

THE
DARK
ROOM

SAM BLAKE



The dead may be invisible but they are not absent.

– St Augustine

Prologue

ALFIG'S HAND SHOOK as he slipped the letter into the mouth of the postbox, his bitten nails black against the cream of the envelope. He hesitated, holding it on the cold cast-iron lip, glancing behind him, checking the road again. The traffic was almost stationary, lights dazzling. He looked in the opposite direction, to the column of blazing red tail-lights.

Safe.

For now.

Above him, the ornate clock on the station tower clicked on another minute.

The letter was thick, his spidery handwriting spread over many more sheets than he'd expected. Once he'd made up his mind and he'd begun, the whole story had come out with detail he'd thought he'd forgotten. The smell of the car, the heat of the sun as they'd driven down from Dublin. The laughter. The roads had been so bad, winding and narrow, the tarmac potholed and loose. And no signposts; he didn't know how tourists found their way around the country at all.

It was important to get the story right. Exactly right. This could be his only chance. Things would spiral as soon as it was received. And everything would change.

He'd ended up writing the last page in cramped letters, the ink beginning to fade as he squeezed his initials into the corner.

A. B.

Alfie Bows.

It wasn't his name, but that's what they called him on the streets, and it had become part of him. Like the violin he was named after, held firmly now under his arm.

Still holding the letter poised to drop, he lifted his other hand, the carrier bag handle looped securely around his wrist, and shook back the tattered sleeve of his tweed overcoat. He looked at the illuminated dial of his watch, at the minutes flicking past. He didn't know when the letter would arrive – Frank in the hostel had only had a second-class stamp and he'd missed the post today – but it would get there eventually.

And when it did, they'd know the whole story.

They'd know what had happened.

Would they believe him? He wasn't sure. He was invisible now, his voice silent, like a whisper in the night. Not like before, when he was younger. He'd been someone then, had been loud and popular and laughing with the others; he'd partied hard but aced his degree, had had a glittering career ahead of him. That's what they'd been celebrating. A weekend away after the results, their last summer of freedom before the real work started and life began.

And then ...

In that one moment, everything had changed.

It was trying to get it all out of his head that had always been the problem, to switch off his imagination. Getting away, becoming someone else, had been the only way he could cope. But it was still there, every day. Like the dull

incessant ticking of a clock in the background of his life. He didn't think he'd ever be free.

It had all come roaring back that night, all the alarms ringing together, like white water, filling his ears, choking, drowning him in the memories, suffocating him.

It had only been a week ago, but it felt like a lifetime. Longer than a lifetime. Before, he'd looked forward to what life offered; afterwards he'd lived day by day. Now it was hour by hour.

He'd had always thought of it as 'his' car park; he was the oldest one who camped there, had been there the longest. He didn't know why he kept going back. There were better places, but Alfie knew he liked the isolation, liked the fact that there were no security cameras, that he was usually alone. He was like a rat, he had familiar runs. Even if they weren't ideal, he knew them – what did they say, 'better the devil you know'?

He wasn't sure about that one.

Alfie had been shocked when he'd seen him swinging out of the cab of the lorry, his face illuminated by the interior lights. The devil himself. He'd had a heavy torch in his hand, and perhaps sensing movement in the darkness beside the bins, had swung the beam around on Alfie just as he'd started to pull his head back into his tent.

His muttered 'What the fuck ...?' had told Alfie he'd been recognised too.

Perhaps he hadn't changed that much.

His hand still on the edge of the postbox, Alfie smiled sadly to himself; normally the long hair and the dirt, the odd assortment of clothes, was a disguise. But not now. Maybe the recent graduate with his rugby jersey, the stiff white collar turned up, hadn't really changed that much, despite what life had thrown at him.

The torch had clicked off as another truck pulled into the yard, Nemo Freight emblazoned on its side. Alfie had a good idea what was going on, why they were here, but he didn't want to know any details. Crawling back inside his tent, he'd pulled his violin to him, buried himself into the furthest corner so he could feel the wall against his back. Shrinking down into all his layers – the sleeping bags with the broken zips, the torn tweed coat he wore now – he had rocked silently, sick with fear.

He'd been seen.

