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CHAPTER ONE

Missing Madame Olenska



When Madame Olenska went back to Russia to visit her family in St Petersburg, everyone knew that although it was just a short trip, it would have a huge impact on the Academy. With the headmistress away, were the mice going to play? No, it wasn't quite as simple as that. Madame Olenska *was* the Academy, even more so than the elegant red and gold crest that appeared above the entrance to the school and theatre and was printed on all of the posters, school reports and certificates. No one could imagine what it would be like without her for a whole two months.

As they walked out one breaktime, Zoe deliberately hung back in the main corridor. Leda stopped to wait for her, but Zoe waved her on. She wanted to go very slowly past the door to Madame Olenska's office and peep inside. The door was closed, but Zoe couldn't make out the usual silhouette moving around behind the frosted glass. Instead there was just an empty space behind the desk.

The substitute teacher hadn't arrived yet, and no one even knew if it was going to be a man or a woman. Zoe was sure that the replacement was going to be some kind of vague, insignificant person, like substitutes always tend to be, who would disappear and be forgotten as soon as everything went back to normal. But she hoped that the new person was at least going to be a good teacher. Zoe enjoyed doing the barre exercises and central practice that Madame Olenska usually taught, and she didn't want to feel that she was just going through the motions. That would be such a waste of time – like when Madame Olenska had been ill. It had happened only once in six years, for two weeks. And that woman who had stood in for her . . . What was her name again? Oh yes, Mrs Meyer. That was it. She was so nervous that she made everyone else feel nervous too. Zoe guessed that she was frightened of children and that they made her feel uncomfortable. She didn't seem to know how to deal with them at all. She just kept on simpering 'daaarling' at

them and she never told anyone off. Zoe remembered that when Madame Olenska returned, it took her over a month to get them all back in line, back to the disciplined ways in which she worked.

'You are full of faults,' she thundered at them. 'It's as though you've all caught fleas and I have to remove them, one by one!' What a nasty idea! But it had been so reassuring to hear her cane again, thumping up and down, boom boom, to the beat of your heart.

Without Madame Olenska around, they were all a little louder, particularly in the playground, and everyone was a bit more rowdy when they played games. This may also have been because it was nearly spring, even if it was still very cold.

Zoe caught up with the others, her hands thrust deep into the pockets of her quilted winter coat. In a moment of optimism, she'd left her hat inside, but her freezing ears told her that she'd made a mistake. Never mind. Roberto walked over, gave Zoe a smile, then reached inside her pocket to take her hand. Their fingers searched and found each other and then laced together. Their two hands fitted each other perfectly, and she felt a little warmer.

Lucas ran over to them, closely followed by Leda. 'Do you want to play dodgeball?' he asked. 'If you move around a bit, it warms you up. Better than just standing there with your teeth chattering.'

They reluctantly admitted that he was right. 'Okay then. Let's play,' said Leda. But everyone was still too cold, so they just stood there, looking at each other shivering, with vacant expressions on their faces. Some stubborn snow was still hanging around after the recent spell of bad weather. It had been quite extraordinary for March and the snow had paralysed the city for two whole days.

'The first thing that mountaineers lose when they're suffering from exposure is their big toes,' Leda announced in a gloomy voice. Everyone burst out laughing. Losing your big toes would be an absolute tragedy for a group of young dancers.

'You know the girl in *The Red Shoes*? That story by Hans Christian Andersen? She had both of her feet chopped off, just to get rid of the cursed shoes that made her dance and dance without ever stopping,' Paula added.

They all looked at each other and laughed again, together. There was a strange feeling of lightness in the air, something you could almost smell, something that you could breathe in. Spring? Maybe. Freedom? Perhaps.

Things felt odd again later when they had a study period instead of their usual barre lesson; no getting changed or tidying their hair really carefully – Madame Olenska wouldn't put up with a single stray hair

escaping from the girls' buns. The class had been cancelled for that day and the next. The new teacher would arrive on Monday.

At the end of the day, Roberto wasn't waiting for Zoe as he usually did; he was having an extra English lesson. He could speak English well, but he still had some problems writing it, so he often had extra classes. Zoe headed outside, thinking about how everyone liked holidays, and that even severe Madame should be enjoying her time away from the Academy.

'Hey, Zoe!'

Leda ran to catch up with her and put a hand on her shoulder. 'Why didn't you wait for me?'

'Sorry,' said Zoe. 'I was miles away, thinking about stuff.'

'Stuff? You mean Roberto, don't you?' Leda giggled.

'Come on, don't be silly. I was just thinking about Madame Olenska.'

'Going away on holiday for two whole months,' mused Leda as they continued walking. 'Lucky her.'

'It must have been really tough for her when she left Russia all those years ago.'

'Lots of people left, didn't they? Because they hated the government there. Dad told me all about it when he gave me that poster of Nureyev.'

Zoe knew the poster she was talking about. It was

really dramatic, in black and white, and showed a dancer doing an elegant jump, with his feet together, tall, agile, strong. He was one of the greatest ballet dancers the world had ever seen.

They arrived at the bus stop, and as they waited for the bus, Zoe looked around. Even though it was a cold day, the sky was bright and blue. The world seemed to be newly painted.

'Why are you so worried about Madame Olenska?' asked Leda. 'I mean, it's a relief that she's not going to be here for a while, isn't it? I don't think you could find a stricter teacher anywhere, not on Mars or Jupiter or Saturn, not in all of the galaxies, not in the entire universe . . .'

Zoe started to speak, but the bus had finally arrived and her reply was lost in the hiss of the brakes and the swish of doors opening. Even if there was no stricter teacher in the entire known and unknown universe, Zoe wanted to explain to Leda that Madame Olenska meant a lot to her, even if she was sometimes so strict that she seemed quite mean. She wanted to say that Madame Olenska wasn't really that bad, that she was fair and that she always did what was right. Madame Olenska wanted each of them to do their best and she did everything she could to make that happen, even at the risk of seeming unpleasant.

Leda was Zoe's best friend and she'd listen to her and

maybe she'd understand, but then again, she might not. She might still insist on seeing Madame Olenska as an adult who was very different from them. But even though friends can have different opinions, Zoe decided to keep these thoughts to herself. It was too difficult to share exactly what she meant. And so she didn't reply, but just slid over to the seat by the window and looked out at the darkening sky.