

SHADOW RUNNER

Prologue

The lamplighter was making his rounds, a ladder over his right shoulder, a pair of brass wick trimmers hanging from his belt. A boy of seven or eight trotted beside him carrying a can of whale oil.

The man whistled the usual cheery tune to let the locals know he was there. A black wool cap sat low on his brow to prevent him from accidentally looking into the homes of his betters. The boy didn't know his place yet. He looked everywhere and talked about everything.

Eighty streetlights lined the avenue: Argand lamps to boot. Aristocrats lived here. They liked their streets well lit, their bobbies smartly dressed and ever-present. It made them think they were safe.

An army of wicks to be trimmed and reservoirs to be filled, and the dutiful pair had to light them all before dusk.

"Don't dawdle, boy," said the man. "Give me the can."

"Yes, sir," said the boy. He snugged his hand-me-down coat tight against the chill.

"You'll do this one day, when you're taller and I'm old and bent. You'll light the way and I'll carry the can."

"What's that?" said the boy. He peered into the twilight, trying to pinpoint the figure he'd just seen. Low clouds rolled down the cobblestone street like behemoth ghosts, soundless and drifting.

"Ain't nothin'." The man clipped a wick and topped off the reservoir.

"There in the shadows. Pitch-black and hooded. Just popped into sight."

“Light’s playin’ tricks on yer eyes.” The man lit the lamp, climbed down from the ladder, and moved on to the next.

“No, I saw somethin’. Looked like a person, it did. But the eyes was scary.”

“Best remedy for beasties is a well-lit street. That’s our job.”

The boy saw it again: a shape stepping out of a blue cloud, mist trailing at its heel. The cloud abruptly disappeared, but the figure remained, making its way toward a gray Gothic Revival on the corner.

“I’m tellin’ ya it’s there. Its eyes is all glassy and haunted. Look!”

“I ain’t got time to look, especially at nothin’. Keep movin’. We’re losing the sun.”

An auto carriage trundled past and backfired. Startled, the boy dropped the can. Whale oil splashed out before he could snatch it back up.

“Look what you’ve done!” The man gave the boy a sharp cuff. “We’ve no time or coin for oil. Better hope we don’t need more. You’ll cost us the job.”

“Sorry, sir,” said the boy.

But he knew he wasn’t wrong. The indigo cloud blossomed again in front of the house and the specter disappeared inside.

CHAPTER 1: Promise

Ada’s fingers gripped the edge of the ornate writing desk as if she might fall to her death if she let go. Part of her wanted to push it over. She’d always hated Mum’s half-animal, half-furniture desk with the ball and claw feet. She imagined it coming to life one moonless night and dashing around the house like some headless lion.

A lone candle left the nurse’s face half in shadow as she sat at the desk. The lines around her mouth and eyes, crinkled as crumpled parchment, looked like they should hurt. Ada wondered if God had decided the woman was a mistake, but let her live, anyway. Wrinkled white-raisin hands traced the lattice on the gender prediction chart, searching for the path to a boy. “The Chinese have been using this for ages,” she said.

Ada wanted to inquire about that. This was England, not China. The nurse must have sailed to London on an airship. The ones with billowy sails and giant balloons that Papa talked about. She

thought it best to be silent for now. There would be time for questions later, when she'd figured out whether the woman was a gift from Papa or Mum's clandestine consultant.

An auto carriage backfired on the street, startling Ada. She lost her grip and fell to the floor. The nurse laughed and went back to her chart. Ada brushed herself off and resumed her station on tiptoes. As unofficial *Keeper of Predictions Mum Wanted to Hear*, she watched the old woman's skeletal index finger, willing it to settle on just the right square.

Brightly colored phases of the moon danced across the top of the parchment. Months lined up on the left side in gold cursive. Rows, up and down and side to side, created a grid. Each square contained a letter: blue *B* for a boy, pink *G* for a girl.

