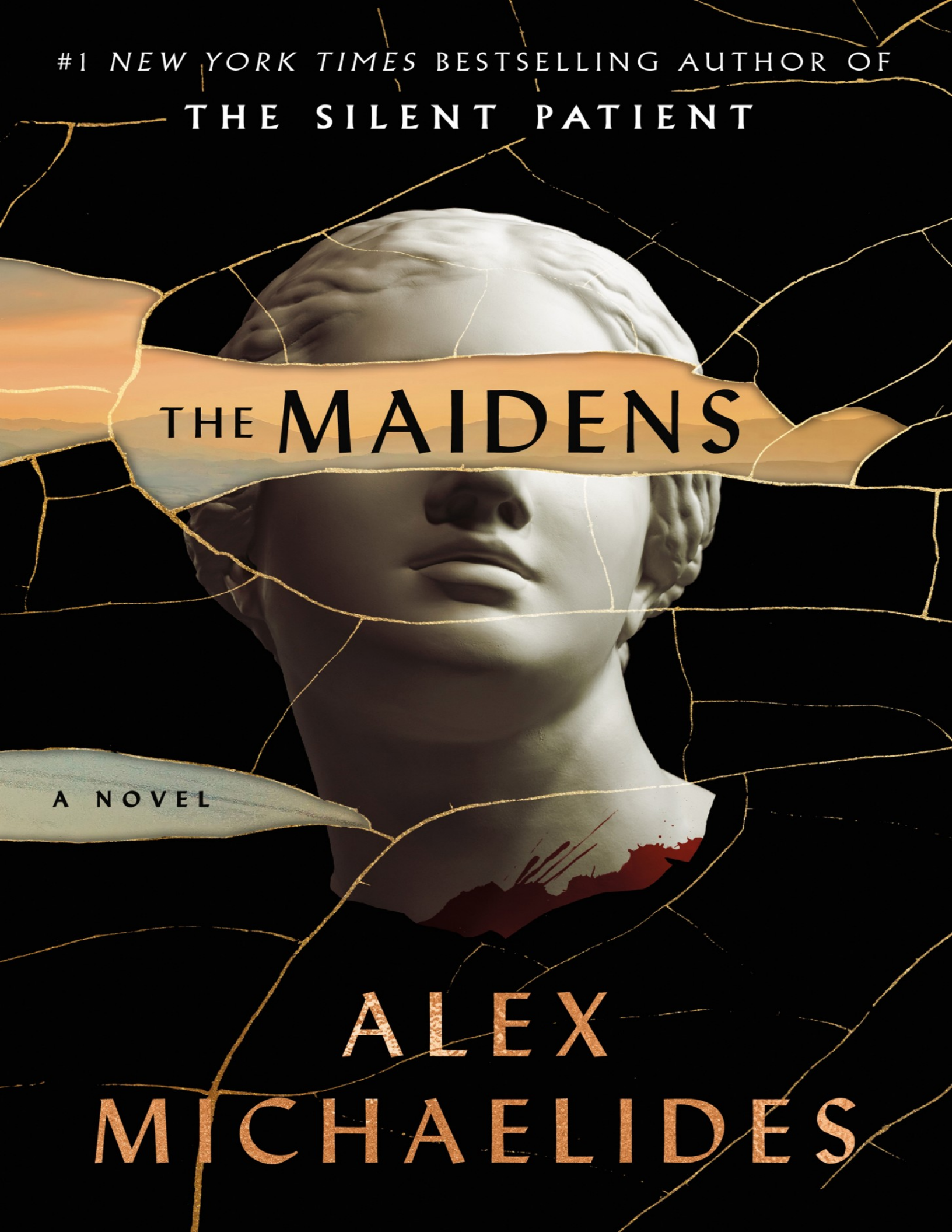
#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF

THE SILENT PATIENT



THE MAIDENS

A NOVEL

ALEX MICHAELIDES

ALEX
MICHAELIDES

THE MAIDENS

CELADON
BOOKS
NEW YORK

To Sophie Hannah, for giving me the courage of my convictions

Tell me tales of thy first love—
April hopes, the fools of chance;
Till the graves begin to move,
And the dead begin to dance.

—ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON, *The Vision of Sin*

Prologue

Edward Fosca was a murderer.

This was a fact. This wasn't something Mariana knew just on an intellectual level, as an idea. Her body knew it. She felt it in her bones, along her blood, and deep within every cell.

Edward Fosca was guilty.

And yet—she couldn't prove it, and might never prove it. This man, this monster, who had killed at least two people, might, in all likelihood, walk free.

