

The Year of Shadows



Author of THE CAVENDISH HOME FOR BOYS AND GIRLS

CLAIRE LEGRAND

*For the music teachers, mine and everywhere—
—and for Mom, my anchor*

Acknowledgments

This is, for many reasons, a special book to me. My own experience as a musician is one of these reasons (I used to be a trumpet player, but I was not much of a charmer); my mom's bout with cancer, which colored the writing of this book, is another. I therefore have many people to thank:

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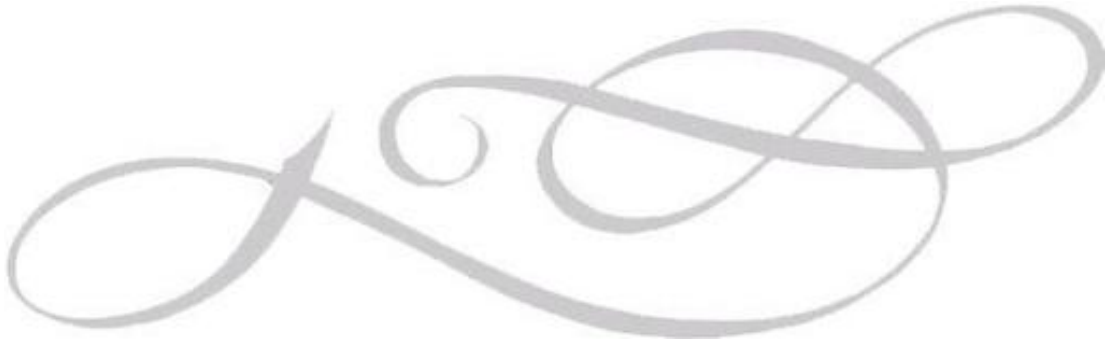
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PART ONE





THE YEAR THE ghosts came started like this:

The Maestro kicked open the door, dropped his suitcase to the floor, and said, “*Voilà!*”

“I’ve seen it before,” I said. In fact, I’d basically grown up here, in case he’d forgotten.

“Yes, but take a look at it. Really look.” He said this in that stupid Italian accent of his. I mean, he was full Italian and all (I was only half), but did he have to sound so much like an Italian?

I crossed my arms and took a good, long look.

Rows of seats with faded red cushions. Moth-eaten curtains framing the stage. The dress circle boxes, where the rich people sat. Chandeliers, hanging from the ceiling that was decorated with painted angels, and dragons, and fauns playing pipes. The pipe organ, looming like a hibernating monster at the back of the stage. Sunlight from the lobby behind us slanted onto the pipes, making them gleam.

Same old Emerson Hall. Same curtains, same seats, same dragons.

The only thing different this time was us.

And our suitcases.

“Well?” the Maestro said. “What do we think?”

He was on one side of me, and Nonnie on the other. She clapped her hands and pulled the scarf off her head. Underneath the scarf, she was almost completely bald, with only a few straggly gray hairs left.

The day Mom disappeared about nine months ago, just before Christmas, Nonnie had shaved all her hair off.

“Oh!” Her wrinkled face puckered into a smile. “I think it’s beautiful.”

My fingers tightened on the handle of my suitcase, the ratty red one with the caved-in side. “You’ve seen it before, Nonnie. We all have, a million times.”

“But is different now!” Nonnie twisted her scarf in her hands. “Before, was symphony hall. Now, is home. *È meglio*.”

I ground my teeth together, trying not to scream. “It’s still a symphony hall.”

“Olivia?” The Maestro was watching me, smiling, trying to sound like he really cared what I thought. “What do you think?”

When I didn’t answer, Nonnie clucked her tongue. “Olivia. You should answer your father.”

The Maestro and I didn’t talk much anymore. Not since Mom left, and even for a couple of months before that, when he was so busy with rehearsals and concerts and trying to save the orchestra by begging for money from rich people at fancy dinners that he wouldn’t come home until late. Sometimes he wouldn’t come home at all, not until the next morning when Mom and I were in the kitchen, eating breakfast.

Then they would start yelling at each other.

I didn’t like breakfast much after that. Every time I looked at cereal, I felt sick.

“He’s not my father,” I whispered. “He’s just the Maestro.” I felt something change in that moment. I knew I would never again call him “Dad.” He didn’t deserve it. Not after this. This was the last straw in a whole pile of broken ones.

