



Dancing  
on the Inside

Glen C. Strathy

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For the real Jenny.



“Dance as though no one is watching.”



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## *Chapter 1*

# Dance School

“You know, it’s not too late to back out,” Jenny’s mother said over the squeak of the windshield wipers and the drumming of rain on the car roof.

It was the twentieth time that morning Jenny had heard these words. She turned her head to stare out the rain-splattered window beside her. Between the clouds and the damp asphalt, the streets looked even greyer than usual. “I know,” she said.

“If you decide after today you don’t like it, I can get a refund. But if you go to two classes and then change your mind, I can’t get the money back.”

“I know,” said Jenny. They were driving through an older part of town, with tall trees and sidewalks. The houses were big, with peeling paint and weedy gardens, but Jenny liked them because they were all different. Some had second-floor balconies and round, tower-like rooms on the corners. Some had wrap-around porches and gingerbread trim. There was a stone house that looked like a miniature castle and another that looked like it belonged to some

Goth family. *If only someone would fix them up*, Jenny thought. *They're so beautiful.*

“And I can probably return the clothes too, except for the tights.”

Jenny glared at the back of her mother's head. “Mom! I want to do it. You promised.”

Glancing up at the rearview mirror, her mother's eyes met Jenny's. “I'm sorry, honey,” she said. “I'm sure you'll have fun. And make lots of friends. Well, I hope so, anyway. And if not, there's always that Girl Guides chapter I saw advertised.”

Jenny growled her annoyance. “I'm too old for Guides. It's called Pathfinders once you're twelve. And besides, I don't want to do it.”

A few minutes later, her mother turned the car into a small parking lot and stopped. “Well, this is the address,” she said. She peered at the long stone building next to them. “Looks a bit run down to me. But maybe it's newer on the inside. The website said the studio was fully equipped.”

Jenny got out of the car and pulled her raincoat tight over her white leotard and tights. She had chosen white because she thought it looked like what dancers would wear. Jenny had put on this outfit the night before and slept in it, hoping it would make her feel more like a dancer herself. But the cool September air made her shiver a little.

They walked up the rusty metal steps, through the heavy front door, and down the corridor. There were lots of closed doors along the way, leading to little offices that were shut on Saturday. Some looked as though they'd been shut for a long time. At the end, one door stood open next to a sign that read “Kingston Ballet School.”

Jenny felt her stomach tighten as they went inside. This was her

first time inside a real dance school, and she had no idea what to expect.

She had seen one ballet in her life. Two years ago, her grandparents had sent her a DVD of *Swan Lake* for Christmas. It was an old Russian production. Jenny had set it aside, unopened, for almost a year. Then one day after school, curiosity and boredom inspired her to watch it, and it awoke in her a fascination that was both surprising and irresistible.

Jenny had watched *Swan Lake* hundreds of times since then, often pausing it so she could draw pictures of the dancers in different poses, leaping through the air, gliding across the floor, twirling. Her parents eventually bought her a portable DVD player so they wouldn't have to see the same performance over and over on the big TV. The more she studied *Swan Lake*, the more Jenny longed to be part of the world she saw on the screen, a world of astounding beauty. But she had never seen live ballet or met a dancer in person.

The room was lined with shabby beige couches. A pile of brochures sat on a badly scratched coffee table. Bits and pieces of scenery leaned against one wall, next to what looked like a box of old junk. On another wall hung a pink Bristol board sign saying "Volunteers Needed!" with a sign-up sheet stapled underneath. At the far end, a large table and chairs had been set up. No one else was there.

Jenny's mother started to help her take her coat off, but Jenny pulled away and did it herself. They were just about to sit down when a woman strode in from a doorway on the other side of the big table.

She had short, brown hair and a round body. Beige-rimmed eyeglasses hung from a string around her neck, overtop a pink sweater.

At first glance, Jenny thought she looked more like a librarian than a dancer. Only her black tights and ballet slippers said anything different. "Hello!" she said, smiling.

Jenny's mother walked over to the woman. "Hi. I'm Marilyn Spark. This is my daughter, Jenny. I phoned the other day."

"Yes, of course," said the woman, in a slight French accent. "You're a bit early. But that's good. Most of the other students have already registered." She turned to Jenny. "Hello, Jenny. You may call me Madame Beaufort. I'll be one of your teachers."

