

ANYTHING

BUT

FINE

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PENGUIN BOOKS

ONE

The second it happens, I know my life is over. I feel the bones break. I literally hear them crack into pieces. As soon as my body hits the floor, my whole world falls apart. My future collapses – dream by dream, goal by goal – right before my eyes.

One missed step and it's all over. It's as simple as that.

One missed step.

Scorching January sunlight pours in through the windows of the studio. It bounces off the wall of mirrors, making me squint as I dance across the floor. *Chassé, pas de bourrée, glissade, jeté.*

'Stretch that back knee in your *jeté*, Luca,' Miss Gwen barks from her white plastic chair up the front of the room.

And again, to the left. *Chassé, pas de bourrée, glissade* – as I push off from the floor, I squeeze every muscle in my body, making sure my legs hit a perfect split in midair – *jeté.*

‘Better.’

Better, she says. Never *good*. No matter how hard I try in class, no matter how many competitions I win, nothing I do is ever *good* in Miss Gwen’s eyes. To be honest, I don’t think it’s even in her vocabulary.

I finish the corner progression and move out of the way as Talia darts across the floor behind me, her long legs sweeping effortlessly through the air as she jumps.

‘Nice,’ I say to her when she joins me at the ballet barre beneath the windows.

‘It was crap,’ she scoffs, pressing her hands against the wooden barre, stretching out her calves. ‘I’m so heavy today. I can’t get off the floor.’

And I mean, Talia legitimately has one of the most perfect *jetés* I’ve ever seen, and she couldn’t be less ‘heavy’ if she tried.

‘You’re ridiculous.’ I drag my palm across my forehead and wipe the sweat on my navy blue unitard.

‘Come talk to me when *you’ve* had to haul your ass through *grand allegro* with your period.’

I wrinkle my nose and walk off towards the back corner of the studio, ready to start the exercise again.

‘Oh, I’m *sorry*,’ Talia hisses, following close behind, ‘does my period gross you out, Mr I Have a Penis and Therefore Never Want to Talk About Anything Even Remotely Vagina Related?’

I snort. ‘Shut up and take the compliment. Your *jetés* are flawless and you know it.’

‘Yeah, well, maybe if Miss Gwen ever took her eyes off *you*, she’d notice how flawless my jumps are.’

‘Excuse me?’

Talia rolls her eyes. ‘Oh, please. We all know you’re the favourite.’

‘Miss Gwen doesn’t *have* favourites.’ I glance over at our ancient ballet teacher, sitting there in her chair like some kind of zombie vulture, waiting to tear us all to shreds if we don’t point our feet properly. ‘She hates everything and everyone.’

‘Sounds like something the favourite would say.’

‘Why are you making this a thing?’

‘I’m not making it a *thing*,’ Talia replies. ‘You’re the one getting defensive, Mr Favourite.’

‘I thought I was “Mr I Have a Penis” etcetera, etcetera?’

‘Whatever, bitch.’ She pushes in front of me and leaps across the studio, catching my eye in the mirror and flashing me her trademark *I’m the shit* smirk.

‘God I wish I had her legs,’ Abbey says from the line of girls behind me. She runs a hand over her bright red hair, which is slicked back into a bun so tight it’s making her look permanently surprised. ‘And her hair.’

‘And her skin,’ Grace adds, milk-white hands perched on Abbey’s slender shoulders.

‘Slash, her Greek genes in general,’ I reply, turning back to watch Talia dance. ‘I’d kill to have some Mediterranean in me.’

‘Oh, I bet you’d *love* to have a Mediterranean in you,’ Abbey says, making her eyebrows dance.

‘Oh my god.’ Grace covers her ears.

‘Abbey, *stop*,’ I laugh, stepping forward into the space, my arms open wide.

