



Chapter 1

Aya could hear the music floating through the walls. And the woman’s voice: “One, two ... *port de bras* ... lift those arms, girls ... three, four ... straighter – yes! ... five, six ... eeeee-longate...” The notes of the piano seemed to trickle down through Aya’s limbs, and her fingertips moved involuntarily towards the tune that tinkled through the stuffy air.

The music stopped. Aya wiggled her toes and glanced around. The community centre was crowded – a jumble-sale collection of people, talking in a bustle of different languages. Hot sun spilled through dusty windows and the room smelled of soup and unwashed clothing. *And sadness*, Aya thought. She sighed and shifted in her seat.

The music started again and Aya glanced upwards. The piano notes were coming from somewhere close by. Upstairs? If she closed her eyes really tight and focused hard enough she could almost – almost – imagine herself back home, in the dance studio in Aleppo. With the heat on her limbs, the white-hot sun falling through the skylight, and the aromas of the city trickling through the windows – dusty streets, car fumes, incense. She smiled as she remembered standing at the barre, tracing her pointed toe through a series of *rond de jambes*, recalling the dust that sometimes trickled across the floor and that drove Madam Belova mad.

Anyone looking at Aya at that moment would have seen a small girl who looked much younger than her eleven years, holding a sleeping toddler in her arms. She had her eyes closed, and a curious expression danced over her face as her small foot traced circles on the grubby floorboards. A headscarf covered her black hair, and the clothes she was wearing were too big for her – leggings sagged over her skinny limbs and an old dress, which might perhaps have once been her mother's, hung limply off her tiny frame. And yet there was something about the way she sat – the bird-like tilt of her pinched face – that made her seem as if she belonged somewhere different.

The sounds of music stopped once more and Aya wriggled on the hard plastic seat. She was hungry and Moosa was heavy in her arms. The music made her feel fidgety and restless, and something else she couldn't find a word for. She shook her head determinedly and sat up straight – she needed to be focused today. To help Mumma.

“How long do you think it will be?” she asked the woman next to her, who just shrugged. Aya wasn't sure if she'd even understood.

She glanced around again. They'd been waiting for three hours to talk to the caseworker – a young man with a beard and tired-looking eyes who sat behind a makeshift desk, papers and files piled up around him. Right now he was talking to Mr and Mrs Massoud – the old couple from the hostel who had told Aya that they came from Damascus. Aya heard the words: “Application for asylum ... appeal ... lawyers ... undocumented ... hearing.”

“Same old story,” she muttered to Moosa. “Right, Moos! Over and over – wherever we go.”

Moosa shifted in his sleep, making the funny little sucking noises that made Aya want to squeeze him tight. “You sound like a baby rabbit, Moos!” she muttered, planting a kiss on her brother's grubby, tear-stained

face. His hair was damp with sweat, his fingers clasped tightly round Aya's thumb. She remembered the first time she had held him, the wave of love she had felt then. The feeling she'd had that she would never let anything happen to him – ever.

“Don't worry, Moosie!” she whispered into his damp cheeks. “Aya's here. Aya is going to sort it all out. Promise.”

Mumma was sitting next to her. She looked tired and faraway. “It won't be long now, Mumma,” Aya said.

But Mumma did not reply. She just kept staring up at the dusty windows – as if she could see something through them that Aya could not.

“You OK, Mumma?” Aya asked. “You hungry? I can get you some food? There is soup today.”

But Mumma said nothing.

Just then the door to the community centre swung open and the music spilled into the room, louder now. A quicker piece was playing and Aya found her toes tapping out the beat on the floor.

“One, two, three... Squeeze, two, three... To the barre, two, three... and – photograph! Loooovely, ladies!”

Aya held her breath for a second. “Photograph!” she muttered, half to herself and half to Moosa.

Madam Belova liked to say that too. “Photograph!” It meant a moment of stillness, a pause, catching hold of the music and waiting with it. The notes and the dancer suspended in time – hovering in the air – just for a second.

Suddenly Aya couldn't sit still a moment longer. She glanced at the queue of people in front of them. It would be ages before they were called. She could slip out – just for a moment – to go and look.

“Mumma, I'm just going out. I won't be long. I promise I'll be back to help. And I'll get you some soup – and bread. You need to eat, OK?”

Mumma turned and nodded, but she seemed to have only half heard. *I will make sure she eats properly today, Aya said to herself. And rub her temples the way Dad used to do when she got one of her headaches. And I'll talk to the caseworker and get everything sorted out. Then Mumma will be able to relax – get better. Be herself again.*

Aya carefully uncurled her little brothers' fingers from her own and laid him down gently in the battered pushchair that Sally – the nice young volunteer who ran the centre – had found for them. Then she stood up and did a little spin on the spot, which – just for a moment – made old Mr Abdul sitting opposite think of a curling autumn leaf, falling through the air.

But Aya was unaware of being leaf-like as she made her way over to the doorway.

She just needed to shake off the fidgety feeling that the music had sent trickling through her limbs. Before she burst!