“*Ombralina* . . . ,” Nonnie scolded. *Ombralina*. Little shadow. It was her nickname for me.

The Maestro stood there, watching me with those black eyes of his. I hated that we shared the same color eyes. I could feel something building inside me, something dangerous.

“I think I’m going to throw up,” I announced.

Then I turned and ran outside, my suitcase banging against my legs. Out through the lobby, past the curling grand staircases and the box office window, and onto the sidewalk. Right out front, at the corner of Arlington Avenue and Wichita Street, I threw down my suitcase and screamed.

The traffic sped by—cars, trucks, cabs. People pushed past me—office workers out for lunch, grabbing sandwiches, talking on their phones. Nobody noticed me. Nobody even glanced my way.



Same old Emerson Hall. Same curtains, same seats, same dragons. The only thing different this time was us. And our suitcases.

Since Mom left, not many people noticed me. I wore black a lot now. I liked it; black was calming. My hair was long, and black too, and shiny, and I wore it down most of the time. I liked to hide behind it and pretend I didn't exist.

I couldn't decide if I wanted to cry or hit something, so I turned back to Emerson Hall's double oak doors. Stone angels perched on either side, playing their trumpets. Someone had climbed up there and spray-painted the angels orange and red. I squinted my eyes, trying to imagine the Hall's blurry shape into something like a home. But it didn't work. It was still a huge, drafty music hall with spray-painted angels, and yet I was supposed to live here now.

"Might as well go back in." I kicked open the door as hard as I could. "Not like there's anywhere else to go."



Our rooms were two empty storage rooms backstage: one on one side of the main rehearsal room, and one on the other side. There was also a cafeteria area with basic kitchen stuff like a sink, microwave, mini-fridge, and hot plate. It used to be for the musicians, so they could break for lunch during a long day of rehearsals.

Not anymore, though. It was our kitchen now.

The Maestro, Nonnie, and I hauled our suitcases backstage—one for each of us, and that's all we had in the world, everything we owned.

The Maestro disappeared into the storage room that would be his bedroom and started blasting Tchaikovsky's Symphony no. 4 on the ancient stereo that had been there for years. The speakers crackled and popped. Tchaik 4—that's what the musicians called it—was the first piece of music on the program that year. Rehearsals would start soon.

Nonnie carefully arranged her suitcase in the middle of the rehearsal room, surrounded by stacked chairs, music stands, and the musicians' lockers, lining the walls. She perched on her suitcase and waved her scarf at me. Then she started humming, twisting her scarf around her fingers.

Nonnie didn't do much these days but hum and twist her scarves.

I sat beside her for the longest time, listening to her hum and the Maestro blast his music. I felt outside of myself, distant and floaty, like if I concentrated too hard on what was happening, I might totally lose it. The tiny gusts of ice-cold air I kept feeling drift past me didn't help. *Great, I thought. It's already freezing in here, and it's not even fall yet.*

This couldn't be happening. Except it was.



Nonnie and I each had tiny cots that came with sheets already on them. I wasn't sure where the Maestro had bought them, but I didn't trust strange sheets, so I took them down the street to the coin laundry and remade the beds.

That put me in an awful mood. Buying the detergent and paying for the laundry had cost us a few bucks, and every few bucks was precious when you didn't have a lot to begin with.

Nonnie and I also each had a quilt. Mom had made them during one of her crafty phases when she'd spread out all sorts of things over the kitchen table after dinner—fabrics, scissors, spools of thread, paper she'd brought home from her office.

The Maestro came into our bedroom while I was spreading out the quilts over our cots.

"You should get rid of those ratty old things," he said.

"This is my and Nonnie's bedroom." I kept smoothing out my quilt, not looking at him. "And you should get out."

He was quiet, watching me. "I have some money for you. If you want to go get some things for your room, school supplies. School starts soon, doesn't it?"

"Yeah." I took the crumpled twenty from him. "You should get out."

After a minute, he did.



When the beds were made, I found some boxes in the rehearsal room that didn't look too old or beat-up. I also found a couple of old pianos, rickety music stands, chairs with shattered seats. All the broken stuff.

I refused to live out of my suitcase. It was too depressing. I stacked my clothes in one box and Nonnie's clothes in another box and arranged them at the ends of our beds, on their sides with the flaps like cupboard doors. Then I shoved our suitcases under the beds so we wouldn't have to look at them.

