the roof, she said, so they made a den of mattresses in Aya's room and lit the candles on the cake and sang Happy Birthday. But the evening was spoiled somehow, and Aya could not fall asleep for a long time because of the sound of gunfire.

The following day they found out that Samia's older brother Rami had been to the protest. He'd been one of the lucky ones. He came home with just scratches and a frightened look in his eyes. Others had not been so fortunate.

Over the next few days the fighting got more intense. The eastern part of the city was taken by the rebels and Aleppo felt as if it had been cut in half. Now there were soldiers patrolling the streets near Aya's home, and Dad said they could not go to the western part of Aleppo because it was occupied by government troops. Luckily Madam Belova's dance studio was in their quarter of the city – that was all that mattered to Aya back then.

The party gifts were all packed away, the last of the cake eaten, but the sound of gunfire did not stop. It was surprising how quickly something like that started to feel … normal.



Chapter 6

"My father is a doctor," Aya explained, for what felt like the millionth time. "I mean – he was."

This was a new caseworker. Not the one they had seen in the detention centre in Bedford. He didn't seem to have their files. They had been lost or mislaid somewhere – nobody seemed to know where – when they had been moved out of the centre and relocated to Manchester, and so Aya had to go over everything all over again.

"He worked in a hospital in Aleppo, but before that he was in England for five years – in a place called Birm-ing-ham." Aya sounded out the unfamiliar name, remembering how Dad had always pronounced it with

a funny nasal accent that had made her laugh. "He had papers from the hospital there. They say they will find him a job."

"Do you still have the papers?" The young caseworker looked up hopefully. He was in his early twenties, with a smattering of a beard growing across his face. He looked very tired.

Aya shook her head. "They were—" she hesitated "—also lost."

Moosa was attempting to clamber under one of the tables by the food bank, and the two elderly ladies in charge were looking cross. Aya went to rescue him before he bashed his head or knocked something over.

"Enough mischief, Moosa!" she said, feeling tired. "Aya is trying to sort things out, so she needs you to be good today, OK?"

The young caseworker was looking impatient as Aya returned with a wriggling Moosa in her arms. Mumma was fiddling with her sleeve, the way she did when she was upset or anxious. Aya leaned over and stroked her hand. "Don't worry, Mumma. It's going to be fine."

"And your initial claim for asylum was rejected because…?" The caseworker was asking questions again. Aya wanted to ask why they had been moved

here, and why she had to go over all this stuff again. There never seemed to be time to ask those things.

"I don't know. They say we are entering the country illegally," said Aya.

She remembered the immigration officials, bundling them all into the back of a police van and taking them to the detention centre, which felt more like a prison than a place of safe haven.

"And I think the other lady – our caseworker before – she said we had already claimed safe haven in Turkey … or Greece, I think – and so we cannot apply for asylum here." These words had become familiar to Aya now – "safe haven", "asylum", "refugee status", "right to remain". She knew the words even though she still didn't fully understand what they meant.

"I see." The young man sifted through papers with a frown as Moosa wriggled his way off Aya's lap again. "Well, I'll see what I can do."

"But we hadn't," said Aya quickly, as Moosa tottered off in the direction of the food bank again. "You see, they interviewed my mother. When we first arrived in the detention centre – three weeks ago."

Three weeks. Had they really only been in England for less than a month?

"But she wasn't very well. And her English…"

She wanted to explain. About how things had been after Dad. About the refugee camp … and Mumma being unwell. About the caseworker at the detention centre who had insisted on interviewing her without Aya – how Mumma probably hadn't understood what they had been asking her.

But the young man had already started putting away papers in the folder and didn't seem to be listening any more. Moosa was being shooed away from the piles of tins and packages by the two fierce-looking ladies, who were tutting crossly.

"I understand." He removed his glasses and rubbed his temples, and Aya thought he didn't look as if he understood at all.

"But we can apply again? We can appeal?" asked Aya. "The other caseworker – she said we could appeal?"

"I'll look into it," said the tired young man, scribbling something on a piece of paper. "Now I must see the next person."

Moosa had fallen over and bumped his head. He was crying now, a high-pitched wail that made Aya feel suddenly desperate.

"They won't send us back, will they?"

The caseworker was beckoning to the next family and Aya could feel panic rising. She had waited so long

to talk to him and there were so many things she still needed to ask.

"Ay-a… Ay-a!" Moosa's sobs rose high in the hot air.

"They can't – can they?" Aya demanded. "They can't send us back to Aleppo?"

She remembered what Mr Abdul had called them – "floating people". Sometimes it felt like they were pieces of driftwood, forever being moved on the ebb and flow of the tide, with no choice where they were taken – always at the mercy of others.

"I will do my very best."

And then the caseworker was opening the next file and Moosa was red-faced and whimpering in the arms of one of the food-bank ladies, who was tutting crossly and saying something about keeping children under control. He reached out his little fingers towards Aya and murmured, "Dada, want Dada!"

"Me too, Moos!" said Aya as she reached out a finger to Moosa's outstretched palm and took his tiny sticky hand in her own. "Me too!"

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