

CHAPTER 1

*“We never know how high we are
Till we are called to rise;
And then, if we are true to plan,
Our statures touch the skies—
The Heroism we recite
Would be a daily thing,
Did not ourselves the Cubits warp
For fear to be a King—”
Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)*

New York City, September 1, 1965.

Beads of perspiration trickled down my spine inside my already damp, lavender leotard as I stood in the center of Studio A.

Biting my nails and hoping for a place in a real ballet company, I watched five judges grimace, throw their hands in the air and argue. Their final decision would guarantee a contract for one, lucky girl.

I heard from ballet friends, some dancers spent years applying to professional companies but never got the chance to audition. And here I’m wringing my hands until my knuckles turned white because I just tried out.

“Please, judges,” I muttered under my breath. “Pick me, see me,” and stared at the five men and women seated behind the long table.

Shifting from side to side, antsy as a flea on Aunt Lucy’s Yorkshire terrier, I couldn’t stand still. *How could I?* Paying attention to five decision makers intimidated us applicants and the crowd now entering the room. *Why?*

The judges included a legendary prima ballerina, a Sadler Wells ballerina and three male soloists and choreographers as austere and stand-offish as Odette and Siegfried. Occasionally, to fend off an impasse, a judge would break his or her Swan Lake pose and point to our resumes or their notes.

Wow, stunning blue-grey eyes and blonde hair as bright as straw when sunshine streamed through the windows in the roof. The vision was Yuri Konstantinov, a premiere dancer, formerly of the Leningrad-Kirov Ballet. Seated in the center of the judge’s table, he defected from the U.S.S.R. six months earlier while dancing in Paris. *Holy cow!* The guy was so handsome I thought I’d stop breathing when he glanced up and stared at my face. My pulse rate spiked at this mighty pang of anxiety. Good thing he looked back down at his notes, I could breathe again and not turn blue. *Whew! I’m telling Aunt Lucy and Bubbe I saw this gorgeous man. Like a movie star, he looked better in person than his picture in the Sunday Times.*

Judges, please hurry. This waiting is awful. The clock over the studio door told me eleven minutes passed since we ended with thirty-two fouettes. *Dollars to donuts*, if I could scream or jump up and down to help these deciders make up their minds, I’d do it. Patience is not a virtue to my way of thinking even when my dad yelled at least a hundred times, “Wait your turn, Sarah! Enough!” *Huh?* I never thought it necessary.

Should I make a run for it? Sprint out the door and quit this torture? No way. I'd danced too many hours in front of these people to quit now.

We seven finalists, with a number pinned to our chests eyed one another like a Halloween spook show checking out costumes. No "Miss Congeniality" would be awarded here. Every time the red-haired girl next to me looked my way, she crossed her eyes. *What's with her?*

I turned my head and focused on more fresh faces marching in single file through the opened doors of Studio A. Parents, teachers and friends waiting in the lobby could now enter the room and hear the judges announce the winner. They took seats on benches, along the floor to ceiling mirrors and stared at us finalists.

Some families whispered among themselves. They looked nervous wiggling in place, swinging their feet or as the two women seated in front of me, filed their nails. Six stage mothers belonging to six finalists stood gawking at the judges. Inch by inch, they moved a little closer to the judge's table trying to listen.

Oh gosh, I could use a hot shower, a gigantic hamburger with everything on it except the sweet pickle and a chocolate egg cream.

Good night! Without any fanfare, Mrs. Pace, the company director, stepped up to the microphone and my heart skipped a beat.

An eerie silence hit the room. Mrs. Pace, dressed like a Vogue Magazine model in an elegant pale grey suit with fancy gold and grey braided trim, stood and smiled. She hesitated and fingered a string of pearls around her neck.

"Thank you, all," she gestured to the group seated at the long table, "to my panel of esteemed judges and artists. You took time out of your busy schedules, to help decide which finalist should dance with our City Center Ballet Theatre."

The audience applauded.

Mrs. Pace turned to us seven finalists standing in one, long line.

"And to our talented young ladies, we thank you for your hard work by taking part in this grueling, audition process. We wish we could pick more dancers but we can only choose one. But, before I announce the winner ..."

A groan echoed throughout the room.

"Wait, please." Mrs. Pace held up her hands. "The happy news is ... our winner will perform as a soloist in a new ballet, choreographed by Mr. Yuri Konstantinov."

The room thundered with applause.

"Mr. Konstantinov will dance the lead in his new ballet, *Colors of The Rainbow*. His first, full-length production and we are thrilled to introduce his genius to New York City."

Applause.

"The world premiere is set for mid-October at the City Center Theatre." She paused ... "Ladies and gentlemen, I present, Mr. Yuri Konstantinov."

The Russian dancer shoved his chair back, stood up and waved. The crowd rose to their feet and clapped like crazy loons.

As the applause continued, Mr. Konstantinov walked over to Mrs. Pace. He kissed her hand and gave her the envelope.

Two girls in the audience shrieked and the crowd laughed and applauded.

Mrs. Pace put on her glasses and opened the judge's decision. The crowd stopped applauding and grew silent.

"Ladies and gentlemen. The winner is ... Sarah Rothman. A seventeen-year-old from Brooklyn Heights, New York."

