

REACHING FOR A STAR

By Felix Mayerhofer

Chapter 1: Jackie's Blue

“Don’t push!” yelled the school bus driver as kids eagerly burst out the door, except for one lonely girl, who kept to herself as she slowly walked down the steps. Entering a convenience store, she emerged a few minutes later holding a large bag of potato chips and a handful of candy bars.

Munching chips on the way home, she stopped and looked longingly through the window of a ballet studio. Girls wearing leotards and ballet slippers were dancing gracefully.

The girl continued her walk down the street, then climbed steep steps to her third floor apartment. She was so overweight, she was gasping for breath by the time she reached the door. Entering the apartment, she threw down her book bag and immediately went to the refrigerator and got something to drink. Turning on the TV, she sprawled on the sofa, finished the potato chips and candy, and hypnotically watched her favorite shows.

It was getting dark when the girl’s mother wearily arrived home from work. She gave her daughter an annoyed look and said, “Jackie, the least you could have done was start dinner.”

“Yeah, yeah!” answered Jackie, hardly paying any attention to her mother.

“Did you do your homework?” her mother asked.

“I don’t have any,” Jackie answered in a whiny voice.

“You’d better start bringing some home,” suggested her mother.

“Your grades are dropping.” Jackie made a long face.

Jackie’s father had died a few years earlier. Her mother had gotten a job but wasn’t able to afford the home they’d been living in. They found an apartment, but it was in a different school district forcing Jackie to change schools. Saddened by the loss of her father and missing her old friends, Jackie had found the move difficult.

After dinner, Jackie went back to watching TV, still eating cookies after having had an enormous meal.

“You’re gaining too much weight,” her mother complained, as her daughter gorged herself.

“Aw, leave me alone, Mom,” Jackie responded.

Jackie’s routine was the same every day. She was bored, felt lonely, and had made no friends.

The owner and director of the ballet studio, Madam Marguerite Gulenka, saw Jackie repeatedly look through the window. She was curious about this girl who was always alone, and wondered if there was anything she could do for her. As a ballet instructor she was strict, instructing her students like they were professionals, but she had a heart of gold. Marguerite had performed as a ballerina with the finest ballet companies in Europe and the Americas. When she retired, wanting to work with underprivileged children, she opened a studio in the low-rent neighborhood where Jackie lived.

The next afternoon, Marguerite was standing by the open door as Jackie looked through the ballet studio's window. "Do you like ballet?" she asked the young girl.

Flustered by the question, Jackie answered shyly, "Yes, I do."

"Would you like to study ballet?" asked Marguerite.

"I'd like to but I can't afford it and I don't think I could dance," responded Jackie.

"I need someone to take care of the young children and do a few odds and ends every day," said Marguerite. "If you're interested, I'll give you free private lessons in exchange.

Jackie couldn't believe the woman's offer and it caught her off guard. "I'd like to do it," she stammered. "When do you need me?"

"The senior class will be through in a few minutes and the children will be next," said Marguerite. "I could use you right now. What's your name?"

"Jackie Manders," she answered.

Marguerite really didn't need an assistant but she felt this girl needed help. "Come in and take off your coat, we'll get the studio ready for the children's class."

Reeling from this unexpected offer, Jackie entered in a daze. After helping Marguerite tidy the studio, the children came in and Jackie took their coats. She couldn't believe their needs, including having to help the youngest put on their tights, leotards, and ballet slippers.

When the class ended, Marguerite spoke to Jackie and said, "Tomorrow is Saturday. Could you come in for a lesson at 7:00 am?"

Ordinarily Jackie slept in late on Saturdays but was excited about taking her first lesson. “Yes, I’ll be here,” she answered. “What shall I wear?”

“A leotard, tights, and ballet slippers,” answered Marguerite in a heavy Russian accent.

Jackie was so excited when she left the studio; her uneaten chips and candy were left behind. Clambering up the steps to her apartment totally exhausted but exhilarated, she couldn’t wait for her mom to get home. She went to the kitchen and began preparing dinner without turning on the TV.

Chapter 2: Raising the Barre

Her mother arrived home expecting to hear the usual loud TV. Instead, she heard movement in the kitchen and smelled something good cooking.

Entering the kitchen, she said, “What a pleasant surprise. What brought this on?”

“Mom!” Jackie exclaimed, giving her a hug. “You won’t believe what happened to me today!”

