

En Pointe

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PANTERA
PRESS

Introduction

I've been on the stage since I was three years old. Three! Insane when you think about it, but that's when my addiction to dance and performing started.

When I was fourteen and a half, I left my family home in Port Macquarie to go and train at a full-time dance school. Thinking about it now, I can't believe how confident and certain I was that it would be fine to leave my family and friends behind. I was a girl on a mission, that's for sure. Even today, I can't comprehend how I had the knowledge and maturity to know exactly what I wanted to do with my life, let alone to live away from home, taking on the enormous demands both physically and mentally that come when you're part of the dance world. But I knew that furthering my training was my

only option if I wanted a career in dance, and in my mind, there was no doubt I could do it. Then, at seventeen, my dream was stopped in its tracks and my life was turned upside down.

I've put a lot of thought into whether or not I should reveal my past. The idea of writing a book and having my most personal information out there for all the world to read terrified me. And once it's out there, it's out there forever! So I pushed the thought to the back of my mind as something I might do in the future. But after a visit to my home town of Port Macquarie in December 2017, that fear turned into a drive—I *had* to write this book. I went back home as an adult to judge and teach scholarship classes at the dance school where I'd trained from the age of three, and I had a 'moment', you might say. This town had given me so much joy as a child, and something about it brought back so many wonderful memories that it was almost too overwhelming for me to be there. A wave of emotion came over me as I remembered a time when I had been one hundred per cent happy. I was a young girl with big dreams, goals and aspirations, ready to take on the world. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined what was to become of my life and the extreme hurdles I would face. All those hurdles flooded my mind and I literally woke up in the middle of the night with an urge to write about them. So I did. Straight away.

When I was seventeen and my world came crashing down, journalling helped me deal with my emotions. I had

always kept a logbook of sorts, and when I started doing research for this book, I came across old journals, letters, cards and speeches that I had kept from that time. All those journal entries have been reproduced and reworked in these pages to show the emotional rollercoaster of contracting a serious, life-threatening illness and how I managed to navigate through those tough times while still pursuing my dreams.

Now, at twenty-eight years of age, dance is still very much a part of my life. But for the past eight years I have found another creative passion that has fuelled my desire to tell stories: acting. I've been so fortunate to have a career that has enabled me to share my love of storytelling through different art forms such as dance, TV, theatre and film. But during this acting journey, I was incredibly scared to reveal my medical history out of fear that people would see me as my past and not... well... just me. I wanted to prove myself as an artist without my personal life influencing the way audiences saw the characters I played. But after much thought, I came to the conclusion that if revealing my past might help even one person going through a tough time, then that's what I had to do.

I didn't have anyone to relate to when my life turned upside down, so hopefully you can take something away from this book. Perhaps you're in a similar situation and in these pages you hear a familiar story, or perhaps you just need a little encouragement to go after your dreams. Whatever it is, I hope this book gives you the inspiration

you need to never give up. Today, I am recovered and have gone on to have a wonderful and interesting career. I hope you enjoy reading about the wild journey that brought me here.

CHAPTER ONE

The budding ballerina

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Have you ever had an addiction? An obsession? Have you ever wanted something so much that you can't imagine your life without it? For me, that's dance.

From the moment I first stepped on to the stage when I was three years old, I loved it. And at twelve years old, I live for that adrenalin rush from nerves and excitement right before you step out into the unknown. The bright lights that shine down on you, making you feel like there's magic in the air. The music that ripples through every inch of your body. I love how I can make an audience feel things they've never felt before. The silence that covers the whole room as the audience becomes one with you. The costumes, the make-up, the playing pretend. I love it all. But most of

all, I love escaping into another reality that isn't my own. Somehow, stepping into the skin of all those different characters makes me feel far more important than myself.



Standing backstage, I hear the audience gathering in the hall. Their laughing and chattering quickly diminishes as the house lights go down. My stomach begins to quiver and bounce around with nerves, as though a hundred butterflies are trying to escape. It's almost time.

