



# 1

## Alice

As she slipped in and out of consciousness, all Alice could process were the stark white lights overhead, the acrid smell of burning, and the searing heat that ripped through her entire body.

An unfamiliar voice drifted above her. ‘Good God, she’s lucky to be alive.’

She wanted to try and work out where she was. Find out who these voices belonged to, and more importantly who on earth they were talking about. But it hurt to just be, let alone think. Plus, those lights were blinding.

‘Lucky? You think she’s going to feel lucky when she looks in the mirror for the first time? She’s been badly burnt, the poor girl.’

She tried to force her brain into action, fighting against the pull of sleep. Just as she was about to give up and allow the cool safety of darkness to take her, Alice started to piece it all together.

The ‘poor girl’.

The smell.

The *burning*.

It was her who was lucky to be alive.

It was her who had been on fire.

## 2

# Alfie

‘There he is! Alfie Mack, the luckiest son of a bitch I know!’

He didn’t need to pull the curtain back to know who had come to visit him – he would never be able to forget that voice, even if he’d wanted to.

‘Not *quite* so lucky when they chopped my leg off, but you win some, you lose some, right?’

‘Can’t argue with that one.’ Matty shrugged. ‘Anyway, how have you been, buddy? By the way, I can’t stay long today, got to pick the missus up and go for lunch with the in-laws.’

It was normal for everyone to make their excuses to leave before they’d even taken a seat, and Alfie was grateful to Matty for at least asking how he was first.

‘Yeah, no worries, I’ve got a fairly packed day too.’

‘Really?’

Alfie could tell he was only half listening.

‘Oh yeah, it’s relentless in here. The main challenge is trying to guess the number of times Mr Peterson will get up and go to the toilet this morning. Normally we average a good

seven, but if he has a sip of that apple juice, it could be anything up to ten.’

A disgruntled voice rang out across the ward. ‘When you’re ninety-two and your bladder is about as taut as a dead duck’s arse, you’ll be pissing constantly too.’

‘It’s all right, Mr P, there’s no judgement here. Although, are you sure you weren’t a writer in another life? Your vocabulary is downright poetic.’

The old man across the way in bed fourteen broke into a smile, then very quickly shoved his middle finger up at Alfie and returned to reading his newspaper.

‘Seriously though, mate, how are you doing? How’s the physio going? Any idea yet when you’ll be out of here?’ Matty’s eyes were wide with hope.

Everyone asked the same questions with the same concern. It was strange; on the one hand he knew that they all just wanted him home and out of the hospital, but at the same time he couldn’t help but sense their slight apprehension. He supposed that while he was in the capable hands of St Francis’s nursing staff, it was one less thing they all had to worry about.

‘No idea, if I’m honest. The infection seems to be all under control now. Physio is going well and they’re going to measure me for a custom prosthetic soon. I just need to keep building my strength up. It’s small progress but, as the nurses say . . . every step is a step closer to the end!’

‘That is the *worst* motivational phrase ever. It sounds like you’re walking to your bloody death.’

‘Well, isn’t that what we’re all doing, Matthew my friend?’ Alfie reached over and patted him on the arm.

‘Oh, give over. You’re still a dark-humoured bastard even with one leg, aren’t you!’ Matty slapped his hand away affectionately.

It was around now when most people usually took their cue to leave – they'd checked in on him, cracked a few jokes, asked the questions they thought they should. There was usually only so much time being surrounded by the sick and vulnerable that a person could take.

'Right, buddy, got to dash. Mel and the kids send their love. Let me know if you need anything, otherwise I'll see you same time same place next week?'

'Don't you worry, I'll be here! Take care of yourself and give the little ones a kiss from me.'

'Sure thing. Love you, mate.'

'Yeah, you too, Matty.'

The declarations of love were still something Alfie was getting used to. They had only started after Matty had thought his best friend was gone for ever. The first time, Alfie could have sworn he'd misheard.

'What did you just say?'

'Nothing.' Matty had shuffled uncomfortably, his gaze fixed to the floor. 'I just . . .' His eyes flickered up briefly to meet Alfie's. 'I just said I love you, is all.'

Alfie had burst out into laughter. 'Oh, come on, mate! Don't be ridiculous. You don't need to say all that stuff.' But Matty was definitely not laughing. In fact, he was looking even more uncomfortable. His head had dropped lower; his fists were tight by his side.

'Look, it's not ridiculous, OK?' He was painfully forcing the words out through gritted teeth. 'When I thought I'd lost you, I realized I'd never said it to you once. Not in the entire fifteen years of our friendship, and so I promised myself that if you survived I'd tell you. Thankfully here we are, so you'd better get used to it, OK?'

It was all Alfie could do not to cry. 'I love you too, mate.'

