

# 1 *America*

There's a feeling you get when you do ballet that's like nothing else in the world. Lots of people think ballet is just a hobby, something little girls in tutus do. They see a line of dancers standing at a ballet barre, slowly moving their arms and inclining their heads, and they think it's easy. What they don't see is the mechanics behind that arm movement. The discipline to make sure the arm bends in just the right way, that it's soft and delicate, yet strong and controlled. No one sees the muscles that are holding the rest of the body firmly in place so that hips don't wobble and bums don't stick out. No one sees that, because after all, it's just a hobby for little girls in tutus.

I'm fourteen and the novelty of tutus and tiaras wore off a long time ago. I know all about the blood, sweat and tears of ballet. If you aren't producing one or all of those three things, you aren't doing it properly.

As I performed a complicated piece of choreography for

my teacher, Miss Lily, I didn't think about the niggle in my hamstring that had been bothering me for the past month or the blister brewing inside my pointe shoe, threatening to pop – instead, my mind had wandered to another place. I was performing not just for my teacher, but instead for a sold-out crowd at His Majesty's Theatre. This particular dance wasn't pretty. It was powerful. I attacked each step like a lion chasing its prey, all the time keeping a cheeky smile dancing across my lips. Everything had to be precise and my timing had to be just right. The excitement tugged at my body, begging me to go faster. I fought against it. If I let adrenalin take over, I'd rush the dance and make a complete mess of things.

I finished the solo with a series of turns, travelling across the floor. In my head, I could hear the audience clapping in time with each turn and it spurred me on. As I reached the last one, I *relevéd* up onto the toe of one of my pointe shoes, trusting my body to hold me still.

I waited for the applause to come. Instead, there was silence.

The mirrored studio walls of the Perth Ballet Academy slowly came into focus. My breath burnt my chest as I glanced frantically around the studio. It was the best I'd ever danced, so where was the loud clap and recognition from Miss Lily? My eyes finally found her. She was standing

by the door talking to a girl I'd never seen before. I didn't know who she was and quite frankly, I didn't care. She was interrupting my private lesson and had just made Miss Lily miss the best performance I'd ever done. It might not have been a *real* performance, but at a ballet school, every dance counted towards securing lead roles. Frustration surged through my body, eating up every last bit of energy I had.

Miss Lily glanced over her shoulder and saw me watching. 'Oh, Amelia, good, you're done.' It wasn't the praise I'd been hoping for. 'Come over here, will you. There's someone I'd like you to meet,' she said with a warm smile.

I straightened my shoulders and lifted my chin. I traded my scowl for a stage smile, knowing full well that a dancer with an attitude would get nowhere. As I made my way towards Miss Lily, I looked the other girl up and down. She was short and petite, and without a doubt a dancer. I could tell by the way she stood with her feet casually turned out and her neck poised.

The Perth Ballet Academy was one of the city's top ballet schools. You had to audition to get a place in its after-school program and it was unusual to see a new face midway through the term. Most of the kids in my class had been at the Academy since we were Juniors. As frustrated as I was with the interruption, curiosity got the better of me. I had to know who this new girl was.

‘Amelia, this is Valentina. She’s come to join us all the way from Italy. Her family moved here a couple of months ago and now she’s settled in, she’s dying to dance again,’ Miss Lily said.

‘I loved your dance,’ Valentina said with a soft smile. ‘It was incredible. Lots of energy.’ Her accent was strong, but her English was clear.

‘Valentina auditioned for me last week. You two are actually very similar. Two powerhouses,’ Miss Lily said.

My smile tightened. I was the best Intermediate dancer at the Academy. Perhaps Miss Lily was just being polite, but with auditions for the midyear show just around the corner, the comparison between my dancing and Valentina’s made me uneasy.

‘Class starts in ten minutes. Valentina can shadow you today, Amelia, while she finds her feet. Make her feel at home, please,’ Miss Lily said, heading towards the door.

I bit my lip. Babysitting the new kid was the last thing I wanted to do. I’m not like the other kids at the Academy. Everyone says they want to be a professional dancer, but sometimes it feels like I’m the only one working hard enough to make sure that dream actually comes true. I’m the first one at the Academy each afternoon and the last to leave, and from the moment I walk through the door, I’m ready to work. The others treat the Academy like a

hangout, a place to chat and have fun, with a bit of ballet on the side. Not me. I’m 110 percent focused. I don’t have time for distractions. Valentina included.

I wanted to protest against babysitting, but there was no point arguing with Miss Lily. Getting on the bad side of your ballet teacher was a sure way to land yourself in the *corps*, dancing in the background, waving a flower or some other lame prop – and no one would see you there.

‘You’re very good,’ Valentina said, breaking the silence.

It was an olive branch, a peace offering, and of course, it made my chest puff out with pride.

