Ballet Besties

Yara's Chance to Dance

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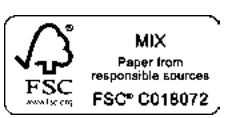
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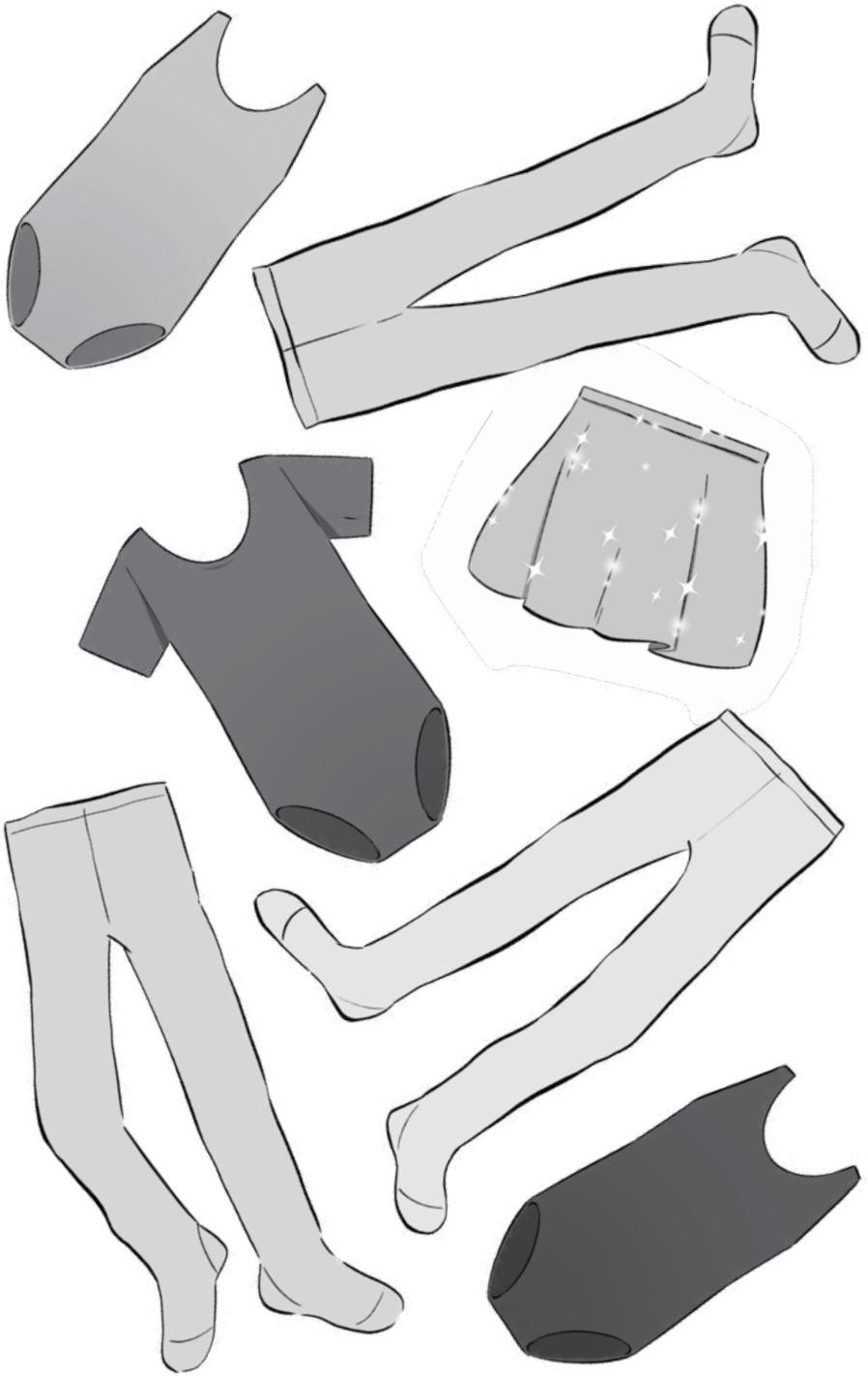


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To all children who have a dream:
believe in your dreams!
Y.N.

