

Breaking Pointe

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FREMANTLE PRESS

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Amelia

I am invincible. I glide across the floor – *chassé, pas de bourrée, glissade* – push off and take flight – *jeté*. My eyes flick towards the mirror and I smile, my legs hitting a perfect split in the air. The second I land, softly and without a sound, I take off in the other direction with the exact same combination. I soar through the air like an eagle, my usual overactive ballet brain silent and enjoying the moment. Nothing can bring me down.

‘Square those hips, Amelia. Don’t sacrifice technique for height!’

Except that.

My teacher Miss Lily’s corrections brought me crashing back to reality. Nothing got past her. I swear she had at least twenty sets of eyes and saw every little one of my imperfections.

I nodded in her direction to show I’d understood. Then I quickly moved to the side, making way for Valentina, who was now flying across the studio. Valentina didn’t have to

worry about her hips being square. She didn't have to force her flexibility like I did. Her body was a giant rubber band. In the air, her legs didn't just hit 180 degrees, they extended well beyond it. It wasn't fair. Both my parents had been professional ballet dancers. If one of us should have been gifted with natural flexibility, it was me. When Valentina joined Perth Ballet Academy, I was wildly jealous of her. So much so, that it almost jeopardised my own dancing. Now, thankfully, we're friends. And the competition is healthy. Most of the time, anyway.

'Way to upstage me,' I muttered as she joined me at the side of the studio.

She smiled. 'Your *jeté* was beautiful.' Valentina's accent was strong, but her English was clear. Her family moved to Australia from Italy at the start of the year. Already, it was hard to imagine the Academy without her. She was practically part of the furniture. 'Who is that man over there? He is making me nervous.'

'I don't know. A scout maybe?' I said with a shrug. I feigned indifference, but the truth was, the mystery man was making me nervous too. He was sitting on a chair in the corner of the room. He was much younger than Miss Lily. At a guess, I'd say he was maybe in his thirties, dressed in loose black track pants and a baggy black t-shirt that almost reached his knees. Not exactly the attire you'd

expect from a ballet scout. He had arrived during barre, not long after we had started class. Miss Lily barely paused to greet him, instead just waving him towards a chair in the corner.

‘He’s not taking notes though,’ I observed.

‘Woah, Amelia. Talking in class? Don’t you know you could ruin your *entire* career doing that?’ Khalila said, sidling up beside us.

It was rich coming from her. Khalila was the biggest chatterbox of the entire Academy. I scrunched up my nose, but she had a point. I used to judge anyone who spoke during class. I saw it as a sign of immaturity and lack of focus. I thought if I wanted to be a professional, I couldn’t let myself get distracted by anyone, or anything. Friends included. I still wanted to be a professional ballerina, more than anything in the world, but I was fairly confident that a few whispered sentences here and there weren’t going to ruin my chances of a career onstage.

Sam and Ari were the last ones across the floor. They weren’t subtle about being competitive.

‘Is that as high as you can go?’ Sam challenged mid-*jeté*.

Neither of them were super flexible but they had great elevation. Ari grunted and pushed himself further for the second *jeté*.

‘Boys ... I want to hear the music, not your voices,’ Miss

Lily warned. ‘And Sam, if you’re going to insult Ari, at least make sure your toes are pointed when you do it.’

Ari shoved Sam’s shoulder as they joined the other three boys at the side of the room. ‘Yeah, Sam, point your feet.’

The mystery man smirked, obviously enjoying the performance. He slouched back against the chair, stretching his legs out in front of him.

‘Right, we’re going to wrap up a bit early today,’ Miss Lily said. ‘*Pirouettes* from the corner to finish, please. Basic combo – *chassé, pas de bourrée*, single *pirouette* finishing in fifth, repeat that with a double finishing in fourth and then the last time, blow me away with however many turns you can land. *Clean*. No wobbles.’ Miss Lily raised her eyebrows high above her glasses, fixing us all with her beady eyes. ‘Got it?’

I lined up next to Valentina. ‘How many?’ I whispered.

Valentina smiled slyly. ‘If I told you, it would not be as fun.’