Ada glared at the counterweight clock on the wall as it marked the seconds until the final proclamation. Tick, tick, tick...

Just be quiet, she thought. I must concentrate on the right answer, or it might not happen. Why do we have to wait in the dark? She eyed the newly installed gas-powered chandelier in the center of the ceiling. Surely, a house that could afford new-fangled lights could afford to turn them on. Why not now?

"A boy for sure," the nurse said at last. "Works every time if the date of conception is right."

Ada slunk back behind Mum's chair. "Then William is on his way?"

"He is," said Mum. "But remember, this is our little secret. Promise you won't tell anyone until I've told your father."

"I promise."

She's not a nurse, Ada thought. She's a witch. Long black cape, coarse white hair, mysterious charts... Where did Mum find her? Why doesn't Papa protest? Is it wise to plot against God's plan?

Even Father Joseph, the parish priest, never did that. Also white-haired and black-robed, he said his piece amid stained glass windows and candelabras. His stories came from the Bible, not magic charts. He offered words of reassurance when tragedies happened—mostly deaths—and endless warnings about accepting God's will. However, he never claimed to know the future.

'The Lord works in mysterious ways.' Ada had heard him say it so many times in her brief life she muttered it under her breath ahead of him, even when Mum nudged and glared.

Father Joseph, earthly ambassador to God. A man whose job it was to explain when lives ended, or hopes were dashed. Papa said, 'The man could be replaced by a pamphlet. Just look under *D* for death, disappointment, or disaster. It's all the same instruction for coping.'

It's Father Joseph's way of telling people to take their lumps, Ada thought. God says no to some, yes to others, and makes no excuses. We're not supposed to question any of it.

Babies died, horses broke their legs, and wishful thinking rarely produced the desired result. It was all part of the Unknowable Plan. The proper way of things. Boys learned to run the family business and take care of the money. Girls played at being Mum while they waited for someone to marry them, and they almost never went on adventures.

In her nightly prayers, Ada always asked God for a joyful life. Some version of, 'Thank you for keeping me safe, Dear Lord. But sometimes, it's just plain boring. Maybe I could have a bit of fun now and then? Please make them pick an agreeable husband for me. One who's not ugly or old.'

She dreamed of being a big sister and accepted that she would someday be a mother. Still, she'd heard of women who had adventures before or instead of marriage.

Her own grandmother on Mum's side went to America, wrote and sold poetry, and didn't marry until her late twenties. Papa said the family finally found a suitable beau, while Mum said Grandmama ran out of money; that her own brother seized her accounts and threatened to cut her off if she didn't move back to London and marry a man of his choosing.

"You'll be on the shelf after baby William gets here," Ada told her newest blue and white China doll. "You're very fancy, but I'll have a real baby to push in the pram soon."

She'd been promised a baby brother four times, but he never appeared. Each time, Mum had taken to bed before the arrival date. Staff spoke in whispers. Doldrums seeped into every heart until Mum finally emerged from her room, pallid and frail, but determined to go to Sunday service.

Gloom meant William had changed his plans. But why did he make Mum suffer for his indecisions?

The dark times were only bearable because of Papa. He'd taught Ada to play chess during Mum's second confinement; how each piece moved, then the opening moves. Later, he'd added strategy. He was incredibly pleased the first time she castled her king.

"Splendid," Papa had said. "I didn't realize you understood that maneuver."

"One day I'll promote a pawn," she had said.

“That would be something to see.”

It was praise Ada lived for. She hoped Papa would continue the games with her even after a boy had arrived.

And this time, her brother was finally on the way.

. . .

Ada wrinkled her nose at the mechanical mount inching across the lawn on stiff legs fitted with wheels, a rigor mortis pony on skates.

Unblinking onyx eyes set in rose gold stared at nothing in particular. A bit of copper showed warm brown on the muzzle where the bridle rubbed. A bronze body masked the gears and mechanical heart, and the saddle hid the door to a windup key.