Jenny gave her a slight smile but said nothing. Madame Beaufort looked down at Jenny's feet and frowned slightly. "It's still raining, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Jenny.

"Well, from now on, please don't wear your ballet slippers outside. It's not good for the slippers, and it gets them dirty. We have a room just down the hall where you can change into your dance outfit right before class."

Jenny's mother glanced quickly at Jenny's feet. "You changed shoes in the car!" she exclaimed.

Jenny nodded.

Madame Beaufort looked Jenny up and down and then turned back to her mother. "It's fine for today, but for the next class, she'll need a black leotard. A black silhouette against a white wall helps us see whether a student is standing correctly. Also, she will need pink tights. That's 'ballet pink,' not regular pink. We like it if all the girls dress the same."

Jenny began twisting a lock of her hair around her index finger.

"She'll also need to come with her hair arranged up off her neck,

preferably in a bun at the back. And she'll need to let her bangs grow out from now on. Can't dance with hair in her eyes."

"I see," her mother replied.

Madame Beaufort looked at Jenny again. "First time taking dance?"

"Yes," Jenny said. The knot in her stomach was getting bigger. The class hadn't even started, and already she'd messed up.

"Well, it won't take you too long to catch up."

"This is a beginners' class, isn't it?" her mother asked, a little concerned.

"This is Grade Four Ballet, for twelve-year-olds," Madame Beaufort explained. "Most of the girls are returning students. But don't worry. Everyone must start somewhere. She can work at her own pace for now. I think you'll be amazed at how quickly her strength and flexibility will improve." She looked down at Jenny again. "Not to mention posture and poise."

Jenny tried to stand a little straighter. The lock of her hair was now very tight.

Madame Beaufort sat down behind the table and opened up a file folder. "Now, I'll need you to fill in a registration form." She smiled at Jenny. "You can go on down the hall and see the studio if you like, while we get you registered."

"Okay," said Jenny. Her stomach was getting tighter by the minute. Jenny had hoped the other students would be beginners too. Now she knew that she would be the worst dancer in the class. And it hadn't even started yet!

But she was curious to see the studio.

Madame Beaufort pointed to the archway behind the table. "It's just down the hall. The first two doors are the changing rooms.

You can hang up your raincoat in the girls'. The studio is at the far end."

"Have fun, honey," said her mother. "Do you want me to wait around, just in case? Or should I just pick you up after?" She stroked Jenny's back reassuringly with one hand.

"After," said Jenny. And she started cautiously down the hall.

The wall on the left was covered with framed photographs. Each photo showed a group of children, almost all girls, in a frozen tableau from some past performance. Some were dressed as clowns, pirates, or animals. Others wore abstract costumes that reminded Jenny of rainbows or fairies. None of them wore white, puffy skirts like in *Swan Lake*. But they were all dancing ballet. The girls looked so strong and graceful. They were obviously having fun. Jenny felt a deep pang of envy and longing combined.

In the girls' changing room, Jenny hung her raincoat on a hook and then checked the bottom of her slippers. They were a little damp but not too dirty. She wished she had chosen a black leotard rather than white. The last thing she wanted was to stand out.

Then she went to look for the studio.

The studio floor was a few inches higher than the hall floor and had a slightly springy feel to it. It was a big, empty room with white walls and a high ceiling. Full-length mirrors and wooden rails ran along one wall. A piano stood in one corner, covered by a quilted cloth. A stereo system sat on a small shelf unit.

Jenny felt very small as she walked to the centre of the room. *So this is where real dancers practise and learn*, she thought.

The more she looked around, the more Jenny found herself wondering if she really belonged here. With each passing moment, she felt sure she didn't. The girls in the photographs all looked so

happy and confident. Jenny had nothing in common with them. She didn't feel confident at all. She felt like a trespasser.

Jenny didn't want to wait for the girls in the photographs to arrive. She didn't belong with them. They would stare at her wrong-coloured leotard and her long hair and know she was not a dancer. She wished she were at home, curled up in her room with a sketch pad. Maybe there was still time to leave before anyone else saw her. Maybe she should tell her mother to ask for a refund. She hoped she wouldn't be too annoyed.

Jenny was just turning to leave when she heard the sounds of light, hurried footsteps coming from down the hall. Too late. The other students were coming. Jenny held her breath. Her feet froze to the floor, and she paused, waiting for them to burst into the studio.