THE DAY OUR SHADOWS QUIT



EVAN ASHCOMBE

CHAPTER 01

Mr Harris Gets Rabbit Ears

Mr Harris had rabbit ears.

At least, his shadow did.

Nora saw them on the white wall behind him. Two long black fingers stuck up on either side of his head. But Mr Harris wasn't holding his hands anywhere near his head. One held a clipboard. The other held his pen.

Ben made a choking noise.

"Are you all right?" Nora whispered.

"I'm trying to be."

It was the last rehearsal before the families came for the school show. Mr Harris was trying to tell everyone where to stand.

"If we all look towards the front—"

His shadow waggled its rabbit ears.



Laila burst out laughing.

Mr Harris lowered his clipboard. “Something I should know about?”

Ben pointed at the wall.

Mr Harris turned to look. His shadow whipped both hands behind its back.

For a moment nobody spoke.

“Well,” said Mr Harris. “That seems rather cheeky.”

He stepped to the left.

The shadow stayed where it was.

Then it bowed.

Ben looked from the black figure to Button, the cardboard dog on his little paper stage beside the hall door. “It’s stolen my ending.”

Just before Mr Harris began, Nora had held the little white screen steady while Ben worked Button’s wooden stick. The flat cardboard dog crept towards Laila’s paper tree.

“He’s going to eat it,” Ben whispered.

“It’s a tree,” Nora said.

“He doesn’t know that.”

Button sniffed the tree, bowed, and fell nose-first into the screen. Nora laughed so hard she nearly let go. Ben tried the bow again. This time the dog stayed upright, and Nora clapped first.

One ear stood up; the other bent in the middle. Ben liked it that way. A tiny bell-shaped hole in Button’s black collar let light through during the puppet act. The stage lamp was switched off now.

Beside the stage was a card that said: BUTTON. DO NOT FEED. MADE OF CARD.

“Don’t give it ideas,” Nora said.

The shadow straightened and waved at Ben.

Ben waved back before he remembered not to.

Earlier, the class had posted impossible answers into the visiting Department's blue box. Ben's had said: A shadow is a very flat pet. Mr Fox had taken the box behind the demonstration curtain while the class finished setting up.

Along the same bright wall, the coat stand's hooked shadow slipped sideways, although the real wooden stand hadn't moved. Beside it, the plant's shadow shook its leaves as if caught in a breeze. The plant stood perfectly still.

Nora wasn't laughing now.

From behind the Department's curtained demonstration table came a sharp click. Miss Quill appeared, already pulling off her work gloves.

"Mr Harris," she said, "please keep everyone together. We've stopped the test."

"What test?" Ben asked.

Miss Quill looked at the shadows on the wall, then at the blue box on her table.

"One that should have stayed behind that curtain. I'm sorry."

Mrs Patel opened the hall doors. "We're going to the library. Walking, please."

As the children gathered their things, Ben looked back at Button. Mr Fox was already beside the little stage.

"I'll keep him upright," the caretaker promised.

Nora stepped into a bright square of sunlight near the door. She could see the shadows of the chairs. She could see Ben's schoolbag casting a long dark shape.

There was nothing beside her own shoes.

She moved one foot.

Still nothing.

"Ben?" she said.

He turned.

"Mine's gone."