Someone should polish your nose, Ada thought. I suppose they’re waiting for your real owner.

Papa’s horses moved with grace and speed. This imposter moved like a haunted pram.

To Ada’s mind, the steamy snorts issuing from the snout sounded more like a forlorn tea kettle than a horse. The little puffs abruptly bloomed into a blue cloud twice her height. A thick fog draped the horse’s head like a hood. She briefly thought she saw a woman’s face in the mist. When she moved to investigate, the apparition vaporized, leaving one eye staring blankly. The other had dissolved into a gaping black hole.

What was that then? The cloud came and went so quickly. No one else seemed to notice. She must have imagined it. Goose bumps rose on her arms, and she looked away.

It’s not my horse, she thought. The eye probably fell off. The gardener will find it. Or the footman will notice it’s gone and replace it.

“Why aren’t you riding your clockwork horse?” asked Mum. Sun freckles danced across her cheeks as she spun her white lace parasol.

“I’d rather not.” Ada returned to the iron bench and perched next to the gingham-lined basket Cook had packed. She snagged a tiny vanilla finger cake and plopped it into her mouth. Her black buttoned boots toing and froing just skimmed the grass. Her raven barley curls bounced like black velvet springs.

“Why not?” asked Papa.

“It’s William’s horse. He’ll be here soon. I’d be quite cross if someone played with my toys.”

“I wouldn’t have fired it up if it wasn’t yours to ride.” In his new cutaway morning coat and tan trousers, Papa looked younger, less portly. A wide-brimmed top hat covered his bald spot and most of his gray hair. If only he was always so agreeable. Perhaps he would retain the day’s high spirits, at least for a while.

“It was made for a boy, Papa,” she said.

“I had a sidesaddle installed for you.”

“We thought you would be a boy,” said Mum. “Your father commissioned it eight years ago, before you were born, and you’ve only ridden it once.”

“Willie was supposed to be born first. I don’t mind, though,” said Ada. “Please put his saddle back so he won’t know I rode his pony.”

“As you like.” Papa waved for the footman to take it away.

“I would like to ride a real horse again,” Ada said. “Perhaps another go on yours?”

He shook his head, even as she placed her hands on top of his.

“Please.” Ada bent at the waist, exhaling the word.

“He’s too spirited,” said Papa.

“No, he’s not. You let me ride before.”

“That was a different horse, and you didn’t ride. I led him around with you on his back. Besides, I shouldn’t have put you astride in a dress. It’s not proper.”

“Gretta will let me borrow a pair of Billy’s trousers. He’s about my size.”

Papa scowled. “Ada, you will not parade around in trousers, especially not those of a servant’s son.”

“But, Papa—”

He locked his strict eyes on her. Ada sulked back to her bench.

“Perhaps a pony for her birthday this year?” Mum’s blue eyes begged for a yes. “There’s just time to shop for one.”

“Perhaps,” Papa said, stroking his chin. “She’s getting too big for dolls and tea sets. Riding lessons would round out her studies nicely.”

Ada flopped onto the bench. Another pretend baby when there were no real ones for Mum. If only she'd been born a boy. Then Mum would only need one more confinement and Ada could ride. Maybe even drive the auto carriage one day.

Mum pressed her hand to her tummy as Papa tenderly pulled her to her feet. The outline of where baby William slept under Tyrian purple skirts was visible, and Ada wondered if he overheard the debate about his steed.

"Dance with me." Papa placed his right hand on the small of Mum's back, his left poised for her to grasp. "Just a short whirl. I'm too happy to laze about. The good Lord is granting us a son at last."

She leaned her head on his chest. "I look like a cow in a frock."

"Nonsense." He nodded to the row of plum heliotropes and sunset dahlias edging the pathway, swaying in the breeze. "Even the blooms are jealous, releasing their best perfume and dancing to a silent song, trying to steal my gaze. Yet they can't hold a candle."

