

"IT ENTHRALS AT EVERY STAGE OF ITS UNPREDICTABILITY"

MARCEL BERLINS, *The Times*



ALEX

Pierre
LEMAITRE

ALEX

First published in the French language as *Alex*
by Éditions Albin Michel, Paris, in 2011
First published in Great Britain in 2013 by

MacLehose Press
an imprint of Quercus
55 Baker Street
7th Floor, South Block
London W1U 8EW

Copyright © Éditions Albin Michel – Paris, 2011
English translation copyright © 2013 by Frank Wynne

The moral right of Pierre Lemaitre to be
identified as the author of this work has been
asserted in accordance with the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Frank Wynne asserts his moral right to be identified as
the translator of the work.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication
may be reproduced or transmitted in any form
or by any means, electronic or mechanical,
including photocopy, recording, or any
information storage and retrieval system,
without permission in writing from the publisher.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN (TPB) 978 0 85705 187 5
ISBN (EBOOK) 978 1 78206 078 9

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters,
businesses, organisations, places and events are
either the product of the author's imagination
or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or
locales is entirely coincidental.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Designed and typeset in Minion
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives PLC

Pierre Lemaitre

ALEX

*Translated from the French by
Frank Wynne*



MACLEHOSE PRESS
QUERCUS · LONDON

For Pascaline

To Gérald for our friendship

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The judicial system in France is fundamentally different to that in the United Kingdom and the U.S.A. Rather than the adversarial system, where police investigate and the role of the courts is to act as an impartial referee between prosecution and defence, in the French inquisitorial system the judiciary work with the police on the investigation, appointing an independent *juge d'instruction* entitled to question witnesses, interrogate suspects, and manage all aspects of the police investigation. If there is sufficient evidence, the case is referred to the *procureur*, the public prosecutor who decides whether to bring charges. The *juge d'instruction* plays no role in the eventual trial and is prohibited from adjudicating future cases involving the same defendant.

The French have two national police forces: the *police nationale* (formerly called the *sûreté*), a civilian police force with jurisdiction in cities and large urban areas, and the *gendarmerie nationale*, a branch of the French Armed Forces, responsible both for public safety and for policing towns with populations of fewer than 20,000. Since the *gendarmerie* rarely has the resources to conduct complex investigations, the *police nationale* maintains regional criminal investigations services (*police judiciaire*) analogous to the British C.I.D., and also oversees armed response units (*R.A.I.D.*).

GLOSSARY

Commissaire divisionnaire – Chief Superintendent (U.K.)/Police Chief (U.S.), with both administrative and investigative roles

Commandant – Detective Chief Inspector

Maréchal des logis chef (gendarmerie) – a rank roughly equivalent to Staff Sergeant

Brigadier (gendarmerie) – a rank roughly equivalent to Sergeant

R.A.I.D. (Recherche, Assistance, Intervention, Dissuasion) – a special operations tactical unit of the French *police nationale*

Brigade criminelle – equivalent to the Murder/Homicide and Serious Crime Squad, handling murders, kidnappings and assassinations and reporting to the *police judiciaire*, equivalent of the British C.I.D.

Procureur – similar to a Crown Prosecutor in the U.K., addressed as *magistrat* as one might say “sir”, or “your honour”

Juge d’instruction – the “investigating judge” has a role somewhat similar to that of an American District Attorney, addressed as *monsieur le juge*

Identité judiciaire – forensics department of the *police nationale*

Le Parquet – Public Prosecutor’s office.

Périphérique – inner ring-road circumscribing central Paris, linking the old city gates or *portes*, e.g. Porte d’Italie, Porte d’Orleans.

3

She is woken by the cold. And the bruises, because it was a long journey and being tied up, she couldn't stop herself from rolling around and slamming into the sides of the van. Then, when the van eventually came to a halt, the man opened the door, bundled her into a sort of white plastic tarp, tied it, then slung her over his shoulder. It's terrifying being reduced to a piece of cargo and terrifying too to realise you're at the mercy of a man who can sling you over his shoulder. It's not hard to imagine what he might be capable of.

