Chapter 3

That night, back in the hostel, Aya could not sleep. The bed she shared with Mumma and Moosa was lumpy, the springs collapsed in one section; and the walls were paper thin so they could hear everything that was going on in every other room. The family next door were arguing loudly in a language Aya did not understand – the husband shouting, the wife crying. In the room above a baby wailed and from somewhere down the corridor she could hear the sound of old Mrs Massoud crying. Poor Mrs Massoud was always crying – for her son who had been taken by government troops in Damascus, and her daughter who had been killed by the bombs shortly after. She told Aya a mother's fountain of tears flows forever.

But tonight there was also music coming from somewhere down the hall, a man's voice singing a song in a language Aya didn't understand. It made her think of the girls in the dance class – the girl called Dotty who had grinned at her – like she was just a normal kid. And Ciara, with the blonde hair and the haughty expression, and the mousey-haired girl - Lilli-Ella - who stuck her tongue out when she was concentrating. Aya's limbs itched as she remembered. Just thinking about it made her want to dance.

'Not really enough room for that kind of thing in here, eh Moos!' she whispered to her little brother, who lay like a starfish on the bed next to her, his tiny fist clamped tightly round her finger, breathing snottily in his sleep.

She glanced at Mumma who was asleep on a chair in the corner, her face creased into its usual anxious frown. Then she pulled the blanket over Moosa and climbed out of bed, reaching as quietly as she could for her rucksack.

They hadn't been able to bring much when they left Syria. They had fled in a hurry with only the clothes they were wearing and one bag each. Sometimes Aya thought of her room at home and all the treasures she liked to collect: the posters of ballerinas on her wall, the glass animals on her mantelpiece, the pile of cuddly toys on the rocking chair, the tiny snow-globe with a dancer frozen in arabesque that Dad had found in the old market... all the things she'd left

behind. In comparison, this room - with its single light-bulb, bare walls, ripped curtains and the damp patch on the ceiling - felt more like a prison cell than a home.

'At least it is warm and dry,' she had said to Mumma when the lady from the centre first showed them in. 'And after the appeal - we'll find somewhere better. Make a proper home – I promise!'

Another promise.

Aya reached to the bottom of the rucksack where she had packed the ballet shoes. They were wrapped in a couple of plastic bags to keep them dry and as she unfolded them she could feel the soft satin under her fingers. She hadn't looked at them or touched them for months. But holding them now made her smile. Dad had bought them for her - just a few weeks before they left. Her first pair of pointe shoes – the most beautiful things she had ever owned. She had no idea where he'd managed to get them from. But Dad was like that. He could do stuff other dads couldn't.

She remembered dancing in them for the very first time in the kitchen at home. Patterned linoleum underfoot; Dad sitting at the table with Moosa in his arms; Mumma standing by the sink – hands wet, clapping with delight and laughing about her beautiful ballerina. 'Dance for us, Aya!' Dad had said.

Mumma sat up, alert suddenly – the frightened look in her eyes – panting with fear. 'Aya?

What is wrong?'

Aya quickly shoved the shoes back into her rucksack. 'Nothing. It's OK, Mumma,' she said.

'Has something happened? Has someone come for us?'

'No, Mumma, everything's good. Go back to sleep. You need to rest.'

The sound of the man singing continued to float along the hallway, as Aya carefully tucked the shoes back into the bottom of her bag - along with the

dreams they had briefly set dancing through the cramped little room. Then she climbed back into bed.

Chapter 4

She couldn't help going back the next day. Even though Mumma's headache was worse and Moosa was restless. Even though she needed to talk to the food-bank lady about nappies for Moosa. And ask Sally about trying to get a doctor for Mumma. Even though they still hadn't seen their new caseworker about the appeal ... Even though all of that was her responsibility now ...

It was the music. The tinkling tune of a piano that had danced through her head all night, and trilled through her fingers all morning. Because it was school holidays here, so there were dance classes going on all morning and Aya sat on a hard plastic chair, swinging her legs in time to the music, dancing patterns on the chair leg with her fingers until she felt like she would burst if she didn't just go up and see.

'Would you be able to watch him, just for a minute?'

She was sitting next to Mr Abdul – the nice old man from Somalia. The day before, Aya had taught him a few words of English and he had started showing her to play chess. He called her his 'young English professor' and shared his peppermints with her.

I'll come straight back again,' she said, speaking in the native Arabic they both shared, even though they had come from different corners of the world. 'My mumma, she is ...'

