

Part One

Prologue

She's more alive now than she's been for weeks, which would be funny if she wasn't drowning. If she can just keep moving her legs then it's possible to think she might make it, but her grasp on the present is slipping, just as her body is starting to lose the fight against the dark and frigid depths.

Soon after she first hit the water, her skin began to tingle with heat, which she guessed was her body trying to save her. She thought in that moment of how, when she was little, her father used to lift her up and drop her into the ocean, remembered how she'd screamed with delighted fear, and was briefly convinced that she'd see her family again. But the warmth has fled now, and the hope, and she can't keep her face above the water. She thrashes, she panics. She can't breathe. She must breathe. She wants her mother, wants her sister, but knows they won't want her, not now. She knows too that if someone doesn't come soon, she'll be sucked down into the blackness – a fitting end given what her life has become. The water is in her mouth, gagging her. She thrashes, she coughs, she claws for the surface, for air. Until this moment, she hasn't realised quite how much she wants to live.

The water is winning, and her chest is burning, searing, despite the cold. Soon her lungs will give out, she'll be forced to

inhale, and then she'll be breathing water. Her life doesn't flash before her eyes as she imagined it would, but rather it projects into the future. She imagines the police telling her family, her sister's face as she hears the news. She thinks of all the other things they'll discover, and the weight of water is unbearable. She must breathe, she can't breathe. Her chest is a ball of fire. Surely she deserves another chance: a new life, a different one. She'll make better choices this time, recognise what people are, see the darkness beneath the surface rather than the light that it reflects. Her lungs are screaming. Her mind is screaming.

She breathes in.

Chapter One

ALEX

‘Alice!’ the barista yelled, banging the coffee cup down on the counter. It was the kind of customer service only London could provide.

Alex raised her sunglasses and squinted at the paper cup – the name ALICE scrawled across it in thick black pen. *Who the fuck is Alice?* But no, okay, fine. She would be Alice today. It was close enough; maybe better. Better than being the Alex who’d drunk unknown amounts of white wine at a chambers’ party the previous night and now had to navigate a full day of distressed clients, criminals and, worse, other lawyers.

She picked up the coffee, added a sugar, lowered her shades and left the café, joining the stream of suited, caffeinated humanity flowing up Clerkenwell Road towards the offices where people would settle around wood-veneer tables and before the blue glow of computer screens and try to make themselves feel that their lives had a purpose. All she needed to do was get into the office unremarked, make it through her 10 a.m. call, then perhaps have a little lie down under her desk.

Alex failed on step one, of course, because nobody ever got anything past Marcia: receptionist, gatekeeper, security guard. The woman raised her eyebrows as Alex walked through the battered office door and attempted a vibrant smile.

‘Late night, was it, Alex?’

‘Just feeling a touch under the weather, Marce.’

‘You and most of the paralegals. Already had one call in sick.’ She accentuated the word, baring her teeth, then shook her head at Alex. *You’re too old for this*, her expression said, and didn’t Alex know it.

‘But Lucy’s here?’

‘Oh, yes. Been in since nine. She always is.’ Another pointed look.

‘Right, well I’ve got a lot to get done this morning, so would you mind putting any calls through to her? Thanks, Marce.’

Alex hurried on before Marcia could object, managing to make it down the damp-stained corridor and into her dingy office without any further assault. She kicked off her shoes, gulped some of the coffee, and leant back in her swivel chair. Maybe if she remained completely still the pain would go away. She closed her eyes. Tried not to think of the many items on her to-do list, the many emails lurking in her inbox, the many clients awaiting her call.

She was still sitting in exactly the same position five minutes later when her office phone began to ring. For a few moments she studied it, willing it to stop. When, after five rings, it did not, she picked it up.

‘Marcia, I said to put calls through to Lucy.’

‘Not this one, Alex. This is a judge.’

‘What?’ She sat bolt upright.

‘Mr Justice Wilson. Calling from Central London County Court. Said he wanted to speak to you immediately.’

Fuck, she mouthed. Why would a judge be calling her? What had she forgotten? The familiar feeling of dread, of having missed something monumental, of having done something complaint-worthy, negligence claim-inducing, career-ending – a feeling familiar to all lawyers – flooded her, despite the fact she

was normally careful, analytical, astute. Alex removed her dark glasses, felt suddenly that she would vomit, grabbed her bin, but the retching passed and she exhaled. ‘Right. You’d better put him through, then.’

The click of the line. ‘Good morning, My Lord.’ My Lord? She squeezed her eyes shut. That wasn’t what you called a county court judge, was it? Shit.

‘Yes, good morning, Miss Moreno. I was expecting you here this morning.’

Alex’s eyes widened and she stared about the room – at the pen-smearred whiteboard, the dented filing cabinets, the dying plant – hoping that one of them would enlighten her. ‘On which case, Your Honour? I fear some communication—’

‘Your client, Ms Bartley. Mr Bartley made an urgent application.’