Since then, it had become the full stop at the end of their every goodbye. Of course it was said in a very nonchalant, testosterone-filled manner, but Alfie knew how important those few words were to both of them now.

Alfie had been a patient at St Francis's hospital for nearly six weeks. Since he'd moved to Hackney three years ago, he'd had the pleasure of seeing St Francis's regularly. Its murky pebble-dashing loomed over the trendy gentrified streets as a reminder there was a shabby history that couldn't be ignored.

'Jesus Christ, if I ever end up in that place, Mum, promise me you'll get me transferred?' he'd joke, whenever they'd walk past it during one of her visits.

'Oh, don't be so morbid. I've heard very good things about that place.'

'Really? You're telling me you've heard good things about a place that looks more like a multi-storey car park than a hospital?'

'Stop it! If you were at death's door, trust me, you'd be begging them to take you in.' She smiled at him in that infuriating self-righteous way. 'Plus, what have I always taught you? Never judge a book by its cover.'

But continue to judge it he did. Right up until the very moment the unsightly building and the people within it saved his life. As soon as he was admitted, they'd known it was bad. Just one look at the wreckage would have told you that, but over a month in hospital? Nobody could have predicted that.

# 3

## Alice

‘Hey, honey . . . can you hear me?’ The voice was quiet, hopeful and cautious.

The smell was the first thing to hit her.

*Bleach. Blood. Human decay.*

‘You don’t even need to say anything, Alice, love. Maybe blink or wiggle those fingers of yours, we just want to know if you’re awake.’

In an act to get this human and her nauseating kindness away from her, Alice forced her fingers to move. The effort alone felt peculiar. How had she forgotten to use her own body? How long had it been since she’d told her brain to work?

‘There you are, Alice, my girl. Well done, you’re doing brilliantly!’

It didn’t feel like she was doing brilliantly. It felt like someone had stretched and pulled at her skin, trying to fit her into a new body that was the wrong shape altogether, and then to top it off they’d run out of material and given up halfway through the job. She felt unfinished and in a hell of a lot of pain.



‘You’ve been in an accident, Alice, but you’re on the mend now. I’m going to call for the doctor so he can come and explain what’s been happening, OK? Sit tight, sweetheart, I’ll be back in a moment.’

Alice’s head was pounding. Broken fragments of memory kept swirling around her mind, making it impossible for her to think. She blinked her eyes open and saw two people hurrying towards her bed.

*Please just tell me where the hell I am.*

‘Hi Miss Gunnersley. Do you mind if I call you Alice?’

The doctor stepped a little closer to her. He had a face that Alice presumed was once filled with hope and enthusiasm for the work he was doing, but now appeared a little jaded and somewhat wary. Here stood a man well and truly hardened to death.

She shook her head very slightly. The only act of acknowledgement she could muster.

‘Fantastic. So, Alice, as the nurse has probably already explained, you’ve been brought into St Francis’s hospital because you’ve been in a serious accident. There was a fire in your office building and unfortunately you were caught in it. You’ve suffered some quite substantial injuries – we estimate about 40 per cent of your body has been burnt to varying degrees. We’ve already performed one surgery in an attempt to minimize the damage, but there’s still a long way to go. For now, I want you to know that you’re receiving the best possible care and we have a plan in place to support you.’ An awkward smile appeared momentarily on his face. ‘Do you have any immediate questions I can answer? I know it must be a lot to take in.’

The words washed over her, flooding her with a deep sense of dread. Surely this couldn’t be real? Was it some cruel

joke? Her brain desperately searched for any other alternative than the one staring her in the face. But the pain was real. She knew that for certain. She looked down at her arm. The damage was unavoidably real.

Alice snapped her eyes shut immediately.

*Don't look. Don't you dare look at it again.*

She heard the doctor shift at the end of her bed. 'It may be uncomfortable for a little while, but we are giving you pain relief to help. I'll let you rest some more, Alice, but I'll be back in the morning to check in on you again, OK?'

She nodded and then, without needing to be told twice, she fell back into a deep ignorant sleep.

\*

Over the coming days, as she grew stronger, Alice found herself able to stay awake for more than only a smattering of time. Her brain had slowly come round to the idea of working, which in turn meant she was able to finally take in her surroundings.

Bleak.

That was the first word that came to mind. 'Soulless' was a fast follower. For a place constantly brimming with noise, it felt empty. There were always people busying themselves with one thing or another. Checking this. Reading that. Talking constantly. Alice knew she was alive but only by the grace of the machines she was attached to. There were so many wires feeding into her she started to forget where the flesh ended and the mechanics began. She let herself be prodded and poked and discussed, all the while taking her mind and most importantly her gaze elsewhere. Every time she looked down, the evidence was there. It was as if the fire had been so incensed that she had managed to escape with her life, that it had wanted to leave its mark on her indefinitely, and it had done its job well.