He took out her gag, but he took no care putting her on the ground or dragging the tarpaulin down the stone stairs. Her ribs banged against every step and it was impossible to protect her head. Alex screamed, but the man just kept moving. When she hit the back of her head a second time, she passed out.

Impossible to know how long ago that was.

Now, there's no sound, but she feels an acute cold in her shoulders, in her arms. Her feet are frozen. The packing tape is wound so tight it's cutting off her circulation. She opens her eyes. Or tries to open them, since her left eye is stuck shut. And she can't open her mouth. A thick strip of duct tape. She doesn't remember that. Must have happened while she was unconscious.

Alex is lying on the ground on her side, arms tied behind her

back, feet lashed together. The hip bearing all her weight is painful. She regains consciousness slowly, like a coma patient; her whole body aches as though she's been in a car crash. She tries to work out where she is, rocks her hips and manages to turn over onto her back. Her shoulders hurt. Her left eye finally comes unstuck, but it registers nothing. I'm blind in one eye, Alex thinks, panicked. But after a few seconds, the half-open eye sends a blurred image that seems to come from a planet light years away.

She snuffles, empties her mind, tries to think rationally. It's a warehouse or a storeroom. A large, empty space, diffuse light pouring in from above. The ground is hard, damp; there is a stench of dirty pools of rainwater. This is why she feels so cold: the place is sodden.

The first thing she remembers is a man pressing himself against her. A strong, pungent smell, the smell of animal sweat. At terrible moments, the things you remember are often trivial: he tore out my hair; this is the first thing she thinks. She pictures her skull with a large bald patch, a whole fistful of hair yanked out, and she starts to cry. In fact, it's not really this thought that makes her cry, but everything that has happened, the exhaustion, the pain. And the fear. She cries and it's hard to cry with the packing tape over her mouth. She chokes, starts to cough, but finding it difficult to cough she starts to suffocate; her eyes fill with tears. She retches, feels her stomach heave. It's impossible to throw up. Her mouth is filled with a sort of bile that she is forced to swallow. It takes forever. It makes her feel nauseous.

Alex struggles to breathe, to understand, to make sense of things. Despite the desperate situation, she tries to calm herself

a little. Calm is not always enough, but without it, you're doomed. Alex tries to relax her body, slow her heartbeat. Tries to understand what is happening to her, what she's doing here, why she is here.

Think. She is in pain, but something else is bothering her; her bladder is full and compressed. She's never been very good at holding on when it comes to peeing. It takes less than twenty seconds to decide: she lets go and pisses herself for a long time. This loss of control is not defeat, because she made the choice. If she hadn't, she would have gone on suffering, squirming and writhing maybe for hours, and in the end it would come to this. And given the circumstances, she has greater things to fear: the need to piss is an unnecessary hindrance. Except that a few minutes later, she is even colder and this is something she hadn't thought of. Alex is shivering and she no longer knows whether it is from cold or from fear. Two images come to mind: the man in the *métro*, at the far end of the carriage, smiling at her; and his face as he holds her pressed against him, just before he shoves her into the van. She was badly hurt when she landed.

Suddenly, some way off, a metal door clangs and echoes. Alex immediately stops crying, alert, frantic, about to crack up. Then, she manages to heave herself back onto her side and closes her eyes, steeling herself for the first blow, because she knows he will beat her; that is why he abducted her. Alex has stopped breathing. In the distance she hears the man approaching, the footsteps heavy and deliberate. Finally he stops in front of her. Through her eyelashes she can see his shoes, sturdy, well-polished shoes. The man says nothing. He towers over her, silent, stands there for a long moment as though watching her sleep. At last, she makes a decision, opens her good eye wide and looks up at him.