‘Thank you. It’s the best solo I’ve ever done.’

‘Perhaps you can teach me?’ Valentina suggested with a hopeful smile.

I couldn’t think of anything worse. I studied Valentina’s face. Her eyes were warm and friendly. I didn’t want to be mean. I know ballet has a bad reputation. Some people think ballerinas are snobs who go around sabotaging one another’s careers, but it’s not like that. At least not from what I’ve seen. I don’t care about anyone else’s dancing. I only care about my own. And it needs to be good. Better than good. With auditions coming up, my technique had to be flawless if I wanted to get the lead role. And I *had* to get the lead role. Every minute at the studio counted.

‘Sorry, but I really need to practise my *pirouettes* before

class,' I said. Last week, Sarah got her triple *pirouette* on pointe. She was the first one in our class to land it. I'd been working my bum off ever since.

'Great, I love to turn,' Valentina said, following me over to the mirror.

'Fabulous,' I said dryly. Clearly Valentina hadn't got the hint. I really just wanted to practise by myself. I took a deep breath and pushed off into a *pirouette*. *One, two*, I spun on my toe like a spinning top, keeping my eyes locked on my reflection in the mirror to stop myself from getting dizzy. On the third turn I began to wobble. I quickly planted my foot back onto the ground for balance and straightened up. My eyes darted towards Valentina. The last thing I wanted was to embarrass myself in front of the new kid.

Thankfully, Valentina was bent over, stretching her legs. I turned back to the mirror and this time, pushed off more gently. *Too gently*. Halfway through the second turn I realised I had nowhere near enough speed to make it around once more. I came to a stop facing away from the mirror, staring directly at Valentina.

This time, she'd been watching. 'Just a suggestion ... and you do not have to listen,' she said, holding up her hands defensively. I could tell English wasn't Valentina's first language by how prim and proper her speech was. 'Do not' instead of 'don't'.

My jaw tightened.

Valentina continued. 'Maybe lift your knee a bit higher and bring your arms closer to your chest. Like that, you will have more ... how you say ... *forza*,' she blushed. 'Three turns will be easy, or as you Aussies say ... *a piece of cake*,' at that she grinned, clearly proud of herself for knowing the saying.

'Have you got your triple *pirouette*?' I asked. It came out harsher than I'd intended.

Valentina smiled politely, but not before I saw the hint of a frown. 'Si. Yes.' To prove her point, she effortlessly did a triple *pirouette*. She didn't wobble once.

I swallowed. Without a word, I turned my back and prepared for another *pirouette*. This time, I reluctantly took Valentina's advice. I drew my foot up a tiny bit higher and tightened my arms. *One, two, three!* As I softly placed my foot back on the ground, I released my breath and smiled. Valentina and I locked eyes in the mirror.

'That was incredible! Like that, you could have done four turns,' Valentina said.

The studio door flew open, interrupting the moment. The other dancers began to wander in. As usual, they were chatting loudly about their weekend plans, favourite TV shows, latest crushes. They were too busy gossiping to notice Valentina.

‘We start at the barre,’ I said, walking to my usual spot at the front.

Valentina followed awkwardly behind me. ‘This school, it is very big. Much more pretty than my old school in Italy.’

‘Look, Valentina,’ I began. I wanted to warn her that Miss Lily hated talking in class. So did I. The chatterboxes always ended up in the back row.

‘You can call me Vale.’ She emphasised the ‘e’ as if it were the start of a word, like elephant or egg.

A loud clap put an end to the conversation.

‘Intermediates, I hope you’ve warmed up your legs as well as your mouths,’ Miss Lily said, sashaying across the studio. A few of the students giggled as they took their place at the barre. Miss Lily used to dance professionally for the Royal Ballet in London and even though she was now in her fifties, and kind of old, she still moved as if she was ready to take to the stage at a moment’s notice. Today, her hair was styled in an elegant chignon and a long ballet skirt floated behind her. Despite her tiny frame, her voice boomed like a megaphone. ‘If you haven’t stretched, your legs will know about it later. We’ve got a lot to get through today,’ she said, making her way to the music station. The speakers crackled angrily as she plugged her iPad into the sound system. It was well overdue an upgrade. ‘I hope some of you have made an effort to introduce yourself to

Valentina. It’s never fun being the new kid, so please don’t just ignore her.’

The other kids started whispering, as if noticing Vale for the first time. Vale was smiling awkwardly, clearly hating the attention. I didn’t blame her.

‘We’ll begin as we always do, with *pliés*. A demi- and full *plié* in first, followed by a *port de bras*, repeated in second, fourth and fifth, finishing with a beautiful rise on *demi-pointe*. Then we’ll turn and do the other side. Valentina, just follow the others. You’ll catch on fast enough,’ Miss Lily said with an encouraging smile.