To my mum who always danced like
no one's watching.
C.S.

To Mora, my best friend. Thank you for your playful spirit and for filling my life with happiness and adventures.
P.F.



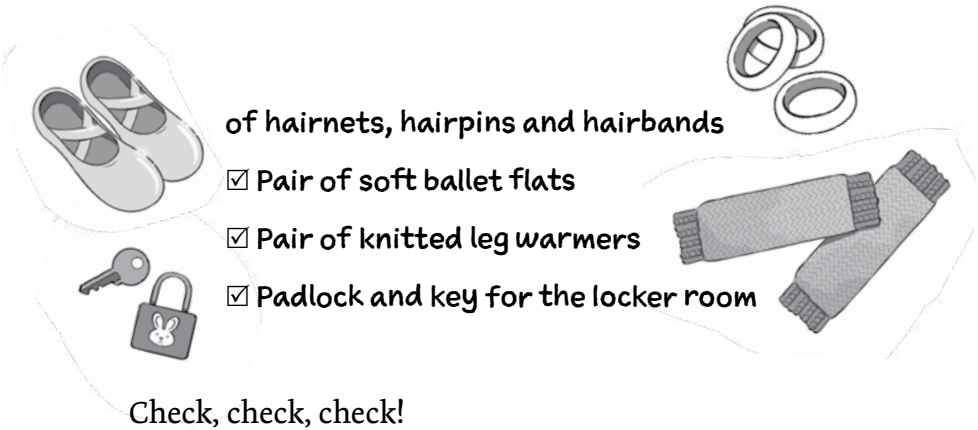
Chapter One

Yara woke up that morning before her alarm went off. She was just too excited to sleep. It was finally Tuesday – the best Tuesday of her entire life, because that afternoon Yara would be going to a proper ballet class in a proper studio with a proper real-life ballet teacher.

The first thing Yara did, after getting out of bed, was check and double-check her new ballet bag.

- ☑ Three leotards and a wrap-around skirt
- ☑ Three pairs of ballet tights
- ☑ Hair accessories: a hair doughnut, a pack





Check, check, check!

Normally Yara wouldn't have bought a new ballet kit, but this new place was special. After years of learning by herself, she would finally be part of a class and perform with other dancers. Also, that summer Yara had grown a bit taller and her old kit didn't fit well, so it was time for a fresh kit for a fresh start.

Last month, Yara had moved with her family to this town from another country. Before that, they'd moved home and country multiple times, following her papa's job wherever it took him. He was an eco-engineer who worked with factories all over the world, to make them less polluting. Yara didn't mind the moving around – she got to see so many new places – but it did mean she'd never been able to join a ballet school before. This time, however, Papa was going to work here permanently and they could settle down at last.

'It'll be good for your studies,' said Mama when Papa had shared the news that this move would be the last one, 'for us to be based in one place.'

'And ballet,' Yara had replied. 'I can finally go to a proper ballet school where I can actually stay long enough to become a professional dancer.'

Papa laughed. 'School and ballet, Yara,' he said, 'in that order.'

'But . . .' Yara started to object.

'We'll make a deal with you, Yara,' Mama said, putting an arm around her. 'We'll find you a good ballet school, but you must promise to focus on

school and keep your grades up.'

Yara loved ballet more than anything else in the world. When she was four, Mama had enrolled her in a gymnastics class, but Yara had opened the wrong door in the studio and stood enthralled watching a ballet class in progress. She wanted to dance like them. She begged Mama to move her into that class, even if only for the short time they were living there, and had never stopped dancing since. When they moved to cities where there were no ballet teachers near them, they'd find someone to teach Yara online. But it wasn't the same. Each teacher had taught her in different ways and Yara longed for consistency.

The worst part of not learning in a proper ballet school, though, was that it was lonely – there was no one to enjoy practice with or make friends with. The online classes were good for learning and she could do them anywhere, but they could never replace the

feeling of dancing with a group in an actual studio.

