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Opening extract from

Dreamer Ballerina

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Chapter One

Rat-a-tat-tat, my feet hit the ground, and the sound sings up like music. I am dancing on the sidewalk, skipping home from school, free as a bird, and my feet are flying. People stare then look away fast, but I don't stop dancing. Not for them, not for no one.

With small, soft steps, I glide over the ground, kicking up dust in little red clouds around my toes. Dangling from its strap, my school bag bangs against my legs as I go. I can feel Miss Priss and her posse behind me, walking to Vicky's Ballet Studio for their class. They're all sweater sets and saddle shoes, but I know they've got pink tights and pink leotards and pretty pink satin ballet slippers in their bags, locked up tight against the red, South Carolina dust.

'Hey, Bigfoot!' Miss Priss yells. 'Have you ever tried walking? You know, like a normal person?'

I stop dancing and turn slowly on the heel of my left foot. Miss Priss only moved to Warren two months ago. She already thinks she's the Queen, just 'cause she came from stuck-up old Greenville. Just 'cause she's been taking ballet lessons since she could walk. The air is hot and dry, and the sidewalk seems to crackle and shimmer in the heat. We haven't had the rains yet, and the dry grass crunches under my shoe as I turn. I pretend it's Miss Priss.

'No,' I say. 'Have you?' And I enjoy watching the flush spread up across her face like it's a smear of Carolina dirt on her clean white shirt.

'You are so weird.' It's the best she can do, and I smile because I know my weirdness offends her. My weirdness has power.

My right foot comes oh-so-slowly to stand beside my left foot. Then I start swaying – hop to the left, hop to the right. My one-two-step power dance.

I am spinning and swaying on the sidewalk in front of Vicky's Ballet Studio. Everyone can see, driving by in their shiny new Cadillac cars. A group of high school boys drives past in a beat-up Ford truck, their hair slicked back and glistening with grease. They yell and whistle as they go by, but I don't care. I am flying high, dancing free under the clear blue sky. I leap like nothing can hold me down. Miss Priss just stares in horror, her face all red because she's been seen with me. I've got her now. My arms go up in the air as I let out a joyful whoop. And then I lose it.

The sound of my voice breaks the spell, and the other girls start to laugh. They crow and cackle and feast on my mistake. Miss Priss raises one bony finger and points at me. She shrieks with laughter, forcing it out until she doubles over, gasping for air.

Now it is my turn to blush. Hot, shameful flames lick up the side of my face. I try to keep dancing like I just don't care. *I don't care*. Miss Priss laughs like an ugly monkey, so who cares if she's laughing at me?

But my feet get tangled. My left foot hooks on the back of my right shoe, and down I go into a heap. One messy pile of arms and elbows, legs and skinned knees.

'Looks like you have two left feet, Bigfoot,' Sally says.

Beth howls. 'You mean two left big-feet!'

They all shriek again even though it's not funny. It isn't even clever. Then, Miss Priss stands up straight, and carefully smoothes her hand over her ballet bun.

'I can't believe you think you can dance. You are the worst dancer I've ever seen.' She sniffs, brushing down her skirt. 'You have no technique whatsoever.'

The other girls sniff too. Sucking up to their new Queen Bee. And then, without another word, they stick up their noses and walk into Vicky's Ballet Studio, leaving me sitting in the dirt alone.

I want to scream and shout, but I can't. I'm too angry to speak, and being angry makes my eyes fill with tears. I bite my lip hard to keep them back. She should be the one sitting in the dirt, not me.

I can feel the people on the sidewalk looking at me, and the people in the cars driving past. And I know what they're looking at, too.

They're looking at my skinny chicken legs poking up from the ground, and my scrawny arms that are all elbowy. And they're looking at my ratty-tatty, used-to-be-white, two-sizes-too-big, Converse high-top shoes. They're saying, *That Casey Quinn is an awkward child. She ain't got no grace, and she ain't no beauty neither.*

It's true my nose is too wide, and I'm freckled from head to tappin' toe. Even under my hair I'm freckled. And maybe my ears do stick out like two mug handles, but I do have grace. I have more grace in my pinkie toe than I bet you've ever even imagined. I have more grace in my left little fingernail than new-to-school Miss Priss Ann-Lee and all those pinky-pink ballet girls put together.

