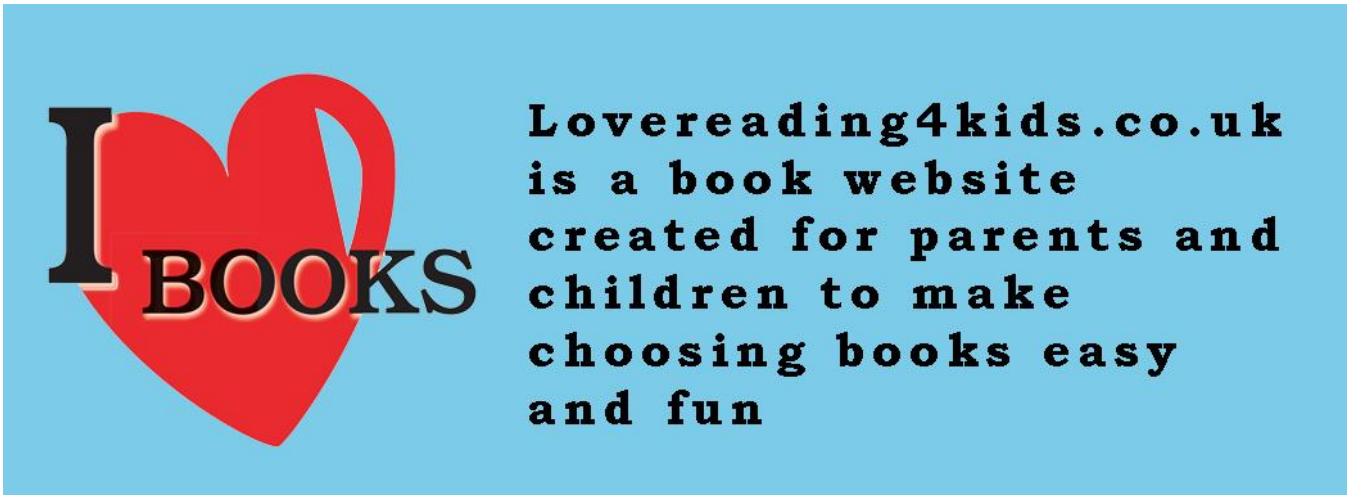


Opening extract from

Born to Dance

Written by

Jean Ure

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Chapter One

I knew the minute I saw her that Caitlyn was a dancer. Even though she was just sitting there quite quietly in the front hall, along with the other new girls, I could tell. There was just something about her. It was the way she sat – straight-backed, but perfectly relaxed, knees neatly together, hands lightly clasped in her lap. Very calm and poised.

On one side of her there was a tall, athletic-looking girl with her legs sprawled out and her hands dangling down like she'd forgotten they were there. *Not* very elegant! On the other side was a tiny, bright-eyed thing with a mop of dark curls, who was swinging her feet to and fro and nibbling at a thumbnail. Probably suffering

from new-school nerves. Caitlyn said a lot later that she had been, too, though you would never have guessed it.

"What do you reckon?" hissed Livi.

We were standing at the top of the stairs, Livi and me and Jordan, peering down into the hall. We weren't supposed to be at the top of the stairs, we were supposed to be making our way to our classroom, but it was the beginning of the autumn term when new girls would be starting, especially in Year Seven. Who could resist the temptation to have a bit of a sneak peek?

"That one looks like she could be OK," said Jordan, nodding in the direction of the tall girl.

"Or the little one," said Liv.

Jordan agreed that she might be fun. Neither of them bothered with Caitlyn; it was almost like she didn't exist. Where I saw a fellow dancer, they just saw someone small and pale and insignificant. In other words, *boring*.

The office door opened and Mrs Betts appeared. Mrs Betts is our school secretary and a lot fiercer than any of the teachers. She glanced at the three of us at the

top of the stairs and frowned slightly, like, *Isn't it time you were in class?* We drew back, guiltily.

"You coming?" said Jordan.

I said, "Yes, OK! I'm coming."

