

Chapter 1

1 November 1989

Rose scrambled up the last few feet of hillside where the incline banked sharply, and mossy turf gave way to a stone ledge running across the cliff. The light was fading and the air was cold and damp. She hurried over the crest but knew that she had to watch her step. As the path narrowed, only a series of rotting fence posts joined with wire separated her from the waves crashing on the scree below.

There was a small gathering of people ahead of her where the path widened out before it disappeared altogether as the cliff ended abruptly, falling away at an almost perfect right angle where it would eventually meet the flatter coastline. As she approached, one of the figures broke from the group and hurried to meet her.

‘Thank goodness, Rose,’ the woman gasped. Rose recognised her as the tall widow who kept the flower shop in the nearby village of Tome, but the name eluded her.

‘I came as soon I could,’ Rose explained, sensing the panic in the flower-woman’s voice.

‘Not a moment too soon.’

The flower-woman ushered Rose through the group who parted for her, their grim faces barely registering in the dusk.



There were a few she recognised from the town and even a couple she could put names to. Being two months into her post with the local constabulary, she felt she really ought to know all of them, but Rose was damned if she could tell one face from another in this light.

‘What took you so long, Officer?’ growled a voice obscured beneath the hood of a raincoat. The garment would have swamped a basketball player, let alone the dumpy character wearing it. She ignored the insinuation and allowed herself to be led to where the wire fence cut across them and a yellow sign warning of the dangerous sheer drop swung precariously in the wind.

Near the edge, a cracked wooden sign bearing the name of the cliff jutted out of the ground at an angle: DEVIL’S POINT.

‘Who found her?’ asked Rose to the flower-woman.

‘Vern was leading his history group up here.’

‘What was a history group doing up here at this time of night?’

‘Well, it’s more of a ghost walk, if you ask me. The cliff is supposed to be haunted by the ghost of a Celtic sailor who—’

Rose raised her hand irritably and the woman had the good sense not to continue. Rose lowered the wire and stepped over it; it was astonishing how brittle the safety perimeter was.

She stopped and stared ahead. Behind her, the dying sun was plunging into the horizon, its final burst of energy igniting the foot of the night sky with a deep crimson gloss. Rose swallowed hard. Standing on the edge of the cliff, her hair caught in the breeze, was a young girl of no more than ten. She faced outwards towards the sea, her hands outstretched, looking for all the world as if she might suddenly sprout wings and dive into the grey abyss.

She looked back, as if the flower-woman might be able to offer some explanation. She was met with an array of blank faces.

‘Hello?’ Rose called gently, careful not to startle her.





At first, the girl did nothing but, when Rose called again, she turned her head and Rose caught a glimpse of a pale, tear-stained face.

‘Sweetheart, I’m a police officer. You’re standing very close to the edge. Can you step back towards me?’

The girl didn’t move. Rose edged forward. The girl was perilously close to the brink – a strong, unexpected gust might be enough to send her over.

‘You’re safe, honey. You just need to turn around, slowly and carefully.’

The wind whipped around her face as Rose lowered herself to the girl’s level. She was seven or eight metres from Rose but, given the proximity of the danger facing her, she might as well have been a thousand miles away. Her heart racing, Rose extended her hand.

‘Can you tell me your name?’

The girl shook her head, almost imperceptibly.

‘Can you tell me where you’re from?’

Another slight shake.

Rose was about to move towards her when someone spoke from behind. The small man hidden in the oversized raincoat.

‘Officer, look.’

Rose followed the outstretched hand to the girl’s midriff, and down to where a ragged skirt flapped across her thin, bare legs. At first Rose thought it might be dirt. It had rained hard the night before and the ground was muddy in places.

But the rust-coloured patches running from underneath her white dress to her heels weren’t mud.

‘Honey,’ she whispered, ‘what happened to you?’



Chapter 2

Present Day

SIMEON: HEY ARE YOU THERE?

SIMEON: HELLO?

USER₃₄₁₂: SORRY, I'M HERE.

SIMEON: BEEN THINKING ABOUT NEXT WEEK A LOT.

USER₃₄₁₂: WHAT ABOUT NEXT WEEK? WE'RE GOING TO
CHANGE THE WORLD ☺

SIMEON: I NEED TO TALK TO YOU.

USER₃₄₁₂: IT'S TOUGH I KNOW. BUT WE'VE COME SO FAR.
DID YOU REMEMBER THE MEETING PLACE? WE
WON'T NEED IT BUT HOPE IT HELPS. KNOWING
IT'S THERE AND STUFF?

SIMEON: IT'S MORE COMPLICATED THAN THAT. I'M NOT
SURE ANYMORE.

USER₃₄₁₂: SIMEON, RELAX. EVERYTHING WILL BE FINE. THIS
IS WHAT WE BOTH WANT RIGHT? THE TRUTH. WE
ARE MARCHING TO AN APOCALYPTIC TUNE.

