

# The Shadow Friend

ALEX NORTH

## Prologue

It was my mother who took me to the police station.

The officers wanted to drive me there themselves in the back of their car, but she told them no. It's the only time I can remember her losing her temper. I was fifteen years old, standing in the kitchen, flanked by two huge policemen. My mother was in the doorway. I remember her expression changing as they told her why they were there, and what they wanted to talk to me about. At first, she seemed confused by what she was hearing, but then her face shifted closer to fear as she looked at me and saw how lost and scared I was right at that moment.

And while my mother was a small woman, something in the quiet ferocity of her voice and the strength of her posture caused both of those huge policemen to take a step back from me. On the way to the police station, I sat in the passenger seat beside my mother, feeling numb as we followed the car that was escorting us through the village.

It slowed as we reached the old playground.

'Don't look,' my mother told me.

But I did. I saw the cordons that had been put in place. The officers lining the street, their faces grim. All the vehicles that were parked along the roadside, their lights rotating silently in the late afternoon sun. And I saw the old climbing frame. The ground beside it had always been dull and grey before, but right now I could see it was patterned in red. It all seemed so quiet and solemn, the atmosphere almost reverential.

And then the car ahead of us came to a stop.

The officers were making sure I got a good look at a scene they were certain I was responsible for.

*You have to do something about Charlie.*

It was a thought I'd had a great deal in the months leading up to that day, and I still remember the frustration it always brought. I was fifteen years old, and it wasn't fair. It felt like my entire life was constrained and controlled by the adults around me, and yet none of them appeared to have noticed the black flower rotting in the middle of the garden. Or else they had decided it was easier to leave it alone – that the grass it was poisoning didn't matter.

It should not have been left to me to deal with Charlie.

I understand that now.

And yet, as I sat in the car right then, the guilt they wanted me to feel overwhelmed me. Earlier that day, I had been walking through the dusty streets, squinting against the sun and sweating in the simmering heat, and I had spotted James right there in the playground. My oldest friend. A small, lonely figure in the distance, perched awkwardly on the climbing frame. And while it had been weeks by then since he and I had spoken, I had known full well what he was doing. That he was waiting there for Charlie and Billy.

And I had walked past him.

A number of the officers at the scene turned to look at us, and for a moment I felt trapped in a pocket of absolute silence. Stared at and judged.

Then I flinched as a sudden noise filled the air.

It took me a second to realize that my mother was leaning on the car horn. The blaring volume of the sound seemed jarring and profane in the setting – a scream at a funeral – but when I looked at her I saw my mother’s jaw was clenched and her gaze directed furiously at the police car ahead. She kept her hand pressed down, and the sound continued, echoing around the village.

Five seconds.

‘Mum.’

Ten seconds.

*‘Mum.’*

Then the police car in front of us began moving slowly away again. My mother lifted her hand from the horn and the world fell quiet. When she turned to me, her expression was somehow both helpless and resolute at the same time, as though my hurt was her own and she was determined to bear the weight of it for me as much as she could.

Because I was her son, and she was going to look after me.

‘It’s going to be okay,’ she said.

I did not reply. I just stared back, recognizing the seriousness in her voice and the conviction on her face, and feeling grateful that there was someone there to look after me, even if I would never have admitted it. Grateful there was someone with me who cared about me. Someone who had such faith in my innocence that the words themselves didn’t need to be spoken out loud.

Someone who would do anything to protect me.

After what felt like an age, she nodded to herself, then looked ahead again and began driving. We followed the car out of the village and left the parked police vans, the staring officers and the bloodstained playground behind us. And my mother’s words were still echoing in my head as we reached the dual carriageway.

*It’s going to be okay.*

Twenty-five years have passed, but I still think about that a lot. It’s what all good parents tell their children. And yet what does it really amount to? It’s a hope, a wish. A hostage to fortune. It’s a promise you have to make, and one you must do your best to believe in, because what else is there?

*It’s going to be okay.*

Yes, I think about that a lot.

How every good parent says it, and how often they’re wrong.

## Part One

### 1

#### *Now*

On the day it began, Detective Amanda Beck was technically off work. She slept late. Having been woken in the early hours by the familiar nightmare, she clung on to the thin threads of sleep for as long as possible, and it was approaching noon by the time she was up and showered and making coffee. A boy was being killed right then, but nobody knew it yet.

In the middle of the afternoon, Amanda started out on the short drive to visit her father. When she arrived at Rosewood Gardens, there were a few other cars parked up, but she saw nobody. A profound silence settled over the world as she walked up the winding path between the flower beds that led to the gated entrance, and then took the turns she had committed to memory over the last two and a half years, passing gravestones that had become familiar markers.

Was it strange to think of the dead as friends?

Perhaps, but a part of her did. She visited the cemetery at least once a week, which meant she saw more of the people lying here than the handful of living friends she had. She ticked them off as she walked. Here was the grave that was always well tended, with fresh flowers. There, the one with the old, empty brandy bottle balanced against the stone. And then the plot covered with soft toys: a child's grave, that one, Amanda guessed, the presents left by grieving parents who couldn't quite allow their child to leave them yet.

And then, around a final corner, her father's grave.

She stopped and pushed her hands into the pockets of her coat. The plot was marked by a rectangular stone, broad and strong, the way she remembered her father from growing up. There was something pleasingly implacable in the simplicity of it – the way there was just his name and a pair of dates that bookmarked his life. No fuss, exactly the way he would have wanted. Her father had been loving and caring at home, but his life had been spent in the police, where he had done his duty and left his work in the office at the end of the day. It had felt right to reflect that aspect of his character in her choice of headstone. She had found something that did the job required of it – and did it well – but kept emotion separate.

*No bloody flowers on my grave, Amanda.*

*When I'm gone, I'm gone.*

One of the many orders she had followed.

But God, it still felt odd and jarring to her that he was no longer in the world. As a child, she had been scared of the dark, and it had always been her father who came to her when she called out. Whenever he was out on a night shift, she remembered being anxious, as though a safety net had been taken away and if she fell there would be nothing there to catch her. That was the way life seemed these days, too. There was a constant sensation in the back of her mind that something was wrong, something missing, but that it wouldn't last. Then she would remember her father was dead, and the stark realization would come. If she called out now, there was nobody to find her in the night.

She pulled her coat a little tighter around her.

*No talking to me after I'm gone, either.*

Another order, so all she ever did when she visited the grave was stand and think. Her father was right, of course. Like him, she wasn't religious, and so she didn't see much point in saying anything out loud. There was nobody to hear now, after all; the opportunity for interrogation had passed. She had been left with the short lifetime of experience and wisdom her father had gifted her, and it was down to her to sift through that. To hold parts up to the light, blow dust from them, and see what worked and what she could use.

*Dispassionate.*

*Aloof.*

*Practical.*

That was how he had been when it came to his job. She thought often of the advice he had given her: when you saw something awful, you had to put it away in a box. The box was something you kept locked in your head, and you only ever opened it to throw something else inside. The work, and the sights it brought you, had to be kept separate from your life at all costs. It had sounded so simple, so neat.

He had been so proud of her joining the police, and while she missed him with all her heart, there was also a small part of her that was glad he wasn't around to see how she'd dealt with the last two years. The box of horrors in her head that would not stay closed. The nightmares she had. The fact that, as it had turned out, she wasn't the kind of officer he had been, and she wondered whether she ever could be.

And although she followed her father's instructions, it didn't stop her thinking about him. Today, as always, she wondered how disappointed he would be.

She was on the way to the car when her phone rang.