I stayed just long enough to watch as Caitlyn and the others made their way across the hall. I was right: Caitlyn had a dancer's walk! Even down to what Jordan and Livi insist on calling splay-feet, just to tease me. Actually it's flat-footed people who have splay-feet: dancers have *turn-out*. There's a huge difference. With splay-feet you *flump*. Caitlyn didn't flump. She was elegant!

Of course at that point I didn't know her name, but I was already wondering where she went for lessons. I knew all of the local dance schools. I also knew lots of the people who went to them. The world of dance is quite a small one. I thought perhaps, looking at her, that she might go to Miss Hennessy, who was the only other teacher Mum considered reputable. The only other teacher besides Mum herself, that is! She was always very scathing about the rest of them, especially

The Dance Bug, with its ridiculous purple uniform and glossy brochures. She said it turned out nothing but robots.

"All technique and no soul."

As for Babette Wynstan and her Babette's Babes – always strutting their stuff in the local pantomime – well! I couldn't repeat the things Mum said about them. It's true that Mum is a bit of a snob where ballet is concerned, but wherever Caitlyn went for classes it looked to me like she had been well taught.

Her name, as I discovered in registration, was Caitlyn Hughes. A good name, I thought, for a dancer. Mum once had a pupil called Martha Roope. How could you get anywhere with a name like that? And I once read that Margot Fonteyn started off as Peggy Hookham. I couldn't believe it! *Peggy Hookham*.

The part of the Swan Queen was danced to perfection by Peggy Hookham...

I don't think so! I was so amazed when I discovered this that I excitedly reported it to Livi and Jordan.

"Did you know that Margot Fonteyn started off as Peggy Hookham?"

I confidently expected them to squeal and go, "Peggy *Hookham*?"

But they just stared at me in total blankness and said, "Who's Margot Fonteyn?" I'm not even sure they didn't say *Margaret* Fonteyn. *Un-be-liev-able!*

I snapped, "She was only one of the all-time greats!" How could anyone not have heard of Margot Fonteyn? People are amazingly ignorant when it comes to ballet. I'd been friends with Livi and Jordan ever since we'd started at Coombe House. We always shared secrets and hung out together and stuck up for one another, but they still couldn't tell a *jeté* from an arabesque, and didn't have had the least idea what a *pas de bourrée* was. As for never having heard of Margot Fonteyn... words fail me!

I watched that morning as Caitlyn filed into assembly with the rest of us. I thought that she would know who Margot Fonteyn was! I liked the idea of having a fellow

dancer to chat with. The only other girl in our class who did ballet had left, and she hadn't been what Mum would call a proper dancer, anyway. Just one of Babette's Babes. Mention Babette to Mum and she goes, "Well, if you want to train *chorus* girls…" Meaning not proper corps de ballet, just Babette's Babes, all simpering and kicking their legs in the air.

At first break I went bounding up to Caitlyn, dragging Livi and Jordan with me. I said, "'Scuse me! Where do you do ballet?"

Caitlyn said, "Ballet?" She sounded startled, like I'd caught her out in some kind of crime. Maybe I'd been too eager. Mum is always accusing me of blundering around like a bull in a china shop.

I said, "Yes, sorry! I'm Maddy, by the way. I didn't mean to be nosy – I just wondered which school you went to."

Caitlyn hesitated, as if she didn't quite know what to say.

"Dance school," I added.

"Actually she *is* being nosy," said Jordan, "but she

can't help it. It's not her fault, poor thing. Her whole family is, like, *obsessed*."

"Her mum," said Livi, giving me a little poke, as if perhaps she might be referring to someone else's mum, "has her own ballet school. She used to be a ballerina! So did her dad – well!" She giggled. "Not a *ballerina*, obviously!"

"Ballet *dancer*," said Jordan.

"Ballet *dancer*," agreed Liv. "And now he makes up ballets for other people. He goes all over the world. Doesn't he?" She turned to me. I nodded, reluctantly. Why were we talking about my dad? How did he come into it? It was Caitlyn I wanted to know about! "He's even been to Moscow," said Liv, proudly.

"Yes, and her brother," said Jordan, "is a *preema* dancer!"

"*Premier danseur*," I said. And anyway he wasn't. He was too young to be a *premier danseur*. He'd only just been promoted to soloist.