SIMEON: NOT SURE I GET WHAT THE TRUTH IS ANYMORE.
IT'S ALL GOT VERY CONFUSED IN MY HEAD. LAST
NIGHT I HAD THIS DREAM THAT WE WERE IN
A THEATRE LOOKING OUT TO AN AUDIENCE,
TELLING THEM OUR STORY. THEY WERE ON FIRE.



ALL OF THEM. I COULD SMELL THEIR FLESH
BURNING. FUCKED UP RIGHT?

USER₃₄₁₂: OK. THE BALANCE, SIMEON. REMEMBER IT'S
ALL ABOUT RESTORING BALANCE. IF WE DON'T
DO THIS THEN WHO WILL? REMEMBER – SNE,
HNE, SNE.

SIMEON: NO. I'VE MADE UP MY MIND.

SIMEON: U THERE?

USER₃₄₁₂: WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

SIMEON: I MEAN ABOUT THE TRUTH.

USER₃₄₁₂: THIS IS JUST YOU HAVING DOUBTS WHICH IS
NATURAL CONSIDERING THE CONSEQUENCES
OF WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT WEEK WHEN THE
WORLD FINDS OUT THE TRUTH.

SIMEON: I HATE MYSELF.

SIMEON: HATE WHAT I'VE BECOME MAYBE. I KNOW WHAT
WE'RE DOING AND I KNOW WHAT HAPPENED
HAPPENED, BUT THAT DOESN'T MAKE US RIGHT.
WHO GUARDS THE GUARDS IF WE DO WHAT WE
WANT?

USER₃₄₁₂: IT DOESN'T WORK LIKE THAT.

SIMEON: WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

USER₃₄₁₂: SIMEON, WE'VE BEEN DOING THIS FOR 2 YEARS.
IT'S NOT LIKE YOU CAN JUST SAY HEY FUCK IT
AT THIS POINT CAN YOU? DID YOU TALK TO THE
MAG'S LAWYER?

SIMEON: I MET HIM A COUPLE OF TIMES.

USER₃₄₁₂: WHO IS HE?

SIMEON: HIS NAME IS PRIEST.

USER₃₄₁₂: AND?

SIMEON: WHAT?





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USER₃₄₁₂: WHAT'S HE LIKE?
SIMEON: KIND OF LIKE A GUY THAT'S GOOD TO HAVE ON
YOUR SIDE AND A REAL BIG DEAL IF HE'S ON THE
OTHER.
USER₃₄₁₂: NOT GONNA FUCK WITH HIM THEN?
USER₃₄₁₂: SIMEON? U THERE?
SIMEON: WE SHOULD GO TO THE POLICE.
USER₃₄₁₂: AND THEY'LL DO WHAT EXACTLY?
SIMEON: YOU KNOW WHAT.
SIMEON: I GUESS WHEN WE STARTED I BOUGHT INTO THE
AGENDA. I GOT WHAT WE WERE ABOUT. CUTTING
OUT THE ROTTEN CORE AND EVERYTHING. YOU
WERE MY INSPIRATION. I THOUGHT I CAN DO
THIS – THIS MAKES REAL SENSE. DON'T GET ME
WRONG. THEY SHOULD BURN FOR WHAT THEY
DID BUT IS THIS THE WAY? IS THIS ME?
USER₃₄₁₂: CALL ME.
SIMEON: I'M SORRY. SOMEONE HAS TO END THIS.
USER₃₄₁₂: DON'T BE A FOOL, SIMEON. IF WE DON'T DO IT
THEN THEY WIN. THAT'S ALL THAT WILL HAPPEN.
THEY WILL WIN.
SIMEON: YOU DON'T KNOW THAT.
USER₃₄₁₂: WAIT.
USER₃₄₁₂: I DON'T WANNA HAVE TO DO IT THIS WAY,
SIMEON, BUT I OWN YOU.
USER₃₄₁₂: YOU DON'T GET TO LEAVE. NOT NOW.
SIMEON: I'M SORRY.
SIMEON: ***SIMEON HAS LOGGED OFF***
USER₃₄₁₂: FINE. BUT DON'T SAY YOU WEREN'T WARNED.
USER₃₄₁₂: ***USER₃₄₁₂ HAS LOGGED OFF***



Chapter 3

Vincent Okoro sat with his arm draped across the back of the front bench of court thirteen, which creaked under the weight of his muscular frame. The trial bundle was spread across his lap but his interrogation of it was limited to idly flipping through the pages, only giving cursory attention to the text. Anything else would have been pointless: he knew the contents intimately.

He was vaguely aware of the hum of people around him. Behind, two men and a woman sat nervously shuffling around, not quite sure how to find a comfortable pose on the ancient wooden pews that served as seating in the Royal Courts of Justice. To his left, an usher draped in ill-fitting robes was moving papers around with great purpose, although the end result eluded Okoro. High above him to the back of the court, a scattering of journalists were engrossed in the soft lights from their smartphones and tablets, trying to find something productive to do before the trial started.

