

Chapter 1

I walked through the foyer of Beaumont Classical Academy for the first class of the year. I felt a rush of excitement to dance again, but also a confusing sense of panic. My hands and feet were buzzing — I'd be dancing again soon! — but my stomach had a rock in it. Summer holidays had been amazing: family and friends at the beach; hanging out with my friends from my old school before we all went off to different high schools; keeping my little sister alive when our parents both had to work ... and trying to forget about the last time I had had my ballet shoes on. It had been two months since our Christmas concert, when I had managed to forget the first half of the *Swan Lake* tribute piece in front of the entire packed audience. I. Nearly. Died. I was so upset I rushed home in a teary mess without even saying goodbye to Natalie and Hanna, my best ballet friends, before the summer break. I'd even skipped our traditional after-show milkshake date. I'd felt so bad about it all holidays.

‘April! It’s so good to see you!’ Natalie squealed as I cautiously entered the change room. She grabbed me and gave me a big hug. Her long red hair was tied tightly in a perfect bun, and she was wearing a new black leotard and crossover, and slouchy tracksuit pants and legwarmers.

‘Thanks, Nat. You too.’ I squeezed her closer, my tummy feeling better already.

I walked with her to a bench to dump my heavy worn-out dance bag, and she started telling me about her holidays and the summer camp she had attended at the prestigious Étoile School in Melbourne. I had seen all her photos on Facebook. It looked like an amazing program — she’d been selected for it by a scout at the end-of-year concert!

‘OMG, wow. The *pirouettes* on some of those girls. It’s like they must practise turns all day long,’ Natalie said, starting to tie the ribbons on her shoes around her delicate ankles. ‘I think it did me good though. My feet are so strong from all that time en pointe, and now I can do, like, ten fouettes without falling over.’

‘Oh, wow, Nat! I can’t wait to see you dance today. You are so *good*,’ I said. I mean, I was totally biased, because she was one of my best friends, but Natalie was the best dancer, and she worked so hard. She totally deserved her spot at that camp.

I burrowed into my bag, which held about a thousand things — a diary to write down routines, a couple of sweat towels, deodorant, two drink bottles, coins for snacks, a change of dancewear and the latest edition of *DANCEWorld* magazine — and screwed up my courage to say something really hard.

‘Hey, I am *so* sorry I didn’t hang around after the concert last year,’ I said. ‘I was so upset with the way I performed I just wanted to crawl up onto the couch and forget about it all. I missed our milkshake! I’m sorry.’

‘A, don’t worry! You were really bummed. And anyway, now I get to see you all the time again,’ Natalie said, smiling. She was *the best*.

It was 4.26pm on the black and white clock on the wall. Class started in four minutes. I whipped off my trackies and quickly tied the ribbons of my pointe shoes. They felt tight and uncomfortable, but I told myself yet again that pain was beauty. I’d never enjoyed the feeling of being crammed into the solid satin slippers, but I loved my friends, and seeing them four times a week, and dancing was amazing. Moving around the studio floor with the music in my head — in my whole body — was the best feeling ever.

‘Where’s Hanna?’ I asked Natalie as she grabbed her hand towel and drink bottle, back straight and ready to move.

‘Um, late, as ever?’ she said, laughing.

Not a second afterwards though, Hanna, all petite and ruffled, burst through the doors puffing and panting like she had run from the train, which she had.

‘Aaahh! I made it! Hi, girls!’ she said with her arms flapping about, trying to juggle her school backpack, dance bag and violin. ‘I hadn’t caught the train from school for so long I almost forgot which one to catch!’ she exclaimed, rushing to get ready for class. Whenever Hanna came into a room, it got a bit brighter and funnier.

Natalie and I jumped up and down and laughed at Hanna’s hectic antics. Our little gang was back together for the first class of the year. It felt *so* good.

We had been dancing at Beaumont Classical Academy together since we were four years old. Natalie had pranced beautifully around her living room as a two-year-old so her parents started her early. She was the best in all our classes from then on. Hanna says that her Japanese parents, who arrived in Australia when she was a toddler, said she had way too much energy to burn. They put her in ballet class so that she wouldn’t tear the backyard apart every day! My mother had always loved the ballet and danced quite well when she was little. She had shown me photos of her at competitions and in concerts all dolled up in her tutu and tiara, and

naturally I wanted to follow in her footsteps. I'd fallen in love with ballet and dance as soon as I started, and had stuck at it ever since.

After catching up on all the holiday goss, like Natalie's family getting a Cavoodle puppy called Bon (it was the cutest little ball of fluff EVER!) and Hanna going back to Tokyo with her parents to visit her family there ('I really wanted Christmas pudding on Christmas Day,' she exclaimed, 'but do you think I got any? Not in Japan!'), we found our positions at the back of the barre in the musty yellow studio. Natalie was in front of me, standing tall and proud, while Hanna was behind, trying to get her thick black hair into a manageable bun before Ms Beaumont began warm-up.