Not only was Valentina ultra-flexible, but she was also a human spinning top. In front of us, Khalila was partnered with Jessie.

‘Jessie, get on your leg. Hold yourself firm,’ Miss Lily yelled.

Both girls played it safe and stuck to a double for their final turn. Jessie wobbled as she came to land.

‘What did I say about wobbling? Tighten your core,’ Miss Lily called.

If the man in the corner was judging us, his face gave nothing away. It didn’t matter who he was – I had to impress him.

There was no way Valentina would stick to a double. If I was partnered with her, it was a triple or nothing. I locked my eyes on a spot on the far wall to stop myself from getting dizzy and raised my arms in preparation. We waited for our cue in the music, then we were off. Valentina and I glided across the floor in time with the piano. With each turn, I braced my core, made sure my thighs were turned out, arms held just below chest height, weight perfectly centred over my big toe. Like that, I knew my body wouldn’t wobble. I trusted myself. I landed each *pirouette* with precision, before taking off for the next. Reaching the third and final turn, I prepared myself for a showstopper. I had spent the whole of last term working on my triple *pirouette*. It had almost killed me. But now, I knew I could land it without a problem. I melted into my *plié*, pushed off and *one, two, three* – landed the perfect triple *pirouette*.

A quick glance towards the mirror made me groan internally. Valentina was still turning. She came down from her fourth *pirouette* without the slightest wiggle.

‘Woo! Yeah, girl!’ Khalila cheered.

‘Very nice, Valentina,’ Miss Lily said. ‘Khalila, while I share your enthusiasm, I might point out that we’re in a ballet class, not at a football game.’

Khalila giggled. ‘I’m sorry, but four turns? *Come on!*’

A few of the others laughed. Khalila was always the class clown.

I raised my eyebrows at Valentina and she smiled softly. She was confident but never cocky, so it was impossible to dislike her. If anything, she just pushed me to work harder. Bring on four *pirouettes*, I guess.

Suddenly remembering our guest in the corner, I discreetly looked over my shoulder. He had dropped his poker face and was leaning forward, elbows resting on his knees, watching Valentina intensely. My stomach churned. I meant it when I said I didn’t dislike Valentina, but I hated her upstaging me. If this guy was a scout, she had completely overshadowed my perfect triple turn. When the last pair had finished, we all clapped politely to signal the end of class.

Miss Lily barely acknowledged us. Within an instant, she was out the door, the mystery man right behind her.

As soon as they were gone, the class erupted.

‘What the heck was that all about?’ Ava demanded, dabbing her forehead with a towel.

‘Right? No one ever watches our classes. Would’ve been

nice if Miss Lily had given us a heads up,' Kate said, joining the group.

'Or at least told us why. I was so distracted, it completely threw me off,' Mei-Lin added.

'Threw *you* off? I tanked my double *pirouette*. How embarrassing,' Jessie groaned.

I leant against the barre with my drink bottle, taking it all in. They had a point. Miss Lily had a strict 'no spectators' rule. It was bizarre to have someone else in the studio without an explanation.

'Miss Italy, the mystery man clearly didn't throw you off. Four turns? Seriously?' Khalila said, flopping down. She undid the knots of her ballet ribbons and tugged her pointe shoes off. 'Ah, that's better!' She sighed, wiggling her toes.

'Amelia, you are okay?' Valentina asked, studying my face.

'Yeah, why wouldn't I be?' I asked. It's not like someone had just completely upstaged me in front of a potential scout.

'Nothing, your cheeks ... they are just redder than Nonna's tomato sugo.'

I chugged more of my water. 'We've been dancing all morning. What do you expect?' I snapped. It came out sharper than I intended.

Valentina's head jolted back in shock.

‘Sorry, I’m just tired,’ I said.

‘I know what will help,’ Valentina said, as Khalila and I followed her out of the studio and towards the change room. ‘A big bowl of pasta. I told Nonna you and Khalila were coming over after class and she pulled out her apron straightaway.’

Khalila pumped her fist in the air. ‘Yes! I cannot wait to stuff myself full of carby goodness. Every ballet class should come with a pasta reward at the end.’