The entire left side of her body was charred. Eaten up and spat out by the flames. In a bid to try and block out the state of her, she spent most of her time looking at the ceiling or at the inside of her eyelids. Sleep became the only place that felt familiar to her. The only place she didn't feel pain and the only place left for her to escape to.

Sleep also meant that she avoided the influx of people constantly checking in on her like clockwork. Throughout her life she'd often wondered how it would feel to be looked after. How would it feel to be cared for with no questions asked or conditions to be met? Now it had become her reality and it made her want to scream until her lungs bled raw. She knew they were just doing their job. She was fully aware that the nurses and doctors were *obliged* to care, but what wasn't required were the tears that would well up in their eyes every time they saw her. Nor was staying after hours to try and talk to her because for days in a row there had been no visitors by her bedside. A bitter resentment ignited inside her, flooding her body with poison and spilling out on to those around her. She recoiled at their touch; she despised their pity. It was nobody's job to take pity on her.

Often, if sleep hadn't carried her away, she'd close her eyes and pretend during their rounds. She couldn't stand looking at the same faces trying to disguise their shock. The same faces attempting to coax even a hint of a word from her mouth, but still she said nothing. At first it genuinely was too painful to speak. She'd breathed in so much smoke during the fire that, as well as a melted face, she'd won a pair of lungs fit for a forty-a-day smoker. No matter how many litres of oxygen she was forced to inhale each day, the entirety of her throat still seared with pain. She was charred from the inside out. A truly well-done piece of meat.

## 4

# Alfie

When he'd first been admitted to hospital, everything felt alien. He didn't belong there. Nothing fitted. Everything, from the chlorinated smell of the air to the feel of the scratchy starched bed sheets and the sounds of the people, was wrong. There was no space that was his and he was constantly being walked in on, interrupted, or woken up by the doctors and nurses. He could feel the frustration mounting with every passing hour and the unfamiliarity was overwhelming. Every night he prayed he could be back in his home. Back in his little one-bed flat in Hackney, surrounded by the safety of his life. Now he wasn't sure how he could ever go back to it. How would he sleep without the meditative beeping of the heart monitors? How could he wake up in his bedroom alone? Where would the faces of the other patients be when he needed company?

One of the rare perks of being a patient for so long was that you got very familiar with the dos and don'ts of hospital life. Six weeks was long enough to know what to choose and what to avoid from the daily menus, to remember which porters had

a sense of humour and which could barely even blink, let alone crack a smile. It was also long enough to know which of the nurses would slip you an extra pudding at dinner and which of them you needed to be on best behaviour for. Luckily, the Moira Gladstone ward contained more of the former than the latter. And none was kinder, more protective and larger than life than Nurse Martha Angles, aka Mother Angel. There was nothing small about her; she was a woman who could fill a room with just her bust and her laughter, and she oversaw the rehab ward with a keen eye and an open heart.

‘Good morning, my Mother Angel, how are you today?’

For the first time in a long time Alfie actually enjoyed waking up early. You couldn’t help but want to absorb every moment you could with Nurse Angles; she was one of those shiny people you only really found once in a lifetime.

‘Good morning, my love. Same old same old for me. Hank took me to the cinema last night – apparently I was asleep twenty minutes in! No clue what the film was about but it was a wonderful sleep, I can tell you that for sure.’

Hank was the love of Nurse Angles’ life. Childhood sweetheart, married at eighteen and with four lovely children. She adored him with every piece of her being, which also meant she moaned about him every waking hour.

‘He really must love you to put up with your snoring on date night! Also, when are you going to introduce us? I need him to teach me how to find a woman like you.’

She gave him an affectionate slap on the wrist. ‘Trust me, honey, finding them is the easy part. It’s trying to keep them that’s the hard work!’

‘Amen, Nurse!’ Sharon shouted from her bed. She was a recent divorcee and even more recent feminist.

Nurse Angles laughed a deep and chesty laugh. ‘Anyway,

let's see how we're doing today.' She glanced down at his bandaged stump.

'Really? Again?' Alfie knew he was being petulant, but quite frankly he wasn't in the mood to have his wound pulled and poked at today.

'Oh, so you want the swelling to come back, do you? You want the scar to burst and that thing to get infected again? Don't make me call orthopaedics and have you transferred back again. You don't think I'll do it, but I will!'

Alfie may not have been in the mood for his checks, but Nurse Angles was clearly not in the mood for his answering back. He'd been moved on to the Moira Gladstone rehabilitation ward after completing his stints in intensive care and orthopaedics. Alfie had been around the block a bit and he knew this was the best place he could ever hope to end up. There was no way he was going to risk being moved again.

