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The Shadow Hour

Written by Kate Riordan

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The Shadow Hour

KATE RIORDAN

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Prologue

21 May 1910

So much can change in a single moment. Imagine a green English field: pretty enough, but so unremarkable that it doesn't even have a name. There's a spire in the distance, a pale cluster of sheep grazing in the shade of a chestnut tree and a farmer's boy sitting on a stile, smoking. He turns his face up to the spring sunshine and closes his eyes as he exhales. That's when he hears it: a low, thrumming vibration in the earth beneath him, coupled with a ringing in the air that's almost too high-pitched to hear. He opens his eyes and looks down the slope of the field to where he knows the railway siding is, hidden behind the hedgerow.

Afterwards, he finds it hard to describe what happened next. People ask him, of course – policemen, his mother, even a newspaperman who slips him a whole packet of Player's. What he does manage to tell them, haltingly, seems entirely inadequate. He just can't put into words the great calamity of it. He can't explain how one minute he was sitting there in the peace and quiet, minding his own business, and the next everything seemed to happen all at once – noise, smell, blinding light, and an unseen force so powerful that it knocked him clean off the stile. The closest he gets to the truth of it is what he says to his mother that evening when he lets her tuck him into bed as he

hasn't since he was little. 'It was like Heaven and then it was like Hell,' he says simply.

He dreams that night of what he saw, after the light and the bang so loud he didn't hear it but *received* it, a breath-stopping thump in the middle of his chest. There was hardly any sound when he got himself up, either; only the ringing he couldn't shake out of his head. He tottered down the field to the gap in the hedgerow, dimly aware that the sun had gone and that the dark was caused not by falling dusk but by rising smoke. He steadied himself against the fence and peered through the hot, swirling air.

A dark hulk of metal lay on its side, halfway up the opposite bank. Dotted here and there were small fires, glowing out of the blackness, like will-o'-the-wisps on a lonely night. Further up the line a couple of carriages were twisted out of all shape and reason, as though they'd been no sturdier than bales of straw on wheels. Beyond that, other carriages were still on the tracks, some leaning drunkenly, others right side up. From these he could see shapes emerging and it took him a moment to realize they were people. He was stunned by this: that anyone else in the world could still be alive.

He looked back at the ruined carriages and, as the dense air began to lift and lighten, he found he could absorb more detail. The glitter of smashed glass. A cardboard suitcase spilling its contents, like a disembowelled animal. A splayed book, streaked with ash, pages fluttering. A woman's round-toed shoe, mercifully without a foot still in it. And then a glimpse of white so clean and pure that he couldn't believe he hadn't noticed it immediately. There was something moving in it, or above it, and he began to

climb the fence to go to it, compelled by some instinct deep within him.

But when he'd clambered over and looked again for that flash of brightness, he saw a figure approaching, as dark as a raven, in a long coat and hat. He watched as the man bent and gently gathered the white thing up, holding it aloft for a moment before tucking it carefully inside his coat. The boy understood then what it was. It was a miracle. A miracle flung from the wreckage of a ruined and smouldering railway carriage, somehow unsullied, somehow unscathed.

It's not always as simple as beginnings, middles and ends. Not all stories should be regarded as a straight line, with the past at a distance and the present close at hand. Some, like this one, are formed like a circle, with something terrible and secret at the core, and everything else radiating out, ripples from a raindrop on water.

One

Grace, 1922

It was a small, unobtrusive advertisement in a Cheltenham periodical that took me to Fenix House in 1922. The *Looker-On* was issued weekly, and my grandmother had been getting it delivered to our house in Bristol for as long as I could remember. The few lines that would alter the course of my life lurked near the bottom of a page full of other advertisements, sandwiched between a request for a lady's companion who would be willing to exercise a small dog, and a vacancy for a plain cook with impeccable references and clean habits. I know it by heart still.

'GOVERNESS', it stated at the top, in large, black-inked capitals.

> YOUNG LADY *sought for seven-year-old boy who cannot attend school. General lessons required with possibility of light nursing duties. Competitive terms include room with picturesque view. References essential. D. Pembridge, Fenix House, Nr. Cheltenham.*

'Do you understand?' my grandmother said. She had laid the periodical in front of me, the corner of the page carefully folded down to mark the place.