I lugged a couple of music stands to our bedroom and put them beside each of our beds, lying their tops flat like trays, so we could have nightstands. On my "nightstand," I carefully arranged my sketchpad and my set of charcoals and drawing pencils. It all looked so sad, sitting there next to my fold-up cot in my bedroom that had ugly concrete walls because it was never meant to be a bedroom.

Nonnie came up behind me and hugged my arm. She could always tell when I was upset.

"Maybe we need more color in these rooms," she suggested.

"Yeah. Maybe."

I couldn't stop thinking about our old house uptown, the pretty red-brick one with the blue door. The one we'd had to sell because the Maestro had taken a pay cut and we couldn't afford to live there anymore. Because the orchestra didn't have any money, so the Maestro couldn't get paid as much as he used to.

Because he'd auctioned off everything we owned so he could plug more money into the orchestra to keep it alive.

I hated the orchestra, and Emerson Hall, and everything associated with either of those things—including the Maestro—more than I could possibly put into words.

So I drew the hate instead. I drew everything. That's why my sketchpad got a place of honor right beside my bed.

"I'll be back later, Nonnie." I shoved the Maestro's money into my pocket, tied one of Nonnie's scarves over my hair, and slammed on my sunglasses—the glamorous, cat-eyed ones Mom had bought for me. Like those actresses from the black-and-white movies wore, like Audrey Hepburn and Lauren Bacall. Mom loved those movies.

“They’re so elegant,” she’d say, hugging me on the sofa while we sipped milk through crazy straws. “You know? The way they talk and walk and dress. It’s like a dream.”

“Uh-huh.” I didn’t get what the big deal was about Cary Grant. I thought he talked kind of funny, honestly. But I’d say whatever Mom wanted to hear.

It made me kind of sick, to think about that now. How did I never see it, right there in front of me? That someday she would leave me?

I shut my eyes on that thought and pretended to squeeze it away. I didn’t like feeling mad at Mom, like if I got too mad, she’d sense it. She’d be right outside with her suitcase, ready to come back to us, and then she’d feel how mad I was and change her mind. She’d walk away, forever this time.

It was easier to get angry at the Maestro. After all, if it wasn’t for him, Mom might still be around.

“Where are you going, *ombralina*?” Nonnie asked as I headed out the door.

“Shopping.”

If the Maestro wouldn’t take care of us, I would. And if he wouldn’t give me and Nonnie a real home, I’d do my best to make us one.



There was this charity store right off Arlington at Clark Street. It had a soup kitchen and a food store, clothes, and household goods. I walked there as fast as possible, huddling beneath my scarf and sunglasses. If I had to go there, no way was anyone going to recognize me. The thought of going there made me want to smash things, or maybe just huddle up in Mom’s quilt and never come out.

I’d never had to shop at a charity store before. No one I knew had ever had to either. I’d have to go back to school in two days being the girl who shops at a charity store. On top of the girl whose father is going crazy, who draws weird pictures all the time, who lives in a symphony hall like some kind of stray animal.

The girl whose mom left.



SEPTEMBER

THIS IS WHAT I got at the Clark Street charity store:

- 1) a pack of multicolored construction paper, for decorating our ugly gray walls
- 2) soup, pasta, milk, bread, a bag of potatoes
- 3) two pairs of flip-flops for me and Nonnie, for when we showered at the Y a couple blocks over (there weren't any showers at Emerson Hall, just toilets with rust around the rims)
- 4) for Nonnie: a new green scarf with gold flowers on it
- 5) for school: a couple of spiral notebooks, folders, pens, pencils

I felt a little bad about buying the scarf for Nonnie. I guess it wasn't totally necessary; she had dozens, and I could have used that money to get some spiral notebooks with designs on them instead of the plain ones. But Nonnie didn't have a lot going on in her life. She played with her scarves and slept and read the three books she owned over and over, and played Solitaire with a deck of cards that had a bunch missing, so I'd had to re-create the missing ones on index cards.

Plus, Nonnie was so small. She seemed smaller, older, and more wrinkled in the buzzing fluorescent lights backstage at Emerson Hall than she'd ever seemed before. It scared me. Kind of like how I got scared when I let myself think about where Mom might have gone. Was she happy? Or was she small and lonely, like Nonnie would be if she didn't have me?