‘Pasta? Room for one more?’ Sam asked, stopping in the doorway of the male change room.

‘Not if it’s you,’ Khalila said with a sweet smile, making us laugh.

‘I don’t know how you can even think about food after a class like that. Just the thought of it makes me feel sick,’ I said, rubbing my stomach. I loved pasta as much as the next person, but after an intense workout like we’d just done, it made me feel queasy.

‘Once you smell it, you’ll change your mind,’ Valentina said.

‘Did you see that?’ Khalila whispered as we passed Miss Lily’s office window. The venetian blinds were only slightly cracked open. I hadn’t seen a thing. ‘She’s in there with that guy. Looked like a serious discussion. Something’s up. I can tell.’

‘How on earth can you tell that?’ I asked. ‘You can barely see anything through those blinds without pushing your face up against the window.’

I should have known better than to give Khalila ideas. She crept back to the window and crouched down, her eyes only just peering above the frame.

‘What are you doing?’ I hissed.

‘She will see you!’ Valentina added. Both of us were as scared as each other. We huddled at the other end of the corridor, as far from Miss Lily’s office as possible.

Khalila held a finger up to her lips, before peering back through the window.

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Valentina

‘So, this is what I think’s goin’ down,’ Khalila said, her mouth full of pasta.

It had taken us ages to drag Khalila away from Miss Lily’s office window and she hadn’t stopped talking about the mystery man since. Her ideas were becoming more and more ridiculous with every minute that passed.

‘He’s the owner of another studio and Miss Lily has agreed to a trade. Two of her dancers, for two of his. That’s why he was watching us all like a hawk.’

I shook my head. ‘Miss Lily would not do that.’

‘Although, I’m sure she’d be happy to sacrifice *you* for a quieter dancer,’ Amelia said, smirking at Khalila.

Saturday lunches at my house were always loud and a bit hectic. Khalila fit right in. The three of us were crammed at the kitchen table, along with my younger siblings, Giuseppe and Caterina, Nonna, Mamma, and our neighbour Anna-Maria and her three youngest sons. There were about four different conversations going at the

same time, so, thankfully, the adults were spared from the craziness of ours.

‘Maybe he was part of the Mafia,’ Giuseppe offered.

‘Giusé, do not encourage Khalila,’ I said. Giuseppe and Caterina were big fans of Khalila. They loved her energy and her wild ideas. I loved them too, although sometimes they were a bit too wild for me.

‘The Mafia? Hmm ... you think Miss Lily owes him money?’ Khalila said, deep in thought. ‘Vale, be honest. Did Miss Lily pay to bring your talent to the Academy?’

‘I wish!’ I laughed.

‘You’re being stupid,’ Amelia said, not lifting her eyes from her plate. She had barely touched her pasta. She pushed the tubes of penne around with her fork. ‘I bet he’s a scout, and if he’s not, he’s probably just a former student or something and Miss Lily let him watch class instead of waiting in the foyer.’ She reached for her glass of water, fixing Khalila with a frustrated expression.

‘When has that *ever* happened?’ Khalila said. She grabbed a piece of bread and began mopping up her leftover pasta sauce. ‘Miss Lily never lets anyone watch class.’

‘Vale, perché Amelia non mangia? Non le piace? Le faccio qualcos’altro,’ Nonna said, pushing her chair back from the table.

Amelia froze, her glass resting against her lips. Her eyes

flickered in my direction. ‘What did she say?’ she whispered.

‘She is worried because you are not eating. She said she’ll make you something else if you don’t like the pasta.’

‘Oh no, no! Tell her I like it. I’m just not very hungry,’ Amelia said quickly.

I translated, but it was a lost cause. Nonna was already shuffling over with a dish stacked high with her famous veal cutlets. Before Amelia knew what was happening, one had landed on her plate.

‘Oh, no ...’

‘You cannot fight it. But don’t worry, Giuseppe will eat what you do not. Or the chickens will,’ I said.

‘Your chickens eat cutlets?’ Khalila said.

‘*Si!* And pasta! They love pasta,’ five-year-old Caterina said, her voice loud like a foghorn.