I take a deep breath and stand up, brushing the dirt off my skirt as best I can. I hear the piano music coming from Vicky's Ballet Studio. I take a quick look behind me, step off the sidewalk, and snake around the back of the building.

I drop my school bag by the base of the low dogwood tree, and scramble up the branches, my heart trilling to the music. I climb up three branches, until I can see in the back window of the studio.

They're all dressed in pink now, and standing at the bar that's bolted to the wall. I watch as they bend and straighten their knees, and then lift their legs high in front of

them, toes curved into perfect points. My bones ache to dance along. But I don't move a muscle. I just watch Miss Vicky with my eyes wide open, 'cause if I blink I might miss something.

I don't take ballet lessons. We don't have money for extras, and Miss Vicky doesn't give lessons for free. And even if she did, where would I get ballet slippers? Miss Priss's hand-me-downs? I'd rather give up gravy than take charity from that toad.

So I don't take lessons from Miss Vicky, but I don't need to. I practice every morning. Dancing the sun up out of his bed with my long legs and pointed toes. And I've checked out every book on ballet in the Warren County Library so many times they are practically mine.

Besides, this is 1959, not the 1800s. We've got washing machines and power-steering. You can get on an airplane and go around the world all the way to China, where they eat with sticks instead of forks. And there are even rockets that can shoot to the moon. Anything is possible. That's why my great-great-granddaddy came to America. He sailed all the way over the Atlantic Ocean from Ireland. He had a dream, just like me. So he came to the country where dreams come true.

My great-great-granddaddy came to America to make his fortune. He came close, too. He had his own corner shop in New York City, but he gave it all up to marry my great-great-grandmother. He moved to Warren to help run her daddy's farm. My gran thinks that it was real romantic, but I think it was just plain foolish. Why would anyone want to come to Warren? Maybe it was OK back when there was farming, but not anymore. Now it's just dusty roads that go nowhere, and people who stay in one place. You can read out the course of your life if you're born in Warren, as

plain as if it was already written down in a book. I want more than that. I want things to happen in my life – big things.

My dream is to be a dancer. Not just any dancer, but a real star. Ever since I was a little girl I've been dancing. My gran took me to see the ballet when I was small. We saw *Cinderella*, and I can still remember the feel of the red velvet seats against the back of my legs, and the sound of the audience humming with anticipation. And then the curtains opened and it was magic. The dancers like music notes come to life, graceful and strong. My legs kicked and my toes pointed, and I wanted to scramble down the aisle and dance with them. And right from that moment I knew I had to be a ballerina. I was born dancing, a true-blue sky dancer. And I never stop.

I dance my way home from school. Fast and hard on angry days, my feet biting the sidewalk like mad dogs. Long and slow when I'm sad. And every-which-way when I'm glad. My feet become drums as they *slap, slap, slap* on the sidewalk. Stompin' soles with stompin' soul, and nobody can tell me to turn them down.

And I don't *need* music to dance, but when I hear music my feet are fire – not hot, but kicking like the flames themselves. Reaching down into the ground, then up into the sky, in my high-tops I fly when I hear music.

So maybe I don't have no pretty pink satin ballet slippers. But can *you* kick the sun to help him up in the morning? Can *you* jump up and touch the moon? Can *you* dance with the stars in your hands?

I can.

The music changes inside Vicky's, and the dancers move into the center of the room. They stand perfectly still and then, suddenly, they're spinning up onto one pointed toe and whirling round in tight little circles. My toes twitch as I watch, and I scoot further down the branch to get closer to the window. The leaves and heavy

white flowers shiver and shake around me as I move forward. I can hear the branch creaking, but I just hold my breath and shuffle closer. I need to see what they're doing.

I am clinging like a cat to the very end of the branch, just out of reach of the window. It's open just a crack to let the air in, and the music is twirling up out of the gap. Miss Vicky's in the middle of the room. She stands statue still with one leg behind her and one arm in front, and then UP. She is spinning on her front leg, back leg bent up like a flamingo. Miss Priss and her ballet bunch try, and wobble like unwound tops. But I could do it, I just know it.

Snap.

A sound like thunder fills the sky. Before I can look round to see what is happening, I am on the ground. Sitting in the dirt for the second time today. Covered in leaves and giant white dogwood petals. And aching all over.