But all that was going to change now! Mama had found a ballet school called Shimmer and Shine, just round the corner from their new house. It was run by a friendly woman called Miss Diamond, who also taught the classes there. The day they had gone to check it out, Yara instantly knew that she was the perfect ballet teacher – she was kind and welcoming, and when she moved she looked like a fairy gliding through the air.

'We just opened a year ago,' Miss Diamond explained, as she showed them round. 'And the class Yara will be joining will have children of different abilities. You'll all be about the same age, so I'm sure you'll fit right in.'

Shimmer and Shine was a proper studio, even though it looked a bit old. The brown-and-red-diamond-patterned linoleum floors were soft and

cushioned, so the dancers wouldn't slip when they jumped and moved across the floor. There were support bars, called barres, fixed to the mirrored walls, and some free-standing ones too, in the centre of the room. While Mama and Miss Diamond were talking, Yara stood at the barre and struck a pose, checking herself in the mirror as she did so.



'What do you think?' Mama asked Yara.

Miss Diamond caught Yara's eyes and smiled. 'I know everything looks as if it's from a long time ago, but I can assure you that it's all safe.'

Yara didn't mind that it was old. It felt loved and cosy. 'I like it,' she whispered to Mama.

Miss Diamond explained that Yara would have two after-school ballet classes during the week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and a third on Saturday mornings.

'That seems a lot,' said Mama.

'It'll be fine, Mama,' Yara had reassured her. 'I can do it.'

They agreed that she would start that week, which would be the first session back for the whole class after the summer holidays, and would give her a full week of ballet lessons before school started too. Yara thought she would quite happily swap ballet for

school permanently. If only her parents would let her.

Right after they had enrolled, Mama took Yara to get her a new ballet kit at a boutique in town. Pink and brown pointe shoes were neatly stacked in the window, and inside tutus and leotards hung everywhere you looked. Yara was in heaven! Gus, the owner of the shop, said he too had been a ballet dancer once, and every time Yara picked out something, he did a perfect *pirouette* and said, 'Gosh, that's such a good choice.'

Yara giggled, thinking about their time at the shop.

Knock, knock!

Mama peeped her head round the bedroom door, interrupting Yara's daydream. 'Ready to go?'

'Do you need to even ask? I'm always ready for ballet!' replied Yara.

'Class isn't for a few hours yet, silly! We're going to the patisserie first. You can get some breakfast there, and then I'll drop you at the studio this afternoon,' said Mama. It wasn't just Yara's dad who'd got a new job when they moved – her mama had opened her own patisserie in the local high street, called Cake Walk. After the Shimmer and Shine studio, it was Yara's favourite place in town.

Yara jumped off her bed and rifled through her ballet bag to check everything was packed one last time before she zipped it up and flung it over her shoulder.

'Did you pack your new school bag yet?' asked Mama, chuckling at her enthusiasm.

Yara headed downstairs. 'Not yet. School doesn't start for another week. I'll have plenty of time to do that later.'

Mama rolled her eyes and smiled. 'Remember our deal!' she said. 'School and ballet, hand in hand.' But

Yara was already out of the front door, wondering what Miss Diamond's first lesson would be.

That day at the patisserie, while Yara watched dance videos in the office upstairs, Mama bustled about in the kitchen, getting cake orders ready.

Even though there was still twenty minutes before she had to be at the studio, Yara changed into her leotard and tights. She didn't want to risk being late for her first class – indeed, she didn't want to miss a minute of anything.

'Mama, I'm ready! Can we go?' she shouted, checking the clock again.

'Give me a sec!'

Yara went downstairs and waited by the counter, impatiently shifting from foot to foot.

Mama finally emerged from the kitchen. 'Livvy, don't forget to ring Mrs Rummage to collect her cake,' she called to her assistant.

'Will do, Mrs Madani,' came Livvy's voice from the kitchen.

The studio was only a few minutes' walk away but Yara felt like they'd never get there! A traffic light, an e-bike on the pavement, someone who flagged Mama down to order a cake – they stopped so many times . . . but still, with all that rushing and fussing, Yara arrived ten minutes before the start of class.