It was a disappointing turn-out. Given the media attention the case had enjoyed for the past two years, he had hoped for more of a journalistic presence on day one of *Elias v. The Real Byte Limited*. But then it was early. The start time was an hour and a half away. Not even the claimant and her team of blood-sucking



lawyers had arrived in court, although rumour suggested they had been milling around the public cafe earlier filling their time with croissants and anecdotes.

Still, an hour and a half to go – and no sign of Priest, or their first witness.

Okoro sighed heavily, and threw the bundle back under the bench. He turned around and was surprised to see behind him another figure who must have ghosted into court.

‘Hello,’ Georgie Someday said brightly, her green eyes peering curiously at him.

‘How long have you been there?’ Okoro asked.

‘Three minutes. I didn’t want to disturb your reading.’

‘I’ve read it before. Where’s Priest?’

‘He rang to say he’s on his way.’

‘Is he with Simeon?’

Georgie grimaced. ‘He didn’t mention that.’

Okoro found himself sighing again, but with more vigour. Simeon Ali – his crucial witness – could make or break this case. Without his evidence, it could well be a very short and humiliating trial.

Maybe the lack of journalists at the back wasn’t so bad after all.

‘Go and phone Priest,’ Okoro instructed. ‘Find out where he is and get confirmation that Simeon is turning up on time this morning and looking like the million-pound witness he is.’

Georgie nodded, brushed a strand of ginger hair out of her face and scurried out.

‘Morning, Okoro.’ A gruff voice directed Okoro’s attention to the claimant’s side of the courtroom where a hunched figure was lining bundles up on the front bench.



‘Hagworth.’ Okoro acknowledged his opponent with a curt nod, which the old silk returned before getting back to the job of trying to make his bundles stand upright – a task that Okoro surmised was being hindered by his shaking hands and milky eyes.

‘Fine morning,’ Hagworth muttered.

Okoro shrugged. ‘I thought there might be more press.’

‘There are some reporters busying themselves in the lobby. *Parasites*. But enough to give you some publicity, if that is what you desire.’

Okoro grunted in a way that was intended to be non-committal. Dickie Hagworth QC was one of the most experienced libel lawyers in private practice but that didn’t stop him from being an objectionable snob.

‘A fine suit,’ Hagworth observed.

Okoro looked down and inspected his eighteen stone of muscle bulging out of an Armani three-piece. He looked back up, not sure what to say. Hagworth rarely said anything for no good reason.

‘You certainly look the part, Okoro. I hope you don’t take the loss too hard.’ The QC smirked and picked up another bundle.

Okoro leant forward, the bench creaking under the movement, and rested his chin on his hand thoughtfully. Then he said, ‘It’s going to be tough for you back at the gentlemen’s club, Hagworth. Trying to explain how you got beat by a black man.’

In front of him, Hagworth’s line of files collapsed, sending papers scattering across the courtroom floor.



Chapter 4

The morning sun glistened off the frost-covered grass as the procession slowly trailed over the brow of the hill, the church behind them and the vista falling away ahead. Crows lined the fence like sentries, watching the proceedings with avid curiosity. The ground was damp and the day smelt of fresh dew. Only the distant rumble of traffic reminded the gathering that the burial ground was only a few miles outside of the city.

The hole was already dug, ready to accept the casket, which was now lowered into the ground. At the far end, the vicar read the familiar set of words, shivering slightly in the cold. Charlie Priest stood at the back, hands thrust deep into his pockets, trying not to be recognised, but it wasn't easy. At six foot three with broad shoulders and a strong, athletic build, Priest wasn't good at merging into the background. With bright blue eyes and drifts of soft brown hair, he cut a rugged and striking sight. Several people had already turned around to look, nudging each other and whispering. They knew who he was. Through the crackle of their hushed chatter, Priest caught one electrifying word drifting on the breeze: Mayfly. He was the man who Kenneth had hired to find his son's killer. The man who had undone everything for the Ellinders.

The ceremony had been mercifully short. Two tuneless hymns and a generic eulogy read to a modest gathering of



family and well-wishers. Kenneth Ellinder's life had been reduced to fifteen simple minutes before his remains were swallowed by the earth.

When a bearer threw the first handful of dirt over the coffin, Priest turned to go. He had paid his respects and discharged what would have otherwise been a nagging burden. He had felt his phone vibrate several times in his inside pocket; no doubt Georgie trying to ascertain his whereabouts at Okoro's request. The Priest & Co. in-house counsel would be furious, but the trial wasn't starting for another hour and a half and Okoro always over-prepared. Besides, Priest's job was done. Everything had been meticulously organised. All he had to do was wind Okoro up, put Ali on the stand and watch the media lap up the hype.

He was halfway down the hill when he felt a hand on his arm.

'Charlie,' said a voice that was neither pleased to see him nor overtly hostile.

Priest turned round and there she was. 'Jessica.'