'Sorry. Be my guest. I just don't like looking at it, that's all.'

'I know, baby, but I'll be quick.' She gently started to unwrap him. His skin lit up with sensations. It didn't hurt as such, although sometimes he wondered whether he'd experienced so much agonizing pain in the days after the accident that his threshold was much higher now. It was a bizarre feeling, like red-hot pins and needles coursing up and down his body. He flinched a little and Nurse Angles rested her hand on his. 'I know it's annoying, but this little bit of fuss far outweighs the risk of losing you. Not going to let that happen on my watch.'

He knew she was right and so he lay back and closed his eyes. No matter how much time passed, seeing the wound still sent ripples through his body. He'd take all the pain in the world over looking at his scars. Those thick white lines

that represented everything he'd lost and would never be able to get back.

'Right, all done. Now, are you ready to storm that runway in physio this afternoon?' Nurse Angles had finished the wound checks as quickly and as painlessly as she'd promised.

'Oh, you bet, Mother A. Today's the day I nail it.'

She gave him another of her gentle slaps and continued going through her routine assessment. Vital signs checked, measurements noted, and most crucially of all, pillow fluffed.

'Now, Alfie, I need to ask you a favour.'

There was a slight change in her voice.

'Of course, what is it?'

She sat most of herself down on the edge of his bed. 'There's going to be someone new moving in next door to you soon.'

Alfie's heart leapt.

'Before you go and get too excited, I need to warn you she's severely traumatized and hasn't spoken a word since she was admitted to the hospital.'

Alfie's heart sank.

'How long has she been here?' He couldn't imagine being silent for even an afternoon.

'A few weeks now.' Nurse Angles inched herself a little closer to him. 'Look, Alfie. I know you'll want to talk to her and try to become her friend, but please, I'm asking you to just leave it be for a while. Let her settle in. Give her some space until she's ready to start talking, OK, honey?'

Alfie was still perplexed by the idea that someone could be silent for so long. He was intrigued to witness how that could even happen.

'Alfie?'

'Sorry, of course. I won't say a word.'

‘There’s a good boy.’ She patted the space on the bed where his left leg used to be, an unintentional reminder of what he lacked, and heaved herself out of his cubicle.

Alfie wondered how on earth this person had survived so long without talking. Surely that was an exaggeration? No one in their right mind could possibly volunteer to be quiet for weeks on end. Throughout his life, numerous people had challenged Alfie to be silent. Once, in high school, he’d gone as far as to raise £3,000 to do a sponsored forty-eight-hour silence. He barely lasted the morning, but people were so proud of him for trying that they donated anyway. Alfie lived for conversation. He thrived off connection. In fact, one of the only things that got him through his days was annoying Mr Peterson or catching up on the gossip with Sharon. Conversations were the fabric of his existence on the ward, and without them Alfie could only imagine what a lonely place it would be.

*She won’t last long.*

How could she? He knew how adamant Nurse Angles was about this, but Alfie couldn’t help his sneaking suspicion that the moment this mystery patient got sucked into the goings on here, she wouldn’t be able to resist joining in. That was the beauty of the Moira Gladstone ward. It wasn’t like the ICU or A&E. People weren’t in and out through a revolving door. They stayed. They recuperated. They became family. It was only a matter of time before his new neighbour would follow suit.



## 5

# Alice

One thing Alice had managed to achieve during her time in the ICU was to piece together an idea of what on earth had happened to her. It had taken a while for her to sieve through the haze of her memory, move aside the broken debris of heat, smoke and screaming, and remember her movements that day.

She'd worked late the night before so hadn't made her Pilates class first thing. She remembered that had annoyed her; missing even one was the start of a downward spiral of complacency. Two double espressos and a quick shower later, she was out of the door and on her way just before 6 a.m.

Alice had worked long enough and hard enough to have earned herself a very comfortable salary and a very senior role in financial consultancy. She'd been fortunate enough, therefore, to have a choice when it came to buying her flat. She'd forced herself to look in the suburbs first, at the beautiful homes people had poured their creativity and love into. She went through the motions of requesting properties with manicured gardens that drank in the sunshine and provided a green sanctuary in the concrete jungle of London. She insisted

on extra bedrooms for future guests and potential offspring. And then she caught herself using the word ‘offspring’ instead of ‘children’ and dropped the pretence. Alice prided herself on being one very independent, very single and very cynical human being. She was never one to believe in something she couldn’t see with her own eyes, measure with a stick, or at the very least read in a textbook. Alice was not the person to engage in a deep spiritual conversation; she quite frankly didn’t give a shit about your hopes and dreams, and she certainly didn’t rely on anyone for anything. All Alice Gunnersley needed was convenience and solitude. And so came the purchase of a penthouse flat in Greenwich. She didn’t have neighbours; she had views of the river and just enough of the park to convince herself she was surrounded by nature. Best of all, she could see her office from her flat, which always brought her a perverse sense of calm.