"He's a star," said Liv. "And her sister—"

"Is having a baby," I said.

"Yes, but before that *she* was a star! All Maddy's family are stars. That's why—"

"Oh, do shut up about my family," I begged. "Nobody's in the least bit interested."

Certainly not Caitlyn. She couldn't have made it more obvious. If she'd been interested, she'd have wanted to know what my surname was, and I'd have said O'Brien and then she'd have put two and two together and realised that my dad must be Declan, and my brother was Sean. She might even have remembered that my sister was Jenny and that Mum had been Yvette Anderson. And she would *certainly* have heard of the Anderson Academy of Dance! Except—

She'd been there, hadn't she, when we had registration? She'd have heard my name read out – Madeleine O'Brien. So, if she was a dancer, she'd surely have put two and two together right away? Just for a moment I thought perhaps I'd got it wrong. But I hadn't! I was sure I hadn't. Caitlyn was a dancer if ever I saw

one. She had to be! When you have a mum who runs a ballet school and a dad who's a choreographer, when your *entire family* is into ballet, you can recognise a fellow dancer when you see one.

By now the silence was becoming too embarrassing even for me. In what I hoped were dignified tones I said, "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to pry, it's just that I know all the local teachers and I couldn't help wondering..." My voice trailed off. Lamely I said, "I just wondered where you took lessons."

"Ballet lessons," said Jordan, encouragingly.

"I don't do *ballet*," said Caitlyn. She said it quite rudely. Almost like, *Who in their right mind would want to do anything so girly?*

Some people do think that ballet is girly. They have no idea of all the training you have to go through and all the hard work you have to put in. They think it's nothing but pointing your toes and wearing fluffy skirts. Was that what Caitlyn thought?

I almost never blush but I could feel my cheeks fire

up. I felt like I'd been slapped in the face. I'd only meant to be friendly!

"Sorry," I muttered. Not, to be honest, that I saw any reason to apologise. I was just showing an interest! Showing an interest isn't the same as being nosy. "I really thought you looked like a dancer."

"Well, I'm not," said Caitlyn.

Jordan slipped her arm through mine. "Let's go," she said.

Meekly I allowed myself to be led away.

"Really!" said Livi. "What a thoroughly unpleasant person."

"Won't bother with *her* again," agreed Jordan. "Dunno what made you go and talk to her in the first place."

Pleadingly I said, "I really thought she was a dancer."

I still thought she was a dancer. Why wouldn't she admit it?

"Doesn't look much like a dancer to me," said Livi.

"That one could be." Jordan nodded across the yard to where the tiny girl with the bright eyes was standing

with the big, athletic-looking one. Ava, her name was. The other was Astrid.

I shook my head. "She's way too small."

"Too *small*?" Jordan's voice rose to a squeak. "How can she be too small?"

"That Caitlyn's hardly a giant," said Livi. She sniffed. "Skinny thing!"

Caitlyn was what I would've called exactly right. Right height, right shape. About the same as me, in fact. Mum has always monitored all of us most carefully, terrified that we'd end up too short or too tall. You don't want extremes in a ballet company, except maybe for soloists. But nobody starts off as a soloist. Pretty well everyone has to begin in the corps, and you can't very well have six-foot dancers and four-foot dancers all muddled up together – it would ruin the line.

The bell had rung for the end of break and I watched, critically, as Ava set off across the yard. She bounced as she walked. Bibbity-bob, bibbity-bob, with her head nodding up and down. Quite cute! But not a dancer's

walk. Caitlyn, on the other hand... I looked around in time to catch her going back into school. She was so graceful. She *had* to be a dancer! I didn't care what she said.

It was a puzzle, and I couldn't help feeling a bit disappointed. It would have been fun to have someone to talk ballet with. Even sometimes, maybe, to practise with. Livi and Jordan meant well, but they had no idea what it was actually like, training to be a dancer. Still I didn't intend to go back for a second helping. I am not a person who bears grudges – I honestly don't believe that I am – but once is enough. I'd tried to be friendly, and she'd made it quite plain that she didn't want to know.