Mum giggled and slid her white-gloved hand into his. "Only a step or two. I'm not even supposed to be outdoors."

Her white boots flashed as he led her in a lively waltz across a carpet of emerald grass. His deep voice hummed the tune of an August orchestra.

This afternoon tea was a celebration. A boy child at last.

. . .

The next morning, Ada studied the cherubs on the sheet music and declared, "I want to play *Fairy Wedding Waltz* when he's born."

"A lovely gesture," said her governess, Miss Howard. "A bit upbeat for an infant, though."

"Teach me something else."

"It's too late to start another piece. Your mother's time is near."

"Then I'll embroider his christening gown."

"He'll be christened in the same gown as you."

"But—"

“Lessons are over for today. Your mother asked that I send you up as soon as we finished.” Miss Howard had barely closed the keyboard lid on the cottage grand before Ada bolted up the stairs. “No running. Baby or not, rules are rules.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ada said, almost missing a step. At the top of the stairs, she tiptoed in case Mum was napping or William had arrived.

She knocked softly on the bedroom door.

“Who’s there?” said Mum.

“Miss Howard said I could visit.”

“Oh, Ada, dear. Come in.”

“Is he here yet?”

“Not yet. Come sit on the bed.”

Mum patted the feather tick next to her. Ada struggled to climb onto the four-poster bed. Her mother didn’t help. “Just stand next to me,” she said. “Hold out your hand. I want you to have this.” She gave Ada a small green velvet box tied in a yellow satin ribbon. “Open it.”

“A gift? It’s not Christmas or my birthday.”

“Sometimes big sisters get gifts when a baby arrives. Besides, it’s a keepsake, not a toy. Go ahead. Open it.”

Ada untied the satin ribbon and peered inside. “A locket! Your locket?”

“It’s the one my mother gave me on the occasion of your birth. Open the charm. Gently, now. It’s very old.”

Ada carefully pulled the gold locket open, as she had seen her mother do from time to time. Inside, heart-shaped frames nestled one on top of the other. When it was fully unlocked, the four hearts formed a clover with space for a picture inside each frame. Two frames contained miniature portraits: one of Mum, the other of Grandmother.

“One day, you’ll add your portrait to it and give it to your daughter for her to pass along.”

“It’s beautiful,” said Ada.

“You mustn’t wear it outside. It’s very special. Do you remember your grandmother wearing it?”

Ada lied. “A little.”

Truth be told, the locket was the last thing likely to come to mind where Grandmama was concerned. Such an odd woman. And embarrassing.

Papa hated her summoning parties: a gaggle of gray-haired lady friends holding hands in the dark, chanting strange words, intent on talking to the dead. As far as Ada could tell, the meetings summon no spirits other than the ones they sipped from their tiny, stemmed glasses.

She wondered if, now that Grandmama and her lady friends were all dead, they sat in some after-world parlor trying to summon the living.

Grandmama's scarves were unforgettable, though. They all looked like peeled strips from a rainbow. They never matched her dress, which seemed to be the point. She'd surrendered to the role of wife and mother, though she refused to let up calling herself a poet and American.

Bo-he-me-an, Papa used to call her. Ada didn't know the term, but he'd turn up his nose as if the word itself well-nigh stunk.

"You know which portrait is of me," said Mum. "The other is my mother. I want you to have it now... Just in case."

Ada traced the clover pattern with her index finger. "May I wear it?"

"Only from here to your room. Put it in your jewelry box for safekeeping."

"I will. I promise."

Mum reached for the locket. "Let me put it around your neck. There, now. Don't you look lovely? Whenever you wear it, think of me."

Ada admired the necklace, feeling quite grown up. "My first real jewelry," she said. "I shall treasure it always."

"I'm tired now," said Mum. "Off you go. Send up the nurse, please. And tell your father to send quill and paper."

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