The day of the accident had been an especially stressful one at work. There was a big report that needed to be finalized before the end of the week, a report that if successful would cement Alice in the minds of the board when it came to identifying future partner talent. Unfortunately, standing between her and writing the extremely important report were endless meetings, project reviews and financial budgeting tasks, plus an hour-long catch-up with her boss. Alice often wondered why Henry insisted on having these meetings every month, considering they had the exact same conversation every time.

‘Alice, you are no doubt a phenomenal asset to this company. I’ve never met anyone with a work ethic and ability to deliver like yours. But you know that’s not all we value here at the firm. If you want to make it all the way to the top seat, you have to start taking people with you.’

*Taking people with you.*

*Another stupid HR phrase, she thought. What does that even really mean, Henry?* She wanted to bite back, but instead she took a deep breath and smiled.

‘I do take people with me, Henry. Look at the stats. I’ve promoted five members of my team this year alone and have the highest staff retention of anyone on the floor.’

‘I know.’ He shook his head in exasperation.

Alice knew she wasn’t exactly easy to manage, but she also knew you couldn’t argue with facts. So facts she always gave him.

‘But that’s not the point.’

‘Well, Henry, I don’t mean to be rude, but I’ve got a hell of a lot to do today, so I’d be grateful if you could get to your point quite quickly . . .’

She knew her comments wouldn’t surprise him. They’d worked together for over ten years now, and Alice’s ruthless commitment to her job had remained very much the same.

‘The *point* is, there’s more to life than this office. I just worry sometimes that you don’t see that. You’re here all hours of the day and night, and I’m not sure it’s particularly healthy. Plus, you rarely attend social events here, and I hardly ever see you interact with anyone other than to talk about deadlines.’

Alice frowned. Was he having some sort of emotional breakdown on her? She began to laugh.

‘I see what this is. It’s some new HR policy about employee health and wellbeing, isn’t it? Look, you don’t have to worry about me at all. I sleep, I eat, and I have some friends I see from time to time. Plus, I *do* talk to people here.’

His eyebrow shot up. ‘Oh, really?’

‘I talk to Lyla.’

‘She’s your PA. You have to talk to her.’

‘Fine. I talk to Arnold.’

Ha. She'd got him with this one.

'Arnold? Who the hell is Arnold?' His eyes narrowed. He always squinted when he was thinking. It was a habit Alice couldn't stand.

Suddenly the penny dropped. 'Oh Jesus, Alice. Not the old guy on reception?'

'The very same one.' She smiled smugly.

Henry rolled his eyes; she could tell his frustration was hitting new limits. 'Right. Well, if you're really telling me that you have deep and meaningful conversations with Arnold, then who am I to judge.'

'Exactly.' Alice stood up. 'Are we done?'

Henry shrugged his shoulders; the man had all but given up. 'Apparently so.'

'Thanks, Henry.' She didn't even bother to look at him as she left the room.

*How odd*, she thought. Why on earth was he so concerned about what she did with her life outside work all of a sudden? Surely all he cared about was getting the best possible value for money out of her. And so what if Arnold wasn't exactly a *friend* – as her role got progressively bigger, he was the person she'd found herself seeing more than any other human being in her life. For five days a week, Arnold Frank Bertram manned the reception desk during the night shift at Alice's office. It was common for Alice to be the only remaining employee in the building after 9 p.m., meaning she and Arnold were the only breathing souls in the entire forty-floor office tower. Every night when she finally found the discipline to tear herself away and leave for home, there he'd be, waiting patiently at the front desk, eyes fixed on the door to the street. As soon as he saw Alice, his face would break into a smile.

‘Another late one tonight, Miss? Not worth doing if it’s not done properly, ain’t that right?’

For a long time, Alice would simply placate the man with a smile. It was a genuine, grateful smile but nothing more. She could sense he was the talking type, in a wonderful, grandfatherly story-telling kind of way, but at 11 p.m. on a Wednesday night with a 7 a.m. start the next day, Alice would challenge anyone to be up for a chat. A smile would have to do.

But as time passed and her late nights often turned into early mornings, Alice found it harder and harder to ignore the old man and his continuous attempts at conversation. During one particularly hellish week when Alice had decided, at the godforsaken hour of 2 a.m., that she needed some fresh air, Arnold had been waiting for her on her return with a cup of hot chocolate.

‘Got to keep your sugar levels up, Miss.’ He smiled and nodded.

‘Thank you.’ She didn’t have any energy to protest and simply took the gift, realizing she hadn’t eaten since lunchtime. ‘How much do I owe you?’