'She's disappearing under the waves,' Mr Abdul said, glancing at Mumma who sat on one of the sofas with her eyes closed.

'She just didn't sleep well,' Aya said quickly.

'Go, go, little professor,' Mr Abdul said with a smile. 'I will keep an eye on the little one!' he waved hand towards Moosa, who was playing with a box of toys one of the volunteers had brought along.

'Thank you!' said Aya. 'Thank you!'

'No need to thank me,' said Mr Abdul. 'We floating people need to look out for one another – or who will? Am I right, little one?'

Aya ran up the stairs, two at a time. The dance class was already in progress. It was mostly the same girls as the day before, moving through the same exercises, the thud of satin slippers on the floorboards, the rhythmic tap of the teacher's cane and her sing-song voice. Aya stood by the door, breathless, watching. The blonde girl was there again. And the mousey-haired dancer with the anxious face. The tall girl. The red-head... only the one called Dotty was missing today.

'So you are real!'

Aya spun round quickly, heat flooding to her cheeks.

'I knew it! I knew you couldn't be a ghost!'

'Ghost?'

'Yeah. I wondered if you were a fairy or something, at first.' The girl called Dotty was throwing down her bag and pulling off bright pink fluffy tracksuit bottoms and a sparkly crop top to reveal her ballet clothes underneath.

Aya glanced round nervously, suddenly unsure if she was allowed to be here.

'Then I thought you might be the ghost of some long-ago ballet student who had died in a freak pirouette accident,' the girl was saying. Her skin was the colour of the sweet almonds Mumma bought in the covered market in Aleppo. 'Or perhaps just keeled over of boredom in one of Miss Helena's endless barre exercises!' She acted out a dramatic swoon before quickly recovering and adopting a theatrical pose as she declared: 'Destined to wander the halls of this community centre forever.'

Aya glanced towards the studio door.

'Sorry – I'm Dotty, by the way.' She stuck out a hand, very formally and Aya reached out her own.

'I am Aya.' Her words came out awkwardly and she bit her lip. She knew she sounded foreign – different.

But the girl called Dotty didn't seem to notice. 'Cool – nice name!' she declared.

She was wearing a different leotard from the one she'd worn yesterday. It had a lace insert across the back and triple straps that criss-crossed daringly over her shoulders. It was the sort of thing Samia would have liked, Aya thought. Samia who had a different leotard for every day of the week – and two on Sundays. Samia who had lived in the apartment block round the corner from hers. Who she had gone to dance class with since they were six years' old, walking along the dusty boulevard hand in hand with their ballet bags slung over their shoulders, Samia talking and talking and Aya listening and laughing.

'You do kinda look like ghost an' all,' said the girl called Dotty. She had the same thick flat Northern vowels as Sally and the other volunteer helpers in the centre, Aya noticed. She pronounced ghost - like 'gurst' and said look with a 'oo' of surprise. 'I mean, only cos you look a bit old—fashioned,' Dotty went on. 'If you don't mind me saying.'

Aya coloured. She knew what she must look like. In trainers that were slightly too big, a skirt that was slightly too small, a boys' sweatshirt and a headscarf that looked more like a tea-towel. She had become used to feeling different, or out of place – at least it was better than just being invisible. But today - now - she didn't want this girl to see her like that.

'Oh, not in a bad way,' Dotty went on, now attempting to tug her unruly black curls up into a lopsided pony-tail. 'It's just with you being so thin an' all. I mean, you can't really imagine a chubby ghost can you...?'

The words seemed to pour out of her - like bubbles or glitter, Aya thought. That was like Samia too. Samia's family had left just before Aya's. Perhaps they

were in the UK now too. Or Germany. Or France. Or maybe still in one of the refugee camps along the way.

If they had made it out at all.

'Ok, so if you're not a ghost, I'm guessing you're from the place downstairs?' Dotty was ready now but stood, hands on hips, surveying Aya, as if she were an exotic species of butterfly or a particularly interesting new flavour of jelly bean.

'Yes.' Aya bit her lip.

'That is pretty cool too,' said Dotty with a cheerful grin. 'Not quite as good as a ghost but I've never met a refugee properly either. Where you from then?'

'Syria,' said Aya, quietly. 'Aleppo.'

'Cool – that place from the news!' Dotty looked excited. 'No idea where it is though.'

'Dotty Buchanan!' a voice from inside the dance studio. 'You are late. Very late!'