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Opening extract from

Chocolate Box Girls: Summer's Dream

Written by

Cathy Cassidy

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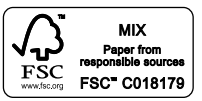
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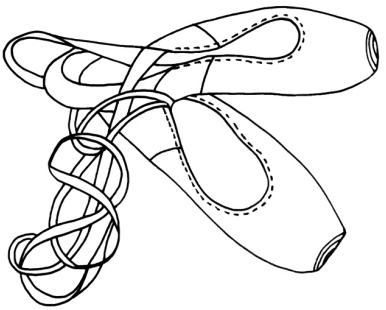
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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON



I

Have you ever wanted something so badly that it hurts? I guess we all have, but I am not lusting after a new dress or a kitten or a baby-pink laptop – I wish. No, my dream is bigger than that, and tantalizingly out of reach.

It's not even an unusual dream – loads of little girls probably share the exact same one. Anybody who ever went to dance class or dressed up in fairy wings and skipped about the living room probably hopes that one day they'll be up on stage with the audience throwing red roses at their feet. For me, the dream stuck; it hasn't been replaced by a passion for ponies, for pop stars, for boys. Even though I have a boyfriend these days, the dream hasn't wavered one bit.

I want to be a dancer, a ballerina, to dance the part of Giselle or Coppélia or Juliet, to dress up as the swan princess

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in a white tutu made of feathers, to make the audience gasp and cheer. I want to dance, and you know what? It didn't seem like such a crazy idea, back when I was nine or ten.

I push open the door of the Exmoor Dance Studios and go inside, my ballet bag swinging. It's early, an hour before my class is due to start, but the small upstairs studio the seniors use is empty at this time and Miss Elise has always told me I am welcome to use it whenever I like.

I do like, quite a lot, these days.

The foyer is busy with little girls in pink leotards, laughing, talking, buying juice and biscuits as a treat between school and dance class, or queuing with their mums to book up for the summer holiday sessions. I used to be just like them, once.

I was good. I got distinctions in every exam I took, danced centre stage at every dance school show, got used to Miss Elise telling the class, 'No, no, girls, pay attention – look at Summer! Why can't you all dance like that?'

My twin sister, Skye, used to roll her eyes and stick her tongue out at me, and the minute Miss Elise's back was turned the whole class would fall about giggling.

Don't get me wrong, though – dance was one thing I



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always took seriously, even if Skye didn't. I loved it. I signed up for every class the dance school offered: tap, modern, jazz, street . . . but ballet was my first love, always. At home I devoured ballet books about girls who overcame the odds to make their dreams come true. My poster girl was Angelina Ballerina, and I watched my DVD of *Billy Elliot* so many times I wore it out. When I wasn't reading about dance or watching DVDs or dreaming about it, I was practising because even then I knew that being good was not enough; I had to be the best.

Dad called me his little ballerina, and I loved that. When you have lots of sisters – clever, talented sisters – you have to try a little harder than most to be noticed. I guess I'm a bit of a perfectionist.

Miss Elise told Mum she thought I was good enough to audition for the Royal Ballet School, that she would set up the auditions for when I was eleven. I was so excited I thought I might explode. I could see a whole future stretching before me, a future of pointe shoes and leotards and aching muscles, a future that could end with me in a feathered tutu on the stage at the Royal Opera House.

It was so close I could almost reach out and touch it.



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And then everything fell apart. Dad left us and moved up to London and it was like our whole family crumbled. For months Mum looked hopeless and crushed, and there were rows about visits with Dad, rows about maintenance payments, rows about everything. My big sister Honey raged and blamed Mum for what had happened.

'I bet Dad thinks she doesn't love him any more,' Honey told us. 'They've been arguing loads. Dad can't help it if he has to be away a lot, he's a businessman! Mum nags too much – she's driven him away!'

I wasn't sure about that, though. It seemed to me that Dad had been spending less time with us and more time in London for a while now. Mum didn't so much nag as mention quietly that it'd be great if he could be around for Coco's birthday or Easter Sunday or even Father's Day, and that would trigger a big scrap, with Dad shouting and slamming doors and Mum in tears.

