"The perfect thriller."—AJ FINN

THE SILENT PATIENT

ALEX MICHAELIDES

THE SILENT PATIENT

Alex Michaelides

CELADON
BOOKS
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE SILENT PATIENT. Copyright © 2019 by Astramare Limited. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. For information, address Celadon Books, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

www.celadonbooks.com

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018961338

ISBN 978-1-250-30169-7 (hardcover)
ISBN 978-1-250-23078-2 (international, sold outside the U.S., subject to rights availability)
ISBN 978-1-250-30171-0 (ebook)

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension 5442, or by email at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First U.S. Edition: February 2019
First International Edition: February 2019

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

But why does she not speak?

—EURIPIDES, *Alcestis*

PROLOGUE

Alicia Berenson's Diary

JULY 14

I don't know why I'm writing this.

That's not true. Maybe I do know and just don't want to admit it to myself.

I don't even know what to call it—this thing I'm writing. It feels a little pretentious to call it a diary. It's not like I have anything to say. Anne Frank kept a diary—not someone like me. Calling it a "journal" sounds too academic, somehow. As if I should write in it every day, and I don't want to—if it becomes a chore, I'll never keep it up.

Maybe I'll call it nothing. An unnamed something that I occasionally write in. I like that better. Once you name something, it stops you seeing the whole of it, or why it matters. You focus on the word, which is just the tiniest part, really, the tip of an iceberg. I've never been that comfortable with words—I always think in pictures, express myself with images—so I'd never have started writing this if it weren't for Gabriel.

I've been feeling depressed lately, about a few things. I thought I was doing a good job of hiding it, but he noticed—of course he did, he notices everything. He asked how the painting was going—I said it wasn't. He got me a glass of wine, and I sat at the kitchen table while he cooked.

I like watching Gabriel move around the kitchen. He's a graceful cook—elegant, balletic, organized. Unlike me. I just make a mess.

"Talk to me," he said.

"There's nothing to say. I just get so stuck in my head sometimes. I feel like I'm wading through mud."

"Why don't you try writing things down? Keeping some kind of record? That might help."

"Yes, I suppose so. I'll try it."

"Don't just say it, darling. Do it."

"I will."

He kept nagging me, but I did nothing about it. And then a few days later he presented me with this little book to write in. It has a black leather cover and thick white blank pages. I ran my hand across the first page, feeling its smoothness—then sharpened my pencil and began.

He was right, of course. I feel better already—writing this down is providing a kind of release, an outlet, a space to express myself. A bit like therapy, I suppose.

Gabriel didn't say it, but I could tell he's concerned about me. And if I'm going to be honest—and I may as well be—the real reason I agreed to keep this diary was to reassure him—prove that I'm okay. I can't bear the thought of him worrying about me. I don't ever want to cause him any distress or make him unhappy or cause him pain. I love Gabriel so much. He is without doubt the love of my life. I love him so totally, completely, sometimes it threatens to overwhelm me. Sometimes I think—

No. I won't write about that.

This is going to be a joyful record of ideas and images that inspire me artistically, things that make a creative impact on me. I'm only going to write positive, happy, normal thoughts.

No crazy thoughts allowed.

PART ONE

He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore.

—SIGMUND FREUD, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*

CHAPTER ONE

ALICIA BERENSON WAS THIRTY-THREE YEARS OLD when she killed her husband.

They had been married for seven years. They were both artists—Alicia was a painter, and Gabriel was a well-known fashion photographer. He had a distinctive style, shooting semi-starved, semi-naked women in strange, unflattering angles. Since his death, the price of his photographs has increased astronomically. I find his stuff rather slick and shallow, to be honest. It has none of the visceral quality of Alicia's best work. I don't know enough about art to say whether Alicia Berenson will stand the test of time as a painter. Her talent will always be overshadowed by her notoriety, so it's hard to be objective. And you might well accuse me of being biased. All I can offer is my opinion, for what it's worth. And to me, Alicia was a kind of genius. Apart from her technical skill, her paintings have an uncanny ability to grab your attention—by the throat, almost—and hold it in a viselike grip.