I saw that she was trembling with her discovery. Her grey eyes shone, and for a moment I could see exactly

how she must have looked when she was young; when she was my own age.

'I think so,' I said cautiously, because I wasn't sure I did. 'It's them. The Pembridge family. But isn't it a strange coincidence that they're advertising for a governess? It's just what they must have done all those years ago, when you went there.'

'Oh, but it's not a coincidence,' she said. 'This is what we've been waiting for.'

'We?' My voice sounded light, amused, but unease was creeping through me. 'What have I to do with it?'

'Why, everything, my love. Why do you think I have been telling you about Fenix House all these years?'

'I thought they were just stories. I thought you wanted to tell me about when you were young.'

'Well, I did, in part. But there was a point to it, too. It was *preparation*. Preparation for when you would go there yourself.'

My grandmother had always been an accomplished teller of tales. My childhood was a silver thread hung with the pearls of them. Even after I'd left childhood behind, they lived on agelessly in my mind, easily as vivid as anything that actually happened to me in those early years. So much so that, looking back, it was sometimes hard to see where the joins were: where the hardwood of my own memories met my grandmother's more pliable recollections.

All my favourite stories in her repertoire were about Fenix House. She had been there in 1878, governess to the daughters of the house, and I felt I knew the terrain of that single summer as well as the lines and folds of my own

upturned hand. I believed I could have walked blindfolded through the place, surefooted as I explored its rooms by touch and sound alone. The hallway tiles of cream, umber and Wedgwood blue hard under the soles of my shoes, the curving banister smooth under my fingertips, softened by years of polishing. A child's cry ringing out from the nursery above, and the porcelain rattle of a servant's tray below.

My grandmother was Harriet Jenner then, and when she told me how she had admired the view out of her bedroom window at Fenix House each morning, I believed I saw with her the gold and green Gloucestershire landscape that tilted this way and that as it undulated away into invisibility.

I suppose, at the time, I preferred Harriet's past to my own present. I was a newly made orphan when I first heard about Fenix House and its inhabitants, so perhaps a part of me drew comfort from hearing about a time when my parents were as safe as I could imagine them, snug in their unborn-ness, which I imagined as a cocoon suspended in the dark, hidden in the shadows beyond the stars.

They were killed on the railways, between London and Bristol on the famous line built by Isambard Kingdom Brunel. The spring of 1910 turned out to be unusually lucrative for the newspapermen. First, Halley's Comet had dazzled and humbled with its fiery silence as it blazed across the skies, its tail of deadly cyanide generating a hundred apocalyptic headlines. Then, as if that wasn't news enough, Europe's uncle and *bon viveur*-in-chief, Edward VII, had died, presumably of a life well lived. No one knew it then, of course, but his funeral on the twen-

tieth of May was the last of its kind, a spectacular turning-out of rank and royalty that numbered no less than nine crowned heads. Gathered from all corners of the continent for one final occasion, most of them would soon be scattered for good: variously deposed, exiled or murdered.

But other, smaller, lives were lost that spring, and names that should have remained in safe obscurity were instead immortalized in smudged ink on flimsy paper. The day after the King's funeral, my parents were among them. Death, such a remote spectre when it had been decked out in royal splendour, or borne on the tail of ancient rock, had now come for my mother and father. Along with nineteen others, a series of small misjudgements and mistakes had propelled them out of this world and into the fleeting infamy of the late editions.

Back in the parlour, twelve years on from those momentous few months, I read the advertisement again, though the words were already imprinted on my mind. I'm not sure I'd yet fully absorbed what my grandmother had said about my going to Fenix House.

'Of course, you should be able to get a few excellent references,' she was saying thoughtfully. 'Thank goodness we didn't wait any longer for you to start teaching.'

'References?' I interrupted, my voice sharp. 'References for what?'

But even as I spoke, I began to understand. Not only the years of stories, but my grandmother's sudden insistence when I reached the age of twenty that I take on a handful of young pupils, to whom I would teach the rudiments of art, arithmetic and literature. An old cliché had

come to me when she first mooted the idea: *I am following in her footsteps*. I'd liked the continuity of that notion and, even more, I'd liked the idea that she was finally viewing me as a grown-up, who might be allowed to forge some connections and independence of her own.