She stood on the elevation at his level, the breeze gently playing with her hair, her eyes fixed on his. For a moment he just stared, searching. But he couldn't read her. This mysterious woman who haunted his dreams stood so close that he could smell the sweetness of her skin, a sensation that was both familiar to him and, at the same time, despairingly alien.

'Say something,' she said.

'I'm sorry for—'

'Not that.' She broke her gaze and let her eyes drift into the middle distance. 'Where were you?'

Priest didn't know. So much had happened. He had first met Jessica Ellinder the previous year, at his office, with her father. Reluctantly, Priest had agreed to investigate the apparent murder



of Jessica's brother, Miles. The case had almost been the undoing of him and had ended with him exposing her family's links with a secret neo-Nazi cult.

Jessica was the only positive thing that had come out of that case. They had agreed to meet – Priest had *wanted* to meet. But he never turned up.

'Charlie. Where *were* you?' she repeated.

'I'm sorry,' he offered, but he knew it wasn't enough.

She nodded. He didn't need a psychology textbook to tell him that she was disappointed, and angry, but whether that was because she had wanted to see him again or because she wasn't used to being stood up was beyond him.

He looked down and pushed the earth around with the toe of his shoe, his inadequacy enveloping him. How could he explain it to her? Whenever he tried to sound out the reason in his head, it sounded pathetic, but the root cause was a mantra that had arisen from the ashes of his past: *whenever I touch something special, it just seems to wither in my hands*. In a world where nothing seemed real, Priest had found that people, especially lovers, eventually faded away. At least this way, Jessica would always stay real to him.

'How are you?' Priest asked, feebly.

For a horrible moment, he thought she might do what he felt he deserved and slap him across the face, but instead she released her hand from his arm, as if she had just realised, with embarrassment, that she was still touching him.

'I'm doing better than perhaps I should be,' she conceded.

'Maybe we could start again?'

'From which point? The point at which I was shown a picture of my brother impaled on a spike, or before that?'



He faltered, although he felt justified in doing so. 'Starting again doesn't necessarily have to mean going back to any particular point. Perhaps it's about rebuilding what we have.'

'Which is what exactly?'

'I have absolutely no idea.'

At last, a statement he was sure of. He shouldn't have stood her up, but maybe there was hope – maybe he could atone. He carried out a quick mental calculation. The trial started in ninety minutes. He had to travel halfway across London to the Strand and negotiate the plethora of cameramen lining the High Court entrance, which would take him to the point where the trial was scheduled to start, but Okoro's patience would have worn thin way before then.

Inside his jacket pocket, his phone resumed its familiar, angry buzz.

'Meet me tomorrow night,' he said, his heart in his mouth. 'Come over to mine. We can shut ourselves away from the world for an evening. I'll attempt to cook you something. Do you like lemon sole?'

'You're asking me out on a date? At my father's funeral.' There was no trace of humour in her voice.

Priest shuffled his feet again. On reflection, he did seem to have set a record for inappropriate passes.

For a full agonising minute, she said nothing, but continued to stare at some imperceptible spot behind him. For every excruciating moment that passed a feeling of hopelessness set in until, finally, she nodded.

'You'd *better* be there, Priest. Or God have mercy.'

Chapter 5

Georgie Someday had never been one to panic. To her mind, she was more of a fretter. The difference was subtle but important. A panicker abandons logical thought in favour of irrational dread. A panicker assumes the worst, but fails to formulate any sensible strategy for dealing with it. A fretter, on the other hand, uses anxiety positively. A fretter calculates all possible outcomes and designs coping strategies for as many as conceivably possible.

Having said that, standing in the Royal Courts of Justice Great Hall, clutching her phone, with half an hour to go before the trial was due to start and still no sign of Priest or the defence's star witness, Georgie was experiencing a sensation she thought was, in truth, much closer to panic than fret.

She put her phone away and removed her glasses to clean them for the eighth time before passing back through security and out onto the Strand. People bustled past, pulling coats tightly around them, ignoring the glare of television cameras lining the entrance-way to the High Court. Close by, she overheard a solemn-faced presenter standing rigidly in front of a camera:

'Operating globally with a combined turnover of over fifty-five million pounds, the Elias Children's Foundation is one of the largest charities in the UK established for the benefit of child victims of war, domestic violence, abuse, neglect and

exploitation. Its operations include an African education programme, disaster and emergency response schemes, HIV and AIDS prevention and care programmes, and programmes aimed at stopping the exploitation of child soldiers for terrorist purposes. It's not for profit but don't let that label fool you – this is big business.

'I'm outside the High Court today because the charity's founder and CEO, Alexia Elias, is suing small independent online magazine, *The Real Byte*, for libel following an article about her they published in 2014. You may remember that in 2009 a scandal broke out at the Elias Foundation when it was discovered that a small branch office had been funnelling charity funds to an organisation known as the Free People's Army, a terrorist cell operating in northern Turkey.