Gabriel Berenson was murdered six years ago. He was forty-four years old. He was killed on the twenty-fifth of August—it was an unusually hot summer, you may remember, with some of the highest temperatures ever recorded. The day he died was the hottest of the year.

On the last day of his life, Gabriel rose early. A car collected him at 5:15 a.m. from the house he shared with Alicia in northwest

London, on the edge of Hampstead Heath, and he was driven to a shoot in Shoreditch. He spent the day photographing models on a rooftop for *Vogue*.

Not much is known about Alicia's movements. She had an upcoming exhibition and was behind with her work. It's likely she spent the day painting in the summerhouse at the end of the garden, which she had recently converted into a studio. In the end, Gabriel's shoot ran late, and he wasn't driven home until eleven p.m.

Half an hour later, their neighbor, Barbie Hellmann, heard several gunshots. Barbie phoned the police, and a car was dispatched from the station on Haverstock Hill at 11:35 p.m. It arrived at the Berensons' house in just under three minutes.

The front door was open. The house was in pitch-black darkness; none of the light switches worked. The officers made their way along the hallway and into the living room. They shone torches around the room, illuminating it in intermittent beams of light. Alicia was discovered standing by the fireplace. Her white dress glowed ghostlike in the torchlight. Alicia seemed oblivious to the presence of the police. She was immobilized, frozen—a statue carved from ice—with a strange, frightened look on her face, as if confronting some unseen terror.

A gun was on the floor. Next to it, in the shadows, Gabriel was seated, motionless, bound to a chair with wire wrapped around his ankles and wrists. At first the officers thought he was alive. His head lolled slightly to one side, as if he were unconscious. Then a beam of light revealed Gabriel had been shot several times in the face. His handsome features were gone forever, leaving a charred, blackened, bloody mess. The wall behind him was sprayed with fragments of skull, brains, hair—and blood.

Blood was everywhere—splashed on the walls, running in dark rivulets along the floor, along the grain of the wooden floorboards. The officers assumed it was Gabriel's blood. But there was too much of it. And then something glinted in the torchlight—a knife was on the floor by Alicia's feet. Another beam of light revealed the blood spattered on Alicia's white dress. An officer grabbed her arms and

held them up to the light. There were deep cuts across the veins in her wrists—fresh cuts, bleeding hard.

Alicia fought off the attempts to save her life; it took three officers to restrain her. She was taken to the Royal Free Hospital, only a few minutes away. She collapsed and lost consciousness on the way there. She had lost a lot of blood, but she survived.

The following day, she lay in bed in a private room at the hospital. The police questioned her in the presence of her lawyer. Alicia remained silent throughout the interview. Her lips were pale, bloodless; they fluttered occasionally but formed no words, made no sounds. She answered no questions. She could not, would not, speak. Nor did she speak when charged with Gabriel's murder. She remained silent when she was placed under arrest, refusing to deny her guilt or confess it.

Alicia never spoke again.

Her enduring silence turned this story from a commonplace domestic tragedy into something far grander: a mystery, an enigma that gripped the headlines and captured the public imagination for months to come.

Alicia remained silent—but she made one statement. A painting. It was begun when she was discharged from the hospital and placed under house arrest before the trial. According to the court-appointed psychiatric nurse, Alicia barely ate or slept—all she did was paint.

Normally Alicia labored weeks, even months, before embarking on a new picture, making endless sketches, arranging and rearranging the composition, experimenting with color and form—a long gestation followed by a protracted birth as each brushstroke was painstakingly applied. Now, however, she drastically altered her creative process, completing this painting within a few days of her husband's murder.

And for most people, this was enough to condemn her—returning to the studio so soon after Gabriel's death betrayed an extraordinary insensitivity. The monstrous lack of remorse of a cold-blooded killer.

Perhaps. But let us not forget that while Alicia Berenson may be a

murderer, she was also an artist. It makes perfect sense—to me at least—that she should pick up her brushes and paints and express her complicated emotions on canvas. No wonder that, for once, painting came to her with such ease; if grief can be called easy.