Now, all my pride in those two years of tutoring folded in on itself, a façade as flimsy as a theatrical stage flat. The small girls I'd taught had played alongside me in nothing more than a dress rehearsal. My grandmother had meant for me to go to Fenix House as a governess all along, precisely as she herself had done half a century earlier. Though for what ends, I could not guess.

Two

Three weeks later, the governess-nurse position having been secured for me via letter, I found myself at Temple Meads station, preparing to leave Bristol behind. The place was thrumming with activity. Engines flared and then roared as they were stoked. Whistles shrieked and were answered by sudden evacuations of hissing steam. The low burble of conversation ran on underneath those more violent sounds, except for the occasional self-conscious shout of greeting or goodbye. Impervious to the din were the red-brick walls, which rose to meet the curving roof of wrought iron and smut-clouded glass.

Everyone but I, or so it seemed, thought Brunel's station quite an ordinary place to be. While they hurried to and fro, I stood and drank it in with all the absorption and wonderment of a child. Of course, I hadn't been a child for some time: I was now twenty-two, the same age as the century. But though I'd often felt as if my childhood had halted abruptly on the day of the railway accident, there, in the confusion of the crowded terminus, I felt more unworldly than I had in years.

I took one last look around before I boarded my train, quite as if I might never set foot in the city again. Noticing my hesitation, a porter sprang forward and handed me up into the carriage, though I would have liked to linger a moment more. My voice when I thanked him was hoarse;

my mouth dry from sudden nerves – not only because I was leaving behind everything I had ever known, but because I had not been permitted to travel on the railways since 1910.

When my grandmother and I had embarked on one of our rare day-trips in the intervening years – to the coast at Weston-super-Mare and, once, to Bath – we had, at her insistence, gone by charabanc. For me to take a train, alone, on such an important day, felt like the sort of temptation Fate would be unable to resist. That my grandmother had shown no such anxiety reassured me only a little.

'But I've told you, you're meant to go to Fenix House,' she'd repeated blithely when, a week earlier, I'd expressed my consternation after she'd produced a railway ticket for me. 'I didn't like to take the chance before, not for just any old day out, but if you're on your way to Fenix House, nothing will happen to you. Trust me, Grace, it's meant to be. I've seen it.'

Despite my grandmother's persuasive conviction that I should go, the fluttery feeling in my stomach persisted as we pulled clear of the city. During the last weeks, I had convinced myself that leaving home was exactly what someone of twenty-two should be doing – that if I remained much longer within the comforting confines of home then I would never leave at all. Now, though, the train carrying me further and further from the familiar, I wondered if I had made a terrible mistake. Even as the rhythmic movement of the carriage rocked my fellow passengers to sleep, I felt doubt unfurl inside me and begin to spread. This left me with no appetite for the sandwiches my grandmother had made me that morning

but I ate them anyway, homesick and already remorseful for being cold to her when we had said our goodbyes.

I had just forced down the last mouthful when the train began to slow for the last time. Gloucester, with its limestone cathedral rising like a ship out of the surrounding floodplain, was already behind us. The next stop was surely mine: Cheltenham Spa.

No one was meeting me; I was to take a bus or, if I preferred, a taxi. Either way I would be reimbursed, or so said the letter my grandmother had folded inside my travelling case that morning. I quickly decided on the latter, wishing to be on my own during the last part of the journey.

Visiting a place that has lived so long in your mind is a peculiar experience – like entering a recurring dream only to find it not quite the same after all; the familiar slightly skewed. So, while the bends of the hill came where I expected them and the road tipped upwards as dramatically as I knew it would, the trees that crowded in on the left, obscuring the limestone crags I knew must lurk behind them, were more menacing than I'd been given to expect.

The gates when we reached them from the short, steep drive were in a state of disrepair. One had come off its hinges, the rusting iron wedged into the gravel at an angle. The other was ajar by six inches and moving in the wind. A great thicket of azaleas just beyond seemed to be gaining on them with the stealth of an army moving silently through the dawn but, when I looked more carefully, I saw that the heart of the shrub was dead – a dark, hollow void whose end I couldn't see. I hadn't expected this and it made the nerves in my stomach flutter again.