'Now we're early!' Mama exclaimed.

'It's better than being late, Mama,' said Yara.

'Let's see what you say when I wake you on Monday for school!'

Yara didn't want to think about school, but she knew that she'd be on time every day if they taught ballet there. She ran ahead of Mama towards the studio's entrance. Two kids were already standing outside, waiting for the door to open.

‘I’ll be OK,’ said Yara, turning to face her mum. ‘You can go.’

New ballet class, new ballet friends. Yara didn’t want Mama to wait with her as if she was a baby.

‘Papa will come to pick you up when class is over,’ said Mama. ‘Break a leg, *ma chérie*.’

Yara waved. She always found it funny that dancers weren’t wished good luck but instead were told to break a leg, hoping the opposite would happen. She sighed happily. There were so many little customs and traditions in the ballet world she wanted to learn and be a part of. And that dream was about to come true.

Yara joined the line to wait. Right in front of her was a tall boy, and ahead of him a dark-haired girl by the door. Her posture was already like that of an advanced ballet student, with her back held straight, and her feet in perfect first position. The boy said something to the girl and she laughed and twirled on her toes.

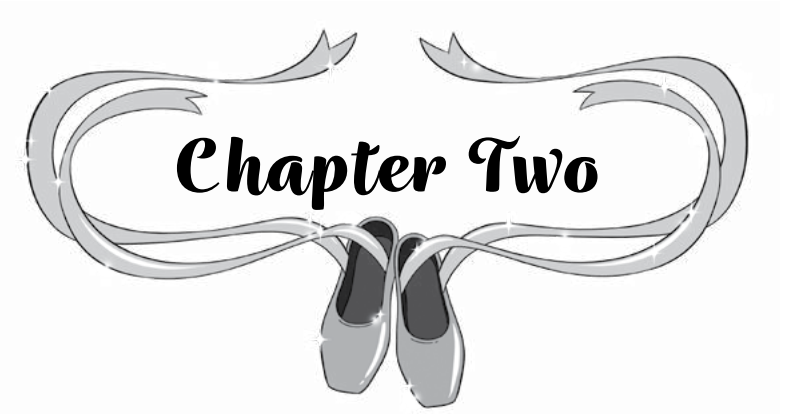
Yara knew this was a mixed-ability class, but suddenly she wondered, nervously, whether everyone else would be more advanced than her. Just then, a short girl ran towards their line holding a big book. Yara tried to make out the cover. It was something about maths.



A few more students arrived and Yara counted a total of ten others waiting in the line with her. Despite her worries about everyone being a better dancer than her, the idea of being in a class with other students still made Yara excited.

'It's time!' squealed the girl in the front. She was even more excited than Yara! She stood on tiptoe and peeped through the glass above the wooden panel on the door. 'I can see Miss Diamond coming.'

Yara brushed her tummy lightly trying to calm her nerves. *This is going to be great*, she told herself.



Chapter Two

Miss Diamond opened the door wide and welcomed everyone into the studio.

'Hello,' she said. 'Welcome to Shimmer and Shine! Nice to see you all ready for class.'

As everyone stepped inside, the girl in front ran to the back of the studio. Miss Diamond pointed that way to Yara and said, 'You remember where the locker room is, don't you? From the tour?'

Yara nodded and followed the girl. The lockers were lined up along the walls of a narrow room just off the main studio. Down the middle was a long, cushioned bench. Yara imagined sitting on it and

chatting with the other dancers.

Yara changed out of her trainers into her ballet shoes, then put her stuff in a locker, shut the door and padlocked it. As she headed out, Yara smiled at the others who were coming in to put away their bags and shoes.

When they had all returned to the studio, Miss Diamond smiled brightly. 'I hope you all had a good summer break. Let's introduce ourselves for any newcomers this year, shall we?'

'I'm Momoka,' called out the girl who had been standing at the front of the queue outside. 'I love ballet and I was in Miss Diamond's class when she taught in another school.'

