

Where Silence Finds You

A psychological thriller by Diana Safieh

Prologue

There were nine of them on this holiday. Ten if you count the body in the snow.

The winter sun reflected harshly off the Alps, despite the heavy snowfall obscuring much of the sky. The white drift was packed delightfully high on the pitched roofs of the quaint wooden chalets spread throughout the forest and up the side of the mountains.

Each chalet in the Monte Silente Resort, on the slopes of the Val Bianca, Italy, could be found at the end of a very long road through the trees, identical in style and isolation from each other. Except one. There was a very perilous difference outside one. At the end of one of the winding driveways, where the snow should be pristine, untouched as of yet by man, there was a dark shadow - a body sprawled on the ground, throat slashed so viciously, the head was nearly decapitated.

The guests inside were slowly starting their day, unaware of the horror just outside their door, only just noticing the absence of one of their cohorts. The fireplace still smouldered from the night before, the scent of charred kindle mingling with expensive perfume and stale alcohol. The air was thick with unspoken tensions buried beneath the surface of polite, and not-so-polite, conversation.

Outside, the snow continued to fall, concealing evidence, swallowing footprints, burying secrets. In the woods, unseen eyes watched the chalet, waiting for the moment when the screams would inevitably begin.

Chapter 1 Micro aggressions and major baggage

Day 1 - Audrey

They walked in through the large front door hand in hand, the first time Daniel had let Audrey hold his in a good many months. She always thought her husband looked good, but she was particularly drawn to him in his crisp beige trousers and cream cable-knit cardigan, Rayban Aviators propped on top of his head, holding his thick dark hair back. Audrey herself always felt scruffy next to him, not having the same designer tastes as her husband, and leaning towards a more retired goth aesthetic. She preferred charity shop finds and vintage markets to his finance guy gilets and Gucci loafers. But even she felt cute in her black one-piece snowsuit and pink bobble hat. Audrey took in the morning sun-drenched wood-panelled lounge area with delight, as she pulled her hat off. Just as she'd hoped for this celebration getaway with her nearest and dearest.

The months of treatment for cervical cancer had made her want to hermit away, not seeing anyone, not socialising, not living. The weight loss she had always tried to achieve in health made her look dreadful in sickness. The whole situation was made worse by the fact that she had to mask in front of others how utterly horrendous she felt, physically and emotionally. How scared she was of losing her husband during it all, too.

Since getting the all clear a few months ago, she wanted nothing more than to reintroduce herself into her circle of friends, not as 'the one with cancer,' but as the old Audrey, the life and soul, the sister, the daughter, the caring friend, the occasional drunken liability, and perhaps most importantly, the adored wife.

Daniel, her husband of nearly twenty years, had of course stuck by her side during her illness, but to say it hadn't put a strain on their relationship would be at best, naive and at worst, an outright lie. She desperately wanted him to look at her like he used to, when he had been proud to have her by his side, to show her off, to please her.

But Audrey was very aware that their relationship was a partnership, not a charity. Theirs was not a marriage in sickness and in health. It was a marriage for as long as it was beneficial to Daniel. And for too long, she was the emotional drain, the burden, the invalid. The main motivator to beat the cancer was that Audrey knew if it was a protracted illness, Daniel would not accept the long-term carer role graciously, if at all. She sometimes felt the chasm that had opened up between them so forcefully it gave her vertigo. Her stomach lurched at the thought of those moments, the loneliness and self-loathing that came with them.

This trip is going to be amazing, she thought to herself. It has to be. She hoped this feeling that the trip was make-or-break for her marriage wasn't putting undue pressure on her and on Daniel, but it really felt like if they couldn't resuscitate their relationship here, it wouldn't happen anywhere or any time.

Audrey dropped onto the sofa, or rather, she disappeared into it, swallowed by its irresistible fluff. She grabbed the fur-lined blanket off the arm of the sofa and pulled it over her, not because it was cold in there, but because the soft textures around the lounge demanded to be touched to skin, caressed.

She looked over at her husband. He was so beautiful to her. Just as with day one, she still didn't know how she managed to snag him, and keep him. She knew other people looked at them and thought the same thing. Not that he was out of her league, necessarily, but just that they were an odd fit.

They had met at university. He was not her usual type and she definitely wasn't his. All her previous boyfriends (and occasional girlfriend) had been grungy musician types. All his past girlfriends had looked like they stepped out of a Boden catalogue, horsey or sailboaty or tennisy, but always very vanilla. But they got chatting at a house party when his date had stood him up and hers was throwing his guts up in the bathroom after too many sambucas. They bonded over their dry humour and high intellect. They both wanted to go to the Alfred Hitchcock revival at the campus cinema, and they had been weirdly inseparable ever since.

Audrey reminisced about her last visit to this resort, back when she and Daniel were fairly newly wed. It was one of the reasons she had chosen to return. She wondered whether she should have booked the trip for just the two of them, rather than inviting friends and her family. She knew some of them could be difficult, her mother and sister in particular. But she felt the guttural need to reconnect, to plug back into her support network. She hoped everyone would be on their best behaviour. They could all manage that for a week, right? For her?

She just felt like such an outsider these days, with everyone, that she really just needed to feel the warm embrace of them all. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but less so as the planning unfolded, and now she was actually highly anxious about it all. She had been offered very little reassurance from Daniel that he was excited about this trip and would enjoy spending time with everyone. The opposite, in fact. He rolled his eyes or huffed and puffed every time she tried to talk to him about the holiday. He took every opportunity to make digs about each person coming along, apart from his best friend Lucian, of course. He talked endlessly of all the activities and antics he planned to get up to with Lucian, his face lighting up every time. Audrey tried not to take this personally, even though he never showed the same excitement when talking about their own plans together.