He was so smug, so sure of himself. *He thinks he's got away with it,* she thought. He thought he had won.

But he hadn't. Not yet.

Mariana was determined to outsmart him. She had to.

She would sit up all night and remember everything that had happened. She would sit here, in this small, dark room in Cambridge, and think, and work it out. She stared at the red bar of the electric heater on the wall, burning, glowing in the dark, willing herself into a kind of trance.

In her mind, she would go back to the very beginning and remember it all. Every single detail.

And she would catch him.

Part One

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.

—C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

1

A few days earlier, Mariana was at home, in London.

She was on her knees, on the floor, surrounded by boxes. She was making yet another halfhearted attempt to sort through Sebastian's belongings.

It wasn't going well. A year on from his death, the majority of his things remained spread around the house in various piles and half-empty boxes. She seemed unable to complete the task.

Mariana was still in love with him—that was the problem. Even though she knew she'd never see Sebastian again—even though he was gone for good—she was still in love and didn't know what to do with all this love of hers. There was so much of it, and it was so messy: leaking, spilling, tumbling out of her, like stuffing falling out of an old rag doll that was coming apart at the seams.

If only she could box up her love, as she was attempting to do with his possessions. What a pitiful sight it was—a man's life reduced to a collection of unwanted items for a jumble sale.

Mariana reached into the nearest box. She pulled out a pair of shoes.

She considered them—the old green trainers he had for running on the beach. They still had a slightly sodden feel about them, with grains of sand embedded in the soles.

Get rid of them, she said to herself. *Throw them in the bin. Do it.*

Even as she thought this, she knew it was an impossibility. They weren't him; they weren't Sebastian—they weren't the man she loved and would love forever—they were just a pair of old shoes. Even so, parting with them would be an act of self-harm, like pressing a knife to her arm and slicing off a sliver of skin.

Instead, Mariana brought the shoes close to her chest. She cradled them tight, as she might a child. And she wept.

★ ★ ★

How had she ended up like this?

In the space of just a year, which once would have slipped by almost imperceptibly—and now stretched out behind her like a desolate landscape flattened by a hurricane—the life she had known had been obliterated, leaving Mariana here: thirty-six years old, alone and drunk on a Sunday night; clutching a dead man's shoes as if they were holy relics—which, in a way, they were.

Something beautiful, something holy, had died. All that remained were the books he read, the clothes he wore, the things he touched. She could still smell him on them, still taste him on the tip of her tongue.

That's why she couldn't throw away his possessions—by holding on to them, she could keep Sebastian alive, somehow, just a little bit—if she let go, she'd lose him entirely.

Recently, out of morbid curiosity, and in an attempt to understand what she was wrestling with, Mariana had reread all of Freud's writings about grief and loss. And he argued that, following the death of a loved one, the loss had to be psychologically accepted and that person relinquished, or else you ran the risk of succumbing to pathological mourning, which he called melancholia—and we call depression.

Mariana understood this. She knew she should relinquish Sebastian, but she couldn't—because she was still in love with him. She was in love even though he was gone forever, gone behind the veil—"behind the veil, behind the veil"—where was that from? Tennyson, probably.

Behind the veil.

That's how it felt. Since Sebastian died, Mariana no longer saw the world in color. Life was muted and gray and far away, behind a veil—behind a mist of sadness.

She wanted to hide from the world, all its noise and pain, and cocoon herself here, in her work, and in her little yellow house.

And that's where she would have stayed, if Zoe hadn't phoned her from Cambridge, that night in October.

Zoe's phone call, after the Monday-evening group—that was how it started.

That was how the nightmare began.

2

The Monday-evening group met in Mariana's front room.

It was a good-sized room. It had been given over to the use of therapy soon after Mariana and Sebastian moved into the yellow house.

They were very fond of that house. It was at the foot of Primrose Hill in Northwest London, and painted the same bright yellow as the primroses that grew on the hill in the summer. Honeysuckle climbed up one of the outside walls, covering it with white, sweet-smelling flowers, and in the summer months their scent crept into the house through the open windows, climbing up the stairs and lingering in the passages and rooms, filling them with sweetness.

It was unseasonably warm that Monday evening. Even though it was early October, the Indian summer prevailed, like an obstinate party guest, refusing to heed the hints from the dying leaves on the trees that it might be time to go. The late-afternoon sun flooded into the front room, drenching it with a golden light, tinged with red. Before the session, Mariana drew the blinds, but left the sash windows open a few inches to let in some air.

Next, she readjusted the chairs into a circle.