‘Their diet is ... how you say ... rich,’ I said.

‘Vale, go and fill the water jug. Your friends must be thirsty,’ Mamma called from the other end of the table.

I frowned but obeyed. The jug was full five minutes ago.

‘You ballerinas are all the same. You never eat. Except her,’ Anna-Maria said, nodding towards Khalila who smiled proudly.

Amelia’s cheeks flushed red.

‘We do eat, but most people don’t have a cooked meal for lunch. They eat sandwiches and things,’ I said, jumping to

Amelia's defence. My family was always trying to force food into people and Anna-Maria was the worst of the lot. It was particularly frustrating given she shouldn't have even been at our house to begin with. She lived next door, but she and her kids seemed to spend more time under our roof than their own.

'What's wrong with pasta? Eat a bowl of pasta and it fills you up for the afternoon. It makes your brain sharp, too. I suppose you will say you want a Vegemite sandwich for lunch now that you're becoming *un'Australiana*?' Anna-Maria said. 'That gunk is disgusting!'

'Anna, leave the girls alone. They'll eat what they feel like,' Mamma said.

Standing safely behind Anna-Maria with the water jug, I rolled my eyes at Mamma. Anna-Maria drove us all a little mad sometimes.

'I'm sorry. I'm just never hungry after class. The pasta's great. Honest,' Amelia said.

'Where's the famous Salvatore today?' Khalila asked through a mouth full of cutlet.

Salvatore was my older brother. He was well known by my friends for being a troublemaker.

'At the restaurant. Papà got him a job helping the pizza chef,' I explained.

'I saw him there last week. He doesn't even make pizza.'

He just washes dishes. Pino called him a *dish pig*,' Giuseppe said with a cheeky grin.

'Pino, did you call Salvatore that to his face?' I asked Anna-Maria's son.

'I'm not an idiot!' Pino said from the other side of the table. He grinned. 'But it's true, he is a dish pig!'

'I've never seen a pig wash dishes,' Caterina said, making us laugh.

'Which restaurant is it?' Amelia asked, picking at her cutlet.

'The same one Papà works at. I think he thinks if Salvatore has a job, he will have less time to get into trouble after school. I don't know if Salvatore knows *that* part.'

'Your family isn't exactly good at keeping secrets, so I'd say he knows,' Khalila said.

The minute lunch ended, I herded the girls down the hallway to the safety of the lounge room. Far, far away from Anna-Maria and my family's food offerings. Caterina skipped along behind us.

'Khalila, will you braid my hair?' Caterina asked, plonking down on the floor in front of Khalila.

'Cate, Khalila might not want to plait hair,' I said, curling up on one of the couches.

'Sure I do! Are we doing one princess braid or two?'

'Two!' Caterina cheered.

‘Remind me, why are there sheets covering the lounges?’ Amelia said, perching awkwardly on the edge of the couch.

‘You can relax and sit on it,’ I said. ‘The sheets are because of Nonna. She wants to make sure the sofa looks new ... for when visitors come.’

‘Visitors? What are we? Vegemite sandwiches?’ Khalila asked.

‘Absolutely not. You’re more of a Nutella sandwich. Sweet and a little nutty,’ I said.

‘I reckon Amelia’s more like Vegemite. Very salty, but grows on you over time,’ Khalila said, combing her fingers through Caterina’s long wavy hair.

‘Hey!’ Amelia protested, snuggling back into the couch. Her eyes looked heavy.

‘*Pur-lease*, you should’ve seen your face when Vale whipped out the quadruple turn,’ Khalila laughed.

‘Quad-roo ...’ Caterina said, scrunching up her face. ‘What is that?’

‘It means your sister did four perfect *pirouettes* and made Amelia jealous,’ Khalila said.

‘At least I didn’t do a boring double,’ Amelia grumbled.

‘*Ragazze* ... calm down please,’ I said, waving the corner of one of the white sheets in surrender.

Amelia and Khalila might be friends now, but they still bickered all the time.

The lounge room door opened and the two of them fell silent. Nonna shuffled in carrying a tray of biscuits. I groaned. It never ended. Nonna placed the tray on the coffee table in front of us.