Audrey was still looking at her husband. Why did Daniel seem so restless? Audrey watched him pacing back and forth in front of the floor to ceiling, wall to wall window overlooking the slope into the forest and up to the mountain-top. He had his phone in hand, grimace on face, and was so incongruous to the background he seemed oblivious to.

The sprawling compound that was The Monte Silente Resort in the Val Bianca, in the middle of the Italian Alps, had changed since their last visit, adding more chalets and amenities. The main building, approximately five miles down the mountain, had ski equipment to hire, an indoor pool, bars and a restaurant, as well as the main hotel with its 200 rooms. Around ten private chalets were scattered across the vast forest and up the mountainside, each at quite a distance from the main building, and each other. Audrey had requested the chalet farthest up the mountain, seeking both the breathtaking views and the undisturbed peace. These chalets hadn't existed on their first visit. They had stayed in the main hotel, which was lush. Audrey remembered the friends they made in the bar. Apres-ski really was fun, she thought, especially when you don't bother with the actual ski. But for this trip, she really just wanted to

spend uninterrupted quality time with her loved ones. She also liked the idea of being segregated from other people. That way, if anyone decided to be awkward or cause a scene, it wouldn't also be accompanied by the crippling embarrassment of a public display. Her mum was a great one for causing an uncomfortable scene. But maybe they were too isolated?

'Fuck's sake!' Daniel grumbled, clearly deep in a sulk. 'There's no reception. Where's the damn WiFi code?' He grabbed desperately at the scarf around his neck, getting overheated by the stress of not being connected to the outside world.

Audrey pointed out that as with almost every other holiday accommodation, this and other information was in the welcome pack. Also to be found in there was the schedule for cleaners and details of chefs, massages, excursions and other services that could be arranged. In fact, Audrey had already booked an award-winning private chef to prepare a special meal for them all on their first night, after the rest of the group arrived on later flights from the UK.

'Babe, come join me on this sofa, it's lush,' Audrey urged her husband. She was determined not to let his bad mood affect hers. She wanted to start this holiday on the right foot.

'You know I have to connect all my devices,' Daniel huffed impatiently. 'Anything could be happening to those IXO shares.'

Audrey hated that she was sharing her holiday and her husband with those fucking IXO shares. Audrey stood up and walked in a way she hoped was seductive to her husband, grabbed the welcome pack from him and held it behind her back. 'They can wait. We're alone now. If you want this, you're going to have to come and get this,' she flirted.

Daniel's eyes actually rolled. This was why Audrey's confidence was rock bottom these days. She knew her body, her energy levels, her face had changed dramatically since she got ill. They were only starting to get back to normal, but this was a new normal, different to how she was before. She had always felt confident trying it on with her husband. He was easy to lure into the bedroom. Too easy, perhaps. It was how Audrey deflected difficult conversations, lifted his mood when he was down, got his attention when she felt the distance between them grow. But recently, even before she fell ill, if she was honest with herself, he had been infinitely more difficult for her to seduce. A major warning sign to Audrey.

'I'm not doing this now. How do you expect me to relax surrounded by your bonkers family and friends if I can't get online? Not everything is about you, Audrey,' Daniel hissed at her with such venom she was taken aback.

This hurt her. She was well aware that it had been 'all about her' for a while, self-conscious about it. But actually, why couldn't this holiday to celebrate her cancer remission be quite a bit about her? She had been to the pits of hell, literally close to death, and had fought back. Was she selfish for thinking her husband might want to rejoice with her too?

Nope, not the time to pick a fight, Audrey reminded herself. Let it slide. She was determined, desperate even, to regain that brief moment of intimacy when he let her hold his hand, and refused to be put off by his moodiness. She tried again.

‘Come on, Daniel, let’s enjoy this gorgeous lodge all to ourselves for a bit. I remember when you found me far more entertaining than scrolling on Instagram.’

‘Yeah, because Instagram didn’t exist when we met.’ Daniel mumbled, not even looking up from his phone.

Ouch. Audrey swallowed the sting of his words. Ignore the dig, just ignore it. He doesn’t mean to be this cruel... does he?

Audrey pulled him closer by one of his belt hoops. She kissed him full on the mouth, partly to stop him upsetting her further. She knew that this was no reason to kiss a man, but sex was the only thing that was ever sometimes successful at lifting these dark moods of his. And his moods could be brutal. No response from him. She upped her game, slid her hand into his pants. Still nothing. Time to bring out the big guns. Literally.

She unzipped her snowsuit and lifted her t-shirt up. Not the most sensual undressing, but she was braless underneath and she knew the effect her tits had on him. They had been a 40th birthday present to herself, but she couldn’t help thinking he really should have paid her at least half, as the main beneficiary.

‘Your surgeon should be knighted for his contribution to humanity,’ he had told her when she first had the implants done. Phil and Grant, she called them, because in low cut tops, it looked like she was smuggling two bald men under her clothes.

This time, Phil and Grant had the desired effect. Daniel threw his iPad onto the sofa, grabbed the welcome pack from behind Audrey’s back, and tossed it too. ‘You’re not going to give up, are you?’ he said gruffly.

He put his arms around her, lifting her up so she could wrap her legs around him. He carried her over to the thick rug in front of the fireplace, laid her down and took one of her nipples into his mouth.

Audrey giggled, ‘this is just like a porno.’

Instantly, all the bickering, the distance between them, the other women, fell out of her brain, and all Audrey could think about was the urge to be the one who could please him. She had never been a fan of giving head before Daniel, but there was something about the simple beauty of his penis, and the appreciative noises he made, how she felt like she had all of his attention, he was all hers in that moment, that meant she really enjoyed this act of giving pleasure. And he was equally giving. Sometimes it felt like making her cum was an ego thing for him, but does the intention matter so much when the orgasms are literally divine? Maybe, but now was not the time to think about it, because Daniel was now straddling her while squeezing her breasts together with one hand, pinching her nipples, while using the other hand to undo his belt and trousers.