The painting was a self-portrait. She titled it in the bottom left-hand corner of the canvas, in light blue Greek lettering.

One word:

Alcestis.

CHAPTER TWO

ALCESTIS IS THE HEROINE OF A GREEK MYTH. A love story of the saddest kind. Alcestis willingly sacrifices her life for that of her husband, Admetus, dying in his place when no one else will. An unsettling myth of self-sacrifice, it was unclear how it related to Alicia's situation. The true meaning of the allusion remained unknown to me for some time. Until one day, the truth came to light—

But I'm going too fast. I'm getting ahead of myself. I must start at the beginning and let events speak for themselves. I mustn't color them, twist them, or tell any lies. I'll proceed step by step, slowly and cautiously. But where to begin? I should introduce myself, but perhaps not quite yet; after all, I am not the hero of this tale. It is Alicia Berenson's story, so I must begin with her—and the *Alcestis*.

The painting is a self-portrait, depicting Alicia in her studio at home in the days after the murder, standing before an easel and a canvas, holding a paintbrush. She is naked. Her body is rendered in unsparing detail: strands of long red hair falling across bony shoulders, blue veins visible beneath translucent skin, fresh scars on both her wrists. She's holding the paintbrush between her fingers. It's dripping red paint—or is it blood? She is captured in the act of painting—yet the canvas is blank, as is her expression. Her head is turned over her shoulder and she stares straight out at us. Mouth open, lips parted. Mute.

During the trial, Jean-Felix Martin, who managed the small Soho

gallery that represented Alicia, made the controversial decision, decried by many as sensationalist and macabre, to exhibit the *Alcestis*. The fact that the artist was currently in the dock for killing her husband meant, for the first time in the gallery's long history, queues formed outside the entrance.

I stood in line with the other prurient art-lovers, waiting my turn by the neon-red lights of a sex shop next door. One by one, we shuffled inside. Once in the gallery, we were herded toward the painting, like an excitable crowd at a fairground making its way through a haunted house. Eventually, I found myself at the front of the line—and was confronted with the *Alcestis*.

I stared at the painting, staring into Alicia's face, trying to interpret the look in her eyes, trying to understand—but the portrait defied me. Alicia stared back at me—a blank mask—unreadable, impenetrable. I could divine neither innocence nor guilt in her expression.

Other people found her easier to read.

"Pure evil," whispered the woman behind me.

"Isn't she?" her companion agreed. "Cold-blooded bitch."

A little unfair, I thought—considering Alicia's guilt had yet to be proven. But in truth it was a foregone conclusion. The tabloids had cast her as a villain from the start: a femme fatale, a black widow. A monster.

The facts, such as they were, were simple: Alicia was found alone with Gabriel's body; only her fingerprints were on the gun. There was never any doubt she killed Gabriel. *Why* she killed him, on the other hand, remained a mystery.

The murder was debated in the media, and different theories were espoused in print and on the radio and on morning chat shows. Experts were brought in to explain, condemn, justify Alicia's actions. She must have been a victim of domestic abuse, surely, pushed too far, before finally exploding? Another theory proposed a sex game gone wrong—the husband was found tied up, wasn't he? Some suspected it was old-fashioned jealousy that drove Alicia to murder—another woman, probably? But at the trial Gabriel was described by his brother as a devoted husband, deeply in love with his

wife. Well, what about money? Alicia didn't stand to gain much by his death; she was the one who had money, inherited from her father.

And so it went on, endless speculation—no answers, only more questions—about Alicia's motives and her subsequent silence. Why did she refuse to speak? What did it mean? Was she hiding something? Protecting someone? If so, who? And why?

At the time, I remember thinking that while everyone was talking, writing, arguing, about Alicia, at the heart of this frantic, noisy activity there was a void—a silence. A sphinx.

During the trial, the judge took a dim view of Alicia's persistent refusal to speak. Innocent people, Mr. Justice Alverstone pointed out, tended to proclaim their innocence loudly—and often. Alicia not only remained silent, but she showed no visible signs of remorse. She didn't cry once throughout the trial—a fact made much of in the press—her face remaining unmoved, cold. Frozen.

