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opening extract from

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CHAPTER ONE

The Holidays



When she was away on holiday, Zoe always felt she was beyond time and space; as if she was suspended in mid-air – floating, free. It was partly because she could forget the usual rules and routines of Ballet Academy and partly because when she went to a different place, *she* felt different too. This year, she'd gone on holiday with her family to the French Alps for the whole month of August – a place they'd never visited before.

They had rented an apartment with a large balcony full of geraniums. The geraniums made such an effort to be red and luxuriant that they seemed to be in competition with the geraniums in the surrounding windowboxes. Zoe

was sharing a room with Maria. Sara was the oldest, so she was allowed to have her own room, but it was fine – Zoe didn't mind sharing with her little sister.

From the small balcony of their room, Zoe could look out over the perfect green of the gently sloping meadow, and breathe in the grass-scented air, which smelled like an enormous cup of herbal tea. As she stood there, Zoe felt like a perfect stranger, a stranger even to herself somehow.

There were some other children staying in the ground-floor apartment, and others in the building next door, which was separated from theirs only by a low fence. As far as those new children were concerned, Zoe wasn't a ballerina from the prestigious Ballet Academy and she wasn't the girl that she normally was outside of school either. Instead, she was just a fun, wild girl, rather unpredictable and full of great ideas.

One day, though, she told Alice – her almost instant best friend – all about herself. It was raining and they'd holed up in the bedroom, both of them sitting on the top bunk where Zoe slept, with the sloping roof just above their heads. It felt like being up a tree or in a secret den. Strange, almost grey, light filtered through the lace curtains, and there was perfect silence outside.

'I'm studying dance,' Zoe said out of the blue.

Alice looked at her from beneath her thick blond fringe and replied, 'I play basketball. But I might stop in

September – I want to try out martial arts.'

Zoe could tell that Alice hadn't understood (how could she?), so she continued, 'It's really serious, though, what I'm doing.'

And then she told her all about the Academy, and Alice opened her eyes wide when she heard the name of the school, because even though she lived in a town by the sea, miles and miles away from Zoe, *everyone* had heard of the Ballet Academy.

Zoe told her about Madame Olenska, probably the strictest teacher in the world, and all about Leda and her other friends. She explained about the school rules and the really tough entrance procedure and end-of-year exams, and she told Alice about all of the children who started at the school and then had to leave because they couldn't cope. She told her how exciting the recitals were and about the hard work they had to do every day. Finally, the two girls sat in silence, just listening to the water gurgling in the gutter.

'Wow,' Alice said after quite a long time. 'I've never met a real ballerina before.'

'But I'm not a real ballerina yet,' Zoe said. 'I might be one day. I don't know for sure.'

'You're so lucky, knowing what you want to be when you grow up,' Alice said. 'I still haven't decided. Maybe an archaeologist or a vet. Hmm. Hey, I think it might have stopped raining.'

Zoe reached over to the window and pulled the curtain aside. Alice was right. The world outside was dripping wet, but it was calm, and the light was changing – it was more golden, more colourful. A moment later, they were outside, and that was the end of the conversation.

Later that evening, listening to the gentle breathing of her little sister in the bunk below, Zoe lay awake and wondered whether she *was* really certain about what she wanted to do when she grew up. Try as she might, she couldn't quite answer the question. Five minutes later, though, she was asleep, and she didn't think about it again for ages. It wasn't really the sort of thing she wanted to think about on holiday.

A few days later, all of Zoe's family went on a trip with Alice's family. Alice was one of three children too, but she had brothers and they were all older than her. They made quite a crowd. They'd set themselves a challenging walk to a mountain hut beside a small lake, which would take them about three hours, and was all uphill. After an hour and a half, Maria sat down on a rock and wailed that she couldn't take another step. Ed and Luke, Alice's brothers, were tired too but they obviously didn't want to admit it. It was Sara who finally convinced Maria to carry on by promising to give her one of her old dolls once they got home. And so the walk continued. Zoe was the only one who never stopped and never complained. It really didn't feel like much of an effort to her.

