

ADVANCE READING COPY

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limelights



Attitude

Robin Stevenson

There's more to ballet than pink pointe shoes and tutus.

When Cassie comes to Vancouver from Australia for an intensive summer ballet program at a prestigious ballet school, she finds it hard to fit in. A clique of girls who have been at the school a long time don't want the newcomers to get any attention. At first Cassie tries to go along to get along, but when she realizes that some of the visiting summer students are being bullied and threatened, and that she herself is being sabotaged, she finally speaks out—and finds out how far some girls will go to succeed.

ROBIN STEVENSON is the author of more than a dozen books for children and teens, including *A Thousand Shades of Blue* and *Inferno*. Her books have been nominated for numerous awards, including the Governor General's Literary Award and the BC Book Prizes. She lives in Victoria, British Columbia, with her family. For more information, visit www.robinstevenson.com.

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Summary: Fitting in at her new ballet school turns out to be more painful for Cassie than breaking in a pair of pointe shoes.



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*Dedicated, with much gratitude, to three
inspiring young dancers: Sasha Beardmore,
Alyssa Beattie and Sophia Harrington.*

One

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For as long as I can remember, ballet has been the center of my life. On our living room wall, there's a photo of me clutching the barre at my first class—a scrawny red-headed four-year-old in a black leotard, squinting out from behind blue plastic glasses. Since then, I've worked and sweated and stretched and strained through thousands of lessons and endless hours of practice. There is nothing in this world I want more than to be a dancer. What I'm doing right now should be—no, it *is*—a dream come true.

So why am I so scared?

I wrap my arms around myself, shivering under the thin gray airplane blanket, and tell myself sternly to smarten up.

Be strong, Cassandra, Peter told me at the end of class three nights ago.

You'll be fine, my mom said as she hugged me goodbye at the airport.

Better than fine, Dad said, winking at me. *Cassie's going to show those Canadian girls that Australians can dance.* And he cracked me up by pretending to do an arabesque and falling over right there in the departures area.

But now, as the plane bumps down onto the runway, a cold, empty feeling settles in the pit of my stomach, and I have to blink away the tears. I turn my face toward the window so the man in the next seat won't see me crying. The plane slows, turns and finally comes to a stop. I pretend to be very interested in the gray sky and the rain. It doesn't look much like summer.

I'm just arriving and already I am homesick. How am I going to cope with four weeks of this?

* * *

I've never traveled alone before, and I'm scared I will lose my passport or get lost, but I manage to get off the plane and find the baggage-claim area

without any disasters. I had three stops on the way from my home in Adelaide, Australia, to my destination in Vancouver, Canada, so I'm getting used to airports. I feel numb and a little sick, but I'm not sure if it's from excitement or jet lag. I watch the suitcases and backpacks glide past on the conveyer belt and wish I could lie down on the floor and go to sleep right here.

I spot my blue duffle bag and heave it onto my shoulder. The weight of it is comforting—my dance clothes, three pairs of ballet slippers, my just-broken-in pointe shoes, my new jeans, a few photos of my friends and parents, and Jackie, my old stuffed bear. I wasn't going to bring him, but at the last minute I changed my mind and squeezed him in. I head through customs, scanning the crowd of people milling around the arrivals area, and it suddenly occurs to me that although my host family is supposed to be here to meet me, I have no idea how we will find each other. I hesitate, trying not to panic, and then I hear someone call my name.

I turn and see a tall dark-haired woman waving at me. The sign she is holding reads *WELCOME CASSANDRA JORDAN*. I blow out a

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tiny breath of relief and cross the short distance between us. Mrs. Harrison looks just like she did in the family photograph she emailed to us, slender and elegant in a flowing skirt and long cardigan. The long-haired girl standing beside her must be her daughter, Edie, who is fourteen—the same age as me.

“Cassandra. Welcome.” Mrs. Harrison gives me a quick hug before leaning away and studying me, laughing. “We would have recognized you anywhere, wouldn’t we, Edie?”

“You don’t look much like your photograph,” Edie says.

“I bet,” I say ruefully. My photo is a glossy head shot—we had to send pictures as part of our application package to the school. “I’m a mess.”

“I didn’t mean that,” Edie says, her cheeks turning pink.

“You look fine,” Mrs. Harrison says briskly. “And I’d have spotted you even without that photograph. You look like a dancer, doesn’t she, Edie?”

Edie nods but doesn’t say anything.

Mrs. Harrison gives a short laugh. “Well, you do, Cassandra. It’s the way you hold yourself.

Lovely posture.” She takes my duffle bag from me. “Come on. I bet you’re dying for a hot shower.”

“Dying to go to bed, actually,” I admit. “I’ve never been so tired in my life.”

I follow them to the parking lot and slide into the back seat of their white minivan. Only twenty minutes to their house, Mrs. Harrison tells me. I sneak a glance at Edie’s profile. She’s pretty, with creamy skin and glossy dark hair like her mother, but she’s not exactly chatty. She seems really shy. My thoughts are disjointed, dream-like. *Mrs. Harrison is beautiful. I wonder if my new host family has a dog. Dad looked so funny doing that arabesque at the airport, with his big belly sticking out. Classes start on Monday. I hope I like Canada...*

Next thing I know, Mrs. Harrison is touching my shoulder. “Cassandra? We’re here.”

I struggle out of a thick, heavy sleep. “Here?”

“Our house. Your new home for the summer.”

She smiles. “You were asleep before we hit the highway. You poor thing. I hated to wake you, but you can’t sleep out in the driveway.”

My curiosity about this place pushes the fog of sleep away like a strong breeze clearing clouds

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from the sky. I unbuckle my seat belt and get out of the car. Everything is green: the grass, the tidy bushes in the front yard, the tall trees that line the street. It is the beginning of July, which means it is summer here, but the sky is gray and the the air is cool. Two days ago, when I left Australia, it was winter, but the weather was much the same: chilly, gray and raining.

No wonder I feel disoriented.

I follow Mrs. Harrison into the house, which is big and spotlessly clean but kind of boring—beige carpets and glass shelves and nature photographs on the off-white walls. “We’ve fixed up the spare room for you,” she says, walking up the stairs. “Let’s put your bag up there. David will be home from work soon and we’ll have dinner. Are you up for joining us, or do you really want to just go to bed?”

“Probably better if I try and stay up, right?”

I actually am kind of hungry.

“If you can bear it. You’ll get over the jet lag faster that way.” She puts my duffle bag on the floor at the foot of the bed. “There’s a dresser for your clothes, and we put in a small bookshelf for you. I’m sorry it’s such a small room.”

“No, it’s fine.” There’s a smooth wooden floor and enough room between the bed and dresser for me to do my stretches, and the bookshelf is the right height to use for balance. The walls are a soft pale blue and a Degas ballerina print hangs above the bed. “Really.” I smile at her. “It’s great.”

Mrs. Harrison gestures down the hallway. “If you want to freshen up, there’s a bathroom on the right. Come on downstairs when you’re ready. We’ll eat in half an hour or so.”

“Great. Thanks.” I watch her leave, and as she closes the door behind her, my reflection swings into the full-length mirror on the back of my bedroom door. I stand and stare at myself for a minute. “This is it, Cassie,” I whisper. “You’re here. You’re really here.”

I stand tall, head lifted, back straight, shoulders down and back, and meet my eyes in the mirror. Underneath the messy dark hair, the tired pale face, the rumpled shirt, I can see her—the dancer I am going to be. Even though I am so tired I can barely stand up, I lift my arms and step into fifth position, and I feel strength and energy flooding through my limbs.

When I dance, I feel as if anything is possible.