The defense had little choice but to enter a plea of diminished responsibility: Alicia had a long history of mental health problems, it was claimed, dating back to her childhood. The judge dismissed a lot of this as hearsay—but in the end he allowed himself to be swayed by Lazarus Diomedes, professor of forensic psychiatry at Imperial College, and clinical director of the Grove, a secure forensic unit in North London. Professor Diomedes argued that Alicia's refusal to speak was in itself evidence of profound psychological distress—and she should be sentenced accordingly.

This was a rather roundabout way of saying something that psychiatrists don't like putting bluntly:

Diomedes was saying Alicia was mad.

It was the only explanation that made any sense: Why else tie up the man you loved to a chair and shoot him in the face at close range? And then express no remorse, give no explanation, not even speak? She must be mad.

She had to be.

In the end, Mr. Justice Alverstone accepted the plea of diminished responsibility and advised the jury to follow suit. Alicia was subsequently admitted to the Grove—under the supervision of the same

Professor Diomedes whose testimony had been so influential with the judge.

If Alicia wasn't mad—that is, if her silence was merely an act, a performance for the benefit of the jury—then it had worked. She was spared a lengthy prison sentence—and if she made a full recovery, she might well be discharged in a few years. Surely now was the time to begin faking that recovery? To utter a few words here and there, then a few more; to slowly communicate some kind of remorse? But no. Week followed week, month followed month, then the years passed—and still Alicia didn't speak.

There was simply silence.

And so, with no further revelation forthcoming, the disappointed media eventually lost interest in Alicia Berenson. She joined the ranks of other briefly famous murderers; faces we remember, but whose names we forget.

Not all of us. Some people—myself included—continued to be fascinated by the mystery of Alicia Berenson and her enduring silence. As a psychotherapist, I thought it obvious that she had suffered a severe trauma surrounding Gabriel's death; and this silence was a manifestation of that trauma. Unable to come to terms with what she had done, Alicia sputtered and came to a halt, like a broken car. I wanted to help start her up again—help Alicia tell her story, to heal and get well. I wanted to fix her.

Without wishing to sound boastful, I felt uniquely qualified to help Alicia Berenson. I'm a forensic psychotherapist and used to working with some of the most damaged, vulnerable members of society. And something about Alicia's story resonated with me personally—I felt a profound empathy with her right from the start.

Unfortunately, I was still working at Broadmoor in those days, and so treating Alicia would have—should have—remained an idle fantasy, had not fate unexpectedly intervened.

Nearly six years after Alicia was admitted, the position of forensic psychotherapist became available at the Grove. As soon as I saw the advert, I knew I had no choice. I followed my gut—and applied for the job.

CHAPTER THREE

MY NAME IS THEO FABER. I'm forty-two years old. And I became a psychotherapist because I was fucked up. That's the truth—though it's not what I said during the job interview, when the question was put to me.

"What drew you to psychotherapy, do you think?" asked Indira Sharma, peering at me over the rims of her owlish glasses.

Indira was consultant psychotherapist at the Grove. She was in her late fifties with an attractive round face and long jet-black hair streaked with gray. She gave me a small smile—as if to reassure me this was an easy question, a warm-up volley, a precursor to trickier shots to follow.

I hesitated. I could feel the other members of the panel looking at me. I remained conscious of maintaining eye contact as I trotted out a rehearsed response, a sympathetic tale about working part-time in a care home as a teenager; and how this inspired an interest in psychology, which led to a postgraduate study of psychotherapy, and so on.

"I wanted to help people, I suppose." I shrugged. "That's it, really."

Which was bullshit.

I mean, of course I wanted to help people. But that was a secondary aim—particularly at the time I started training. The real motivation was purely selfish. I was on a quest to help myself. I believe the same is true for most people who go into mental health. We are

drawn to this profession because we are damaged—we study psychology to heal ourselves. Whether we are prepared to admit this or not is another question.