His hands are behind his back, his face bent towards her. It is impossible to make out what he's thinking, and he simply bends over her as he might bend over a *thing*. From below, his head is impressive, his thick black eyebrows casting shadows that partly hide his eyes, but mostly it is his forehead, bigger than the rest of his face; it seems out of proportion. It makes him look retarded, primitive. Pig-headed. She racks her brains for the word. Doesn't find it.

Alex wants to say something. The tape makes it impossible. In any case, the only words that would come out would be "Please, I'm begging you . . ." She tries to think what she might say to him if he unties her, to come up with something that does not make it sound as if she is pleading, but she can think of nothing: no questions, no demands, nothing but this entreaty. The words won't come; Alex's brain is frozen. And the baffled thought: he's abducted her, tied her up, dumped her here – what is he going to do to her?

Alex cries; she can't help herself. The man walks away without a word. He goes to the far corner of the room. With a sweeping gesture, he pulls away a tarpaulin; it's impossible to tell what it was covering. And that magical incantation begins again: please don't let him kill me.

His back to her, bent double, the man staggers backwards, both hands dragging something heavy – a crate? – that screeches against the concrete floor. He's wearing dark grey cotton trousers and a striped jumper, large and baggy, that looks as if he's had it for years.

After moving backwards for several metres he stops, looks up at the ceiling as though calculating something, then stands, hands on his hips, as though wondering how best to proceed.

Finally he turns and looks at her. He comes over, crouches down, his knee close to her face, reaches out and suddenly slashes the tape binding her ankles. Then his fat hand grips the tape at the corner of her mouth and rips it savagely away. Alex howls in pain. He manages to haul her to her feet with one hand. Not that Alex weighs much, but even so, one hand. A wave of dizziness courses through her – standing sends blood rushing to her head and she falters again. She barely comes up to the man's chest. He grips her shoulder hard and turns her round. She doesn't have time to say anything before he cuts the tape around her wrists.

Alex summons all her courage; she doesn't think, she simply says the first words that come to her.

"Please, I'm b— b— begging you . . ."

She barely recognises her own voice. And she's stammering, like a child, like a teenager.

They're standing face to face. This is the moment of truth. Alex is so terrified at the thought of what he might do to her that suddenly she wants to die, right here, wants him to kill her right now. What she fears most is this waiting, which her imagination fills with images of what he might do to her. She closes her eyes and sees her body, pictures it as though it is no longer a part of her, a body lying as she was a moment earlier: it is mutilated, bleeding profusely, in excruciating pain; somehow it is not her, but it is her. She sees herself lying dead.

The cold, the stink of piss, the shame, the fear – what's going to happen, don't let him kill me, please don't let him kill me.

"Strip," the man says.

His voice is deep, calm. The order is deep, calm. Alex opens her mouth, but she does not have time to utter a word before he

slaps her so hard she spins around, losing her balance. Another slap and she crumples on the floor, her head smashing into the ground. The man comes towards her slowly, grabs her by the hair. The pain is vicious. He pulls her up. Alex feels as though her hair is going to be ripped out of her scalp; she grips his fist in both hands, tries to hang on, in spite of herself she feels strength returning to her legs and she stands up again. When he slaps her a third time, he's still gripping her by her hair so her body just gives a jolt, her head whips round a quarter turn. The sound is so loud. She is in so much pain she can barely feel anything.

“I said strip,” the man says again. “Everything.”

And he lets her go. Alex takes a step, dazed. She tries to stay standing, collapses onto her knees, stifles a whimper of pain. The man comes over, bends down. Lowering over her, his fat face, his large head with its oversized skull, his grey eyes . . .

“Do you understand?”