Ah, Mr Bastardby. Financier and manipulative narcissist. A man who’d abused his wife for years and was now trying to silence her in the courts. ‘Well, he didn’t serve it on us, I’m afraid.’

‘There is a fax receipt.’

Fucking faxes. Law remained the only profession on earth that still used fax machines. She rubbed her eyes. ‘Well, I’m terribly sorry, sir, but no fax was given to me. If you could just explain the nature of the application?’

‘He’s applied to have your client’s case struck out. His barrister is here now, so you had better get your instructed counsel here. I can delay by an hour, but no more. I’ll be in my chambers. I can expect you?’

Alex’s mouth was open but she was unable to produce any sound from it. She was thinking of their so-called instructed counsel, namely Mike from King’s Bench Walk, who she’d last glimpsed on Instagram. Or at least she’d seen his knees, bronzing by a pool in Italy.

A young woman had appeared in her doorway: light-brown hair tied back, no makeup, gorgeous. Lucy. She held up two sheets of paper. The dreaded fax.

‘Miss Moreno?’ came the judge’s voice.

‘Yes. I believe our counsel is abroad, but I will be there, Your Honour. As soon as possible. You will appreciate that this is a complex case that follows years of failures by the criminal justice system. Strike out at this early stage would be entirely inappropriate and would deprive my client of a remedy for the many years of suffering she endured.’

‘That is for you to put to me when you finally arrive,’ came the judge’s voice.

Alex put down the receiver, took the papers from Lucy and skimmed through them. ‘Shit. Shit it. How did this not make its way to us yesterday?’

Lucy shrugged. ‘No idea. It just arrived in my in tray but the hearing—’

‘Yes, the hearing is now, and I don’t even have a shitting jacket. Do you?’

‘No, it’s dress down Friday. No one wears a jacket on Friday, do they?’

‘Go and find out for me, would you? Someone must have one. I’ve got to read through this and work out what the scumbag’s up to now.’

Alex rooted through the cupboard for the paper file and cursed herself for not filing everything earlier in the week, but then she hadn’t had time. She’d skim the recent documents, then ring her client on her way to court to tell her of her ex’s newest ruse to continue his lifelong strategy of escaping culpability for his actions.

‘Got a minute, Alex?’ It was Ari, her colleague from the crime team, leaning through the doorway.

‘No, Ari. Not even one.’ She continued trying to sort the

papers, cursing the system that allowed men like Bastardby – white, monied, connected, assured – to win again and again, not just in the courts, but in life. Well, she wouldn't let him win this one.

'This could be juicy, Alex.'

'Whatever it is, I'm not doing it, OK, Ari?' She'd known him for years: a smart criminal solicitor specialising in fraud, cybercrime, and in getting people to do what he wanted.

'Listen. It's interesting. Dead Moldovan girl taken out of the Thames, near Tower Bridge.'

Alex was hole-punching the documents and shoving them into the file. 'I'm not taking on another inquest, Ari. I can't.' Not financially, not psychologically. A substantial part of Alex's caseload was inquest work; mostly deaths in prison or police custody, deaths following lack of mental health help. A cornucopia of misery and injustice, and almost none of it properly paid.

'Hear me out. The Home Office post-mortem found there were drugs in her system but her sister, Rosa, she says Natalia never took drugs.'

'Ari, that's what the families always say.' It's what she herself had said many years ago.

'I know, I know. But it's dodgy, I reckon. It's a simple one-day inquest. And I owe Rosa a favour.'

Alex was skimming a document on the Bastardby file. 'Here we go. Why?'

'She was a character witness on a fraud case I dealt with a while back. Sidorov. Remember that? Big case.'

'That doesn't mean I have to act for her.'

'No, but I said you'd at least speak to her.'

Alex looked up from the papers. 'Oh, did you now?'

'That's all I'm asking. A chat.'

'For free.'

‘For free. I promise you: it’s interesting. Might be something in it. A nice, lucrative police claim, or something.’

Alex felt a vague feeling of nausea rise through her. ‘Ari, I really have to go.’

‘So, you’ll speak to her?’

Alex sighed. ‘Fine! Very briefly.’

‘You’re amazing. I’ll send you the documents. Most of them are in Romanian.’

‘Great. Helpful.’

‘You’re a superstar, Alex.’ Ari was walking from the room.

‘I’m not doing the whole thing for free, Ari, you know that, yes?’ she shouted after him. ‘Paul will kill me. You will be doing *my* inquest!’ Paul was the mafia boss-like managing partner: the money man, the enforcer, the one who tried to keep it all together as many other firms fell apart.

‘Love you!’ Ari closed her door.