As human beings, in our earliest years we reside in a land before memory. We like to think of ourselves as emerging from this primordial fog with our characters fully formed, like Aphrodite rising perfect from the sea foam. But thanks to increasing research into the development of the brain, we know this is not the case. We are born with a brain half-formed—more like a muddy lump of clay than a divine Olympian. As the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott put it, "There is no such thing as a baby." The development of our personalities doesn't take place in isolation, but in relationship with others—we are shaped and completed by unseen, unremembered forces; namely, our parents.

This is frightening, for obvious reasons. Who knows what indignities we suffered, what torments and abuses, in this land before memory? Our character was formed without our even knowing it. In my case, I grew up feeling edgy, afraid, anxious. This anxiety seemed to predate my existence and exist independently of me. But I suspect it originated in my relationship with my father, around whom I was never safe.

My father's unpredictable and arbitrary rages made any situation, no matter how benign, into a potential minefield. An innocuous remark or a dissenting voice would trigger his anger and set off a series of explosions from which there was no refuge. The house shook as he shouted, chasing me upstairs into my room. I'd dive and slide under the bed, against the wall. I'd breathe in the feathery air, praying the bricks would swallow me up and I would disappear. But his hand would grab hold of me, drag me out to meet my fate. The belt would be pulled off and whistle in the air before it struck, each successive blow knocking me sideways, burning my flesh. Then the whipping would be over, as abruptly as it had begun. I'd be tossed to the floor, landing in a crumpled heap. A rag doll discarded by an angry toddler.

I was never sure what I had done to trigger this anger, or if I deserved it. I asked my mother why my father was always so angry

with me, and she gave a despairing shrug and said, "How should I know? Your father's completely mad."

When she said he was mad, she wasn't joking. If assessed by a psychiatrist today, my father would, I suspect, be diagnosed with a personality disorder—an illness that went untreated for the duration of his life. The result was a childhood and adolescence dominated by hysteria and physical violence: threats, tears, and breaking glass.

There were moments of happiness; usually when my father was away from home. I remember one winter he was in America on a business trip for a month. For thirty days, my mother and I had free rein of the house and garden without his watchful eye. It snowed heavily in London that December, and the whole of our garden was buried beneath a crisp thick white carpet. Mum and I made a snowman. Unconsciously or not, we built him to represent our absent master: I christened him Dad, and with his big belly, two black stones for eyes, and two slanting twigs for stern eyebrows, the resemblance was uncanny. We completed the illusion by giving him my father's gloves, hat, and umbrella. Then we pelted him violently with snowballs, giggling like naughty children.

There was a heavy snowstorm that night. My mother went to bed and I pretended to sleep, then I snuck out to the garden and stood under the falling snow. I held my hands outstretched, catching snowflakes, watching them vanish on my fingertips. It felt joyous and frustrating and spoke to some truth I couldn't express; my vocabulary was too limited, my words too loose a net in which to catch it. Somehow grasping at vanishing snowflakes is like grasping at happiness: an act of possession that instantly gives way to nothing. It reminded me that there was a world outside this house: a world of vastness and unimaginable beauty; a world that, for now, remained out of my reach. That memory has repeatedly returned to me over the years. It's as if the misery that surrounded that brief moment of freedom made it burn even brighter: a tiny light surrounded by darkness.

My only hope of survival, I realized, was to retreat—physically as well as psychically. I had to get away, far away. Only then would I

be safe. And eventually, at eighteen, I got the grades I needed to secure a place at university. I left that semi-detached prison in Surrey—and I thought I was free.

I was wrong.

I didn't know it then, but it was too late—I had internalized my father, introjected him, buried him deep in my unconscious. No matter how far I ran, I carried him with me wherever I went. I was pursued by an infernal, relentless chorus of furies, all with his voice—shrieking that I was worthless, shameful, a failure.

During my first term at university, that first cold winter, the voices got so bad, so paralyzing, they controlled me. Immobilized by fear, I was unable to go out, socialize, or make any friends. I might as well have never left home. It was hopeless. I was defeated, trapped. Backed into a corner. No way out.

Only one solution presented itself.

I went from chemist to chemist buying packets of paracetamol. I bought only a few packets at a time to avoid arousing suspicion—but I needn't have worried. No one paid me the least attention; I was clearly as invisible as I felt.