Just the excitement in Jackie’s voice thrilled her mother. She hadn’t seen her daughter so enthused about anything since before her father’s death. Through dinner Jackie told her mother every detail of the day’s events. This was the first pleasant conversation she’d had with her daughter in a long time.

After dinner, they went to the mall to buy the items Marguerite requested she wear for class.

The rest of the evening Jackie’s mother listened as her daughter talked of nothing but the lessons. The mother was amazed. She had no idea that Jackie was interested in ballet.

Needless to say Jackie had trouble going to sleep that night. The following morning she had butterflies in her stomach and could only drink juice for breakfast.

Jackie felt insecure when she left home for the studio. As she arrived she saw Marguerite waiting for her.

“Good morning,” she said in a cheerful voice to Jackie, as she gently took hold of Jackie’s hand and directed her to the barre.

Looking at her new student the elegant woman said, “Learning ballet will change your life and for the better. Once you start you’ll never stop.” Taking hold of the barre she continued, “Watch me carefully as I demonstrate the barre exercises.”

Marguerite put her heels together in 1st position, toes turned out with legs also well turned out at the hips, as she performed the exercise gracefully. “Now you try,” she said to Jackie.

Jackie had already imagined herself as a star ballerina, but then looked at herself in the full-length mirror. She wasn’t happy with what she saw. She placed her feet in the right position, but her large thighs refused to cooperate. Jackie looked at the instructor with concern.

"Don't worry," Marguerite said. "Your body will change in time." You won't recognize yourself in a few months." For some reason, Jackie believed this woman, whom she had never known until yesterday.

Marguerite then did the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th positions, showing Jackie where the hands, arms and feet should be placed. Jackie didn’t say anything during the lesson, but she was entranced with what she was doing. In the short time she’d been there, a magical change came over her, and she knew she would always dance.

After they were through, she and Marguerite sat down and the instructor said, “I like what you did today. You’re intelligent, you have grace, and I feel you have the potential to be a fine ballerina. There’s a lot of hard and painful work ahead. Are you willing to make the sacrifice?”

Jackie knew the answer and exclaimed without hesitation, “Oh, Yes!”

“We both know what your main obstacle is,” said Madam Marguerite, as she looked straight at Jackie, “and it will be up to you to have self-discipline. It’s your decision to make.”

Marguerite was kind and didn’t use the word fat, but Jackie knew what she meant. If she wanted to be a dancer, she’d have to eat less and lose weight. With this first lesson, she felt like a cloud had been lifted, and replaced with a burning desire to become a dancer. During the short time she’d been at the studio, Jackie felt happier than she’d been in years.

She scampered up the steps to her apartment after the lesson, not even realizing she was puffing. “Mom!” she yelled, “We have to set up a barre in the basement right away!”

“What’s a barre?” asked her mother.

After Jackie’s explanation, her mom spoke to the apartment manager who gave his permission to use the basement. She then phoned Jackie’s uncle who soon arrived at the apartment. Jackie took him to the ballet studio because he needed to see what a barre looked like. He left after taking a few measurements, returning with his tools and materials. Not only did he set up a barre, he laid down a small area of tile where she could dance and do the barre exercises. The only thing she lacked was a full-length mirror.

Jackie’s muscles were sore that night after working out in her own private studio. She couldn’t do the positions the way she wanted to, but she knew she would eventually. What really challenged her were the three flights of stairs back to the apartment.

Her mother was ecstatic over the turn of events, and helped Jackie with her diet by giving her smaller portions at dinner that evening and every night thereafter. Even though Jackie was happy over the prospect of learning to dance, she couldn't stop thinking about food. She soon realized the thought of food and sweets would remain with her for months. It was going to be a long, tough struggle.

Chapter 3: A New Attitude: Yes, I Can!

Jackie's new routine began that Monday when she got off the school bus. Not going into the convenience store for chips and candy was like losing an old friend. But Marguerite surprised her with an apple when she came into the studio, and had a variety of fruit every day to keep her energy level high. Jackie liked being with the children and after awhile began taking class with them. She felt self-consciousness in the beginning, but the children accepted her as she was, and grew to love her.

The teachers at Jackie's junior high school noticed her change of attitude, especially after she started handing in her work and it was well done. Jackie was getting into the routine of starting her homework when she got home from Marguerite's. She'd help set the dinner table and make the salad, or start their dinner before her mother came home if she had time. It hadn't been too long in the past that she constantly ate and watched TV for company. Her life now had new interests. After dinner, she would finish her homework, then go to the basement to practice. She noticed that after awhile she wasn't as winded when she climbed the four flights of steps back to the apartment.