'Me too,' said the tall boy who had been in the front of Yara. 'I'm Charlie, and I was in Miss Diamond's class at her last school. When she opened Shimmer and Shine, some of us came here with her.'

Next to introduce themselves were Lauren, Finley, Madison and Igor – though Yara was soon struggling to remember all the names! However, her nerves were settling a bit and she could let her shoulders relax. Everyone had different levels of experience, and some kids had only started when Miss Diamond had opened this studio. Yara had been learning ballet for years, even though it had been in different countries and with various teachers. That had to count for something, she hoped.

It was then that Yara realised everyone was staring at her. It was her turn to introduce herself. 'Hi, I'm Yara,' she said. 'I'm new here. I've been learning ballet since I was four, but this is my first time in a proper ballet school. I want to become a professional dancer.'

Miss Diamond smiled. 'Dream big, work hard and you can definitely achieve it,' she said.

'Not me,' someone whispered.

Yara turned round to see the girl with the maths book. She stood with her shoulders droopy, her eyes staring at the floor. Not a dancer's posture, for sure.

'Hi, I'm Indu,' she said with a shaking voice. 'I'm new to ballet and I'm a bit nervous.'

'It's OK to be nervous, Indu,' said Miss Diamond gently. 'Even professional dancers can feel anxious before a big show. Just know that we're all going to help and support each other.' Indu seemed to brighten up a bit at that.

'Right, class, listen up,' said Miss Diamond. 'We're here to learn something beautiful. We'll be dancing together, moving like birds in a formation. Now, I know that not everyone wants to become a professional dancer, but, whatever your reason for learning ballet, give it your best, help each other and, most of all, make friendships that go beyond the class. Having great team spirit makes it all much more fun – and remember: I'm always here to listen, to teach and to cheer you on.' Miss Diamond checked the door. 'We're still missing one student, but they can join in when they arrive. It's time to get started!'

She headed to shut the door when a football came flying into the studio, bouncing off the smooth floor.

'Wait, wait, Miss Diamond!' a voice called, and a few seconds later a boy came running in. He was wearing a football kit, carrying a huge bag and dripping in sweat. He had the cheekiest smile Yara had ever seen.

Charlie called out to him. 'Hey, Dante!'

'Hey, Charlie,' he replied. 'Did you see my kick?'

'There you are, Dante!' said Miss Diamond with a big smile. 'Always making a grand entrance, eh!'

'Sorry I'm late,' said the new boy.

'Why don't you change into your ballet kit,' said Miss Diamond, 'and join us quickly at the barre?'



Dante ran off towards the locker room as everyone else moved towards the barres against the mirrored walls. Yara found herself standing with Momoka, Indu and Charlie.

'Rule number one,' said Miss Diamond. 'Always warm up before you start practising. This is the golden rule for any type of physical activity, be it ballet or football.'

While Momoka and Charlie started warming up, Indu stood still, waiting. Yara realised that Indu didn't know what to do because she had never done ballet before. She turned to ask Miss Diamond, but she was busy with another group.

Yara went over to Indu. 'I can show you how to do a warm-up,' she offered. 'You can do frog stretches, shoulder rolls, leg splits, barre rises, jumping jacks–'

'What? Wait, slow down!' wailed Indu. 'I don't know what any of those things are.'

What's the easiest thing to start with? thought Yara. Jumping jacks, definitely. She jumped with her legs and arms apart and gently landed on the floor, and then jumped again, this time bringing her feet back together and her arms to her sides. 'This is a jumping jack – it warms up your whole body because it makes the blood flow faster to your muscles.'

Indu copied her. They grinned at each other as they jumped in sync.

'Then you can do some shoulder rolls,' said Yara, as she shrugged her shoulders up to her ears and rolled them back and down.

Indu copied that too.



'Great! OK, do those ten times,' said Yara.

'Thanks,' said Indu, and the girls exchanged smiles.

Dante joined their group at the barre, now in his ballet tights. 'What did I miss?'

'Nothing yet,' said Charlie. 'Why were you late?'

