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CHAPTER ONE

A Day Like Any Other



'And one, and two, and three, and four. And one, and two, and three, and four. Anna, pay attention to your wrist. Francine, your shoulders. And three, and four . . .'

Zoe hated doing *pliés*. She'd always hated them, ever since she was a little girl of five. She'd never understood the point of all that bending low with your knees going out, while you kept your back very straight. Then there was the problem that when she was doing *pliés*, her feet had the annoying tendency to turn inwards and flop in a weak and feeble way – exactly how they shouldn't be.

'Zoe, straighten your feet. Nice and flat. *Flat.* Do you understand?'

Yes, Zoe understood. As flat as a pancake. As flat as a flatfish flattened on a flat floor. Zoe imagined a long line of fish, dead ones, arranged at regular intervals, in three rows, their eyes dim. Their teacher, Madame Olenska, would be happy then, wouldn't she? You couldn't get much flatter than that.

She suddenly felt like laughing, but managed to smother her giggles with a cough. Madame Olenska glared at her anyway. One mustn't cough, one mustn't sneeze, one mustn't scratch, and one mustn't laugh. *May we please breathe, Madame?* Zoe thought. Some days she was sure the answer would be no.

Zoe laughed to herself, but very quietly, just gently through her nose. And she carried on going up and down, up and down, a little elevator controlled by the music and by Madame Olenska's commands. After a while, she stopped thinking about it, and then she became aware that she wasn't thinking about it, and realised that, in fact, that was the way movement should be. Her body clearly could do what it was supposed to – obey her and and behave itself properly (well, most of the time, anyway), so why was her mind so rebellious?

It was probably a question of personality. Zoe took advantage of a swift *renversée* to glance in the mirror at

the empty, perfect doll's face that belonged to Laila. Laila was French. Laila never rebelled. She didn't laugh, didn't fidget, didn't talk in class. Everything that she did was perfect and it seemed effortless for her – as if she didn't have to think about it at all.

Despite this, Zoe knew she would never want to trade places with her, even if Laila *was* the best in the class, and therefore Madame Olenska's favourite. To Zoe, she looked just like one of those dolls with a key in their backs – the clockwork sort that you wind up and which then always move in the same way, with the same sequence of gestures, always following someone else's instructions. Zoe was happier being a *real* girl – one who made mistakes and got into muddles – even if that meant she wasn't perfect. At the Academy, *perfection* was a word that seemed to be carved in letters of gold and diamonds above all the doors, a word that sparkled and demanded that every student should sparkle too.

Madame Olenska clapped her hands together sharply, breaking Zoe's thoughts.

'The lesson is over. You may leave. *Au revoir*,' she said, as she did every day.

They responded in a singsong chorus, '*Au revoir,* Madame.'

Zoe wasn't very good at pronouncing the soft French 'r', even though she'd tried a thousand times to say it

properly, standing at home in front of the mirror. Naturally, the words slipped from Laila's mouth as sweet as honey, but then, of course, she was French. Never mind, once they were through the classroom door, she could shrug her shoulders and even pull faces behind Laila's back. No one was going to tell tales on her, because no one else liked Laila either.

Somebody slipped an arm through Zoe's. It was Leda.

'Are you still mad at her?' Leda whispered, nodding towards Laila. She fell into step beside her best friend. It wasn't an easy task. Leda had grown so tall recently – she'd suddenly shot up and already looked like a teenager, while Zoe still had the size and proportions of a little girl. It was strange because they'd been the same size for so many years. Zoe was glad it was the only thing that had ever changed between the two of them.

'No, I'm not mad at her,' replied Zoe, almost reluctantly. 'I'm mad at *myself* for being mad at her. I mean, it's stupid. She's just Laila and she can't help seeming prim and superior. It's not her fault – she's just like that.'

'Hmm, maybe she doesn't even realise how she's behaving, or maybe she doesn't like the way she is, but doesn't know how to change. After all, we don't really know her very well, do we?' said Leda, sympathetically.

That was typical Leda – she really did have a kind heart. She wasn't just good in a dull kind of way, she was

always thoughtful and she paid attention to other people and their feelings. It was just one of the reasons Zoe liked her so much.

They stopped talking, because you weren't allowed to talk in the corridors. You couldn't run in the corridors at the Academy either. But once they reached the changing rooms it was a different matter – the class suddenly transformed. With a frenzy of freedom from classes, they pushed and crowded together, ran and jostled to the benches where their clothes were waiting in varying degrees of disorder, stuffed into big bags hanging from the clothes hooks. No one cared if tights were put on inside out, if T-shirts fell below jumpers. Perfection was no longer a sacred word and normality took over.

With everyone feeling relieved that another rule-filled day was over, it was finally time to go home.

When she slipped under the side portico of the Ballet Academy and walked through the artists' entrance each morning, Zoe always felt very proud, even though she'd been doing it for five years.

Leaving the building in the afternoon was a different matter. She always felt very slightly relieved. She was heading back to normal life: to friends, family and fun. Zoe said goodbye to Leda and walked to the bus stop. She had only been allowed to travel on her own this year, after much pestering of her parents, and it still

excited her. The bus pulled up and Zoe got on, letting the hardships of the day melt away as she thought about the evening ahead.

As always, Zoe rang the doorbell, just once. Her mum opened the door and gave her a hug. Then she had a snack and settled down to watch television for a while. Her mum joined her on the sofa, as she always did when she had the time.