At the studio an intermediate class of girls and boys about Jackie's age were scheduled after the children. When the group came in the day she began her new job, they gave her strange looks like she was an unwanted intruder. Jackie felt uncomfortable. But whenever they

were there, she stayed to watch them before leaving for home. As the end of the school year approached, one of the girls came up to her and asked, “Do you catch the school bus at the corner?”

“Yes,” answered Jackie.

“I thought that was you. I’ve been meaning to talk to you. My name’s Vickie and I live a couple of blocks away.

“I’m Jackie,” she responded.

“I know,” Vickie said. “I’ve heard Marguerite speak your name.”

On the spur of the moment, Jackie said, “Would you like to come to my apartment after the lesson? I live at the end of the block.”

“Sure,” answered Vickie, “but I can only stay a few minutes.

“I’ll be waiting for you in apartment 302,” responded an elated Jackie.

She ran home and did her chores in record time, then started dinner. She opened the door just as Vickie was coming up the steps. Both girls still had on their leotards as Jackie took Vickie down to the basement.

“Wow! You’ve got your own studio,” exclaimed Vickie. “You’re lucky!”

“My uncle plans to set up a full-length mirror soon,” Jackie said. Excited that Vickie was there, Jackie, without thinking, lifted her formerly oversized leg high above the barre with ease. She was astounded! When she began taking lessons that had been one of her goals.

Realizing what Jackie had done, Vickie complimented her by saying; “You’ve lost a lot of weight since I first saw you.”

Those magic words out of the mouth of one of her own peers were worth every minute of agony she'd suffered these many months. She knew she'd found a friend.

Chapter 4: No Time For Jealousy

The school year came to an end and Jackie received her final report card, all A's, and promoted into the eight grade. Her mother was extremely happy. She couldn't believe that one activity, ballet lessons, had changed both their lives. Jackie was achieving her goals one by one: she had slimmed down, was doing well in school, had a close friend, and was becoming a good ballet dancer.

That summer Jackie's mother had to buy her a smaller size leotard. She also surprised her with a new bathing suit which Jackie loved. Jackie and Vickie became even closer that summer. They began going to the local swimming pool and practiced ballet together in Jackie's cool basement. It was a wonderful summer for both.

When school began that fall, Jackie and Vickie to their delight were in the same eight grade classes. Not only that they were both in Marguerite's advanced ballet class. Marguerite had surprised Jackie by saying, "When school begins I'm promoting you to the advanced group." Jackie was thrilled. The three classes a week she had been taking had paid off.

During the first dance session, Jackie felt relaxed because she knew a few of the girls from school. But one girl, Tawny, resented her being there. Tawny, who was pretty and one of the best dancers, thought Jackie wasn't qualified. Jackie felt confident with her own ability and wasn't concerned what Tawny thought. She figured it was Tawny's problem not hers.

Jackie soon found out that most of the girls had taken tap dance instructions at other studios before they enrolled at Marguerite's, who only taught classical ballet.

"I sure would like to take tap lessons but my mom can't afford them," Jackie moaned to Vickie as they were practicing in the basement.

"Let's make a deal," Vickie said. "I'll teach you to tap if you help me with my algebra. I just don't get it!"

"It's a deal!" exclaimed Jackie. "Let's start right now!"

As the year progressed, Jackie made new friends except for Tawny, who always made snide comments during ballet class and in physical education at school. During the previous year when Jackie was still heavy, Tawny laughed and said, "You can hardly fit into your P.E. pants you're so fat!" The cruel remark hurt Jackie's feelings, especially with her classmates present. But what a difference a year had made. Now that Jackie had slimmed down, Tawny could no longer use Jackie's weight as a weapon. It began to bother Tawny that Jackie was developing into a good dancer, too.

When Jackie and Vickie came out of the gym with a few of their friends they bumped into Tawny. Tawny, the best dressed girl in school, stopped, looked down her nose at Jackie and said, "Do you still buy your clothes at a thrift shop?"

Vickie got mad and immediately came to her friend's defense. "Stop this nonsense right now, Tawny!" she said, standing toe to toe. "You're just jealous because Jackie is more popular than you and you can't stand it!" From Tawny's reaction, Vickie knew she had hit a nerve.