Nine chairs. A chair for each member of the group, and one for Mariana. In theory, the chairs were meant to be identical—but life didn't work like that. Despite her best intentions, she had accumulated an assortment of upright chairs over the years, in different materials and in various shapes and sizes. Her relaxed attitude to the chairs was perhaps typical of how she conducted her groups. Mariana was informal, even unconventional, in her approach.

Therapy, particularly group therapy, was an ironic choice of profession for Mariana. She had always been ambivalent about groups—even suspicious of them—ever since she was a child.

She'd grown up in Greece, on the outskirts of Athens. They'd lived in a large ramshackle old house, on top of a hill that was covered with a black-and-green shroud of olive trees. As a young girl, Mariana would sit on the rusty swing in the garden and ponder the ancient city beneath her, sprawling all the way to the columns of the Parthenon on top of another hill in the distance. It seemed so vast, endless; she felt so small and insignificant, and she viewed it with a superstitious foreboding.

Accompanying the housekeeper on shopping trips to the crowded and frenetic market in the center of Athens always made Mariana nervous. And she was relieved, and a little surprised, to return home unscathed. Large groups continued to intimidate her as she grew older. At school, she found herself on the sidelines, feeling as if she didn't fit in with her classmates. And this feeling of not fitting in was hard to shake. Years later, in therapy, she came to understand that the schoolyard was simply a macrocosm of the family unit: meaning her uneasiness was less about the here and now—less about the schoolyard itself, or the market in Athens, or any other group in which she might find herself—and more to do with the family in which she grew up, and the lonely house she grew up in.

Their house was always cold, even in sunny Greece. And there was an emptiness to it—a lack of warmth, physical and emotional. This was due in large part to Mariana's father, who, although a remarkable man in many ways—good-looking, powerful, razor sharp—was also highly complicated. Mariana suspected he had been damaged beyond repair by his childhood. She never met her father's parents, and he rarely mentioned them. His father was a sailor, and the less said about his mother, the better. She worked at the docks, he said, with such a look of shame, Mariana thought she must have been a prostitute.

Her father grew up in the slums of Athens and around the port of Piraeus—he started working on the ships as a boy, quickly becoming involved with trade and the import of coffee and wheat and—Mariana imagined—less savory items. By the time he was twenty-five, he had bought his own boat, and built his shipping business from there. Through a combination of ruthlessness, blood, and sweat, he created a small empire for himself.

He was a bit like a king, Mariana thought—or a dictator. She was later to discover he was an extremely wealthy man—not that you would have guessed it from the austere, Spartan way they lived. Perhaps her mother—her gentle, delicate English mother—might have softened him, had she lived. But she died tragically young, soon after Mariana was born.

Mariana grew up with a keen awareness of this loss. As a therapist, she knew a baby's first sense of self comes through its parents' gaze. We are born being watched—our parents' expressions, what we see reflected in the mirror of their eyes,

determines how we see ourselves. Mariana had lost her mother's gaze—and her father, well, he found it hard to look at her directly. He'd usually glance just over her shoulder when addressing her. Mariana would continually adjust and readjust her position, shuffling, edging her way into his sight line, hoping to be seen—but somehow always remaining peripheral.

On the rare occasions she did catch a glimpse into his eyes, there was such disdain there, such burning disappointment. His eyes told her the truth: she wasn't good enough. No matter how hard she tried, Mariana always sensed she fell short, managing to do or say the wrong thing—just by existing, she seemed to irritate him. He disagreed with her endlessly, no matter what, performing Petruchio to her Kate—if she said it was cold, he said it was hot; if she said it was sunny, he insisted it was raining. But despite his criticism and contrariness, Mariana loved him. He was all she had, and she longed to be worthy of his love.

There was precious little love in her childhood. She had an elder sister, but they weren't close. Elisa was seven years her senior, with no interest in her shy younger sibling. And so Mariana would spend the long summer months alone, playing by herself in the garden under the stern eye of the housekeeper. No wonder, then, she grew up a little isolated, and uneasy around other people.

The irony that Mariana ended up becoming a group therapist was not lost on her. But paradoxically, this ambivalence about others served her well. In group therapy, the group, not the individual, is the focus of treatment: to be a successful group therapist is—to some extent—to be invisible.

Mariana was good at this.

In her sessions, she always kept out of the group's way as much as possible. She only intervened when communication broke down, or when it might be helpful to make an interpretation, or when something went wrong.

On this particular Monday, a bone of contention arose almost immediately, requiring a rare intervention. The problem—as usual—was Henry.