The day before school started was a Monday. After lunch that day, I went to The Happy Place, a tea shop across the street from the Hall.

Mom started taking me there for muffins and juice when I was little, and I'd kept going even after she left. It had bright yellow walls, a bright orange door, blue lamps, and THE HAPPY PLACE written in swirly black letters above the door. On either side of it was Antonio's Shoe Repair, which had been boarded up for over a year, and a dingy gray apartment building, so The Happy Place stood out like sunshine.

"Mr. B?" I called out, stepping inside. Gerald the parrot cawed at me from his perch in the corner. I waved at him and he bobbed his head, dancing around on one leg.

Mr. Barsky popped his head up above the counter. "Why, Olivia, *ma belle! Bonjour, ma petite belle!* And how are you zis fine Monday?"

Not even Mr. Barsky's silly fake accents could make me smile today. See, he used to be an actor. He'd never "made it," as they say, but he claimed accents were his specialty, so he put on these accents all the time and pretended to be different characters. This guy, the French guy, was Ricardo.

"Isn't 'Ricardo' a Spanish name?" I'd asked him once.

He'd leaned close and waggled his eyebrows. "Ricardo is . . . a mystery, Olivia."

"Hey, Ricardo," I said, slumping onto a stool at the counter.

"Why, whatever is ze matter, mademoiselle?" Mr. Barsky flung his towel over his shoulder and started rummaging through the pastry displays. "When people wear expressions like yours, I always say, ah! Time for *une crepe!* Or, *un biscuit chocolat!*"

Mrs. Barsky came out of the kitchen with a big steaming pitcher. She clinked when she walked because she liked to wear miles of beads around her neck. Today they were a shiny ocean-green color. Her hair was silver and stuck up everywhere, and her nails were painted ten different colors, one for each finger.

“Olivia!” Mrs. Barsky said. “What a pleasure. It’s been a while. What’ll it be? Raspberry tea? Mango juice?”

“Actually, I can’t have anything.” I looked around, starting to sweat. There were only two other people here, two guys by the window chatting over some book. “I was wondering if I could work here? Just for a while, maybe.”

I didn’t want to keep waiting on crumpled twenties from the Maestro. Besides, who knew how long he’d keep giving them to me?

The Barskys looked at each other, and then at me. Mr. Barsky closed the pastry case.

“You need a job?” Mrs. Barsky asked.

“Well. Yeah.” I cleared my throat, trying to figure out how I could somehow melt into the cracks in the floor so no one would ever have to look at me again. “See, we sold our house this summer. We moved into the Hall, backstage, and we just have these suitcases, and the orchestra’s running out of money. You know, with The Economy and everything.”

I wasn’t too sure what The Economy involved, but everyone had been talking about it lately, and I knew it was something about no one having any money. Whenever grown-ups talked about it, a shadow fell over them, like they’d just heard terrible news.

“Oh, Olivia.” Mrs. Barsky said that in this sad, sighing voice. I couldn’t look at her. Instead, I pulled one of my charcoals from my bag and started scratching a doodle on a napkin. I took my charcoals with me everywhere.

“It’s just that I have to buy groceries, you know? And things for school, probably. And the Maestro doesn’t help too much. I can wipe off tables.” I dug the tip of my charcoal into the napkin. “I can wash dishes, sweep. I could probably bake cookies or something too.”

Mr. Barsky put his hand on my hand so I had to stop drawing. “Of course you can work for us, Olivia,” he said, with his normal voice, which was warm and scratchy like wool. “We’d be glad for the help. How does twenty dollars a week sound? You can come in after school.”

I cleared my throat. "I can only come in Mondays through Thursdays. Once the season starts, I've got to be around on concert nights. Nonnie likes me to be there."

"Of course," said Mrs. Barsky.

"And I can probably only stay for a little bit after school." My voice got quieter and quieter, until I almost couldn't even hear myself. "You know, because of homework, and I've got to make dinner and get Nonnie ready for bed. And I've got to have some drawing time."

I didn't feel bad talking about drawing to the Barskys. I used to go to The Happy Place all the time to draw. The green star-shaped table in the corner was my spot. Sometimes Mr. Barsky would waltz by between serving people and leave me an oatmeal raisin cookie.