'Following extensive investigations by the Charities Commission, that office was closed down, with Turkish police arresting several Elias Foundation employees.'

She decided to hang around. Although the way the reporter kept brushing her hair back vainly was beginning to grate on her, she was interested to know how accurate the reporting was. So far, not too bad.

'In 2014, *The Real Byte* published an article alleging that not only was Alexia Elias fully aware of the Turkish scandal involving her charity, but she had received bribes from terrorists totalling four hundred thousand pounds to keep quiet about it. This is day one of a four-week trial here at the High Court in which Alexia Elias hopes to clear her name . . .'

Georgie went back inside, nodding at the security guard on her way in. What might make more interesting reporting, she thought, was if *The Real Byte* solicitor, Charlie Priest, her

employer, didn't turn up in the next half an hour accompanied by the magazine's main witness. It was this thought that was making her stomach churn.

'Come on, Charlie,' she said to herself through gritted teeth. 'Now's not the time to be late.'

Until 2012, Simeon Ali had been an Elias Children's Foundation employee working at their Turkish branch. Georgie had never met him. As far as she was aware, Charlie had only met him a few times. He kept a very low profile and with good reason – Alexia Elias and her husband, Dominique, were powerful figures with powerful friends, and connections that went right the way to the top of government. There were plenty of images of Alexia sitting in conferences – a broad smile across her face – drinking tea with Cabinet ministers doing their rounds across social media. A lot of influential people had backed the Elias Foundation and its charismatic CEO. A lot of people had put their hands deeply into their wallets. In Georgie's view, the charity had survived the Turkish scandal because of some very good spin. During the press conference in the immediate aftermath of the scandal, Alexia Elias, surrounded by PR managers and lawyers, had produced the performance of a lifetime:

'We are hurt, and we are betrayed, but we will not succumb to evil, nor we will shrink in the face of oppression. We will rise up, in union, and remember why we are here, who we are and what we stand for.' Then, with a tear in her eye: *'We are the Elias Foundation, and we shall not be beaten by a tiny group of weak-minded traitors. I will use every resource available to me to right this wrong.'*

After assuring the press that the corruption had been isolated and contained, the weeping CEO had stepped down to embrace her husband in a moment of rehearsed solidarity before giving

way to her press officer to mop up any question from the awe-struck crowd.

The suggestion that Alexia had been lying when she said she knew nothing about the scandal until it was too late was unthinkable. The idea that she had been a part of it was heresy.

Nonetheless, a trace of doubt remained, and Alexia Elias was not without her critics. So far, though, the voice of dissent was small, confined to people who had been labelled conspiracy theorists: dismissed as part of the same group who supposedly believed the Rothschild family controlled the world and Hillary Clinton was an alien. Although perhaps the non-believers weren't as insignificant as some first thought: *The Real Byte's* advertising revenue had doubled following the media's coverage of the libel action.

There were two things in Priest & Co.'s favour: the first was that the magazine's insurers were funding the trial, albeit with considerable reluctance, and the second was that Alexia had openly taken the moral high ground and decided to only sue the magazine itself and not Tomas Jansen, its owner, personally, which would have complicated matters. Jansen might have even needed separate representation.

But even with a third party paying the bills – for now – there was considerable risk. Insurers would always find a reason not to pay, or only partially pay out, if they backed the wrong horse. For *The Real Byte* and Priest & Co., the stakes were about as high as they could get.

She tried ringing Charlie one more time, this time leaving a message. She hoped it made it clear she was anxious to hear from him without completely betraying the panic that had now gripped her.

Damn, damn, damn!

She glanced back to court thirteen but decided it would be best not to report back to Okoro until such time as she had some positive news. As she did, she saw an older gentleman lope across the lobby looking rather harassed. This, she surmised, must be Dominique Elias, Alexia's husband. His witness statement had struck her as being rather curt. He loved his wife and regarded her as the very personification of integrity and professionalism and of course he would have known if she had received bribes of that level. All very businesslike and matter-of-fact.

Her mind had wandered, and it took a few seconds to register the voice in her ear.

'Miss Someday? Hello?'

Georgie spun around and found her personal space had been filled by a young woman with long, blonde hair which looked bleached, beaming at her. She was tucked inside a black coat and was clutching an iPad. She was pretty. With such a sparkling smile, she might even be called striking were it not for a certain air of detachment visible through her eyes. Georgie groaned inwardly.

'Yes?' she asked.

'Elinor Fox – independent. You're with Priest & Co., aren't you? Could I ask you about the trial?'

'You mean you're independent or you're from the *Independent*?' replied Georgie, folding her arms.

The dazzling smile faltered slightly and Georgie rejoiced in its retreat. 'The former.'

'Sorry, I can't talk to journalists.'

Fox continued, undeterred, 'How are your clients bearing up?'