I pointedly didn't take any notice of Caitlyn after that. At least I tried not to, but I still found myself watching her at odd moments, like in morning assembly or out in the yard at break. It didn't help that her desk was directly in front of mine in class, which meant I could

hardly avoid studying the back of her head. A dancer's head! There are all different types of heads. Big ones, like turnips; small ones, like tennis balls. Round ones, oval ones, lumpy ones, bumpy ones. Caitlyn's was small and shapely, perfectly balanced on a long, slender neck. Just right for ballet!

It was really frustrating. I still couldn't believe I'd got it so wrong. I might almost have been tempted to break my vow and try talking to her again, but Livi and Jordan made sure I didn't get the chance.

"Just ignore her," said Liv. "People who are that rude aren't worth bothering with."

"I mean, so *insulting*," said Jordan.

"Ungracious," said Liv. She is rather into these literary sort of words. It's cos of her dad being this big, important professor of English. "You'd have thought she'd feel *proud* being at school with someone from a famous family."

I mumbled a protest. "My family aren't famous."

"We think they are," said Jordan.

I said, "Sean might be, one day." Even I might be, one day!

"Are you telling me," said Liv, "that people don't know who your mum and dad are?"

"Well... *some* people," I said. "Ballet people."

"We're not ballet people," said Jordan.

"No, but you're my friends," I said.

And being my friends they did sometimes have this tendency to boast a little. To new girls, for instance, such as Caitlyn. But it wasn't like *I* was boasting! There really wasn't any reason for Caitlyn to have been so unpleasant.

For all that, I still couldn't stop studying the back of her head. I still refused to believe she wasn't a dancer.

I tried talking to Mum about it after class that evening. I said, "There's this new girl started at school. She's called Caitlyn. She swears she doesn't do ballet but I don't believe her! I'm sure she does."

Mum said, "Really?" Not, unfortunately, in a very interested sort of way. More like, *Why is she telling*

me this now? It probably wasn't the best moment to try talking to her about Caitlyn, when she'd been teaching all day and half the evening and just wanted to get home. But it's never a best moment with Mum. She's very... absorbed in her work, is what Liv would say.

I waited while Mum locked up and we walked out to the car. I said, "Why would anyone lie about it?"

"About what?" said Mum.

"Learning ballet!"

"Oh, goodness knows. People have their reasons. Incidentally, I meant to say earlier, you really must put in some work on your *ports de bras*. You're getting very sloppy!"

I pulled a face. I know that arms are not my strongest point.

"Did you hear me?" said Mum.

I said, "Yes. I heard you."

"Well, don't just talk about it," said Mum. "See to it!"

"I will," I said. "I will!"

I always give up, in the end. You simply can't have a conversation with Mum that isn't directly to do with ballet. Dad isn't very much better. No use expecting either of them to shed any light on the mystery. But I do so hate to be wrong!

On Thursday the following week, when we'd been back at school for ten days (and I was still hypnotically staring at the back of Caitlyn's head), it poured with rain and we had to do PE in the gym. Coombe House is a very small school; we don't have proper sports facilities. Just a single court where we can play netball or tennis, plus a patch of grass for rounders. No hockey. Certainly no football. So, when it rains, we all have to go up to the gym, where there isn't very much except a few wall bars and a bit of coconut matting.

Miss Lucas, our PE teacher, is quite ancient and what she likes best is to get us all swaying about in time to music, or doing strange, bendy exercises – "Stretch,

girls! As high as you can!" Sometimes we do a bit of dancing: old-fashioned stuff like polkas and waltzes. Stuff that anyone can do. But still Miss Lucas always goes, "Watch, girls! All look at Maddy!" Really embarrassing. There was this one time she said we were going to do Greek dancing and we got all fired up with enthusiasm, cos Greek dancing is fun, at least all the Greek dancing I've ever seen. I was all ready to fling myself into it, and this time I wouldn't have minded if Miss Lucas wanted people to watch me. I'm really good at character dancing! But then all it turned out to be was just wandering about, striking weird poses. No real dancing at all.