The driver wouldn't go any further and I didn't bother

arguing with him once I'd got out and seen the scratches made by the drive's straggling bushes on the polished paintwork of his doors; I was anxious that he would demand compensation.

He went round to unlash my trunk, allowing it to land heavily on the muddy ground that, on closer inspection, had once been laid with stone in a neat herringbone pattern. Now it was ruined, by time or neglect or a combination of both: every other stone was cracked or loosened and undermined by weeds. There were some tense minutes as he attempted to turn the cab around, the wheels slipping on wet mud and stone worn smooth, but eventually he made the road again and I was alone.

The wind, which was much fiercer on the hill than it had been down in the town, whipped around me in a fury, pulling at my new grey cloche and sending the trees into a frenzy of creaking movement. Every time a new gust flung itself at the open gates, which I had approached but was now reluctant to go through, it let out a moan that was unnervingly human.

Hesitantly, I put out a hand to grip one of the old iron bars and felt the unbending frigidity of it through my glove. I realized I was probably standing on the very spot my grandmother had, almost fifty years before.

Until then, Fenix House had been a setting in a story: suspended in time until my grandmother and I chose to revisit it. Only now did I truly understand that the real house had been there all along, decaying and deteriorating, like any building offered up to time and nature.

From my position at the gates, much of the garden was hidden by the colossal azaleas. All I could see of it were

the laurels and firs that towered over everything, dwarfing even the house. The laurels shook their branches, leaves shivering, and the tops of the firs swayed, and though I knew it was only the wind moving them, they felt to me like expressions of wrath, directed at those who had allowed the once-resplendent garden to fall into ruin.

The carriage sweep, of which I could see a portion, was also a sorry sight. The gravel was thin and patchy, showing the earth beneath, like a balding carpet; weeds and grass had taken hold in patches. No doubt it had once been flat and smoothly raked; now it was even more pitted than the remnants of the brick drive I was standing on.

And beyond it lay the house – the house about which I had heard so much; a house I had hoped would be a familiar friend in peculiar circumstances. In truth, even before I had noticed the laurels and the firs, and the appalling condition of the carriage sweep, I had looked through the bars at Fenix House and then glanced quickly away, as one averts their gaze from a stranger with a damaged face. Initially too cowardly to face it squarely, I now forced myself to absorb it.

It wasn't quite ruined, of course. The roof was still on and the window glass intact. None of the walls had given up and simply fallen down, just as none of the chimneys had plummeted through the roof's slates one stormy night. But what had happened was almost worse. Caught in the act of decline, somewhere between faded elegance and utter decrepitude, you could still see – and therefore mourn – glimpses of the charm and idiosyncratic beauty it had once possessed. In some places the stone had darkened in sooty streaks; in others, where the guttering had been allowed to fracture and leak, it had been stained by trails of rust- and

moss-coloured damp. The stone balustrade that rose to the front door had lost one of its roundels, which still lay where it had fallen and rolled, like a guillotined head. The six steps leading up were cracked and chipped, those gashes of newly exposed stone seeming pale and vulnerable.

But something else was wrong, too. It wasn't just the condition of the house: it was the scale of it. Elements of it were familiar – the gables, the corner turrets, the curious blend of architectural styles – it was just that . . . well, I'd thought it would be larger. I'd expected a pile built by titled old money, rather than a house that was certainly large but not on the grand scale I'd envisaged. It looked like a residence for an affluent Victorian industrialist and his family, which is exactly what it had been, so why had I anticipated more? My grandmother had once said, '*Everyone* knew of Fenix House.' I hadn't invented that, I was sure. And yet my taxi driver had never heard of the place, asking me to repeat the address twice. Still, he was as young as I – the house may have begun its slide into obscurity before either of us was born. Besides, perhaps everything that seemed imposing and impressive to a child looks shrunken when glimpsed through adult eyes.

I studied the house again and the version I'd carried for so long in my head faded, like a photograph hung in a sunny room. I might have managed a hollow laugh if something akin to respect for the dead hadn't stopped me. Shaking off the air of mingled diminishment and disorientation, I straightened my hat, smoothed down my coat and, leaving my heavy trunk to the mercy of the deserted drive, passed through the gap in the gates.