I take a deep breath, lift my chest, and repeat the progression on both sides – *chassé, pas de bourée, glissade, jeté*. It’s such a simple exercise. I’ve been doing it in class like, five times a week since the dawn of time, but there’s something about it that still makes me feel so . . . I dunno. It’s kind of hard to explain. It makes me feel strong and super

masculine (which, let's be honest, I'm not) but also graceful and delicate at the same time. Kind of like I'm showing every part of myself at full volume. It makes me feel lighter than air, like I could jump right through the roof and up into the sky. It makes me feel so . . . *me*.

I've been dancing at the Gwen Anderson School of Ballet since I was three years old. And not only is it by *far* the best ballet school in Ballarat, it's like my second home. Although, I don't know if I can really call it my *second* home when I spend more time here than at my *actual* home. And considering my mum died before I started dancing, Miss Gwen is the closest thing I've ever had to a mother. Which is kinda weird, because she's like, nine-hundred years old and possibly a vampire of some kind.

When I first started ballet, she was still in good-enough shape to demonstrate all the exercises in class, but, thirteen years later, she's lucky to be able to walk in and out of the studio. I mean, she really should be in a wheelchair by now, but she flat-out refuses. Too stubborn, I guess. Her daughter, Miss Prue, teaches all our classes now, but Miss Gwen still insists on coming in and screaming at us from her chair down the front of the studio.

Yeah, it's about as fun as it sounds.

As I *jeté* past Miss Prue – stick thin and kind of pinched-looking – she nods in approval. Miss Gwen might not be one to dish out praise, but Miss Prue is the exact opposite. 'Beautiful, Luca,' she calls out as I walk over to the side of the studio. 'Just *beautiful*.'

'She knows you're gay, right?' Talia says when I arrive beside her. She pulls a hairpin out of her jet-black bun, separates the metal prongs with her teeth and puts it back in at a different angle.

I roll my eyes. 'Honestly, do you ever stop?'

‘Just saying, she’s barking up the wrong tree.’

‘She’s like, forty,’ I reply, pulling the fabric of my unitard up the front of my thighs. ‘And married. And you’re literally the worst person I know.’

‘You love me.’

‘Yeah, remind me why that is again?’

Miss Gwen claps loudly from where she sits beside the prehistoric stereo system. ‘All right, everyone. *Révérance*. And for god’s sake, try to make it look like it’s not causing you physical pain this time, will you?’

As a class, we move to the centre of the studio and perform our carefully choreographed bows and curtsies, set to a gently tinkling piano track.

‘Thank you, Miss Gwen,’ we say in unison. ‘Thank you, Miss Prue.’

‘Thanks, girls,’ Miss Prue replies, then smiles at me and adds, ‘and *boy*.’

As we start to file out of the studio, Miss Gwen calls my name.

I stop and turn around.

‘No . . .’ Talia whispers as she slips past me, ‘she doesn’t have favourites at *all*.’

I ignore her and jog over to Miss Gwen, who stays in her chair, gripping its plastic arms with her wrinkled hands. Miss Prue is fiddling with the stereo.

‘This is a big year for you, Luca,’ Miss Gwen croaks.

I nod.

‘ABS auditions are only –’

‘Six months and thirteen days away,’ I say. ‘I know.’

Miss Gwen exhales loudly through her nose. ‘You’ve got all the potential in the world, Luca, but that counts for nothing if you don’t put in the *work*.’

‘Yes, Miss Gwen.’

'I know what you boys are like.' Her top lip curls up at the side. 'I've watched it happen over and over. You turn sixteen and you lose focus. You lose your drive. You don't *like* ballet anymore. It's too girly. It's not *cool*. You start thinking with your penis. Suddenly, your biggest ambition in life is to have sex with any girl who'll have you.'

I turn my laugh into a strangled little cough. I should probably remind Miss Gwen that having sex with girls is literally the last thing on my to-do list, but instead say, 'I am one hundred per cent focused, Miss Gwen.'

She narrows her eyes and leans in closer, as if she's searching my face for lies. 'I will not have you squandering your hard-earned talent and wasting your time with all that . . . hormonal nonsense, do you hear me?'

I nod again, biting my bottom lip to keep from smiling.