‘Hellooooooooooooo! Anyone home?’ came a high-pitch Scottish lady’s voice, so loud and so out of place in the Italian Alps. ‘Oh shit! Sorry! Sorry! Sorry!’ she then blurted.

A tall woman in her early twenties stood at the door, covering her eyes with a clipboard. She was dressed in The Monte Silente Resort puffer jacket and beanie, the uniform cream in colour with a forest green colour text embroidered on it. The

colour combination was cute on the notepads, pens and bags sprinkled around the chalet, and was extremely flattering on this bombshell redhead.

'I am so sorry, I am Lola, your holiday rep. I just came to make sure you had found everything. I'll come back in five minutes. Five minutes? Or do you need longer? I probably set you back, though. OMG stop talking, Lola!' She looked almost in tears. She hid her face behind the clipboard again, clearly trying to collect herself.

Audrey quickly pulled her clothes back in place and patted down her wild hair. 'Lola! It's fine, really! I am so sorry you had to see that,' she giggled. She was in fact not sorry at all that this gorgeous young thing had seen her husband worship her body. He's mine and don't forget it, Lola, she thought to herself, while also wondering when she went from being a girl's girl to seeing them all as competition. Was it an age thing? A husband thing? Did everyone get it?

Daniel also rose, swearing to himself. This did not bode well for his mood later. Audrey hoped they would be able to pick up where they left off, but she feared the moment was lost forever, and that Daniel would retreat even further into his phone.

'I am so sorry. I did knock. I guess you didn't hear me,' Lola was still apologising. At least she doesn't look like she is going to cry anymore, thought Audrey, it might be because she seems to have noticed how fucking fit my husband is though. Back the fuck off, bitch. Audrey's smiley face belied the cruel thoughts about Lola going through her head.

'Should have knocked louder then,' barked Daniel. Although it pleased Audrey to hear him be rude to Lola, rather than the usual flirt mode reserved for almost any other woman, it was a bit mortifying considering Lola was the one organising all their activities and they would no doubt be seeing her often during the week.

But then Daniel literally did a double-take, like he was Sid James in a Carry On film. It was like he didn't notice who the interruption had come from initially, only caring that he wasn't getting what he wanted. Then he noticed that this interruption came in the form of a leggy young woman, and now he wanted that toy more. Audrey could literally see this thought process all play out on his face, and his body. Audrey followed Daniel's predatory glare, and her heart sank.

'We are so looking forward to the chef's dinner tonight. Can I just check there will be vegetarian options for two of the guests, and gluten-free for my mum. Stop it, Daniel, I can feel you rolling your eyes behind me. You know she gets physically uncomfortable when she has gluten, and that's no fun for anyone.'

'You don't have to remind me that your mum is no fun.' Audrey ignored this unhelpful comment from Daniel. She'd had weeks of them in the run up to this trip.

'Yes, that's all sorted, and the chef, her sous chef and the waiter will get here at 4pm to start prep. Dinner will be served at 8pm. Is that all still ok?' Lola was still flustered and staring at her clipboard while talking, a little too intently for normal conversation, but then she had just seen her client's boobs, and possibly her husband's penis too. 'How about I come back later to schedule the helicopter flight and the zipline tour you mentioned you wanted to do? Although you should know, heavy snow is forecast, so the helicopter flight may not be possible.' She clearly wanted to run to the hills, perhaps jump on said helicopter, fly away and never come back.

'Yes, come back later. Well, if that's all, Lila?' Daniel, blunt as always. Audrey could tell he was torn between picking up where they left off, a guaranteed shag, and flirting with the pretty young thing.

'Daniel, her name is Lola,' Audrey corrected him. 'But yes, Lola, is there anything else you need from us at this point?' Audrey was also keen to try to get back to business, and get this woman away from her husband.

'No, that's it for now. I'll check in on you tomorrow. Bye!' Lola practically fled the chalet, ginger curls flapping behind her, leaving behind the scent of her expensive perfume. Must get nice tips from all the rich men, thought Audrey unkindly. She wondered what other services Lola offered to the hotel clients. She then mentally slapped her wrist, knowing she had absolutely no reason to think that Lola was some high-class prostitute. Well, middle of the range prostitute, she thought meanly, and I think we are meant to call them sex workers now. Audrey hated that she got so spiteful about other women nowadays, but it really was Daniel's fault, and the cancer, of course. Her body had failed her. Meanwhile, other women didn't even appreciate their fully-functioning lady parts.

Audrey wanted to tell Daniel not to be so off with people. She also wanted to tell him not to ogle them simultaneously. It was constantly unsettling not knowing when he would forget, or ignore, social etiquette. He had a long career in the city, very people-facing, so he clearly knew how to act in public when it suited and benefited him. But he didn't seem to give a rat's ass if his tantrums, mood-swings or perving embarrassed his own wife. But Audrey also wanted to have a drama-free holiday with him. After all, she wanted to resuscitate their marriage. So instead of saying any of this to him, she approached him and tried to nuzzle into his neck. He all but shoved her back on the sofa, the thankfully extremely plush sofa.

'Oh, it's like that, is it? You want it rough?' Audrey enjoyed the anticipation of a good seeing to. She went to go slide off her jumpsuit for him.

'I'm going for a shit,' picking up his iPad and the welcome pack, and going off to find a bathroom.

So much for reconnecting.

Later, when Audrey wondered what was taking him so long, so she went to find him, put her ear up against the bathroom door. She could hear the unmistakable sounds of fake orgasms and ass slapping so often featured in the kind of porn Daniel liked to watch, made her watch with him too sometimes. He was finishing himself off in the bathroom without her. Yet another burn.

Later, the rest of the group arrived on the minibus Audrey had booked for them from the airport. She had arranged for them all to take the later flight together so that she and Daniel could have the chalet to themselves for a few hours, but all they seemed to have done in that time is not have sex with each other. Oh, and Daniel had a wank and then took a three hour nap.