'Of course it's easy for you. You're a ballerina!' Alice panted at her when they finally reached their goal and collapsed on the benches outside the mountain hut.

Zoe just smiled. There were advantages to being a ballerina: her body was used to doing what she told it to – it obeyed instinctively, without being bullied into it.

Zoe opened up her rucksack, took out a bar of hazelnut chocolate and broke it in half with a snap. 'Here you go,' she said to Alice, giving her one of the pieces. Zoe sank her teeth into the hard, crunchy chocolate and the delicious flavour filled her mouth. She felt proud of her body – proud and grateful too. It felt as though she was thanking her body by giving it this small pleasure.

When their holiday was over, Zoe and Alice swapped phone numbers and kept in touch by texting. Zoe's mum and dad had given her a mobile phone as a present at the end of the school year. It was so difficult to say anything important in just a few words, though. Texts were better for quick messages and jokes. Zoe started texting away like mad with Leda, her best friend. Leda hadn't been an instant best friend like Alice, but she'd been her best friend since forever – her real best friend.

Zoe and Leda met up quite often in the ten days before school started again, and Zoe told Leda all about Alice, but tried not to make their friendship sound too important. Leda had gone to the seaside for a fortnight

with her dad (who had split up from her mum) and Leda had spent the entire time practically glued to him, because she was so happy to be with him. That meant she hadn't made any new friends or done anything much. But she was happy to keep talking about her dad, telling Zoe how her dad did this and her dad did that, and then he said this, and then he did that, and then he bought her a . . .

Zoe felt really sorry for Leda. She could see how much she missed her dad, but now that everything was returning back to normal, Leda would only see him once a week, twice if she was lucky.

A few days before school started again, Zoe realised she was almost happy that the holidays were nearly over. Going back to the Academy gave her a sense of security: knowing exactly what each day would be like and what she was going to be doing put her in a good mood.

It was an important September for Maria as well, because she was starting at a new school. She was pretending that it was no big deal, but every now and then a casual question slipped out and gave her away. 'What if the teacher doesn't like me?' Maria would ask suddenly, or 'What if I don't like the teacher?' A few nights before, when Zoe was almost asleep, she'd felt a warm little bundle snuggling up to her. 'Can I come into your bed?' It was Maria, sounding agitated.

'Of course,' said Zoe, and she wriggled over to make space for her sister. She stroked her hair to calm her down.

'I don't think I want to go to school,' Maria said after a while.

'Oh yes, you do,' Zoe told her. 'It's just that you don't know it. There's no way you can know how much fun it will be yet. You'll see.'

Then she reminded her of the things that you do at school – about new schoolbooks, reading, drawing, games . . . She made it sound as exciting as she could. And, after a while, Maria dropped off and all her little worries vanished into sleep. Zoe hugged her tight and thought how happy she was to have a sister who still needed her sometimes.

CHAPTER TWO

New Arrivals



Zoe may have been looking forward to the comforting familiarity of a new school year, but there were always a few surprises too. One of the things Zoe had to do back at school was go to the costume department, to try on her new leotard. Now that she was one of the first year seniors, she'd left behind the simple, sleeveless leotard that the juniors wore. The uniform was still black, but with three-quarter-length sleeves and a beautiful short skirt.

Demetra, the head of the costume department, saw Zoe coming in and immediately said, 'Have you seen how gorgeous the new teacher is?'

Zoe was amazed, mostly at hearing Demetra talking

about a teacher like that, but also because she hadn't known that there was going to be a new teacher. When she went to the changing rooms to get ready for the first lesson, the news was spreading fast.

'His name's Kai Zwerger,' Paula announced. Paula always knew everything about everybody. 'He's studied in Paris and New York.'

'He's twenty-eight,' added Francine, wrinkling her nose. 'A bit too old for me.'

'Yes, but have you seen his beautiful eyes?' Paula said. 'They're so yummy I could almost eat them up.'

Zoe couldn't help grinning as she imagined Paula the cannibal using a dainty silver fork to spear two blue eyes – his eyes would just have to be blue, wouldn't they – and then popping them into her mouth like a couple of grapes or cherry tomatoes.