Not too badly, was the honest answer, *considering that the future of their magazine depends on winning this case. The Real Byte* was a small outfit which had stumbled on a big exclusive and were paying the price. The magazine's executive editor, Tomas Jansen, was born and graduated in Denmark and had started *The Real Byte* five years previously when the demand for quick, accessible online news was starting to increase exponentially. He had written the Elias article, with some input from his managing editor, Gail Woodbead. Their small team was completed by Karl Jones, the magazine's technical director. Those three – and a handful of external contributors – comprised the entirety of the magazine's human element.

Elinor Fox was apparently still speaking. 'Miss Someday?'

'No comment,' Georgie said.

'Not even one little quote?'

'Not one. Thank you.'

Fox pinched her face together in what appeared to be a sympathetic gesture but which was obviously a manifestation of huge disappointment and utter contempt.

Then Georgie saw something flit past her vision. She scanned the air around her, then saw a bee land behind Fox. She stiffened and moved around the reporter, who looked puzzled.

'Sorry,' said Georgie, motioning to the insect. 'I'm allergic to bee stings. It's called anaphylaxis.'

A voice crackled over the PA system – 'All parties in *Elias v. The Real Byte Limited* to court thirteen. That's all parties in *Elias v. The Real Byte Limited* to court thirteen, please' – and Georgie took the opportunity to go back inside, giving the bee and the reporter a wide berth.

Once inside, she looked around, realising that she would have to explain to both Okoro and the clients that they would have to proceed without Charlie and Simeon for now. *Just don't shoot the messenger. Wait! Is that . . . ?*

A figure bounded up the court steps and threw his keys and a phone into the security box. He looked up and waved at her. She pointed to her watch and Charlie Priest waved her away, as if they had all the time in the world.

He collected his things from the box once it had passed through the scanner then started to usher her across the lobby to court thirteen. 'Did you miss me?'

'Vincent will be *very* angry,' Georgie advised.

'No doubt. How's Dickie looking?'

'Richard Hagworth QC?'

'Yes. Dickie.'

'He looks OK, I guess.'

'Oh, come on, Georgie. I've seen Ikea tables with more movement in their joints. Now, where's Simeon?'

Georgie stopped.

'I thought he was with you?'

Chapter 6

Charlie Priest knew a lot about disaster management in litigation. Rule number one was to preserve the illusion that no disaster existed. Nothing was more fragile than the short period of time between parties shuffling into court and the moment the chambers door swung open and the judge manifested himself or, in this case, *herself*. Trials were made and broken in that vacuum where time stood still. The slightest breeze could be enough to dislodge the nerve of a witness or an advocate; a case that took years to prepare could be undone in seconds.

So Priest ignored the burning sensation developing in the pit of his stomach and announced his entrance into the courtroom by letting the ancient wooden door deliberately crash against its frame, which drew a turning of heads from the occupants of the front bench. Even the journalists lowered their phones to see who had disturbed the calm.

‘Dickie.’ Priest nodded to the QC as he joined Okoro. Hagworth neither returned the gesture nor rejected it but stared curiously at him from behind a pair of round glasses perched on his crooked nose.

Unimpressed, Okoro hadn’t moved other than to look up from behind the bundle he was holding. He gave Priest a look that suggested, in no uncertain terms, that he regarded his unpunctuality



with considerable annoyance. When Priest reached across to place a file on the table Okoro whispered in his principal's ear.

'Where in the name of Jesus have you been, Priest?'

'Funeral.'

'A what?'

He placed a reassuring hand on Okoro's shoulder and turned to the three bemused faces sitting behind him. Shaking each hand in turn he addressed the oily-haired man sitting on the edge of the bench.

'Tomas, how are you doing?' Priest asked, smiling.

'We were expecting you a little earlier but—'

'Just checking a few things for you but all done now. Gail, hi. Karl, love that tie. Listen, Tomas, have you heard from Simeon?'

'No.'

Tomas shifted his weight while Gail leant across him anxiously. Priest had thought when he first met *The Real Byte* team that, despite the obvious discomfort Tomas felt in his own skin, he might have been having an affair with Gail Woodbead. She was a good foot taller than him and had the air of a retired headmistress but there was an obvious tension between them, the kind that lovers might share. So perhaps it was unsurprising that, in this critical moment, Tomas now exchanged a worried look with her. Karl Jones, *The Real Byte* technical director, was slumped back in his seat and might not even have been a noticeable occupant of the bench were he not taking up most of it. His frame was oversized, cumbersome, bulging in places that weren't supposed to bulge. The fat pulled at his jowls, giving him a frog-like appearance. He also insisted on lugging an enormous holdall bag with him everywhere, which now sat at his feet, although goodness knows what was in it.





Priest nodded and breathed in hard, a thousand possibilities surging through his head.

‘Did you speak to him last night?’

‘No,’ said Tomas, anxiety creeping into his voice. ‘I thought he was meeting you before court.’

‘We agreed he would be here at nine thirty and we would meet in the foyer. You’ve not seen him?’