'We haven't had a student accepted into the Australian Ballet School since Laura Pearson, and that was . . . When was that, Prudence?'

'Uh . . .' Miss Prue looks up from the stereo as she slides the syllabus CD back into its plastic pocket.

'2014,' I say, glancing over at a framed photo on the wall of Laura dancing as Coppélia in the 2012 recital. I smile, thinking of how she always used to call me Cutie.

'Too long for a studio like this,' Miss Gwen sighs. 'I used to send two girls off to ABS every year. This . . . *drought* is becoming embarrassing.'

'Mum,' Miss Prue says gently, walking over and holding her hands out to Miss Gwen. 'Luca has enough pressure on him as it is.'

'I am one hundred per cent focused,' I say again. 'I promise. I know what it takes.'

Miss Gwen grunts as she uses her daughter's hands to pull herself up to her feet. 'Yes, but *knowing* what it takes and

having what it takes are two very different things,' she says, her eyes drilling into mine. 'Do you *have* what it takes, Luca?'

I clear my throat. 'I do.'

'Then you should know better than to talk in class.'

'Sorry. I –'

'Don't be sorry, dear. Do better.'

'Yes, Miss Gwen.'

'You can go now.' She dismisses me with a wave of her hands.

Miss Prue smiles apologetically as I trot off across the studio and out into the carpeted waiting area.

'What was that about?' Talia asks, already changed back into her green and white St Tom's summer dress, her ballet tights still on but rolled up to her knees.

'Just your standard, horrifically awkward pep talk,' I say, grabbing my bag and heading into the toilet to get changed.

'You coming to Grill'd?' she says through the door.

'Obviously.'

Since I'm the only boy at the studio, I don't get an actual change room. I get the toilet, which also doubles as a cleaning supply closet. Super glam, I know.

I take off my ballet shoes and battle with my sweat-soaked unitard, eventually managing to yank it off. I slip on my grey school shorts and white shirt – minus my St Tom's tie – and throw on a pair of thongs. I swing my textbook-filled bag over my shoulder with a loud '*oof*' and head back out into the waiting area. Talia is standing at the top of the staircase that leads down to street level, hands on hips, lips pursed.

'Are Grace and Abbey coming?' I ask.

'I don't know,' she huffs, already bounding down the stairs two at a time. 'Let's go. They can catch up.'

By the time I start down the carpeted staircase, Talia's already out on the street.

‘Luca?’ Abbey calls out from above.

‘Down here, hurry up!’ I say over my shoulder.

I only look back for a second. One second. But that’s all it takes.

With my eyes on Abbey at the top of the stairs, I miss a step. My stomach swoops as my foot finds nothing but air, and I fall. The front of my left thong catches on the carpet and my foot twists beneath me on the step below.

The second it happens, I know my life is over. I feel the bones break. I hear them crack into pieces beneath the weight of my body. I feel the ligaments stretch past breaking point as my ankle buckles and I tumble down the stairs, landing on top of my backpack in front of the glass door.

‘Holy shit!’ Abbey yells from the top of the stairs. ‘Luca!’
Someone calls out for Miss Prue.

I can’t feel my foot.

Time blurs as I watch Abbey and Grace pelt down the stairs towards me in slow-motion, Miss Prue only a couple of steps behind them. Talia swings the door open and stands above me, swearing. The rest of the girls from class stare down at me from the top of the stairs, hands over their mouths, eyes wide.

‘Luca? Are you okay?’ It’s Miss Prue. It sounds like she’s under water.

Abbey grabs my hand, but I don’t really feel it. Grace is crying.

‘I’m . . .’

‘Can you stand up?’ someone asks.

I feel hands grasp my arms, my waist, my wrists. I’m lifted to my feet, balancing on my right foot.

Miss Prue, still under water, asks, ‘Luca, can you put weight on it?’

Mindlessly, I lower my left foot to the floor. Pain shoots through the arch of my foot and I cry out. The world suddenly tilts and I feel like I'm falling again. Everything around me fades to black.

It's all over.

One missed step.

It's as simple as that.