Unsurprisingly, Audrey's mum Linda barged in first. 'That road up here is treacherous! Our driver nearly drove us into the ravine eight times. I counted! It's so

cold in here. Why is the fire so small? Really, Audrey, couldn't you have put the heating on when you got here. Look at these huge windows, anyone can spy on us! And think of all the heat escaping! Why would anyone want to use a hot tub outside in this weather? Audrey, let me look at you!

Audrey braced herself hard, she knew that whatever was about to come out of her mother's mouth now, it was not going to be complimentary on her appearance. 'I never thought I would ever have to say this to you, but for once you are actually too skinny. You look like a Holocaust victim.'

Let the microaggressions begin. Could they be called microaggressions when they were constant and always on the same sore points? Linda then stood in the middle of the room, dry bleach blonde hair extra bouffante today, hands on hips, scanning the room for things she could critique. She was wearing another one of her ridiculous outfits. Audrey thought she looked like what Hyacinth Bucket (pronounced *bouquet*, obviously) would wear for apres-ski. She had a fur-trimmed, full length cream wool coat on. She had matching gloves and fur hat. It was possibly fake fur, but she would never admit this. She wore a silk scarf, tied round her neck in a fashionable manner. Fashionable in the 70s, thought Audrey. Of course, she was adorned with a pearl necklace and matching earrings. She was never without these staples. Always ready in case she bumped into dignitaries or had to host some royals for afternoon tea, unlikely in South London and whilst married to a retired electrician.

Linda was removing her coat now, revealing tailored trousers and a cashmere pink jumper. Audrey noticed her snow boots had a wedge heel. These were not ideal for the actual snow, but perfect for sitting in front of the fireplace with a Kir Royal. Nothing wrong with that, thought Audrey, she, too could do with a drink.

'Hi, Mum. You look so glam! How was the flight?' Audrey tried to force cheer.

'Don't start her off, dear.' Her father, Tony, entered the room behind her mum, as per usual, carrying all of their bags, two large suitcases clearly belonging to Linda and one small carry-on for him. He was also dressed in his staples, tesco jeans, off-brand trainers and a t-shirt. Decades of Linda trying to smarten him up had only resulted in a single improvement in her eyes, he no longer wore jeans after they tore at the knees.

'Does no one dress appropriately for flights anymore? I remember when we put on our finest if we were lucky enough to travel by plane. Hats and gloves and all! Now it's all men in shorts and sandals and women with no makeup,' Linda liked to talk about the good old days whilst at the same time denying her real age.

'When airlines go back to making the experience luxurious, then we will go back to dressing for the occasion. But while they are charging us for simple cups of tea and to go for a wee, I am wearing my joggers. Sorry, Mum.' In came Audrey's sister, Katherine. She was wearing what Audrey believed was known as athleisure wear. Basically, ridiculously expensive beige tracksuits.

Their mum thought it would reflect her glamorous nature and lifestyle aspirations to have daughters named after the Hepburns, although this was slightly less glamorous when paired with their surname, Gallagher. Linda often criticised her husband for giving her such a 'common' last name, but her maiden name was Pugh, so surely

even she thought this was an upgrade? And why she doted on one daughter and constantly criticised the other was a mystery beyond everyone in the family, especially Audrey, the butt of the digs. Many of Audrey's counselling sessions revolved around her mum in some way. She had learned to thicken up her skin, but in all honesty, it still got to her. She had hoped this trip would soften her mum. But if the cancer hadn't endeared her more to her own mother, Audrey doubted paying for her to come on a luxury holiday would make much difference.

'Of course *you* don't need makeup, Katherine sweetheart. You have my cheekbones. But people like your sister can only benefit from social situations where you are obliged to make an effort with your appearance.'

'Thanks Mum, can I remind you I had cancer?' Audrey was used to her mum being quite cutting with her words, but didn't really have the strength to shrug it off for the seven days they were there. Why had she thought this would be a good idea? She had instant regret and could see Daniel's 'I told you so' expression on his face, and for once she thought she could actually smack that beautiful husband of hers.

To be fair, Katherine did have strong cheekbones, a striking look overall, rather than being conventionally pretty, and an intimidating personality to match. She always dressed in neutrals, as if to soften the edges of her bristly nature. Her long dark bob was always razor sharp, and her makeup subtle but impeccable.

'And Daniel! There you are, my darling! You look dashing as always. Is that shirt Lacroix?' Linda adored her son-in-law, perhaps because, rather than despite, the fact that he made little effort with her and barely masked his indifference. His successful career in finance, of course, shaped her opinion of him far more than how he treated others, including her daughter, his wife. Audrey suspected her father Tony's opinion of her husband was a bit less positive.

'Katherine, where's Adrian?' Audrey tried to deflect the conversation elsewhere, away from the raw nerves.

'He's just bringing in the cases. He was so excited for ages about this trip. He really wants to get to know you all better.' Katherine was constantly passing on compliments Adrian had supposedly made to Linda and Audrey in particular, all of which Audrey suspected were bullshit. Katherine was always so anxious to paint Adrian in a good light, often telling the family he wanted to spend time with them, only for him to sit silently in a corner when they were all together. He certainly didn't give off the appearance of someone who enjoyed their company and wanted to become more integrated into the family.

At this point Adrian slipped in through the doors, lugging two massive matching suitcases. Katherine was notorious for overpacking and then complaining she had nothing to wear.

'Hey, Ade. Glad they let you out of detention.' A little running 'joke' from Daniel, because Adrian was a secondary school history teacher. Daniel often asked Adrian if he was allowed out past curfew on a school night, and whether he had existential crises about his ever-diminishing state pension.

Adrian rolled the suitcases into the hallway, left them there to join the group in the living room. If you had to guess his profession from his clothes, thought Audrey, you

would think either tech nerd, geography professor, or Gen Z actor. He was in ill-fitting jeans, a button-down patterned shirt clearly purchased by Katherine. His dark curly hair flopped over his forehead, and over his eyes as he usually was looking downwards.