'What are you smiling at, Zoe?' said Paula, who never missed anything.

'Oh, nothing. I was just thinking,' Zoe answered. 'Who were you talking about?'

'The new teacher for character dance,' they all chorused.

Zoe didn't say anything, she just drifted into a daydream. Zoe really, really loved character dance – the rich variety of folk dances that found their way into classical ballet. Some of the tunes seemed to beat in Zoe's muscles, and pulse around her body with her blood. And when that happened she just let herself go

and let the rhythm carry her along.

Their lessons also included trying out more interpretative styles of dance, which Zoe loved too, because her body was so free to move, and so was her face. She didn't need to have that fixed smile on her lips that made ballerinas look like dolls. She could scowl or grimace. Even her fingers and toes played a part and weren't imprisoned by the classical positions. And her shoulders and neck got to join in too – the whole body was used, so Zoe could transform herself into a cat, a bear, a frog . . . the only limit was her imagination.

'Hey, Zoe. Are you ready?' Leda startled Zoe out of her trance and brought her back down to earth. 'Come on! The lesson's starting.'

And then they were at the barre, each of them chained to the spot by Madame Olenska's fierce and forceful gaze.

At the beginning of the class, she said, 'Good morning and best wishes for the new school year. The first year of senior school will be very, very demanding. To those of you who have already studied with me, I will only say that you will have to work even harder than before.' And she ran her eyes over last year's students: Anna and Francine, Laila, Leda and Zoe, Paula, Sophie, Estelle, Stephanie, Alissa on one side, and Lucas, Roberto, Matthew and Jamie at the back.

'As for the new arrivals,' she continued, 'I can only hope that you have talent and dedication. Without talent,

dedication is useless. But without dedication, talent just withers and dies, like a flower without water. Just like this.' She used her hands to mime a flower wilting away.

Zoe couldn't resist the temptation to peek in the mirror to see the expressions of the two new students. There was Haydée, whose incredibly red hair went all the way down to her waist when she let it loose – although at the moment, of course, she had it up in a big, full bun for the lesson. And there was Leo, who had very dark eyes hiding beneath a fringe that was just a bit too long. Haydée looked nervous, but Leo seemed calm. Zoe would almost have thought he was smiling, if it weren't for the fact that smiling was not acceptable in lessons, unless Madame Olenska instructed you to do so. Both new students had already introduced themselves to the class during normal lessons. They seemed nice, but it was hard to tell anything more at this early stage.

Then the lesson began, and everything was the same as usual, or so it seemed to Zoe. She didn't feel another year older. She didn't even think she'd grown all that much. She was wearing the shoes that she'd bought for the end-of-year recital and her exam. That all seemed like such a long time ago although it was only ten weeks before – something that somebody else had done. Zoe could remember all of the exercises that Madame had ordered her to do for the exam, one after the other, watched by the critical eyes of the committee. She'd danced very calmly, almost clinically. But

everything had gone fine, which must mean that emotion wasn't a required ingredient.

However, now that she was thinking about character dance, Zoe felt a kind of excitement that was new to her. She wished they were in the other dance studio, up on the top floor. It had a view out over the city, so her imagination could really take off – and start to wander a long way, and become lost amongst the patterns of the roofs, the television aerials and the church spires. Of course, she really shouldn't spend all her time gazing out of the windows when a new teacher had come all the way from the other side of the world especially to teach her class how to do the kind of dancing that Zoe liked best.

'And three, and four.' Madame Olenska stopped beside Zoe. 'Zoe, are you still on holiday? Let me take this opportunity to remind you that the new school year has begun.'

It was strange, but Madame didn't seem quite as strict as usual. She almost seemed to be joking with Zoe so her words didn't make Zoe feel bad, but bounced off her skin like raindrops instead. *Fine then, I'll concentrate,* Zoe thought, and she really did. She banished her wandering thoughts and concentrated fully on the barre, the wooden floor and the gentle motion of legs bending and straightening, up and down, up and down.

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