I watched the fight to get on. The girls

pushed and shoved their way onto the bus squealing like gulls circling a bag of old chips. The noise bulged into the downstairs silence and then disappeared up the steps. No one noticed me.

When the bus reached Kings Norton, and the last of the Kings' girls got off, I went upstairs and sat in the front seat. I still had ages to go, through the endless suburbs of Bournville, and Selly Oak, until the bus finally got to Harborne and even then I had to walk another mile to get home. But I liked sitting on the top deck looking down on the dark streets, watching people rushing about wrapped up in their own stories.

I leant against the window thinking about how stupid I'd been to do that mad dance, exposing myself to Sadie's scorn. I imagined how ridiculous I must have looked and expected to feel ashamed but instead the music rushed back into my head and a ball of fire started glowing in my chest. I wanted to get up, right there on the bus, and start dancing. I knew then I was definitely going to do the dance solo even if it meant I had to fight Sadie Thompson every day for the rest of term.