The stage manager standing next to me announces the first competitor, who disappears through the thick black curtains and on to the stage. Oh god. I've got exactly three minutes before I'm up.

I pop my hip out to the side and use my bum as a punching bag to loosen up the muscle in an attempt to gain some last-minute flexibility. My hands drop to my ankles, and I allow my body to ragdoll between my legs, careful not to hit my gold tiara on the floor. My red-and-black Spanish-inspired tutu tilts forward as I try to look at the ceiling through my legs. I snap back up and start bouncing from side to side like I'm in a boxing ring to get the blood flowing through my body and fight off those nerves. After cracking and stretching the muscles in my neck, I split my legs into a turned-out squat, cracking my back and stretching my inner thighs. My tiara is cemented in place atop my slicked-back hair and I shake my head vigorously up and down and

side to side to make absolutely certain it's secure. It doesn't feel like it's going to go flying off into the audience, so all's good in that department. I hope.

My routine plays on repeat in my head as I pace up and down. It's always in this moment, right before I'm about to go onstage, that the anxiety creeps in and I start to second-guess the steps I've practised all year. I've rehearsed a thousand times but I can't remember which leg I start on. I think it's the right one.

The other dancers behind me giggle and whisper, and I realise how strange my pre-dance routine must look. Girls in the dance world are competitive, and support for one another at competition time is almost unheard of. It's hard not to become wrapped up in all the gossip and rivalry that goes on, and I have to work hard to stay focused. My parents continually tell me and my siblings that we need to work hard, be kind and stay humble. Though sometimes I can't help but listen in to the gossip that quietly hums in the background of most dance events.

My presence in the finals of the Port Macquarie ballet Eisteddfod scholarship is surprising. The girls tell me what a great jazz and contemporary dancer I am, but I have to wonder if they're complimenting me or having a dig at the fact that I could never make it as a ballerina. It's hard to tell. My mediocre feet and tiny stature aren't exactly made for ballet, but I have to believe that I am meant to be here. If I don't, I will crumble and break into a thousand pieces.

Trying to shake off their remarks, I check the satin ribbons on my ballet shoes to make sure they're tucked in—my ballet teacher will kill me if they come out onstage.

It's time. I take a deep breath and run out on to the stage to take my position.

Silence.

Standing in a classical pose with my left leg stretched behind me, I wait for what feels like minutes before my music begins. The heat of the stage lights warms my skin. The audience is dark as I'm blinded by the lights.

The first *ding* in the music and my mind and body are transformed into another person. Another character. A Spanish ballerina. The music creates a fire in my belly, allowing me to dance with passion and a fiery flavour as I *châiné*, turning multiple times rapidly down the stage, flirting with the audience. I can't see any of their faces, but I know they're there. Or at least I pretend they're there. I can feel their energy joining mine.

My mind stays focused, at the same time ticking over and over as it tells me to adjust my turnout, stretch my feet, use my *plié*, jump higher, resist and hold my pirouettes, land in fifth position and roll through my feet. All of this happens somewhere in the back part of my brain so the rest of me can be calm and present as I draw the audience further and further into my world.

Sweat drips down the back of my neck as heat rises under the thick layer of stage make-up that's caked on to my skin. Finally, one swift hop lands me in a kneeling position,

and I extend my leg and arm on a diagonal in a sharp and dynamic end to my piece.

A few seconds of silence, then there's a roar from the audience, cheers and claps escaping high into the ceiling, piercing the air. Most of the applause comes from the centre of the hall where my parents, my brother Zac and sister Phoebe are sitting. They are my whole world. My biggest supporters.

I can't wipe the smile off my face as I hear both Mum's and Dad's cheers travel up and over the crowd towards me. The dance mums always clap the loudest for their own daughters and aren't as enthusiastic in supporting anyone else. Sometimes I think they're more competitive than the dancers themselves.

I curtsy, then run off into the wings once more. My breaths are fast as adrenalin rushes through my body. I did it. I feel so alive.

