



I wait until almost all the other girls have looked at the list pinned to the door before I can go near it. My legs feel like they've turned to stone. But I force them up and down and over. I've come all the way to New York City, and I'm not going to stop here. There are a few other girls like me, waiting. I can tell they haven't done well. Their faces look thin and long, like used-up water rushing down a drain.

The names are written in small, neat letters. I can feel my heart slow beat to beat as I look for mine. But it isn't there.

I look again, running my finger up and down the list. I see Andrea's name, and the horrible words Ann-Lee Ryder, but Casey Quinn just isn't there. The floor seems to

open up beneath my feet, and I feel everything spinning away from me.

I grind my toes into the floor, pushing down until everything spins back into place. It is not fair. I was born to dance. I won't let anyone stop me, and I refuse to let them get me down. A tear splashes on the toe of my shoe. I rip it off.

Anger, sharp and hot like acid, eats up my insides, and I walk back to the changing room. How could they not pick me? I am meant to be here. I know I am. And no one can tell me different.

I sit by myself on a bench in the back of the changing room and try not to cry. If I cried it would be letting them win, saying I didn't get in. So I won't cry. I'm still in New York. I've still got my feet. There's still a chance.

Other girls start to file into the changing room. Some of them have long faces and walk slowly, and I know they're the ones who didn't get called back. Like me. They get changed quickly and leave without a word. The other girls are all smiles and skipping. They run around the changing room, instantly friends with all the other chosen ones, laughing with each other, as they get ready for the next audition round.

I hunch my shoulders and stare at the floor. They don't even notice me. They're too happy for themselves, and too

nervous about the next part of the audition to care about a non-ballerina like me. Tears start to leak out of my eyes. I pinch my leg savagely to stop them, but it doesn't help. I can hear footsteps, and I know it's Miss Priss coming to gloat. Swaying and swaggering in her brand-new slippers. I grit my teeth like a shield around my heart.

'Did you really think you'd get in?' Miss Priss stands over me like a vulture. I glare at her because I'm no set of dried-out bones. Not now, not ever. And I won't have her picking at me.

'You are so stuck-up. You walk around Warren like you're the only one who can dance. Like you're already too good for Vicky's Ballet Studio,' she says. Her hands are on her hips.

My mouth goes open. Miss Priss calling me stuck-up? It is almost funny, but I don't laugh. She keeps walking closer to me.

'You think you're special just because you're poor,' she says. 'Like that means you deserve to get in more than I do. Just because your father fought in the war and mine didn't.'

'What are you talking about?' I say. I'm confused.

'You've thought you were better than me ever since I came to Warren. But you're not. You don't know anything about what it means to be a ballerina. I've been taking

lessons since I was four. I practice every day.'

'I practice, too,' I say.

Miss Priss tears off her brand-new shoes. 'Show me your feet,' she says.

'What?'

'Look at my feet,' she demands.

I don't want to do what she says, but I can't help it. She shoves her foot onto the bench next to me. They are disgusting. Her toenails are black and bruised. Her toes are covered with blisters and scabs. And her feet are horribly bent.

'I practice every day until my feet bleed. I want to be the best. I work really hard. I work until it hurts, and you,' her voice cracks, '. . . and you just show up, no work at all. And you think I'm the one who should go home.' Miss Priss's eyes glisten like she's going to cry. She takes a deep breath to keep the tears in. 'You think I should go home and you should stay,' she says. 'How can you even start to think that that's right?'

I stare down at the floor. My own feet stare back at me. They are long and straight with clean, healthy toenails. Not one bruise or blister in sight. I try to say something, but the words get choked back. My eyes are hot with uncried tears. Why is she saying this to me? I didn't get in. Why can't she be happy with that?

'Just leave me alone.' I force the words past the lump in my throat.

My skin feels sticky and hot with her gloating. Miss Priss looks at me like my bones aren't even worth picking at anymore. Then she shrugs and walks away.

I swallow hard at the lump in my throat, trying to force it down. I didn't get in. I got all the way to New York City, all the way from Warren, and now I have to go back. I get busy in my bag, pulling on my street shoes and blue striped traveling dress right over the top of everything else. The tights and leotard itch, but I can't take them off. Not just yet. Andrea springs into the seat next to me. Her face is red and excited.

'Did you see that? I actually made the next round!' I try to smile because Gran would say I should be gracious, but Andrea can see I'm sad. Her smile slips south. 'Don't worry about it, Casey. I didn't make my first audition, either. You'll get it next time.'

The words *next time* burn like iodine on a skinned knee. I don't think I'll get a next time. This was my chance. And I blew it. I'll never get to see Times Square at night, and I'll never see my name in lights.

The door to the changing room swings open and the long, thin woman from the audition steps inside. Everyone turns to look at her.

'Which one of you girls is number 53?'

My heart leaps up. Maybe she's come to say there's been a mistake. Maybe I'm already in and I don't need to go to the next audition. Maybe that was why I wasn't on the list. I swallow hard and stuff my hope back into my shoes where it belongs.

Andrea gives me a shove and I step forward as brave as I can.

'I'm number 53.'

'Mr Balanchine would like to see you,' says the woman.

Suddenly, I wonder if I'm in trouble. Maybe he's mad that I came without having had a lesson, but who is he to be mad? I was meant to be here.

I set my shoulders firmly on top of my spine and follow the long, thin woman out the dressing room. I glance over my shoulder just before I get out the door. The last thing I see is Andrea grinning and holding up her thumbs. I smile, and then I go to see Mr Balanchine. If he thinks he can just send me home, he's got another think coming. I didn't dance myself all the way to New York City to go home without a fight.