Tawny went into a rage, her face turned red and she stomped off. This was the first time anyone had had the courage to stand up to her. From that time on, Tawny never spoke to Jackie or Vickie again, either at school or during Marguerite's class.

Jackie was spending most of her spare time practicing tap and getting quite good. "I can't believe I've taught you to tap dance," said Vickie, "and now you're better than me!"

Jackie's uncle put up the full-length mirror and at the same time laid down more tiles. She not only had plenty of space to practice ballet, but also created a new tap routine for herself. She'd been watching old musicals on TV, and her mother had bought her a couple of professional ballet and tap videos. In addition to taking lessons, they were wonderful learning examples.

Chapter 5: Reaching For a Star

The school principal announced that the Fine Arts Department was producing a musical, which caused quite a stir. Auditions for singers, dancers, and actors would be held in two weeks.

There was a bustle of activity, as everyone with talent began getting ready for the audition, including Marguerite's dancers. Tawny was sure she'd be chosen as the soloist and lead dancer. With Vickie's encouragement, Jackie was preparing for the same spot.

During the past year and a half, Jackie had perfected all the barre exercises and many ballet steps, including the Double and Triple Pirouettes. She was now secretly working on doing a series of 10 Fouette's.

Audition day finally arrived with hopeful young performers nervously waiting off-stage to try out.

The director of the Fine Arts Department asked former professionals to be judges: a singer, an actor, and two dancers (one tap, one ballet). They were to make the final selections. Jackie was pleasantly surprised that Marguerite had been asked to audition the ballet dancers. She knew she'd be fair to everyone, including those who studied at other studios.

A few of the advanced girls from Marguerite's studio were the first to audition, and felt confident they'd be selected as part of the dance ensemble.

"What are you going to do, ballet or tap?" Vickie asked Jackie.

“I’m not sure,” answered Jackie.

Vickie decided she’d do the ballet, and when she finished auditioning, Jackie said, “You were terrific! I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

Tawny danced after Vickie and her performance was outstanding, with everyone in agreement that she’d be the lead soloist. As she happily ran off-stage she gave Jackie a better than you look.

Jackie knew that if she were to be chosen over Tawny as the lead dancer, she’d have to do something different.

When her turn came to perform, she slowly walked to the front of the stage and surprised the selection committee, especially Marguerite, by asking, “Can I do both a tap and ballet routine?”

The committee put their heads together, then after a few minutes nodded their approval.

The recorded music began playing. The other contestants watched as Jackie slowly started her routine, and then picked up the tempo demonstrating her fast feet and clear tap sounds. The other dancers had no idea she tapped so well and were amazed with her ability. It was obvious that Jackie had worked hard. When she finished, their applause was music to her ears. Now that her confidence had been given a lift, Jackie changed into her ballet slippers. The beginning strains of “Swan Lake” came over the speakers as Jackie flowed gracefully into her ballet solo.

Everyone watched intently, especially Tawny, as a chilling thought crossed her mind: Could this girl, who she’d taunted and laughed at, be selected over her? No! It could never happen!

Jackie was doing beautifully. As she glided along she concentrated intently on her routine. Knowing she had to do something spectacular to win, she decided to go for ten Fouette's. Dare she take a chance? She decided to risk it. As her dance routine came to the final bars of the music, she held her head high and began the twirl. Could she do it? Or would she fall on her face and lose it all? When the final notes of the ballet came to a close, there was wild applause. Jackie was overjoyed! She had successfully performed her final goal, the ten Fouette's.

After a long consultation, the judges read the names of those who had passed the audition and made the musical.

"We've had a tough decision to make," said Marguerite to the assembled group. "There were two very talented dancers and it was a close finish. One of the exceptional ballerinas, Tawny Rice, will have a featured role in the show!" Tawny screamed and jumped up thinking she had been selected as the main dancer.

Marguerite continued. "The 'Lead Dancer' in the starring role--goes to Jackie Manders, who will solo in both tap and ballet!" There was an explosion of sound as Tawny looked at Marguerite in disbelief. Vickie wildly embraced Jackie and her friends cheered. Jackie would always remember this day.

Sitting unnoticed in the rear of the dark theater was Jackie's mother. She tearfully applauded her daughter's dancing, who through tireless effort, had reached out and caught the star that fulfilled her dreams.