Chapter 5

Dotty shrugged and grinned. 'Alas, duty calls! Nice to meet you though, Syria Girl.' She paused for a second by the door, surveying Aya closely, her expression changing suddenly. 'Hey, I'm dead sorry if I said the wrong thing, by the way. – I do that. My mum says I speak without thinking...'

Aya shook her head. 'You ... didn't.'

'Dotty Buchanan! You will please get in here.'

Dotty still looked concerned. 'Come back – won't you?'

Aya wanted to say something but the door to the studio was opening and there stood the dance mistress. Up close, Aya thought she looked even smaller, like a tiny, tough little fairy grandmother. She was much older than Madam Belova but there was something about the elegance of her movement, the tilt of her chin that reminded Aya of her old teacher – a kind of indefinable grace that shimmered around the old lady like fairy dust.

'Dotty Buchanan, what are you doing shilly and shallying out here – and so late?'

'Sorry! My mum was in rehearsal, then we got caught in traffic - and then I met Aya.'

The ballet mistress glanced skirtingly in Aya's direction before tapping her watch and staring significantly at Dotty. 'Time – Miss Buchanan!'

'But Aya is a refugee - from Syria,' Dotty explained. 'How cool is that, Miss Helena?'

Miss Helena flicked another fleeting glance in Aya's direction. This time she frowned – ever so slightly.

'That is very 'cool' but I am thinking that you are the one with big audition coming up,

Miss Buchanan, so perhaps you should spend less time chittering and more time perfecting your développés, yes?'

'Yes Miss Helena,' Dotty sighed and glanced apologetically at Aya as she started to make her way back to the studio. Then she stopped by the doorway. 'Hey, could Aya join our class?'

Aya felt suddenly as if a swarm of butterflies had awoken within her belly – coloured wings fluttering.

'I mean, look at the way she stands,' Dotty was saying. 'It's dead obvious she's a dancer.'

'This class it is full,' said Miss Helena gently but firmly.

'But ...' Dotty cut in.

The butterfly wings scattered like fallen leaves in Aya's empty belly. For some reason she felt like crying. And she hadn't allowed herself to cry for weeks.

'But nothing, Dotty Buchanan ...' said Miss Helena sharply, though she glanced at Aya again – an odd expression in her eyes. 'Let us be getting to the barre!'

Aya blinked hard and tipped her chin up firmly. She hadn't cried since Dad and she wouldn't let herself do it now.

'You will come back again!' Dotty whispered, as Miss Helena hustled her back into the classroom.

'I don't know,' Aya heard herself say. 'I can try.'

'Promise?' said Dotty.

Aya thought of all the promises she had made. To Mumma, to Moosa, to Dad ...

Miss Helena was shooing Dotty into the room. She looked back at Aya and nodded – ever so slightly.

'OK, I promise.'