As he waits for an answer, he raises his hand, the fingers splayed. Alex panics. “Yes,” she says over and over, “yes, yes, yes.” She immediately gets to her feet, prepared to do whatever he wants so he doesn't hit her again. Quickly, so he will realise that she is prepared to do whatever he says, she peels off her T-shirt, rips off her bra, fumbles hurriedly with the buttons of her jeans as though her clothes had suddenly caught fire – she wants to be naked as quickly as possible so he won't hit her again. Alex wriggles and squirms, takes off everything she's wearing, every last stitch, quickly, then stands up, arms against her body, and it's only then that she realises what she has lost and can never get back. Her defeat is absolute – by undressing so quickly she has accepted everything, said yes to everything. In a sense, Alex has just died. She dimly feels something, though it is very far away.

As though she is outside her own body. Perhaps this is how she finds the courage to ask:

“Wh— what do you want?”

His lips are so thin they’re almost invisible. Even when he smiles, you can tell it’s anything but a smile. Right now, it’s a question.

“What have you got to offer, you filthy whore?”

He tries to make it sound lascivious, as though actually attempting to seduce her. To Alex, the words make sense. They would make sense to any woman. She swallows hard. She thinks: he’s not going to kill me. Her mind coils around this thought, knotting itself tightly against all contradiction. Something inside tells her he’ll kill her anyway, later . . . but the knot in her mind is tight, tight, tight.

“You can f— f— fuck me,” she says.

No, that’s not right, she can tell, that’s not the right way . . .

“You can r— rape me,” she says, “You can do wh— whatever you want.”

The man’s smile freezes. He takes a step back so he can look at her. From head to foot. Alex spreads her arms wide; she wants him to know she is offering herself, surrendering herself – she wants to show him she has relinquished her free will, that she is putting herself in his hands, that she is his, so she can buy some time, just a little time. In these circumstances, time means life.

The man studies her steadily; his eyes move slowly down her body, finally coming to rest over her genitals. She doesn’t move. He leans towards her slightly, questioningly. Alex feels ashamed of what she is, exposing herself like this. What if he’s not attracted to her? If what little she has to offer is not enough, what will he do then? He shakes his head as though disappointed, no, not

good enough. And to make her understand he reaches out, grips Alex's right nipple between thumb and forefinger and twists it so hard, so fast, that the young woman immediately doubles up and screams.

He lets go, and Alex holds her breast, eyes bulging, gasping for breath, hopping from one foot to the other, blind with pain. The tears come in spite of herself as she says:

“Wh— wh— what are you going to do?”

The man smiles as though simply stating an obvious fact.

“Me? I'm going to watch you die, you filthy whore.”

Then he steps to one side, like an actor.

And she sees. Behind him. On the floor, an electric drill lying next to a small wooden crate. About the size of a human body.

“THIS IS HARSH, FIERCE CRIME WRITING”

GEOFFREY WANSELL, *Daily Mail*

Alex Prévost – kidnapped, savagely beaten, suspended from the ceiling of an abandoned warehouse in a wooden cage – is running out of time. Her abductor appears to want only to watch her die.

Apart from a shaky eyewitness report, Police Commandant Camille Verhøeven has nothing to go on: no suspect, no leads. To find the young woman, the detective – a man with a tragic past and extraordinary abilities as an investigator – must first understand more about her.

As he slowly uncovers the story of the girl’s singular childhood, he comes to realise she is no victim. Beautiful, tough, resourceful, always two steps ahead – the enigma that is Alex will keep Verhøeven guessing till the bitter, bitter end. Before long, saving Alex’s life will be the least of Verhøeven’s considerable challenges.

“MOVES FROM READ-AS-FAST-AS-YOU-CAN HORROR TO AN INTRICATELY PLOTTED RACE TO A DARK TRUTH”

ALISON FLOOD, *Observer*

Translated from the French by Frank Wynne

MACLEHOSE PRESS

An imprint of Quercus

UK £7.99

Fiction/Crime

Cover photograph ©

ISBN 978-1-78206-079-6



9 781782 060796

www.maclehosepress.com