'My football match went into penalties,' he said. 'And they needed me to take a shot.'

Charlie sat down to do to a frog stretch. He brought the soles of his feet together with his knees out to the sides, pulling his heels as close to his body as possible to stretch his hips and groin. 'You should have told them you have ballet class,' he said.

Dante laughed. 'I did, but we had to win the game,' he replied. 'The good thing is, that means I'm already warmed up.'

Miss Diamond clapped her hands. 'Right, I think it's time to begin our first lesson.' She turned on

the sound system and piano music came out of the loudspeakers. ‘We’re going to begin with the basics – the ABCs of ballet. Who knows what those are?’

Momoka raised her hand and started to speak before Miss Diamond even turned towards her. ‘The five feet positions and five arm positions!’

Miss Diamond smiled. ‘That’s right. All the feet positions use . . .’

‘A turnout,’ Dante called.

Even though Yara knew this already, she paid close attention.

‘Turnout is a rotation of the entire leg, coming from the hip joint,’ said Miss Diamond, demonstrating it. ‘Turnout must never come from the foot or the knee as this puts great pressure and stress on the joints.’

After everyone copied Miss Diamond to try the turnout, she slowly led them through the five feet positions, one at a time.

There was the first position, where the heels touched and the toes faced outwards so the feet formed a V shape. Miss Diamond showed them a full turnout, where the feet made a flat line. Then she went on to the second position: feet as wide apart as the shoulders, and legs outwardly rotated from the hip so the feet pointed out. In the third position, both legs were rotated, and the heel of the front foot met the middle of the back foot. For the fourth position, the heel of the front foot was opposite the big toe joint of the back foot, with some space left between each foot. Finally, the fifth position was where the heel of the front foot was placed against the big toe joint of the back foot.

The fifth position was the hardest. Yara tried it over and over again. Miss Diamond must have noticed because she said, ‘The fifth position is quite

demanding and it can take several years of training to reach complete balance in this position. So don't feel disappointed if your fifth position doesn't look exactly like mine.'

When everyone felt confident with the five feet positions, Miss Diamond said, 'Now let's move on to the five arm positions. Momoka and Dante, do you want to come up here and show the class?'

Yara smiled as Momoka whooped and ran to the front while Dante skidded across the floor to take his position on Miss Diamond's right. *One day, Miss Diamond will call me too*, she thought.

'Watch carefully as we demonstrate, and remember to stand straight with your feet together for all these movements,' said Miss Diamond. 'In the first position, keep both arms down and rounded with both hands in front of the hips and fingers almost touching. The arms must be curved and brought up so that the tips of the fingers are in line with the belly button. In the second position, the arms are out to the sides, angled down and with palms facing forward, elbows slightly lower than the shoulders, and the wrists are level with the elbow,' she continued. 'Then in the third position, one arm is curved as in the first position and the other arm is extended out to the side as in the second position.'



The class was quiet as they copied her. All Yara could hear was everyone's gentle breathing.

Miss Diamond went on, 'In the fourth position, one arm stays extended out to the side and the other one goes in a curved shape above the head, and finally, in the fifth position, both the arms are extended above the head, in a circle shape, maintaining a gently curved line. Remember to always keep the shoulders down.'

They ran through the five positions a few times as a group.

'One more time,' said Miss Diamond. 'When you are dancing, you'll always be moving through one of these arm positions. That's why you've got to practise until you know how to do them naturally.'

Yara looked straight ahead and focused on the order of the arm movements and the elegance of each position.

Miss Diamond stood at the front of the class and asked everyone to return to first position.

'OK, I think you're ready to move on to the *plié*.' She bent her knees and straightened them again, with her feet turned out and the heels kept firmly on the ground. 'It's used in jumps and turns,' she explained, as she gestured to the class to follow her move. 'It provides a spring, to absorb shock, as well as an exercise to loosen the muscles and develop balance.'

It wasn't Yara's first plié but she still concentrated on Miss Diamond's words and her demonstration. It was nice to watch and learn from someone right in front of her rather than from a video.