Further up the barre were Isobel and her perfect friends, hands on hips, preening like peacocks. She was Queen Bee, rich and mean, stretching over her left leg in second position on the barre, flaunting her new jet-black halter leotard. She turned her nose up at pretty much everyone. Look, OK. Isobel was an amazing ballerina — she had fine, strong bones, long arms and legs and real talent. Not to mention she was really pretty, with her long glossy brown hair naturally turned golden blonde by the sun, freckle-free skin and big blue eyes. She was graceful when she danced, but as a person she could be completely menacing. She made

people feel bad about their dancing, their clothes, the school they went to — or anything else for that matter. She had complete control of the girls who surrounded her. They totally loved her, and they did everything she said so she wouldn't be mean to them.

Now they were fussing over Isobel and chatting about school holidays, in particular how she had kissed a Year 8 boy from the local grammar school on the front beach at Portsea. They couldn't get enough of her *glamorous* life. Her dad was a politician and her mum had been on the cover of *Vogue* when she was seventeen years old. She definitely got her mother's good looks and her father's bossiness. I hadn't missed her or her snide remarks over the break.

She caught me looking at her group. Great.

'Nice leotard, April. Isn't that the same one you've worn the last three years?' she said sweetly. Her girls giggled and started to whisper behind cupped hands.

My face went red. I tried to think of something to say, but my voice had dried up in my throat. I wasn't going to let Isobel's attitude get to me. She was always up for putting someone down. It was fairly pathetic. At least that's what I was trying to tell myself.

'Don't worry about her,' Natalie whispered, leaning in to me closely. 'She's mean for no reason.'

‘Ah, well, nothing changes if nothing changes,’ Hanna said, rolling her eyes and wiggling her hands. ‘The queen is back for another year of torture. PS — that new leotard of hers is blah blah blah. She looks like a wannabe Madonna from the 80s. I mean authentic Madonna, fantastic, but wannabe?’

This was funny coming from Hanna, who was wearing an electric-blue capped-sleeve leotard with kitsch braiding on the sleeves, no doubt a purchase in Japan. Quirky was her go.

Natalie had never let her amazing dancing change her kind nature. Why couldn’t Isobel just be more like that?

Someone who was always encouraging was the amazing Grace Delacroix. She was a few years older than us and one of those dancers who was literally phenomenal. She was the BEST dancer to have ever walked through the doors of Beaumont Classical Academy. She’d recently been accepted into the Australian Ballet School and was definitely going to become one of their Principal Dancers in a few years’ time. Everyone loved Grace and everyone, including me, wanted to dance like her. She was seriously WOW! And nice too. She came by every couple of weeks to do extra classes. Seriously dedicated!

I had to work a lot harder than most in the class. I looked like a hockey player or netballer, not a classical ballerina. My legs were short and though I was super fit and strong, my muscles looked stubby, not long, like Natalie's and Isobel's. Over summer I had worked on my turnout. I would watch TV at night lying on the ground, my legs splayed into second splits against the back of the couch, my head tilted to the side. I'd improved marginally, but I was still a fair way off Natalie's perfect ballet stance. My strengths weren't technical; I was much better at putting my own spin on the steps and being creative with the routines. If only that was encouraged in classical!

Hanna, on the other hand, was all full of bounce and spring. She could fly in any jeté, even though she was clearly one of the shortest in the class. Her spirit was infectious and she always tried her heart out. She loved ballet, despite knowing she would never make it her profession. Her mother was always in the waiting area of the studio during class, watching Hanna's every move through the glass. Afterwards she would try and give Hanna advice, but Hanna would simply roll her eyes. 'Japanese parents — always wanting perfection,' she would dramatically say. It cracked us all up. Hanna was so creative and individual, and nothing was going to change that.

After stretching out our hamstrings on the barre, a familiar voice rang out from the front right corner of the studio. Ms Beaumont, who was probably about sixty, had performed with companies all over the world as a Principal Dancer, dancing Juliet and Odette and Coppélia — oh, all the most beautiful roles. The story goes that when she turned forty she decided to set up her own studio instead of teaching at dozens of different schools, and so Beaumont Classical Academy was born. She was so strict about tradition and technique and always looked like she was going onstage at any moment. Her white-blonde hair was cut very short but spiked up at the top, and her lips were always painted bright red. She wore a black long-sleeved leotard with a chiffon skirt that fell just below her knees, and tan teaching shoes. She wasn't a fan of 'modern' ballets and was really tough on us.

'Ladies,' Ms Beaumont sang from beside the large stereo system mounted on the wall. (She still hadn't learnt how to use it: 'Girls, can someone get this iPoddy thing to work? I just need the music to play, but I think it's broken,' she would call at least once a week.)

The chatter from all the students immediately hushed. 'Welcome back to the Academy. I hope you had a great break, but all chatter and gossip must wait

until after class. No time to waste today. First position,
pleeeeaasssse.'

And just like that I was back in my ballet world,
ready for another year.