'I got lines instead.' The first joke Adrian had ever made in front of them, Audrey thought, and it was possibly funny. Maybe he was keen on getting to know them all better? But before she even finished this thought, he had already slinked off to find his room without another word.

Next in from the cold were Amelia and the formidable Lucian. Amelia and Audrey had met at freshers week at university in London and had been like two sides of the same coin ever since. Having been each others' maids of honour, they often joked about how they had been kind enough to extend an invitation for *their* weddings to their grooms. Luckily for them, their grooms were also friends, working together for different firms in the city over the years.

Audrey and Amelia suffered an uncomfortable moment in their friendship when Audrey refused to take calls from or see Amelia when she was in treatment. During a recent drunken heart to heart, Amelia told Audrey she understood her desire to distance herself from everyone else, but not her. They had been through so much, holding each other's hair back on nights out, propping each other up during heartbreaks, supporting each other in their careers, Audrey's suspicions of Daniel's extramarital affairs, and the stigma of being childless women. That one stung them both in different ways. Audrey tried to explain as best she could, not fully understanding it herself, that she felt so much like a different person, so *not* herself, that she didn't want people, especially those closest to her, to see her like that. And if she died from her illness, she didn't want her loved ones to remember her like *that*.

But they were both keen to get their friendship back on track now that the cancer had cleared and Audrey was making steps to reclaim her old life. This trip was the first step, quite a big step, Audrey realised, and was eternally grateful for Amelia coming along too. She was more than a bit nervous about having her family and her friends sharing a holiday. She knew that the light relief that Amelia brought, despite being a true crime podcaster who often listed serial killer facts at dinner parties, would help act as the buffer and the glue. She also seemed immune to Linda's venomous tongue, which extended to her eldest daughter's friends as well. Amelia remembered one time when Linda had asked Amelia if she was worried her quirky outfits would mean she would never find a man and die alone. They had been 22 at the time! Amelia has just laughed and said 'maybe I'm looking for a woman.'

Amelia met her husband through Audrey and Daniel, and about five years previous, they started dating. Audrey loved them as a couple. Not an immediately obvious match either, their odd pairing made her feel less self-conscious about hers and Daniel's. Lucian seemed good for Amelia, rather than making her focus on her insecurities. He was stable yet lively, a perfect pairing for her outgoing personality. And he loved her kooky nature.

'Where are Nadia and Dom?' Audrey had also invited her childhood friend Nadia, and her hulk of a boyfriend, Dom. Audrey and Nadia met when they were six years old in the playground. Nadia asked Audrey if she could bake her a mud pie. Audrey had no desire to eat mud, but she likes Nadia's Sailor Moon backpack so she agreed

to sit with her while she spooned soil into buckets and decorated the top with pebbles and grass. They had periods of being always together, often joking they would never find partners that treated them as good as they treated each other. Even when they had long stretches of not seeing each other, it was like no time had passed at all when they met up. Those friends are priceless, thought Audrey.

'Is it possible Dom has got even weirder? Honestly, how does Nadia cope? I mean, she's not entirely socially inept. But that guy! Sweet Jesus!' Katherine always had an opinion on other people and their relationships, and it was usually negative and paired with a smugness that Audrey found difficult to stomach. Katherine was like their mother in that respect, condescending and arrogant. Audrey couldn't blame her sister for being so judgemental, as she had little other role models to teach her collaboration instead of competition, a rising tide raises all ships, and other such mantras involving being supportive and kind to people, rather than tearing them down in order to get ahead or feel better about yourself. She had hoped that dating a teacher would make her more empathetic, but Adrian wasn't particularly warm and compassionate either.

'Yeah, yeah, but where are they?' Audrey grew immediately concerned. Had they missed their flight? Nadia hadn't texted to say so. If they had, they would miss the private chef dinner. And that would be the start of all of Audrey's best-laid plans unravelling.

'They decided they didn't want to come in the minibus with us. They were going to arrange their own taxi. That's going to cost a fortune. So wasteful.' To be fair, Linda had a point here for once.

'What?! Why?! Did something happen? Have you guys already been rowing?' Audrey asked. She was really wondering if someone, probably her mother, had upset them. It was too early in this holiday to have arguments. Audrey's stomach sank. Was she going to be anxious like this the whole time, even when there was no drama, constantly worried it was going to erupt at any moment?

'Honestly, no. I tried talking to them but they were insistent that they wanted to go in a taxi. Dom said that the large vehicle on the mountainous roads made Nadia car sick, which is weird considering how she drives.' Amelia replied. This reassured Audrey, as she could trust Amelia for an objective assessment of the situation, or to tell her if Nadia had been offended by something or someone else in the group. The others were largely oblivious to how their bluntness might be received by others.

At that moment, a taxi pulled up outside of the doors of the chalet, and a brute of a man stepped out. It was like watching clowns emerge from a mini. How the hell did Dom manage to fold himself up into that hatchback car? His beard was even longer than ever and his shoulders all but eclipsed the sun. He was the type of guy you could picture in a Viking Netflix drama. In fact, Audrey was pretty sure he watched those shows for style tips. He was followed out of the car by the considerably smaller Nadia. Dom was always grumpy in appearance, but for once Nadia looked even more sullen than him. They did not look like they were just pulling up to a holiday of a lifetime.

Through the window, Audrey watched as Nadia took a deep breath before forcing herself towards the front door, as if bracing herself for something she really didn't

want to do. Audrey wondered what was ailing her normally vivacious best friend. If she was honest with herself, she was also a bit put out that someone might ruin this holiday by bringing bad vibes on day one. Had her friend felt obliged to come along because Audrey had had cancer? That's exactly the kind of attitude she hated seeing in people when she was ill. She didn't expect it any longer now that she was well. Dom followed Nadia in through the door, muttering under his breath, swearing by the looks of it. That surprised Audrey not one bit, she had never seen Dom look like he was happy to be anywhere.