My head is spinning, but I can still wiggle all my fingers and toes. I sit still for a while, waiting to see if anyone heard me fall. But no one comes running.

I stay still until I hear the music from inside the studio stop, and then I know I need to scoot, or Miss Priss and the ballet bunch will see me sitting in the dirt. I get up slow and bent over. My backside is aching, and when I walk I waddle, but I don't care. I have a new move to try.

[line #]

I am sore and walking too slow, and it isn't long at all before I hear giggling behind me. I turn on the heel of my foot, wince hard and try to hide it.

Miss Priss and her pinky-pink posse are walking behind me, their eyes lit up like it's Christmas as they huddle around a piece of paper. I don't want them to see me, but I can't move quick enough to get away.

Miss Priss looks up and wrinkles her nose at me. ‘What happened to you? Fall over your feet again?’

She and the others are back in their street clothes. I look down. I’m covered in dirt and leaves. I can feel my face going red.

‘She’s been practicing her “dancing”,’ Sally sneers, and Beth giggles. I hate their staring eyes.

‘Oh, poor Casey. She thinks she’s a dancer. Why don’t you show us what you can do?’ Miss Priss crosses her arms, and all three of them watch me with greedy beady eyes.

I stand up as straight as my sore legs will let me. ‘I’m better than you.’ Miss Priss is too stuck-up to dance. All she can do is a peacock prance.

She takes a step forward, and so do I. We are toe to toe. Hers splayed out like a duck; mine pointing straight forward like I mean business.

‘Prove it,’ she says, and jams a folded piece of paper into my face.

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. Then I read it: ‘*The School of American Ballet, New York City. Open Audition.*’

‘I’m auditioning,’ Miss Priss sneers, giving me the greasy eyeball. ‘And I’ll bet I get in and you don’t.’

I take the paper in my hands, gently, afraid it might crumble. New York City – I can hardly believe my eyes.

‘What’s the matter? Scared?’ Miss Priss says.

‘Ann-Lee, that’s not fair. You know she can’t afford to go to New York. They don’t even own a car.’ Beth pretends to whisper, but I reckon she wants me to hear all the same. And even if I didn’t hear, it doesn’t matter. I’d know what they’re thinking. Everybody in this two-bit town is thinking the same thing. *That Casey Quinn is an*

unfortunate child: no money, no father, no nothing. But they don't know a thing. I am not, you hear me, *not* going to wind up cleaning the hospital like my mama and my gran. I'm gonna get out of Warren, no matter what.

Miss Priss zaps me with her cold blue eyes. Then she turns away. 'Come on. It's starting to smell around here,' she says to the ballet bunch. 'It's just as well Bigfoot can't afford to go. This way she can keep on dreaming she's a dancer.'

They walk past me, bumping my legs with their bags, noses in the air like I really do smell.

I am alone in the hot April sun. My fingers crunch the audition notice. I don't let the tears prick at my eyes until I am sure they are gone. I won't let Miss Priss see how close she got to my secret.

I know I don't look like a ballerina, not in these dirty high-tops with my scabby knees. But inside there is a ballerina leaping to get out, leaping so hard that sometimes I think she'll bruise my heart.

I look at the audition notice again. I don't even care about proving Miss Priss wrong. Not much anyway. If I could only get to the audition, I know I could get in. I have been dancing since the day I was born. But New York City is so far away. There are whole states between South Carolina and New York. I'll bet New York City makes Warren look like an anthill. In a city like that, no one would know where you came from, no one would know you were poor or your father was dead. In a city like that, I could be anyone I wanted to be and no one would laugh at me for trying.

I glare at the street and the cars and the whole two-bit town. Then I shuffle down the sidewalk, past Willy's General Store and the Shell Station, down past where the sidewalk ends. I walk through the oak tunnel with its great leafy branches that throw dapples on the dirt. Toward home.

And as I go, my shuffling gets lighter and lighter until I am floating *gracefully* like a bit of dandelion fluff on the breeze. I am dancing hopeful. I don't need ballet lessons to get out of Warren. I've got my feet. The audition is in two weeks – plenty of time to get a job and earn the fare for the Greyhound. Me and my feet are gonna dance ourselves all the way to New York City. You just see if we don't.