It was cold in my room, and my fingers were numb and clumsy as I tore open the packets. It took an immense effort to swallow all the tablets. But I forced them all down, pill after bitter pill. Then I crawled onto my uncomfortable narrow bed. I shut my eyes and waited for death.

But death didn't come.

Instead a searing, gut-wrenching pain tore through my insides. I doubled up and vomited, throwing up bile and half-digested pills all over myself. I lay in the dark, a fire burning in my stomach, for what seemed like eternity. And then, slowly, in the darkness, I realized something.

I didn't want to die. Not yet; not when I hadn't lived.

This gave me a kind of hope, however murky and ill defined. It propelled me at any rate to acknowledge that I couldn't do this alone: I needed help.

I found it—in the form of Ruth, a psychotherapist referred to me

through the university counseling service. Ruth was white-haired and plump and had something grandmotherly about her. She had a sympathetic smile—a smile I wanted to believe in. She didn't say much at first. She just listened while I talked. I talked about my childhood, my home, my parents. As I talked, I found that no matter how distressing the details I related, I could feel nothing. I was disconnected from my emotions, like a hand severed from a wrist. I talked about painful memories and suicidal impulses—but couldn't feel them.

I would, however, occasionally look up at Ruth's face. To my surprise, tears would be collecting in her eyes as she listened. This may seem hard to grasp, but those tears were not hers.

They were mine.

At the time I didn't understand. But that's how therapy works. A patient delegates his unacceptable feelings to his therapist; and she holds everything he is afraid to feel, and she feels it for him. Then, ever so slowly, she feeds his feelings back to him. As Ruth fed mine back to me.

We continued seeing each other for several years, Ruth and I. She remained the one constant in my life. Through her, I internalized a new kind of relationship with another human being: one based on mutual respect, honesty, and kindness—not recrimination, anger, and violence. I slowly started to feel differently inside about myself—less empty, more capable of feeling, less afraid. The hateful internal chorus never entirely left me—but I now had Ruth's voice to counter it, and I paid less attention. As a result, the voices in my head grew quieter and would temporarily vanish. I'd feel peaceful—even happy, sometimes.

Psychotherapy had quite literally saved my life. More important, it had transformed the quality of that life. The talking cure was central to who I became—in a profound sense, it defined me.

It was, I knew, my vocation.

After university, I trained as a psychotherapist in London. Throughout my training, I continued seeing Ruth. She remained supportive and encouraging, although she warned me to be realistic

about the path I was undertaking: "It's no walk in the park" was how she put it. She was right. Working with patients, getting my hands dirty—well, it proved far from comfortable.

I remember my first visit to a secure psychiatric unit. Within a few minutes of my arrival, a patient had pulled down his pants, squatted, and defecated in front of me. A stinking pile of shit. And subsequent incidents, less stomach-churning but just as dramatic—messy botched suicides, attempts at self-harm, uncontained hysteria and grief—all felt more than I could bear. But each time, somehow, I drew on hitherto untapped resilience. It got easier.

It's odd how quickly one adapts to the strange new world of a psychiatric unit. You become increasingly comfortable with madness—and not just the madness of others, but your own. We're all crazy, I believe, just in different ways.

Which is why—and how—I related to Alicia Berenson. I was one of the lucky ones. Thanks to a successful therapeutic intervention at a young age, I was able to pull back from the brink of psychic darkness. In my mind, however, the other narrative remained forever a possibility: I might have gone crazy—and ended my days locked in an institution, like Alicia. There but for the grace of God . . .

I couldn't say any of this to Indira Sharma when she asked why I became a psychotherapist. It was an interview panel, after all—and if nothing else, I knew how to play the game.

"In the end," I said, "I believe the training makes you into a psychotherapist. Regardless of your initial intentions."

Indira nodded sagely. "Yes, quite right. Very true."

The interview went well. My experience of working at Broadmoor gave me an edge, Indira said—demonstrating I could cope with extreme psychological distress. I was offered the job on the spot, and I accepted.

One month later, I was on my way to the Grove.