'Oh, there you are Nadia, finally. Really, I don't understand why you had to complicate matters by getting your own car. There was more than enough room in the bus. If you don't want to spend time with us, why are you even here? Are you going to be difficult the entire holiday?' It never failed to surprise Audrey just how many digs Linda could get into one breathy monologue.

'Mum! It doesn't matter! She literally pulled up three minutes after you guys. Nads! Come give me a squeeze.' Audrey embraced Nadia, and held on to her even tighter when Nadia tried to pull away. 'No, I am not ready to let you go yet!' This was their running joke. Nadia always claimed she didn't like people or physical touch and Audrey always hugged her for just that moment too long, to make it awkward on purpose. She could tell by how tense Nadia was that she appreciated this little schtick even less today. Audrey didn't care, she hadn't seen her friend in months.

'Jesus Christ, Audrey, did you get even bigger tits? I can barely reach you to hug you! Sorry, you know those swerving mountain roads make me anxious.' No, Audrey didn't know this. It was news to her, but she didn't feel like dwelling on why Nadia seemingly was making excuses to not be in the same van as everyone else. Nadia finally slipped out of Audrey's grasp.

'Dom! I haven't seen you in ages! The beard is even more majestic! Oh, you've even braided beads into it. How Nordic of you!' Audrey tried to give Dom a hug but he put one of his bear paws on her shoulder and physically, and in every other way, held her at a distance. Right, no physical affection, understood, thought Audrey. Dom was a lot of things, but cuddly was not one of them.

Feeling a bit more relaxed now everyone had arrived safely, Audrey was determined to let any negativity slide off her like water off a duck's back, and truly enjoy this holiday with her most cherished people.

The watcher in the woods observed as the final guests arrived. Just as Audrey was thinking inside the chalet, though for very different reasons, the onlooker too felt that the real fun was about to begin.

Chapter 2 Cracks in the ice

Day 1 - Amelia

Everyone had gathered in the living room, some looking at the view, glasses of prosecco in hand. The fireplace was throwing atmospheric shadows on the walls and making their cheeks rosy. There was an Art Deco style brass bar trolley loaded up with more spirits than Amelia could name, with a chopping board and knife for the limes and other cocktail garnishes. It was a veritable feast of fur trim and good cheer. On the surface, at least, thought Amelia.

She turned to Nadia to cheers her, but Nadia had turned her back on her and the view to go sit in a chair in the corner. What's up with her? She looks like a bulldog chewing a thistle, Amelia speculated. Amelia and Audrey always joked that Nadia was their little bubblegum goth. She was tiny, standing at about 5 ft with her biker boots on, she was usually always dressed in black, but with a contradicting bubbly, cheery personality. She was like the two sides of The Cure, her favourite band, dressing like Pictures of You, yet acting like Mint Car.

Dom pulled Nadia further into the corner and whispered something in her ear. Amelia could practically see Nadia's hackles go up, and she flinched when he touched her. There was clearly tension there. Amelia clinked her glass against her husband Lucian's instead, and he promptly told her off for not looking him in the eye. 'We don't want bad luck, do we honey? Or bad sex!'

Not possible. Ever, Amelia thought. But she still had her eyes on Nadia and Dom. She couldn't tell if they were annoyed with each other, or something or someone else. Or all of the above. Who in the group would they even have drama with? Amelia decided she would orchestrate some time alone on this trip with Nadia and Audrey so they could have a proper catch-up, like the old days they were so desperate to get back to. Hopefully, Nadia would feel comfortable enough to open up and let them know why she wasn't her normally chirpy self. She was usually good at sharing what was ailing her. And it looked like she needed her girls more than ever right now.

Linda was guiding Tony around the room, pointing out how she would decorate the room differently. 'Who uses wallpaper these days? It's so dated! A nice fresh lick of brilliant white paint is what this place needs. And about half as many tacky ornaments. We get it, we are in the Alps, but do we really need all these vintage ski posters?' Tony just nodded in agreement, whilst clearly not having an opinion either way. Amelia wondered when he finally lost the last of his voice. Very early days in their marriage, she would bet. It wouldn't have lasted very long if Tony maintained whatever backbone he had been born with. Such a shame, thought Amelia. She had always liked her friend's dad, consistently warm and welcoming as long as she had known him, yet he had this downtrodden air which was really oppressive to witness now as a full grown-up. Linda clearly wanted to be able to manipulate Tony to do her every bidding, whilst simultaneously losing all respect for him for bowing to her so much. 'I could never last in a marriage like that. But each to their own, I guess,' she reflected, trying to think of any redeeming features of Tony and Linda's marriage. She supposed it must be easier leaving all the decision-making to someone else?

Audrey and Daniel were now standing with Katherine and Adrian. Amelia noticed Daniel's hand on the small of Katherine's back, resting there far too long, far too low and far too comfortably, like it had been there a thousand times before. The sisters were following Linda's movements around the room, laughing at Tony's lapdog behaviour, even though Amelia knew it bothered both of them that their mum bullied and coerced their father, and that their dad had become a complete doormat. He used to be quite the character, apparently. Amelia had once met Tony's brother at a family barbeque. He shared several of their adventures and it seemed like Tony had been a bit of a ladies' man, as well as a lover of mischief. Now he gave off the vibe of a man who has been beaten down and broken down over many years and just can't be bothered expressing an opinion, or saying anything contravening what his wife says or thinks because the arguments, the silent treatment, whatever passive-aggressive, or aggressive-aggressive, methods Linda would choose to use, would not be worth it. He clearly just wanted the easy life, the path of least resistance, until the day that he died. So grim, mused Amelia, pleased she didn't share a shred of this mentality with Tony, and feeling a bit smug that she had a partner in Lucian who wanted to hear her voice, championed it even.