'This is boring,' someone whispered.

'I know it can feel that way,' said Miss Diamond, 'when you have to repeat the same moves over and over, especially the basic ones, but mastering the

basics is very important in order to prepare your body for the more demanding and difficult exercises we'll move on to. A plié not only gives you strength when you jump but it also helps you transition from one step to another, so we need to learn it until it becomes second nature. Learning the steps is like learning grammar. It'll help you speak the language of ballet more fluently so that you can dance freely and express yourself.'

'It's like dribble drills in football,' said Dante as he bent down into his own plié. 'Practice makes perfect.'

'Shh!' said Momoka, who was focusing on her own move.

Yara shared a secret smile with Dante, who stuck his tongue out playfully at Momoka.

The music swirled through the room. Everyone concentrated on their movements.

'Let's take five,' said Miss Diamond after a while. 'Make sure you drink some water to keep hydrated.'

Yara and the others at her barre wandered to the water fountains together.

'It's cool that you do dance and football,' Yara said to Dante after she introduced herself.

Dante grinned. 'One day I want to become the only ballet dancer to score in the World Cup.'

Momoka laughed. 'Dante is *so* humble,' she joked.

'I'm the humblest dancer in the whole world.'

'"Humblest" isn't a word,' said Indu in a quiet voice.

'It's a Dante word,' said Charlie, nudging his friend with his elbow. 'Hey, Indu, do you have any other hobbies?'

'I learned Bharatanatyam, when I was little. It's an Indian traditional dance,' she said. 'But I always got stage fright before performances so I stopped. Then I

got really into science – I want to be a neurosurgeon some day.'



'That's a brain doctor, right?' asked Dante.

'Kind of,' said Indu. 'I want to get over my fears though, so I thought I'd give ballet a try.' Then she turned to Momoka and asked, 'What are your hobbies?'

'I take violin lessons,' said Momoka, and quickly added, 'but I love ballet most of all.'

'What about you, Charlie?' asked Yara.

Charlie blushed and Dante cut in. 'Charlie's great at loads of things – he's an artist and he can draw and crochet, and he loves baking.'

'Really?' said Yara. 'You should visit my mum's patisserie then.'

Dante's mouth popped open. 'Your mum owns a patisserie? Why didn't you say that first? We're *all* going to visit – not just Charlie!'

Charlie grinned and said, 'Just don't let Dante near the cakes!'

They all laughed as Dante licked his lips, probably imagining a giant football cake.

However, there was no more time to chat as

Miss Diamond asked them to assemble on the floor for some cool-down exercises, starting with light jogging and walking round in a circle to slowly get their heartbeat down. Next, she demonstrated how to stretch the upper body, by interlacing her fingers and pressing her palms up to the ceiling, and then she moved on to lower body stretches. They tried knees-to-chest poses, twisting lunges and finally hamstring and quad stretches.

Yara was exhausted as she headed to her locker and packed up her stuff, but she also felt energised by everything she'd done and the people she'd met. She was finally in a *real* ballet class. And she had made some new friends too. Friends who loved ballet as much as she did. OK, maybe Indu didn't love it yet, but she would soon, Yara was sure of it.

Miss Diamond stood at the main door to say goodbye to them all.

Yara waved her new friends off as Charlie and Dante walked home together and Momoka was picked up by her mum. She waited with Indu for their parents to collect them.

'So which school are you joining?' asked Indu, as they sat on the wall outside the studio.

'Mavis something,' said Yara, uncoiling her bun into a ponytail.

'Mavis Primary?' asked Indu. 'That's where I go too. You're ten, right?' Yara nodded. 'You'll be in my class then. Our teacher's name is Mr Hardcastle.'

Yara shrugged. 'I wouldn't even go to school if I didn't have to,' she said. 'I'd just dance all day long.'

Indu's eyes opened wide. 'I *love* going to school,' she said. 'Mr Hardcastle is really nice, even though sometimes he's strict about schoolwork.'

Yara shrugged again. 'School's not until Monday,' she said. 'I'm not going to worry about it yet.'