I got a bit bold, cos it was, like, really frustrating, and shouted, "It's not like *Zorba the Greek*!" *Zorba the Greek* is this film that Dad has in his collection and which I know practically off by heart. They do *real* dancing in that. But when I told Mum, expecting her to be sympathetic, she said it was not only extremely rude of me but also unkind.

"Poor old soul," she said. "She does her best."

"But Mum," I wailed, "it was just *stupid*!"

"So learn to put up with it," said Mum. "Behave yourself!"

I do try, but when you're told to "hop like a kangaroo" or "bounce like a ball" it's very difficult to take it seriously, especially when you're used to the discipline of barre work, with Mum prowling about the studio, watching your every move with her hawk-like eye.

That Thursday, after the usual stretching and skipping, Miss Lucas said she wanted us to walk across the floor as though on a tightrope above Cheddar Gorge.

"High, high up!" She wafted her hands above her head to demonstrate. I giggled, and immediately stifled it. I like Miss Lucas; I would never want to hurt her feelings. But it really did make me feel like I was back to being four years old and just starting my first dancing class. It's all very well being kangaroos and bouncing balls when you're four years old; not when you're eleven and have been studying ballet for almost as long as you can remember. But Mum had said to behave myself so I

obediently went off to the far end of the gym to make like I was crossing Cheddar Gorge.

I glanced at Caitlyn out of the corner of my eye to see how she was taking it. She seemed quite happy, lost in a world of her own. High up among imaginary clouds, no doubt. I shrugged. What would Dad do, I wondered, if he was making a ballet about tightrope walkers? He would be bound to have *one* person who was a bit uncertain. Like in *Les Patineurs*, which is a skating ballet, where one of the skaters goes *flump!* on to her bottom. I couldn't very well go *flump* and fall into Cheddar Gorge, but I could be a bit wobbly. More than a bit wobbly! I could miss my footing. I could slip, I could slide, I could almost fall off. *Eee... ow... aaaargh!*

I knew it wasn't what Miss Lucas wanted. She wanted us all to be beautifully poised and balanced, like the time she'd got us walking around the gym with books on our head. But you have to have *some* fun!

When we'd all successfully walked our tightropes across the yawning gulf beneath us, Miss Lucas said,

"Right! Let's all watch Maddy." She nodded at me. "Off you go!"

I think by now people were used to me being singled out. They were kind of resigned to it. There wasn't anyone else in the class who was a dancer, or even wanted to be a dancer, so perhaps they didn't really care.

I wobbled back along my imaginary tightrope. I slipped and tripped and threw up my arms in horror. People laughed. I did it again, and they laughed again, so I pulled this agonised face and began to step *reeeeally sloooowly*, trying not to look down, cos if you looked down... *E*ee... *ow... aaaargh!* That was nearly it. *Phew!*

Everybody by now was in fits of giggles. Miss Lucas gave a little smile. She said, "Well, I think you'll all agree that was very clever. Thank you, Maddy! Now... Caitlyn." She beckoned. "Not quite so clever, maybe, but... let's see what people think. Come! Don't be nervous."

Caitlyn had turned bright pink. I wondered what Miss Lucas had meant when she'd said, "Not quite so clever *but...*" Like maybe clever wasn't such a good thing?

"Off you go," said Miss Lucas.

Caitlyn set off diagonally across the gym. We all watched, like in some kind of trance. You could almost feel the wire stretched taut beneath her feet, just as you could almost sense the gaping void beneath her. If she'd been in a film, instead of in the gym, it would have been enough to make you hold your breath. I think some people actually did hold their breath, cos the minute she reached the end and stepped off there was a loud burst of applause. Even Miss Lucas joined in. After a few seconds (to get over my surprise) I did, too.

"So, there you are," said Miss Lucas. "Two very different interpretations. Maddy used technique, Caitlyn her imagination. We laughed at one and held our breath with the other."

Liv and Jordan grumbled afterwards.

"What on earth was she on about? You used your imagination just as much as she did!"

But I hadn't; Miss Lucas was right. I *had* relied on technique. If I'd used imagination, people wouldn't have

laughed: they would have been holding their breath, just as they had for Caitlyn.

Why did I feel that I'd let myself down?