When I asked Dad why he was leaving, he said that he still loved us, very much, but things hadn't been perfect for a while now. Back then it didn't seem like a good enough reason to me. When things aren't perfect, you need to work at them until they are, right? Dad obviously had different ideas.



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A few days after the split, Skye, my twin, announced that she didn't want to go to ballet class any more, that she'd only really gone along with it because I wanted to go. That kind of pulled the rug out from under my feet. I always thought that Skye and I knew everything there was to know about each other . . . and it turned out I was wrong. Skye had a whole bunch of ideas that I didn't know about.

'Summer, I don't want to tag along in your shadow any more,' she said, and if she'd slapped my face, I couldn't have been more hurt. It felt like she was cutting loose, leaving me stranded, at exactly the moment I needed her most.

If you'd taken my life and shaken it up and thrown the smashed-up pieces down in a temper, you couldn't have made more of a mess. So . . . yeah, that whole ballet school idea. It was never going to take off after Dad left, I could see that.

I passed the regional auditions OK, but by the time the date rolled around for the London one my head was a muddle of worries and fears. Could I really leave Mum, so soon after the break-up? Could I leave my sisters? I was torn.



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Dad had agreed to take me to the audition, being based in London himself, but he was late collecting me and by the time we finally arrived I was sick with nerves. I danced badly, and when the panel asked me why I thought I should be given a place at the Royal Ballet School, I couldn't think of a single reason.

'Never mind,' Dad said, exasperated, driving me home. 'It's no big deal. Ballet is just a hobby really, isn't it?'

That just about killed me. Ballet was a big deal to me – it was everything. I stopped being Dad's 'little ballerina' that day. I'd lost his respect – I was just one daughter of several after that, the one whose hobby was dance.

Needless to say, I wasn't offered a place.

'Don't blame yourself,' Mum told me. 'You've been under a lot of pressure, and I should never have trusted your dad to get you there on time. There'll be other chances.'

I smiled, but we both knew that I'd messed up a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

You'd never have made it anyway, a sad, sour voice whispered inside my head. *You were kidding yourself.*

I brushed the voice aside, although I couldn't quite forget it. Sure enough, that voice has been around ever



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since, chipping into my thoughts with a bitter put-down whenever I least expect it.

That was over two years ago. Now, I am thirteen and I still love to dance. I still get distinctions in my exams and I still get good roles in the shows. Things at home are better. Dad lives in Australia now, but it's not like we saw much of him anyway, even before the move. Mum has a new boyfriend, Paddy, who is kind and funny and easy to like. They are getting married in just a few days' time. Paddy has a daughter, Cherry, so I have a new step-sister too, and I like her lots.

My big sister Honey can still be a nightmare, especially since Paddy and Cherry moved in, but I have Skye and Coco, a boyfriend, and good friends I can rely on. I do well at school. I should be happy, I know . . . but I'm not. Even though I messed up my chance of dancing professionally, I still have that dream.

In the deserted changing room beside the senior studio, I peel off my school uniform and fold it neatly, wriggling into tights and leotard. It's like peeling away the layers of the real world. In my dance clothes I feel light, clean, free.

I loosen my hair from its long plaits, brush away the day's



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hassles and braid it again tightly, pinning it up around my head. I have done this so many times I don't even need a mirror any more. I sit down on the wooden bench and pull the pointe shoes out of my bag. I slip my feet into the pink satin shoes and tie the ribbons firmly, tucking the ends out of sight the way Miss Elise has taught me. I stand and walk across the changing room, into the empty studio, the mirrors glinting. Beside the door, I dip the toes of my shoes into the chalky dust of the rosin box, so that I do not slip or slide on the hardwood floor. I reach down and flick on the CD player and the music unfurls around me, seeping under my skin.

When I dance, my troubles fall away. It doesn't matter that Dad left and that my family are still putting the pieces back together again. It doesn't even matter that I never got to go to the Royal Ballet School.

I take a deep breath and run forward, rising up en pointe, curving my arms upwards, swooping, twirling, losing myself in the music. When I dance, the world disappears, and everything is finally perfect.



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