‘Nothing.’ He held his hands up. ‘You can get them in tomorrow night.’ He winked and then returned dutifully to his desk.

And so the strange nightly ritual began: alternating hot chocolate purchases and snippets of conversation with Arnold had become a standing agenda item in Alice’s working day.

The night of the fire was no different. Although, for some reason, it seemed the sugar rush hadn’t done much to energize her. Alice had been working on the report since 10 p.m. but something wasn’t quite sitting right with the tone of it.

She distinctly remembered closing her eyes in the hope that a quick power nap would be all that was needed to restart her brain. She drained the dregs of her hot chocolate and laid her head on the desk.

The authorities had later informed her that while she was sleeping, between two and three that morning, an air conditioning unit on the floor above had caught fire and ripped the top of the building to pieces.

‘You were lucky, Miss,’ the police officer said, after his fruitless attempts to gather as much information as he could from her for his report. Even though she was getting stronger physically, her recollections were still based on other people’s versions of events. A patchwork quilt of stories she’d been forced to adopt as her own.

If this life was lucky, she dreaded to think of the alternatives.

‘You have a very diligent receptionist. That man would have all but dragged you out himself if the fire rescue teams hadn’t arrived when they did. The poor guy was distraught.’

*Arnold.*

‘He saved your life, Miss Gunnersley.’ The second officer looked imploringly at her; his desperation for just a hint of emotion or response was blatant. She gave him nothing but a nod.

‘All right, well, we will send you the full report when we’ve written it up. If you do have any questions, please don’t hesitate to call.’

Apparently Arnold really had been a friend. In fact, he’d overnight turned out to be one of the most significant people in Alice’s life. He had saved her.

Now she wondered if it would have been better to have let the fire take all of her instead.

## 6

# Alfie

‘Mr P, you know what time it is!’ Alfie heaved himself up and reached for his crutches.

The old man frowned. ‘Jesus, it’s worse than being on a Butlin’s holiday with the number of activities you all have planned. I’m not one of your bloody school kids, you know.’

In his old life, before the accident, Alfie had been a Sports Therapy and Physical Activity Educator at a high school in south London. Essentially he was your run-of-the-mill PE teacher, but apparently that was a shameful word to use – politics had firmly infiltrated the education system and titles soon became a reflection of self-worth and ego. Alfie didn’t care. He didn’t need prestige or glory; he simply loved every second of his job. In fact, one of the hardest things about being on the ward was how much he missed being surrounded by his pupils. Sure, he cursed them continuously every moment he spent with them, but he wouldn’t change them for the world.

‘One day your misery will be the death of you. Now, hurry up before they run out of chocolate brownies.’

Despite Mr Peterson's complaining, Alfie noticed he'd already got his slippers on ready for their walk.

'Hurry up! That's rich coming from you. Don't forget you're the one without a leg, son. I move at lightning speed compared to you.'

'Are you two ever nice to each other?' Sharon's voice cut across the squabbling.

'Pipe down, Sharon,' Mr Peterson quipped. 'Or I won't buy you that hot chocolate you've been moaning at me to get you for the past hour.'

The bickering never stopped. Alfie sometimes wondered if, without it, everyone would be forced to remember they were stuck in a hospital ward fighting their own pain without the comfort of their families around them.

'You're worse than my Ruby and she's just turned six! You should be ashamed of yourselves,' Jackie called out from across the ward, her words still slightly mumbled from the stroke. Jackie was the only resident on the ward who had children, and Alfie loved how even just the mention of her daughter would seem to momentarily ease some of her suffering. 'But while you're there, Alfie . . . I'd kill for a cinnamon bun.'

'Jesus, it's not a delivery service,' Mr P muttered.

'You know if you don't ply them with sugar they're even worse!' Alfie smiled at his friend, who had hooked his arm through his. He was a stubborn, strong-willed man, but at ninety-two years old Mr Peterson's physique was understandably frail.

Their regular walk to Costa was an excuse to get away from the ward and escape some of the cabin fever that tended to set in. Alfie knew he needed to keep practising his walking and Mr Peterson was a sucker for a hot chocolate, so it suited both parties perfectly.



‘I had an interesting chat with Mother A this morning.’ Alfie tried to sound casual, knowing any hint of gossip would hook his friend in immediately.

‘Oh, yeah?’ The old man’s eyes lit up.

‘Turns out I’m getting a new neighbour. A silent one.’

‘You what?’ Mr Peterson’s face crumpled in confusion.

‘There’s someone moving into the bed next to me. Apparently she hasn’t spoken in weeks, refuses to, and has done ever since they admitted her. Nurse Angles says she’s pretty traumatized.’ Alfie shrugged, still puzzled by the silent determination of this patient.

‘I reckon she must be badly hurt.’