Audrey then turned to the group and dinged her glass with her diamond-banded wedding ring a couple of times. She claimed she didn't like how blingy her engagement ring and then her wedding band were, protesting too much that they were too flashy for her. She sure likes to draw attention to them as often as possible, though Amelia thought, with no judgement. Perhaps it's more what they symbolise that she wants to highlight and make people aware of, that Daniel thought she was worthy of such a ring, and that he had wifed her up. Amelia was saddened to know her beautiful friend felt insecure in her marriage.

'Attention people! I have a surprise for everyone!' Audrey announced, clearly pleased with herself and preparing for praise from the group.

'Here we go. It's the Audrey show again' Amelia heard Katherine whisper to Adrian. Even he shushed her. Ungrateful bitch, thought Amelia. She knew Katherine couldn't have afforded to come on this holiday, and with Adrian in tow, without Audrey and Daniel paying for them. She always thought it was a shame that their mother had successfully pitted the sisters against each other, rather than encouraging an unbreakable bond between them. She knew younger sisters were meant to be annoying and sibling rivalry was a real thing, but Linda really exacerbated this between these two girls. Amelia noticed that Katherine seemed to be biting her nails a fair bit, a habit she never had before, always sporting perfect manicures. Something's bothering her, thought Amelia. Maybe she was as anxious as Audrey about the dynamics on this holiday.

Audrey continued, unaware, or ignoring, her sister's spiteful comment. 'I arranged for a private chef to come cook us a special meal tonight. She will arrive at -'

'Does she know about my allergy to nightshade vegetables and sesame seeds? And you know my skin turns yellow if I eat mangoes. And obviously it all needs to be gluten-free.' Linda interrupted. From the tone of her voice, you would think this was a life or death situation, not just a slight food intolerance and a long list of dislikes. Both sisters rolled their eyes. Neither had ever seen Linda experience an allergic reaction to anything in her life, but it was easier to go along with these unusual dietary

requests (definitely not requirements) than have Linda not eat and then go on and on about how faint she felt for lack of eating. Amelia would never forget the time they went for a nice meal for Audrey's 30th birthday and Linda complained the entire time that she couldn't concentrate because she could smell the aubergine on the next table.

'Of course, Mum, I told her everyone's requirements. She is arriving shortly and dinner will be at 8 in the dining room. Let's all get a bit dressed up for it, hey? Don't you all think that would be fun?' implored Audrey, looking round the room, trying to gauge the excitement level of the group. Amelia put it at about a three out of ten, and that was purely because Tony looked pleased at the thought of being cooked for, for once. As far as she knew, he had always cooked every meal in their household, often cooking different meals for each of the women in his life because they were all such fussy eaters.

Amelia worried that Audrey might have very high expectations for this trip, putting a lot of pressure on herself and also everyone else to ensure that everything was perfect in her eyes. Would Audrey be thrown into a depression if anything didn't go 100% according to plan? Amelia hoped not, but thought so. She had seen it happen before when Audrey had tried to force goodwill and cheer within her family.

'Really, Audrey, you and your ideas. You could have told us if we were expected to bring a suitable outfit. Do you have any nice clothes for this *dinner*, Audrey, or do you need to borrow something from your sister? She has such impeccable taste!' This was Linda again, of course.

'I think I got this, Mum, thanks for the concern. I just wanted to thank you all for being so supportive to me over the last year, even though I was a nightmare, even though I isolated myself a lot. And for being the best of friends for even longer than that. And to my family, who made me who I am today. So I would like to make a toast to friendship, family, and healing!' Audrey was welling up. 'She's struggled more than I realised,' thought Amelia, 'I should have been there for her more.'

'And to Audrey' cheered Daniel. He looked proud of himself for thinking of this toast, for honouring his wife on her own celebration holiday. Amelia liked Daniel for the most part, she was certainly quite used to his type of personality, but he was quite arrogant and self-centred. Amelia thought again about how her friend must have been quite lonely during her illness. She couldn't see him in much of a care-giving role. It did not seem to come naturally to him to think of others' needs, even his own wife. And Audrey had distanced herself from most people, leaving her with Daniel as her main source of support and entertainment, and he was too egocentric to maintain the care of someone else for any significant amount of time, even if he wanted to. And Amelia suspected he didn't want to. He was the type that would lose patience quickly with a partner he viewed as a burden.

The doorbell rang, bellowing chimes, and the arrival of the chef and her team was like a reset, lightening the mood and changing the atmosphere from mildly tense to maybe even quite exciting. Amelia volunteered to show them into the kitchen, purely to get away from the rest for a while. She led a very quiet life back home, so being surrounded by this many people for this long was going to be a challenge for her, even without all the family dynamics and drama coming into play. People often assumed because she was a podcaster who talked for a living that she was really

social. They forget that she podcasts at home, from her sofa, face full of make up but the bottom half of her body still in her pjs. She loved being social, but she needed double the down time to reset. And very few people could bring her out of her shell and make her feel confident to be her true self.

The gourmet ingredients being brought in by the chef, and the partly prepared dishes looked sumptuous though, and gave her hope that the night wouldn't be as fraught with unresolved family trauma, barbed comments and bad moods. Or if it was, at least she would eat well.

Walking back to the living room, Amelia spotted the back of Katherine. She was whispering to someone in the tight hallway. There were lots of twisty corners for secret liaisons in this chalet. Adrian trying to isolate her from everyone else again, no doubt, she thought. Amelia had never gelled with Adrian. But when Katherine turned slightly to the side, Amelia saw that the man she was talking to, the man with both his hands on her hips, looking at her beseechingly, was her sister's husband, Daniel. And the inappropriate intimacy between them hit Amelia like a lover's moan in a place of prayer.