They watched one of those programmes with witches or fairies in, which always seemed more or less the same. As Zoe watched the whirl of colours, magic potions and spells, almost without realising, she gradually started to lean on her mum, until her entire body was slumped against her, like a sloth, soft with sleepiness and keen for cuddles. And then, just at that moment . . .

'Mummy, why do you only love Zoe?'

For some months now, that had been Maria's favourite question and Zoe never knew whether to smile or to feel a little worried. Of course, Maria was only little but you had to try to understand her point of view. Zoe had been trying to understand her for six years now without much success. As usual, Maria's question was followed by a thud on the sofa, and then a tiny but insistent presence squeezed its way into the cosy cuddle Zoe was having with her mum. Maria wriggled in between them like a stubborn little caterpillar, twisting around to separate

them. Was she really jealous? Or was it just a game, a little ritual of hers?

'You know I love all three of you the same,' Mum said, like someone repeating a refrain without even thinking about the words. 'You *do* know that, don't you?'

'Yes, but I want to watch television with you too.'

The duo became a trio, and slowly Zoe settled back down to watch the programme again. Maria was noisy though, and sang along with all the theme songs.

A bit later, Zoe felt a shadow over her. 'Oh, look at that, the gang's all here.'

'Come on, Sara, come and join us,' Mum said.

Zoe's older sister Sara flopped on to the sofa with a small sigh and Maria climbed on to her. Just for a while, they all sat together.

At one time, Zoe and her sister Sara were good friends. After all, there were only three years between them and they shared the same room and the same toys. Sara even used to dress Zoe up and put make-up on her and pretend she was a living doll and then show her off to her friends, who were a bit jealous because they only had brothers, the poor things. Then everything changed. Zoe started going to Ballet Academy, and Maria was born. They moved to a new house and everyone had their own bedroom. Zoe and Sara grew apart. Sara was grown-up now – she wore real make-up, even though she wasn't

supposed to. Heaven help anyone who told on her though. But Zoe wouldn't dream of doing that – Maria was the one with the big mouth.

Now Zoe and Sara were more like two classmates who had been put next to each other. They had nothing in common and no desire to find out if they had anything in common. But as they sat together on the sofa, Zoe wondered if they might grow close again.

The programme finished and Mum switched off the television.

'I have to go and play now,' announced Maria, and she slid off the sofa to go to her room.

Sara got up and left too, without saying anything. In another few minutes, Mum left too, and Zoe knew the cosy time was over for another day.

Zoe was always the one who helped to lay the table in the evening. One of the advantages of Ballet Academy was that there was no homework to do during the week. Dad was at home all day on Saturday and Sunday, and on those days he took care of the evening meal from start to finish, from shopping and cooking to laying the table. His *pasta al forno* was the best in the world.

However, as it was a Thursday evening, it was Zoe who picked the colour of the paper napkins, so that they matched the tablecloth, and took care of everything else

as well. As she set the table, she chatted with her mum.

'How's Leda?' her mum asked her, pouring herself a glass of white wine. 'You haven't invited her over for a while.'

'I have invited her,' said Zoe, 'but she always says no. I think she feels self-conscious now she has grown so tall.'

'Oh dear. But she needn't worry – no one's going to stare at her here. Leda . . . it's a good name for a ballerina.'

'Why?'

'Well, did you know that her name comes from a Greek myth? Leda was a beautiful girl and Zeus, the king of the gods, fell in love with her. To win her over, he transformed himself into a swan.'

'All ballerinas are a bit like swans, aren't they?' Zoe replied.

She had a clear memory from when she was little – only three years old – when she went to see a ballet for the first time with her family. It wasn't *Swan Lake*, it was *Giselle*, but the ballerinas with their long white tutus and their soft, agile arms had looked like swans gliding over a lake.

'Oh, absolutely,' said her mum. 'But maybe she feels a little more like the ugly duckling at the moment.'

'She's better off than Anna, though. At least she's still got nice, smooth skin. Well, normal skin, anyway. Anna's

covered in spots, poor thing. And she hasn't eaten any chocolate for months.'

'They'll pass soon enough,' said Zoe's mum. 'It's all part of growing up.' She smiled. 'When you were all little, there weren't any of these sorts of problems.'

'No, that's true,' said Zoe. 'We just had to be good little girls.'

'And you all were good little girls, back then. You were good and sweet and full of life and all you wanted was to become even better. Oh, my goodness! The water's boiling.'

Her mum got up and went to check the pasta. Zoe slipped out of the kitchen. She stopped in front of the long mirror in the hall and felt happy about what she saw. The girl looking back at her was not too tall, nor too short, not fat and not too thin. She had long legs – you could see that even when she was wearing jeans. And the wrists emerging from the sleeves of her jumper were slender ones. Her hair was still in the tight bun the school insisted on, but some strands had slipped out of the hairpins and were softening the contours of her face, which was longish, with sharp cheekbones. She had big, hazel eyes – honey eyes, her dad said – pale eyebrows and the same smooth skin as Maria, with the same freckles.

Are you going to change as you get older? Zoe silently asked her reflection. Of course she would. But how

much? And in what way? Zoe was curious to find out what would happen to her, and a little scared, but she knew there was nothing she could do about it. She sighed to herself as she walked away from the mirror – she was just growing up.