‘Sure seems that way, doesn’t it.’ Silence hung heavily between them as each focused intently on his slow shuffling steps.

‘Well, give it a week or so, these things always pass. And if not, then maybe she can teach you a thing or two about being quiet. Give us all some peace for a bit.’ The old man laughed loudly at his own humour.

‘Or . . . most likely, I’ll get her to cave, and in no time we’ll *both* be spending our days irritating you.’ Alfie nudged his friend gently in the ribs, grateful for the lightness returning to their conversation.

Mr Peterson rolled his eyes. ‘Good God, in that case I pray the lady never speaks again!’

# 7

## Alice

When Alice had first been told she'd be moving wards, part of her was relieved. It meant progress was being made. She was no longer deemed in a critical condition and she was finally on the road back to her old life again. Although her skin grafts had started to heal, the burnt flesh beneath them slowly recovering, she still hadn't spoken a word. What was there to say? All anyone wanted to hear from her was that she was 'doing OK'. That she was 'feeling much better, thanks'. Yet all you needed to do was take one look at her to know that was a lie. Not that *she'd* actually taken one look at herself since the accident. She had point blank refused to open her eyes when the doctors had encouraged her to look at her reflection. All she had to do was glance down at the congealed skin on her arms to get an idea of the damage done to her face. She didn't need a mirror to know that she was significantly damaged goods.

And still the over-friendly, over-emotional and incessantly positive nurses carried on with their 'weren't you lucky' bullshit.

‘Weren’t you lucky it only really affected one side of you, Alice.’

‘It’s lucky you were rescued when you were, or the damage might have spread to your right side too.’

Oh, wonderful, she would have been completely fucked up then. How lucky she felt that she was only disfigured down one side of her body.

*Lucky, lucky fucking Alice.*

‘Good morning, Alice. How are you?’ the doctor said flatly. Why people continued to ask her these questions baffled her. Silence continued to be her only answer yet they still kept trying.

‘I’ve been looking at your notes and I’m happy with your progress. The grafts are healing well and all the vital signs are looking stable.’ The doctor looked up from his clipboard and smiled. His weak attempt at positivity somehow felt more awkward than encouraging. ‘The next thing we need to do is build up your strength and mobility. You’ve been lying down for quite some time and we need to prevent any further muscle waste. That’s why we want you to move to the Moira Gladstone ward. It’s a rehabilitation facility based in this hospital. It’s one of the best in the country. You’ll have a physio plan put in place, they’ll continue to monitor the wounds, and when we know the extent of the scarring we can discuss other options.’

*Nothing you do can give me what I had back.*

‘The only thing we’re concerned about is . . .’

*The fact I haven’t spoken in weeks or looked at my own face?*

Alice enjoyed watching this man struggle to find the appropriate words.

‘. . . we don’t feel like you’ve made much progress on the

path to accepting the accident. We need you to start communicating, Alice. If you're going to get out of here, we have to be confident that you've accepted what's happened and can make positive steps forward.'

*Positive steps? Why don't we swap places, doctor, and see how many positive steps you take.*

She raised the corner of her mouth as a poor offer of acknowledgement.

'Alice.' He took a deep breath in and came a step closer to her. 'There *are* other options for you, but first we have to let the skin heal more. This isn't the end for you . . . I know it may feel like it now, but it isn't.' The doctor reached his hand out momentarily, then let it fall limply by his side. 'In order to make you feel most comfortable, we will move you tomorrow night. Any questions, you know we're here to answer them.'

\*

Unfortunately it hadn't been possible to transport her curtains along with the bed, but at least the darkness just about hid her face as she was wheeled along the corridors. The moment she arrived on the Moira Gladstone ward she sensed the change in energy. It was calmer. No rushing. No fear of immediate danger. People weren't running on extreme adrenaline and caffeine twenty-four hours a day. As she rolled past the rows of beds, Alice could just about make out the picture frames, multicoloured bed throws and trinkets. It seemed that the people occupying this space were no longer patients, they were residents. That was another stark difference to the ICU; all of these people had been given the gift of time back. In theory, they weren't going anywhere any time soon.

Alice was woken up the next morning by one of the nurses.

This woman was big and bold and not afraid to confront the elephant in the room.

‘Morning, baby.’

Alice physically recoiled. She was definitely not this stranger’s baby. Alice Gunnersley was, in fact, no one’s baby.

‘I’m Nurse Angles and I’ll be overseeing your treatment while you’re here. I know you’re not comfortable talking, so whenever I ask you something all I need is a simple nod yes or shake no – can we at least manage that? Otherwise it’s going to be hard for me to make sure you’re comfortable.’

Maybe she could forgive the term of endearment if this nurse wasn’t going to try and force her to talk.

Alice nodded.