Holy cow! My heart beat like a jackhammer.

“Miss Sarah Rothman, a student from the Brooklyn School of Ballet, welcome to the City Center Ballet Theatre. Please, step forward. Congratulations!”

My hands flew to my mouth stifling the word “yes” and I walked up to Mrs. Pace and accepted a bouquet of long-stemmed, red roses. She touched my shoulder and smiled. “These flowers represent the first of many. Congratulations, Sarah Rothman.”

I choked back tears of joy. The moment so special I’d never forget. A few tears did escape down my cheeks and someone in the audience offered me a tissue.

“Thanks,” I muttered looking at the woman whose eyes glistened as much as mine.

Mrs. Pace kissed my cheeks and put her arm around my shoulders. The crowd applauded her affection.

Me, the kid from public schools, the streets of Brooklyn and Miss Candy’s ballet class at the St. Felix Playhouse, the Academy of Music. I mumbled, “Thank you,” several times and meant it.

Yuri Konstantinov kissed my hand and in a foreign accent, I thought he said “Congratulations” but wasn’t sure. He leaned in and said something else but all I understood was, “Sa-rah Rot-ting-man or ham.”

Good golly, he smelled so good like the subtle scent of suede and leather. Not the odor of my brothers and dad who used Old Spice, that stinky stuff in the television commercials I hated.



Reporters from the New York Times and New York Post interviewed Mrs. Pace, Yuri Konstantinov and me. Their newspaper photographers asked us to pose for pictures and we did. The Russian dancer put his arm around my waist and gently yanked me to his side. Startled by his warm body, I flinched.

He laughed, “Da, okay, fo-toe.”

“Really a photo?” The hair on my arms stood up.

“Da, fo-toe,” he nodded and Mrs. Pace chuckled, “It’s alright, Sarah. We’re posing for the press.”

I blushed feeling his hand slide around my waist for the second time. He pulled my hips against his hard body. *Wow! Some introduction.*

We three smiled for dozens of popping flashbulbs and became blinded by the flashes but only for a minute or two and then it was over. Everybody thanked everybody.

Mike Kravitz, a reporter wearing a New York Times Press Pass with a photo I.D. asked, “Miss Rothman, how do you feel at this very moment? What are your thoughts?”

“Oh, um, ah, I, I guess I have to say, I’m dreaming. I mean ... yes, I love ballet ... I loved ‘The Red Shoes,’ I saw it twice.”

“You mean the movie? The Red Shoes?”

“Yes, Aunt Lucy took me. It was the best birthday ever. I was eight years old. Did you see it?”

“No. I was more into hockey and baseball.”

My chest started to heave and the tears welled up.

“Miss Rothman, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt your feeling.”

“No, no, no,” I sniffled.

“What is it?”

“I’m alone,” I blurted out. “Nobody in my family came to see me audition. Aunt Lucy tried to get Uncle Al to close the deli but he wouldn’t do it. My family worked.”

“But, when they hear you won, they’ll be happy.”

“Why?” I sobbed. “I took the subway alone. I danced two hours alone. That’s not happy, nobody cares.”

A tall, young man shouted, “I care. The audience cares.”

“But, I didn’t share it with my family.”

“You shared it with us. Hey, I’m Gary. I’m a friend of one of the judges. I got to stay and watch you dance.”

I smiled at the tall, young man, “Thank you.”

Several teenage girls circled around me. “Congratulations. You’re really lucky to win. We’re going to buy tickets to see you dance.”

“You are? You’re coming to see me? Ah, wow.”

“See, Miss Rothman,” interrupted Gary moving closer. “You’re not alone. We’re cheering for you.”

“Yes, I guess,” I sniffled. “Do you have a hankie? I have to blow my nose.”

Gary shook his head but the reporter offered me his.

I blew my nose long and loud. “Honk, honk ... there, I blow my nose like everybody else. Are you gonna print that?”

“Sure, can I quote you?”

“No.” I stopped blubbing and frowned. “I’ll wash the hankie for you.”

“No, keep it.” He glanced over his shoulder, “I have to go. Good luck.”

Mrs. Pace walked up and whispered in my ear. “Sarah, let’s put on a happy face and smile for our guests. That’s what we do.”

“Yes, Mrs. Pace.”

“Good girl.”



Earlier in the day, when I rode the BMT alone into Manhattan, I looked forward to this final audition. Knowing my family couldn’t make it wasn’t a problem until Mrs. Pace announced my name.

Three hundred and twenty-two girls competed for the prize and I won. The New York Times reporters considered my winning an achievement; a real accomplishment. As Mike Kravitz wrote the following day, “Inspiring and awesome for one so young.”

And being a soloist without dancing in the corps de ballet first? “It’s you,” said my Aunt Lucy. “You grabbed the brass ring on the Coney Island, Merry-go-round. An honor, dancers struggle to achieve. A few make it, most don’t. Consider yourself ahead of the game.”

“And to be young and talented and win the lead role in a new ballet by a Russian premiere dancer?” quoted the New York Post and the local television news, “surprised everybody.”

But it didn’t surprise me. At seventeen, I knew what I wanted. What could go wrong?