‘I haven’t. This is disturbing news, Mr Priest. Our case—’

Priest put his hand on Tomas’s arm to steady him. ‘Slow down, Tomas,’ he urged. ‘They’re watching you.’

He nodded subtly. Over the executive editor’s shoulder, he saw Alexia Elias nudge Hagworth and gesture in their direction. Fortunately, it took Hagworth the equivalent of three moon cycles to manipulate the sagging muscles in his neck and make his head turn, by which time Tomas had understood the point and had lowered his voice.

‘When did you last speak to Simeon?’ Tomas asked.

‘A few days ago. Everything was fine, and everything *will* be fine, I’m sure. We have his statement and he won’t be giving evidence until this afternoon, possibly not even until tomorrow. I’m sure there’s a perfectly reasonable explanation.’

Priest heard the words tumble out of his mouth but even he was unconvinced by them. This was the principal risk that he and Okoro had considered. Throughout, Simeon Ali had demonstrated a deep-rooted desire to ensure that the court, and the world, was presented with the truth, but he had proved to be an aloof character, insisting that almost all communications were carried out by email or Skype. They had met a few times, at a train station outside of the city in the summer, and even then, the meetings had been like a clandestine encounter straight out of a Sherlock Holmes novel.





‘He seemed so sure of himself,’ offered Gail, leaning further across Tomas. ‘I can’t believe he’s lost his nerve at this moment.’

‘He was convinced somebody was watching him,’ said Tomas. ‘We should have done more to ensure his attendance, Mr Priest.’

‘Short of bundling him in the back of my car and holding him hostage I’m not sure what,’ Priest remarked, ignoring Tomas’s intonation.

‘I take it you’ve rung him?’ asked Gail.

He glanced over at Georgie who had just lowered her phone. She shook her head.

‘Straight to voicemail,’ she explained.

‘Let’s not worry just yet.’ Priest smiled and turned back to whisper confidentially into Okoro’s ear. ‘Did you hear all that, old man?’

Okoro replied in a low growl, ‘As I understand it you want me to win this case without my star witness, relying purely on hearsay evidence from non-independent witnesses. Is that right?’

‘Yes and I pay you bloody well for it, too,’ Priest hissed back. ‘But I realise it’s a tall order so why don’t we try an alternative approach under which you buy me time and I go and find our witness?’

‘That’s fine because, doing it my way, Dickie’s going to have a bloody field day.’



Chapter 7

Priest's exit from court thirteen was far less grand than his entrance and would have been entirely unnoticed had it not been for Alexia Elias's grey eyes watching his every step.

Outside the courtroom, he passed several robing rooms, finding vague amusement with the sign pinned to one of the doors – MEMBERS OF THE BAR ONLY. As a solicitor-advocate, Priest was perfectly entitled to pop in and use one of the wire coat hangers to store his overcoat, but the thought couldn't have been further from his mind. Firstly, because he did not own an overcoat and, secondly, because Charlie Priest generally hated other lawyers. Those that he didn't were merely the exceptions that proved the rule.

As he passed myriad portraits of stony-faced judges he couldn't name and didn't care about, he tried to reflect on the present situation. Simeon's no-show was bad news but it wasn't his firm's one hundred per cent win record that troubled him. It was the grey eyes of Alexia Elias that had tracked his quiet withdrawal from court. There had been mounting media pressure backed by a plethora of very high-profile individuals against *The Real Byte* and, indirectly, its lawyers. The Turkey scandal aside, the Elias Children's Foundation had benefited tens of thousands of children across the globe. Its brand stood



for everything that was good in humanity. This trial meant everything for both sides.

Litigation disaster management rule number two: if you have to call Mother Teresa a whore, make sure it's a charge that sticks.

In the Great Hall, he paused. People were milling around everywhere. Mostly worried-looking parties and pompous-looking counsel, mixed in with the occasional tourist photographing the court's cathedral-like architecture. As he looked down to the entrance a familiar feeling of disconnection began to creep over him. The Great Hall was still there in all its Victorian glory and the people were still bustling around the security checkpoint, but Priest no longer felt that he was a part of the scene, it was as if he had stepped backwards and found himself looking in to the stage rather than out of it.

For a moment, he wavered between worlds, like Alice staring down the rabbit hole, contemplating the leap. But in his mind, Alice didn't look like Alice. She looked like Jessica Ellinder.

'Charlie?'

He felt a tug on his arm. The rabbit hole vanished. The image of Jessica dissipated. A pair of startling green eyes stared at him.

'Charlie? Are you OK?'

He shook the feeling of drowsiness off. 'Fine. Everything's fine. Thank you.'

'Were you having one of your disassociation moments?' asked Georgie.

'Of course not. I only get those when I'm stressed.'