Lucy reappeared a minute later while Alex was crawling under the desk trying to disconnect the laptop charger, bringing with her Daisy, the tallest and thinnest of the paralegals, a beanpole of a human being. Alex banged her head, stood up, stared at her, then at Lucy. ‘Yes?’

‘You wanted a jacket.’ A pause. ‘Daisy has a jacket.’

Alex’s gaze returned to the tall paralegal, to her long, beige-clad limbs.

‘Yes, so she does.’ She would be needing another coffee.

Alex swallowed. This was evidently going to be tricky. 'When did you last see Natalia?'

'About six months ago. Just before she left Moldova.'

'She hadn't been back since then?'

'No. No coming back. Barely even any phone calls after the first month or so. I tell you, there was something strange.'

'Do you know where she was living, what she was doing?'

'She told me she was working as receptionist for a company in West London. Making good money, she said. But then she called less and less.'

'Did you ask her about that? Why she didn't call?'

'Yes, of course. I said to her, "Natalia, what is going on with you? You don't care for your family anymore?" And she said that she was very busy in London. Many friends. Lots of work. She would call when she could.'

Alex looked at the photograph of Natalia in her folder. The penetrating dark eyes. She thought of her own sister, Elisa, also dark eyed, beautiful, gone. '*Could you, for God's sake, at least call Mum?*' 'Rosa, do you think maybe she'd made friends who were not very good for her?'

'I don't know. Perhaps. Something was not right. It was not like her to be going to parties she wasn't invited to. But I do not believe this business of her taking drugs. She never took drugs in Chişinău. Never. She barely even drank alcohol.'

Alex and Matthew's eyes met. Both had read the pathologist's report, which recorded a heady mixture of alcohol, amphetamines and cocaine.

'The problem is, Rosa,' Matthew said, 'that we'll need to address then why the report showed such high levels of toxins in her system.'

'Lies. All lies,' the woman said sharply. 'Our father killed himself with alcohol, over many years. We watched him leach the

life out of himself, ruin everything around him. You think she would do that to herself? No. Never.'

Interesting, Alex thought.

'Neither of us ever drank,' Rosa continued. 'We never would. They make up this report. You understand?'

'Yes, we understand,' Alex said, and yes, maybe this was a sign, but then again, a family history of alcoholism could indicate various things. Trauma tended to travel in circles.

Matthew chewed his lower lip. 'Did your sister talk to you about where she went in the evenings? Had she mentioned going to parties? Out with friends?'

'No, she did not talk about this. She said she was with people who were looking after her.'

'Did she say what any of them were called?'

A pause. 'I do not remember.' Then: 'Isabella. She mentioned Isabella several times, but the others I do not know.'

'According to the police report, she attended this boat party with a friend, Tanya. Had she mentioned her?'

'No, never. But like I said, I did not talk much with her those past weeks. And if this girl is really her friend, why does she not notice when my sister disappears off the boat?'

Alex tried to imagine Natalia: young, drunk, at a party where she knew hardly anyone. How had she ended up in the water? 'Could she swim?' Alex asked.

'No. No, we never learnt as children.'

A silence and Alex regretted having asked the question. She envisaged the dark waters of the Thames, the girl struggling to stay above water. The image came to her easily, vividly. It was oddly familiar, like something that had come to her in a dream. She remembered a time she herself had been pulled beneath the waves as a child, trying to come up for air, but the wave still roaring over her, her mouth full of salty water, convinced she would drown. She imagined, as she had before, her sister's

pale face in the water, though she didn't know why it came to her like that. She rubbed the image out.

'It would be very helpful, Rosa,' Matthew was saying, 'to get a statement from you telling us, telling the judge who hears the inquest, what Natalia was like as a child, what she was like as a young woman. What her aims and ambitions were, that sort of thing.'

'She went to England for a good life,' Rosa said. 'She went because she wanted to make something of herself. She was smart.' Her voice broke down. 'She did not just drown in the river like some drunkard. That is not Natalia. They need to find who did this to her.'

'I understand,' Alex said, and she did, all too well. 'That's why it's important that we get your view of her. But I have to manage your expectations and tell you that, unless we're able to produce some evidence that there was an element of foul play in Natalia's death, it will be difficult to get the coroner to give a verdict of anything other than death by accidental drowning. And so far, we have nothing. The police don't seem to think anyone else was involved.'

'That is because the police are not looking. They think: drunk foreign girl in the river. Why should we bother investigating?'

Alex raised her eyebrows at Matthew. It wasn't so far-fetched. Not given what she knew about how certain victims were treated as important, some not; some believed, some not. 'I'm going to see if I can get anything else out of the police, OK, Rosa? Ask them what angles they explored when they investigated, get hold of the CRIS report which will show us everything they did during their investigation.'

'You need to do your own investigation.'

Matthew took over. 'I'm afraid that isn't our job, and it's rather beyond our means. We're lawyers, not investigators. We can analyse the evidence and challenge the police and other