‘Wonderful. Well, welcome to the Moira Gladstone ward. Let’s do a quick change of your dressings and then we can discuss the treatment plan.’

Alice glared at Nurse Angles, keeping her arm just out of reach.

‘I know it’s uncomfortable but I will need to change the dressing.’

Uncomfortable? Just lying still was scarcely bearable. The itching of the skin as it tried to heal itself, knitting together with the foreign slabs of flesh they’d stitched on to her. Any movement, even breathing, would tug and pull at the skin, making her wince in pain. Sometimes it was a sharp pain, like a hundred knives slashing and tearing at her; other times it was a deep dull ache that would sit in her bones and weigh her down.

‘I need to make sure your dressings are clean, Alice.’ The nurse tentatively reached for her arm again. ‘Please.’

Reluctantly Alice allowed herself to be taken and tended to. She hated it when they did this. Not only did she have to feel the covering being peeled off her raw flesh, but it also

meant she had to see the damage in all its glory. No hiding. No masking. A melting pot of skin and bone, fighting to heal but still falling short. Yet the exasperation in the nurse's voice pulled at something inside her. She didn't mean to cause a fuss, but she had gone too long without saying anything and it felt too hard to break the silence now.

'I've been given the handover from your doctor and there's a lot we need to start doing to get you fit, healthy and out of here.' Nurse Angles scanned the sheet of paper on her clipboard. 'You're off the oxygen now, which is great, wound care will remain pretty much the same, pain relief can start to be decreased slowly, and we'll have to start physio.' She squeezed herself into the chair next to Alice's bed. 'And that, honey, means you're going to have to get yourself up and out of this bed.'

Fear drenched her like ice-cold water. She couldn't. She wouldn't get up. Alice started to shake her head furiously; adrenaline made her stomach churn and her fists clench tightly. Nurse Angles rested her hand on the bed.

'It's OK, Alice. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to panic you.' Alice felt her breathing slow just a little; the weight of Nurse Angles' hand next to her was having a calming effect. 'I know it's a lot to ask of you, but we do need to get you moving. You've been lying down for so long it's important we build your strength up quickly. Let me speak to the physio and see what we can do, OK?'

Alice closed her eyes and drew a long deep breath into her lungs.

*It's OK. It's going to be OK.*

'I'll let you rest now, sweetie. Like I said, leave it with me and we'll work something out.'

*Just work out how you can stop this hell. Please.*

## 8

# Alfie

He knew his neighbour had arrived the moment he woke up. The curtains around the bay next to him were fully closed, and from inside he could hear the familiar sound of Nurse Angles running through her routine introduction. It was a rare occurrence to transfer people at night, so everyone on the ward knew the red carpet really was being rolled out. Alfie could see the familiar faces of the other patients craning their necks to try and sneak a glimpse, as Nurse Angles expertly extracted herself from the curtains without revealing an inch of what lay within.

‘Did you see her?’ Mr Peterson mouthed, waving at him from across the room.

Alfie shook his head; it was too early and he was too tired from a rather disturbed night’s sleep to respond properly. He tried to settle himself back down, longing for a few more hours of rest to help him get through the day. But just as he closed his eyes he heard it.

A cough. A ragged, heavy and painful cough coming from behind the tightly closed curtains.

He bit his tongue and resisted asking if everything was OK. The sound alone told him it was a no. The rest of the morning followed the same pattern. Silence punctuated by that excruciating cough, over and over again. It took Alfie a huge amount of self-control to stay quiet. It was in his nature to care; in fact, all Alfie ever wanted to do was help. That desire for good coupled with his uncanny ability to connect with people was the main reason why Alfie was so good at his job. ‘Those that can’t, teach’ everyone would joke. Fuck that, he always said. Those that can change lives, teach. But he had promised Nurse Angles to stay clear, and so he needed to be cautious.

For the rest of the day, Alfie did his best to distract himself. He managed to pass a good hour or two with his puzzle books, but it was hard not to get caught up in the hushed excitement that was mounting in the ward. The nurses would come and go, talking at her as they went, but still the lady behind the curtain said nothing. The other patients became so intrigued as to who the mysterious new guest was that they started to gather in small groups, whispering their suspicions and throwing wild guesses around like confetti.

‘Do you think she’s even in there?’ Jackie asked.

‘This isn’t some elaborate joke they’re playing on us! Of course she’s in there.’ Mr Peterson laughed dismissively.

‘I’m going to ask the nurses about her. The young ones always let slip things they shouldn’t.’ Sharon’s voice rose in excitement.

Alfie lay in his bed, half listening to the mutterings of his friends and half worrying that the lady next to him could hear them. Maybe she was asleep? Perhaps that would explain her silence.

‘Can we not just stand around here like lemons, please?’