I straightened my shoulders and rested one hand lightly on the barre. The pressure was on. If Vale was going to copy me, I had to be perfect. She’d already seen me stuff up my *pirouettes* before class, I couldn’t afford to make another mistake. As the soft introductory chords of the piano tinkled through the speakers, I felt a deep breath escape my lips. I hadn’t even realised I’d been holding it in.

There’s something really special about ballet. I can’t figure out if it’s the music, or the movements themselves, but whenever I’m dancing, I disappear into another world. It’s like magic. Nothing else matters.

We moved quickly through each exercise. *Tendus*, *frappés*, *rond de jambes*. Miss Lily walked up and down the length of the barre throughout each exercise, correcting

students as she went. ‘Ava, we are doing ballet, not hula. Hips still please ... Jessie, bottom in and lifting up, please. Imagine a string that extends from your head, pulling your entire body upwards. Liam, why does your hand look like a claw?’ she paused near the front of the barre. I instantly felt my shoulders straighten and my stomach tighten. I could feel Miss Lily’s eyes in my direction and I craved her attention.

‘That looks great,’ Miss Lily said. A smile crept onto my lips. ‘Valentina, I’m so impressed by how quickly you’re picking everything up.’

My jaw dropped and so did my shoulders. I could’ve sworn Miss Lily had been talking to me. Suddenly, I felt hands on my shoulders, pulling them backwards.

‘Posture, Amelia,’ Miss Lily said. With one finger, she tilted my chin up towards the corner of the room. ‘Remember, no one wants to buy tickets to see a ballerina slouch across the stage.’

I continued to move through the movements as she adjusted my position, but inside, I was dying of embarrassment. Teachers always managed to look at the worst possible moment.

By the time we reached the final exercise of class, I was exhausted. We all congregated in two lines at the side of the studio, ready to do *grand jetés* across the floor. Sarah and

I were up first. We both leapt through the air in time with the music. I watched our reflections in the mirror, pushing myself to make sure my legs extended higher than Sarah’s.

‘Nice, Amelia. That extra stretching is paying off,’ Miss Lily complimented. Flexibility’s one of the things I always have to work at. Both my parents are ex-ballet dancers, yet surprisingly, I wasn’t gifted with natural flexibility. I’m forever doing the splits with my foot resting on a stack of books to try and overstretch my muscles.

‘Ah! Those *jetés* are the best I’ve seen in a *very* long time!’ Miss Lily exclaimed.

I felt my grin grow wider. Finally, Miss Lily was noticing the extra work I was putting in.

‘Everyone, look at Valentina’s *jetés*!’ Miss Lily continued. My smile dropped. Once again, the compliment hadn’t been for me.

‘Notice how her hips are perfectly square when she is in the air. Gosh, that flexibility! Incredible, those legs were *definitely* made for ballet,’ Miss Lily said, clapping her hands.

Having reached the other end of the studio, I stopped to watch Valentina. Miss Lily was right. Her flexibility was next level. She threw her legs into the air with each *jeté*, not just doing the splits midair, but extending beyond them. I felt a fire burn in my gut. As hard as I worked, it was unlikely my legs would ever be like that.

‘She’s pretty amazing, huh?’ Mei-Lin said, sidling up beside me.

‘Mmm.’

‘I was watching her during *grand battement* at the barre. Her kicks were so high, I’m surprised she didn’t kick *you*.’

‘Luckily, we avoided collisions,’ I said. I watched as a few of the other girls gathered around Valentina, gushing over her *jetés*.

‘Did you see her *arabesque*? She’s *crazy* stretchy,’ Ava added.

‘I wish my legs looked like that!’ Kate whined.

‘You’d have to snap bones to get that flexible,’ Ava said with a smirk. Kate gently shoved her shoulder in protest. Kate and Ava were best friends and without a doubt the biggest gossips in the entire school.

I turned my back on the conversation, pretending to watch the other dancers. If I had to hear one more time how flexible Valentina was, I’d probably scream.

‘The competition’s picked up, that’s for sure,’ Ava said.

‘God, Amelia, I bet *you’re* worried,’ Kate said.

‘What? Why would I be worried?’ I asked. I avoided Kate’s eyes, keeping my own fixed on the other dancers.

‘Well, auditions are coming up for the midyear show. Imagine if the new girl came in and stole the lead,’ Kate said.

It was a small comment, but it was like a match and it struck a fire inside of me. ‘There’s more to ballet than flexibility, you know,’ I snapped, walking away from the barre to join the others. I heard Kate and Ava laugh behind me. I hated that they’d got to me and made me crack. It was what they did and why I tried to stay away from them.

We all clapped and curtsied politely as Miss Lily dismissed the class. While everyone else made a beeline for the change rooms, I grabbed a stretch band. My muscles were more pliable when they were warm and I’d never been more eager to work on my flexibility.