

# LOCKED IN

*The Will to Survive and  
the Resolve to Live*

VICTORIA ARLEN

# FOREWORD

BY VALENTIN CHMERKOVSKIY

“You have a very special young woman as your partner this season,” said my executive producers on *Dancing with the Stars*. “It’s going to be a little different for you, and we’re very excited.” I was about to walk into a small ballroom dance studio in Beverly Hills to meet my Season 25 celebrity partner for the reality TV show where I’m a professional dancer. I had no idea what to expect.

As much as I love the show and everyone I work with, I also know that Hollywood doesn’t always get “excited” for the same reasons I do. I nervously nodded a simple “awesome” to the producers, but in my head I was asking a million questions. “What do they mean, ‘different’? Different how? What is so different about this partner that I haven’t seen during the twelve seasons I’ve been on the show?” I would quickly find out.

I walked through the door, stepped onto the wooden parquet of the humble little ole dance studio, and caught my first sight of a

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beautiful young woman who stood in the center of the room. She was obviously excited with anticipation and glowing with enthusiasm.

“Hi, I’m Val,” I said, starting things off as simply as I could.

“I’m Victoria,” she replied.

“So tell me a little about yourself,” I said. “We’ll be spending quite a bit of time together in the next few months.”

That was putting it mildly. On *DWTS* the celebrities and professional partners train almost daily for three months even before the show begins. My style of coaching can be quite intense, with a very challenging rehearsal regimen. Nothing about what was to come would be easy for any celebrity.

“Well, I’m a Paralympic gold medalist,” she replied, with a mix of pride and humility that was really very touching.

“*Para*-lympian?!” I thought to myself, more than slightly baffled. Where was the “para”? In front of me stood a perfectly healthy, strong, vibrant girl, no different from any other twenty-three-year-old I’ve danced with before. What I had never seen before were Victoria’s huge, extremely expressive, deep brown eyes—they were really quite exceptional.

“I don’t mean to come across as rude,” I said, “but why ‘para’?”

The conversation that ensued and the experience I would go on to share with Victoria Arlen would change my life forever. I soon came to understand what was so special about her. It wasn’t just her ability to rise above any challenge placed in front of her, including

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the years of paralysis that hit her beginning at age eleven, with loss of speech, loss of hearing, and finally loss of consciousness. What made Victoria special was her response to those early challenges, when someone with a less fierce sense of determination might have been tempted to give up. She never did, and neither did her strong, amazing parents.

Well, even though she still had not fully recovered feeling in her legs, Victoria had just signed on for yet another challenge, which was learning to do the Argentine tango with me. Over the course of the months we rehearsed and performed together, I discovered the source of this young woman's strength, which was quite simply her unquenchable love of life. She loved life so much that it amounted to her particular superpower. She simply refused to be defeated, no matter what obstacles were thrown in her way. Victoria's one-of-a-kind perspective on life taught me the greatest lesson anyone could ever teach someone: "Don't take a single breath for granted."

In this book, you will get to know a girl from an ordinary family who was placed in the most extraordinary circumstances imaginable. Instead of giving up, Victoria, her mother, and her father chose to fight on for dear life, literally. She is not just an American hero for her medals in the Paralympics. She's a human hero for her triumphs over something that universally unites us, our mortality and the fight for life. There's no greater example of the human spirit than that, no better demonstration of strength in

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family and faith. Victoria's story will inspire you with a sense of purpose, helping to ignite a passion and appreciation for life that you may never have thought possible.

I'm incredibly grateful to have been Victoria's partner on *DWTS*, thankful to her family for sharing her with me, and actually indebted to the whole wide universe for putting us together. Victoria allowed me to be a small part of her incredible story, one that will certainly leave a mark on the world. Reading her story, I think you'll come to respect, honor, and love this woman just as I did, and cherish the opportunity to get to know her.

—Valentin Chmerkovskiy

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