‘*Mangia,*’ she said, pointing her finger at Amelia. ‘*Questi biscotti sono buoni. Li ho fatto io. È una mia ricetta segreta.*’ She patted her chest, smiling proudly, then shuffled quietly back out of the room.

‘I really need to learn Italian if I’m going to eat all of your family’s food,’ Khalila said, grabbing a biscuit.

‘You can learn Italian, but you will never learn Nonna’s secret recipes,’ I said, waving a biscuit in the air. I grabbed another and tossed it at Amelia. ‘*Mangia, ciccia!*’

‘Ow! *Fine,* I’ll eat a biscuit.’

‘Amelia Scott, ladies and gentlemen. The only person in the world who acts like eating a delicious biscuit is a chore,’ Khalila said.

‘What’s chee-cha?’ Amelia asked, taking a bite.

‘It is ... a name of affection. Like honey,’ I explained. It wasn’t something I had ever given much thought to. In my hometown, we said it all the time.

‘I wish you came here more,’ Caterina said, straining her arm to reach for a chocolate-coated biscuit without moving her head away from Khalila’s braiding. ‘We almost never get Nonna’s special biscuits.’

‘See, you are visitors,’ I said.

‘So, back to the mystery man,’ Khalila said.

Amelia and I both groaned. ‘Let it go!’ Amelia said. ‘We’ll probably never see him again.’

‘But say he is a scout. What do you reckon he’s looking for?’

‘Talent,’ Amelia said dryly.

‘No ... you don’t say ...’ Khalila said sarcastically. ‘I meant what do you think he’s casting for? A company, a show? All done, Caterina.’

‘Maybe for the TV!’ Caterina shrieked with excitement. She patted the top of her head, feeling along the braids. ‘I want to be famous, too!’

I laughed. ‘I don’t think so. But maybe there is a new spectacle coming to the city and he needs dancers.’ And just like that, my brain floated off into the clouds. Dreaming of dancing onstage, surrounded by my friends. Performing for full theatres and receiving standing ovations and bunches of flowers.

‘*Finally* someone’s on board with me. What do you think, Milly?’ Khalila said.

Amelia was snuggled back into the couch, her eyes closed.

‘Amelia?’

Amelia opened one eye. ‘I think I’m tired and you’re both being stupid.’

‘What’s wrong with you? Why are you so tired?’ Khalila said. She sounded genuinely concerned, but as she spoke, she threw a cushion at Amelia.

‘Will everyone stop throwing things at me? I’m fine. It’s just been a long week, I’ve danced a lot, I’m tired. George keeps waking me up.’

‘George? Who is George?’ Caterina asked.

‘We have a dog now. A labrador,’ Amelia explained to Caterina. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and found a photo. ‘Dad’s friend had to move to London. He couldn’t take his dog, so he’s ours now.’

Caterina snatched the phone from Amelia’s hand and studied it closely. ‘He is so cute! You are so lucky. I want a puppy. Vale, let’s ask Papà for a dog!’

‘Cate, there are already too many people in this house. We cannot have a dog too,’ I said.

‘It’s not as great as it sounds,’ Amelia sighed, ‘trust me, Caterina. George is cute, but he won’t leave me alone and he keeps waking me up at night.’

‘Here, have another one of Nonna’s biscuits,’ I offered. ‘It will make everything better.’

‘Anyway, you’re wasting too much time thinking about that guy,’ Amelia went on. ‘I bet you when we get to the Academy on Monday, things will be back to normal and we’ll never see him again.’

First published 2024 by
FREMANTLE PRESS

Fremantle Press Inc. trading as Fremantle Press
PO Box 158, North Fremantle, Western Australia, 6159
fremantlepress.com.au

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Cover illustration by Irene King
Cover design by Rebecca Mills
Printed by Shanghai KS Printing Co. Ltd. Shanghai, China



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 9781760994334 (paperback)
ISBN 9781760994341 (ebook)



Department of
Local Government, Sport
and Cultural Industries



Fremantle Press is supported by the State Government through the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries.

Fremantle Press respectfully acknowledges the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land where we work in Walyalup.

