

The
Year of
Shadows

Also by Claire Legrand

The Cavendish Home for Boys and Girls

The Year of Shadows

CLAIRE LEGRAND

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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, smiling toothlessly. “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.





Caption TK

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 reshape 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 the quilts out 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.

After the beds were made, I found some boxes in the rehearsal room that didn't look too old and 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 redbrick 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.