He'd got so used to not being seen – even when he was playing outside a Tube station people heard him, but they didn't *see* him. Now he'd been seen – and worse, recognised. And not by just anybody. By the one person who had every reason to want him to stay quiet, to silence him. He'd been quiet; he'd slipped into obscurity, getting by, not talking to anyone, keeping his story to himself. Until he'd met Hunter, and then it had started to change. He hadn't planned to tell anyone anything – ever – but Hunter was interested. He wanted to know what life was like on the streets, whether Alfie had people out there somewhere. He'd looked out for him, bought him the watch.

But why. Always why.

That was the question he wouldn't answer. Why.

And then Hunter's TV crew had arrived with their cameras and mics and questions in the car park. Alfie cringed again at the timing of it all. Why had it had to happen like that? As they were unloading their equipment, another Nemo Freight truck had pulled into the car park, this time turning and pulling out again just as quickly.

And Alfie had known he was in danger.

The driver had cleared out so fast he knew a message would

go back. It wasn't how it looked, but would he have time to explain?

Maybe he'd got paranoid living on the streets but this time he didn't think he was being alarmist.

He'd been found, and he'd been seen speaking to the documentary crew. Something was going to happen. He could see it in the shadows, feel it in the air. And whatever happened next, Hunter had been good to him, he owed him the truth.

The rain was getting heavier now, falling like a gossamer curtain illuminated by the street lights. Alfie took another look at the envelope and caught his breath as he dropped it into the box.

His violin under his arm, he pulled the carrier bag to himself protectively. He shivered. He'd got a new woolly hat when he'd called in to see if they had a stamp at the hostel, and a pair of fingerless gloves. They helped a bit, but Alfie knew he wouldn't feel warm again until it all came out. He'd been cold with fear from the moment that torch beam had fallen on him, like a spotlight centre stage.

But he wanted his voice heard – whatever happened, he wanted them to know the truth. It wasn't pretty. It was dark and dirty and had changed the entire course of his life – Christ, the number of times he'd wished he'd gone home that weekend instead of chasing a high. But there had been the promise of booze, of lines, of a country house by the sea and a long hot weekend. They'd had everything.

And then they'd had nothing.

In the road beside him, the traffic began to roll forward again. Alfie looked over his shoulder. He was sure he'd been followed before, but he'd been careful this time.

It had taken him all day to write the letter. But it was done now. All of it. And whatever happened they'd know; they'd have to hear him now.

Chapter 1

Thursday 9 January

THE TWO POLICE officers shifted uncomfortably in the steel and glass reception area of Red Fox Films as Rachel approached them. She'd only just got back to her office, had been collecting her backpack when she'd heard her desk phone ring and seen Stacy in reception's light flashing. *At least they'd been quick.*

She looked at the officers anxiously; the second one had his back to her, looking at the stills plastered over the walls. They seemed to have brought the January chill in with them; cold air hung in the normally warm atrium like a cloud.

'Rachel Lambert? I'm PC Miller from Kennington Police Station. This is PC Anand.'

'Thanks for coming so fast, the lady I spoke to said you might not be down till later.'

'I'm sorry?'

PC Miller frowned, confused. He looked about twenty-five, acne still peppering his jawline. He was probably only a few years younger than her, but he made her feel old.

'The break-in, I reported it about an hour ago?'

'Oh.' He seemed to falter for a moment. 'We're not here about that, I'm afraid.'

Not ...? What on earth could they be here for?

Rachel's mind raced over the wrap on their last location.

It had been a big one; as well as the core cast, they'd had fifty extras in a wedding scene. Catering trailers, costume and make-up. A farmer getting in a sweat about his cows being disturbed. It was her job to ensure that when the cast and crew left, everything was exactly as it had been when they'd arrived. Sometimes it wasn't and then the shit could hit the fan – but it didn't normally involve the police.

Rachel frowned, slotting her hands in the back pockets of her jeans.

'So what's the problem?'

Why had he said 'afraid'?

'Can we go somewhere more private?'

This had to be really bad.

As if getting the barge broken into wasn't enough trouble for one day. And Hunter still hadn't called her, despite her endless messages. He'd said he was going to a meeting but it seemed to be going on all day.

Christ, what could it be?