Priest waved the notion away before it occurred to him that he had never discussed his dissociative disorder with his assistant solicitor. He hadn't really discussed it with anyone. Not that



he was ashamed of the condition that caused breakdowns in his perception of reality, but he didn't see the value in talking about it. Besides, he counted himself lucky. There are generally six recognised classifications of dissociative disorder but many sufferers of one of the most common – depersonalisation disorder – have their lives utterly wrecked by the condition, living in a permanently emotionless, unreal world. Priest had experienced that early on, but the symptoms had faded with time. Now he was able to function ninety per cent of the time without giving the slightest hint of his vulnerability, except on occasions where, like now, he felt his grasp slip slightly.

He shook the feeling off, refocused. It didn't feel like the onset of an episode. Just a glitch in his own personal matrix.

'How do you know about it, by the way?' he asked, meaning the disorder. When she didn't immediately answer, the detail suddenly seemed unimportant. 'Moreover, why aren't you in court? I pay you to be in court, not diagnose complex personality illnesses.'

'Vincent said I should go with you,' Georgie said firmly.

'What about the clients?'

'He said you might need more looking after than them.'

'No, he didn't. Okoro would never say that.'

Georgie at least had the decency to look slightly sheepish. 'That may have been my interpretation of what he said.'

Priest smiled and she smiled back. She had an infectious smile. He remembered seeing it for the first time when she had walked into the interview room and presented a CV bursting with commendations, awards and an Oxford first. Priest's policy was to only ever ask one interview question. None of the pro forma questions and aptitude tests candidates were subjected to



in the recruitment processes of the supposed elite practices – the so-called Magic Circle firms. Priest found the best measure wasn't something Freud had conjured up. It was his gut.

'If you were me, how would you conduct this interview?'

Priest had laid out his only interview question to another fresh-faced candidate and sat back, waiting for the usual diatribe of executive bollocks which might include repeating large sections of the About Us section of the Priest & Co. website or, if he was lucky, a Google-assembled analysis of the reform of conditional fee arrangements in personal injury work.

To his surprise, Georgie Someday had met his gaze and spoken without a hint of sarcasm.

'I wouldn't. Asking me questions isn't going to tell you anything about me you won't get from your receptionist. That's why your candidates have to turn up an hour early.'

Priest had faltered. She had smiled awkwardly and, without being able to stop himself, he had smiled back. Awkwardly.

Later, as he had poured over the headnote of a Court of Appeal authority, Maureen, his chain-smoking receptionist, had poked her head around the door and directed a series of gruffly constituted words in unambiguous tones at him which had landed Georgie her training contract.

'You better bloody hire that girl, Priest,' she had said. 'Your tea's in the kitchen.'

'You seem distracted,' Georgie observed as they negotiated through the jumble of lawyers and clients cluttering up the High Court entrance. 'You know: even more than usual.'



He dismissed her. 'No, no. This is just as it is, Someday. Follow me.'

She took him by the arm and was about to lead him away from the court when a voice stopped them. Priest turned and saw a small man hunched up against the side of the court, a cigarette stuck to his lip. His hair was grey and wiry and his skin had the purple stain left by years of alcohol and fags.

'Excuse me?'

He immediately regretted having spoken so when it became clear that the man who had addressed them was Dominique Elias. He must have slipped out at some point for a smoke after the cameras had packed up.

'I said, I wonder if you get a kick out of what you do, Mr Priest?' Elias croaked.

Priest hesitated and felt Georgie tug on his arm, but something stopped him from doing what he should do and move on.

'Sorry, Mr Elias. I can't talk to you. Professional rules. You know how it is.'

Elias ignored him. 'How do you think it's going to be after this, Mr Priest? When the judge throws you out of court? Did you ever stop to think about the children we look after? All that charity money wasted on legal fees that could have gone to helping kids who need our help. How many of them do you think have died because of you and that poxy online operation you're representing?'

'None.'

Elias made to say something but stumbled into a fit of coughing. When he'd finished, his face was red. One eye was a little bloodshot. 'You have a lawyer's conscience, I see.'



‘No,’ said Priest, calmly. ‘I just have a better understanding of moral causation than you.’

‘Hm. And what do you know about moral causation?’

‘*Your* side brought the claim, Mr Elias.’ Priest was relaxed – in fact professional rules prevented him from talking to Alexia, since she was a party to the proceedings, but Dominique wasn’t, so the conversation wasn’t illicit. *There is no property in a witness.* ‘Remember: you picked the fight.’

‘Didn’t have much choice, did we? *Your* client published that filth.’

There was more; Dominique was about to say something else but he stopped. Something had caught his eye, further up the road on the other side of the High Court entrance. He winced, squinted as if he saw someone he vaguely recognised. Then slunk back against the wall. Priest followed his eyeline but it was impossible to tell from the group of people mingling outside who had distracted him.

Assessing that the exchange was at an end, Priest doffed an imaginary cap. ‘Good luck in court, Mr Elias.’ He turned and led Georgie away, sensing Elias watching them all the way. When they reached the Tube entrance, he noticed Georgie was still holding on to his arm.