"How about just half an hour after school?" Mrs. Barsky suggested. "Maybe forty-five minutes if it's busy and you don't have too much homework?"

"Perfect," I whispered. "Thanks."

Mr. Barsky patted my hand, and Gerald squawked because new people were coming in, some college kids from the university. I dug out my sunglasses and shoved them on so maybe they wouldn't look at me.

"Here," Mrs. Barsky said, on my way out the door. She put a twenty-dollar bill into my hand and folded my fingers over it. "Consider it a signing bonus. Go get yourself something nice, all right? A pick-me-up?"

I shifted back and forth from one foot to the other. If I didn't get out of there that very second, I'd start crying like some kind of pathetic baby.

"Thanks, Mrs. B," I said, and hurried out the door.



The only good thing about living in the Hall is that it had lots of staircases and sculptures and weird architecture I could use to practice drawing.

I shoved the Barskys' twenty-dollar bill into my clothes box, beneath my underwear where nobody would go looking for it. Then I headed for the grand staircases in the main lobby. Today I planned to practice drawing steps, and the ones on the grand staircases were tricky because they curved.

On my way through the west lobby, I peeked inside the Hall's propped-open doors.

A bunch of people were milling around onstage, chatting and setting out their music, blowing warm air into the cold metal tubes of their instruments.

The musicians were back.

Summer was off-season for the orchestra, like how football teams don't play in the spring. Some orchestras still had concerts during the summer, but special ones, like pops concerts and concerts for kids.

We didn't have the money for things like that, though. Instead, the Hall had stayed locked up all summer, except for when the Maestro came here to root through the music library and "get some peace and quiet." I'm not sure what he needed peace and quiet for; our house had been quiet ever since I woke up the morning Mom left, when I'd found the Maestro sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of cold coffee and his head in his hands.

Normally, I'd have gone to say hi to the musicians—given Hilda Hightower a hug, let Richard Ashley ruffle my hair, which always gave my stomach these weird floaty flips because he'd smile at me when he did it.

But not today. Today, I stayed in the shadows. If the musicians didn't already know about us selling the house and moving backstage, they'd know soon. And I didn't want to see them looking sorry for me, or hear how awful it all was, or—even worse—how everything would be okay.

I heard voices coming from around the corner, and slid back against the wall behind a pillar. The Maestro and Richard Ashley entered the Hall from the lobby.

"Maestro," Richard was saying, "you can't be serious." He looked furious. "This is no place for a twelve-year-old girl to live, much less an eighty-year-old woman."

"I had no choice," the Maestro said.

Some of the musicians onstage paused at the commotion. The Maestro clapped his hands. "What are you staring at? We start in five!"

"Maestro. *Otto*," Richard whispered. "Are things really that bad?"

“Yes.” The Maestro ran his hands through his oily black hair. “If this season goes as badly as last season . . . I don’t know what will happen. The numbers don’t look good. Donations are down. Even our regulars don’t have money to give these days.” He shoved his hands in his pockets. “We just need a year. A year to get back on our feet. Things will get better. Next year will be different, and I’ll move Olivia and her grandmother back uptown. We just need a little time.”

“Do you really think things will change this year?” Richard said.

The Maestro looked at him, not saying anything. Then he headed for the stage.

When he was gone, Richard sighed. I must have moved or something, because his eyes narrowed and he peered behind my pillar.

“Olivia!” He flashed me a smile, the one Mom had always said to watch out for, because it was “pure trumpet player,” and trumpet players could be real charmers, whatever that meant. “How was your summer?”

I wanted to shrivel up and die. I could tell he was worried I’d heard him and the Maestro talking; his voice sounded bright, and too happy. Why had I let him *see* me?

“You know. It was all right.” I folded my arms over my sketchpad and hugged it tight. “I drew a lot.”

“I would expect nothing less from my favorite artist. You’ll have to show me your new work sometime.”

My cheeks turned hot. “Okay.”

“So, Olivia.” Richard got this weird look on his face. He cleared his throat and looked back at the stage. I saw Hilda Hightower polishing the bell of her French horn. I saw Michael Orlov wheeling out his double bass. Hilda waved at me. I waved back and hoped they wouldn’t come over. I started inching away.

“I just want to check on you,” Richard said.

“About what?”

“Your dad told us what happened this summer. With your house, and the move.”