PC Miller was still frowning, as if whatever it was, was *very* serious. Had something happened after they left the location? Had someone had an accident falling over a prop she'd missed, or tripped in a hole? Her job was all about building relationships: first finding the right location, often one that a director had in their head and was little more than a squiggle on a piece of paper, a vague description; then making sure *everyone* was happy – the locals, the cast, the crew, the director. But they all knew that anyone in this business was only as good as the last job.

Looking at the police officer, Rachel could feel her mouth going dry.

'My office is this way.'

Nervously tucking her unruly strawberry blonde hair

behind her ear, she indicated with her head and turned back down the corridor. The police officers followed her, and she could feel the occupants of the offices they passed swinging around to look at them.

Pushing open her own door, Rachel indicated they should go inside. Jasper stirred in his bed, making a grumbling German shepherd noise at the interruption to his snooze. The officers looked surprised to see a dog in the corner. Or perhaps it was just that Jasper was a very large dog.

‘Come in, it’s okay, he was a police dog, he’s very safe. How can I help?’

Jasper lifted his head and cocked his huge ears forward as the officer cleared his throat.

‘We’re afraid there’s been an accident, Ms Lambert.’

‘It’s Rachel.’ She kept her voice level.

Here it came. She braced herself. People saw ‘film company’ and automatically assumed that meant millions of dollars in payouts – and her job was all about that *not* happening.

‘Rachel. We believe you are listed as the next of kin for a Hunter MacKenzie?’

Rachel felt her knees go weak. ‘Hunter’s my partner – what’s happened?’

She could feel the panic rising inside her, reached out to grab the back of one of the chairs pushed away under the table. Immediately picking up on her mood, Jasper stood up, sleep forgotten, eyes bright. She glanced at him as the police officer continued.

‘There was an accident earlier today near Lambeth Bridge – on Millbank Roundabout.’

‘Jesus. He goes that way to work. What happened, is he okay?’

‘He was involved in a traffic accident. He was knocked off

his bike. We're looking at the CCTV in the area to find out exactly what happened. It's a very busy roundabout.'

'My God.' Rachel's hand shot to her mouth, the diamanté eyes in the heavy silver skull ring on her middle finger catching the light. 'But ... Is he ...?'

'He's in the Royal Hope – A & E. We can take you to the hospital.' PC Miller paused. 'He's in good hands.'

'Holy Christ. That's why he didn't call.'

Rachel crossed her arms and stared at the blue carpet tiles for a moment, seeing Hunter's smiling brown eyes and broad grin as she'd headed in to work this morning. The way he pushed his glasses up his nose and rubbed his hand over his shaved head when he was thinking. She'd forgotten to get milk; they'd both had their coffee black, Jasper stretched on the sofa looking at them critically, whining occasionally. He'd wanted to be let out, to run the length of the marina snapping at the heels of the ginger cat that lived on the *Marie Claire*, a houseboat two down from them. PC Miller's voice interrupted her thoughts.

'Does he have any family we can contact – anyone we can call for you?'

Rachel shook her head, her bobbed curls falling into her face. She realised Jasper had moved to her side, pushing his head into her thigh. Uncrossing her arms, she tucked her hair behind her ear again and gave him a rub. He sat down, looking at the officers steadily. Feeling his weight against her leg, she took a moment to answer PC Miller's question.

'His mum and dad are at home in Jamaica. He's a sister in America, in Los Angeles. There's only me here.'

'You think he was going to work?'

'Yes, he's a documentary director. He had a meeting. Can I see him?'

‘Of course. But we need to ask you some questions—’

‘Later? I can answer all your questions. I need to talk to the doctors, find out what’s happening.’ Rachel’s voice was brisk, the one she used to organise the guys on a shoot. She needed to get things moving.

Rachel glanced at her watch, Hunter’s watch, a chunky silver Aviator. It was already after four. *When had this happened?*

‘I need to get someone to look after Jasper. We’ve a houseboat down at Limehouse – there was a break-in this morning so I can’t take him back. That’s what I thought you were here about.’ She put her hand to her head; there really was too much happening today. ‘They said the scenes of crime man would be down about five.’ Rachel looked around the office, not even sure what she was looking for – her skiing jacket? Her backpack? She picked them both up. ‘I’ll ask Nathan. He’s one of the animators. Jasper loves him.’ *Why was she telling them that? Was it even relevant?* ‘Can we go now?’