As the next competitor takes to the stage, I quietly grab my tutu at the sides and fold it up around me so I can squish past the other dancers waiting in the wings. Breaking free from the sea of tulle, I walk downstairs and inspect the lipstick kisses all over the wall. It's a tradition I've never quite understood, where before a performance the dancers press their shiny red lips to the wall. Maybe it's for luck. The perfectionist in me is too scared I'll mess up my make-up.

Heart still pumping from my performance, I make my way down the corridor towards the dressing room. I love

corridors. Every time I see one, I get an overwhelming urge to *jeté* down it, splitting my legs apart in a huge balletic jump.

I glance around to make sure no one's watching, then, unable to help myself, I sprint down the corridor in my tutu. I *jeté* and *jeté* and *jeté* until I reach the dressing room, where I do a little happy-dance jig and quickly change into some tracksuit pants beneath my tutu.

'Mmmm.' The sound escapes me as I cram food into my mouth. Chicken on white bread with a pinch of salt. Probably not the most nutritious meal, but that salty goodness tastes so good. I can never eat properly before I dance. Too much food in my stomach makes me feel sick, so I always stick to bananas, yoghurt and red frogs.

In the silence of the dressing room, I splay my legs out in a side split and munch on my sandwich while I go over my performance in my head. I did okay. Actually, more than okay.

For the first time in my life, I felt like a real ballerina. I took the whole year to focus on my ballet technique and it seems to have paid off. My turns were on, my jumps landed softly, no falls or slip-ups. Thankfully. I have a history of slipping over on stage, but that's meant I've also had to become a master of disguising my slip-ups with some sort of 'in the moment' dance move that gets me back into a standing position. I try to convince myself that no one ever notices, but I've had more than one dancer come up to me post performance to ask, 'Did you fall over or was it meant

to be like that?’ in a tone that I know is supposed to make me feel insecure.

‘All girls, would you please line up backstage for the adjudication,’ the stage manager announces over the PA system.

I get to my feet and shimmy my tracksuit pants down my legs from underneath my tutu, then head back up the stairs. I hate this part, when they announce the winners while we all stand in a horizontal line like robots.

As the tutus file into the wings one by one, everyone looks nervous. I consider making small talk with the girls beside me, but they don’t seem in the mood. So I stand in line, content that I did my absolute best, before we are filed out on to the stage.

The MC gives a long speech about how wonderful it’s been to watch everyone dance. My legs start to go numb from standing in a classical pose for so long, and my mouth quivers from plastering on a smile. When they rank our dancing with prizes, I feel as though a little of the magic of what we all just did is extinguished. But here I am, and I mean, I was the one who entered the competition in the first place. And the prize money does sound appealing. I always give my parents any money I win to help with my dance tuition fees. Every year, they tell me that if I quit dance we could all go on numerous holidays, so I contribute wherever I can.

The leg I’m standing on is getting pins and needles, and I quickly change legs hoping I don’t draw too much attention

to myself. Just as I feel myself looking bored, the adjudicator starts her speech, rattling off what she was looking for in the dancers this evening. I know I'm not in the mix for a prize, so instead I focus on the crazy patterns emerging on the floor as light bounces off the sequins and crystals from everyone's costumes. I'm also dreaming about taking these ballet shoes off. I think the ribbons are starting to cut off my circulation.

'Chloe Bayliss.'

I look up. Huh? My name is being called. The adjudicator just called my name.

A little confused and disorientated from staring at the sequin light display, I stumble towards the adjudicator who is smiling at me.

She hands me a trophy and an envelope full of money, and a sash is placed over my head.

I won. How on earth did I manage that?

I hear a whooping in the crowd that could only be my dad—it's the kind of whoop that he usually reserves for the footy. Whoa. If my dad is whooping, this must be real.

Slowly, the reality of what is happening starts to sink in, along with an underlying realisation that makes my heart sing: maybe I do have what it takes to be ballerina after all.