'We are starting the evening's tasting menu with gurnard in a mussel broth, and for the vegetarians and food restrictions, celeriac veloute stilton beignets. This dish is paired with a South African sauvignon blanc from the Franschhoek region' Chef Giulia stood before them, explaining the menu. Despite the incredibly Italian name, her accent gave off dirty South. She had trained with Emeril Lagasse and several other famous chefs in New Orleans before moving to Italy to work as a private chef.

'And is mine gluten-free? And remember the nightshades!' asked Linda, for maybe the eighth time.

'Mum, you don't need to ask every time they bring something out. They get it. You will die if you have to even stand next to a tomato.' Katherine was the only one who could get away with poking fun at her mother's endless ailments and allergies, and she took advantage of this fact. She could be ruthless with her 'jokes.'

'I've never heard of being allergic to nightshade vegetables. Actually, I have never heard of nightshade vegetables.' Lucian enquired of Linda, appearing sincere but Amelia knew her husband and recognised this as his networking mode, where he had to entertain and humour people he didn't like. She was grateful for his mastery at the skill in this instance, because she knew Linda always played nicer when the men around her showed interest in her in any way. And if Linda was happier, the atmosphere would be lighter, and perhaps they might actually have a good time.

'Oh, it is incredibly rare. Apparently, it is more common amongst royals in Europe' boasted Linda. Weird brag, thought Amelia, so was inbreeding.

A silence settled over the table as they ate, the only sound was cutlery clinking. Everyone was clearly using the food as an excuse to not have to maintain awkward small talk for a few minutes. They knew each other too well though for the conversation to be this stilted. Amelia thought back to the holidays she had taken with different compositions of this group. She and Lucian had of course gone on many breaks with Audrey and Daniel. Nadia had joined them a fair few times,

sometimes alone, sometimes with previous boyfriends, never with Dom. Amelia thought that might be intentional. He wasn't a natural fit into their group, and he clearly didn't enjoy himself in their company either. Come to think of it, they really knew very little about him at all. Amelia had luckily avoided every vacation with Katherine, but she had tagged along on a family holiday with Linda and Tony while at university with Audrey. They had gone to the south of France because Linda wanted to spend time in the cafes in Monaco. What would the Monégasques think if they knew that at night they were staying in a hostel in Nice? That holiday hadn't been so bad because Audrey and Amelia took themselves off on their own a lot, going out to the bars in the evenings without Tony and Linda. And Katherine had refused to come along for some reason or another, probably a guy, so that was also a bonus. She had never actually been on any vacation with this number of people all staying in one house.

Amelia looked at Katherine over her prosecco glass. She was noticeably quieter at dinner, despite digs at her mum. She hadn't laid into Audrey all evening, and she seemed to be avoiding eye contact with everyone, especially Daniel. Normally super attentive to Adrian in a way that was nauseating to Amelia, she seemed to barely notice him tonight. Adrian too was quiet. He knew enough people there well enough to be able to socialise and have a good time, regardless of what mood was distracting Katherine. And yet again, Nadia and Dom might as well have been at a different party. Or no party at all. They purposefully sat at the end of the table, even moving the place cards Audrey had organised. For this, Amelia had been grateful, as she was originally meant to sit next to Dom. They had turned their chairs and whole bodies in towards each other and only spoke to one another. This behaviour was so out of character for Nadia, who was never anti-social or rude around others. Dom has always been the silent moody type, although this always felt slightly affected to Amelia, like a persona he was desperate to portray rather than his actual nature. Amelia imagined him unwinding after a long day of brooding by taking a bubble bath or playing with kittens, and she chuckled to herself.

Lucian asked her what was so funny. She told him and he joined her in a little giggle. Thank fuck for my husband, thought Amelia, kissing his cheek and resting her hand on his knee.

Three courses into an eight course tasting menu, and the chef gave them all a little break to digest and use the facilities.

'My favourite so far was the Scottish crab with roasted yeast and fermented milk. Who would have believed that rotten milk would taste so good' exclaimed Lucian to no one in particular.

'Did it? Did it taste good? How silly to arrange so many courses. Audrey, you over-ordered. It must be costing a ridiculous amount. And where did that chef even say she went to culinary school? She sounds like she just escaped the bayou.' Linda was on usual form. Amelia wondered if she actually took pleasure in complaining. Maybe she was only happy if there was something she could criticise? Perhaps it was her comfort zone, and being satisfied with anything would feel too alien for her.

'I am going to try to make that white wine granita at home.' Amelia tried to intercept one of Linda's long rants. And anyway, she was. She enjoyed experimenting in the kitchen, and she definitely enjoyed white wine.

'Why serve something cold when we are in the snow?' Linda had not been stopped yet.

Amelia looked out the window, the snowfall seemed to be intensifying. The howling wind accompanying it seemed to muffle all sounds and isolate them from the rest of the world. Possibly a lovely feeling if you were here with the right people, thought Amelia. Maybe she would come back here one day with just Lucian.

'Linda' Tony touched his wife's arm, eyes entreating her to lay off the diatribe for once, as if he had ever had any influence on Linda's behaviour in the past.

'What, Tony? What? What do you have to say?' Linda was particularly venomous towards her husband tonight.

'Nothing' he backtracked, 'I just wanted to ask if you wanted a drink.'

Poor man. And seven days of this is going to kill me. But remember your main goal for this trip, Amelia reminded herself. As chatter drifted over from the group, Amelia stepped away under the guise of refreshing her lipstick. She spotted Adrian lingering by the drinks trolley in the hallway, alone, nursing a whiskey. Typical of Adrian to avoid engaging in the group conversation, which to be fair, was wholly unpleasant, as Linda was now making everyone agree with her that the snow is of higher quality in St Moritz than anywhere in Italy. Linda was such a snob. Amelia wished she would fuck off to Switzerland right now.

Amelia smiled at Adrian, aware that this was probably their first conversation alone together ever. 'Funny how everyone gets louder when they are pretending they don't want to say something.' Amelia took pleasure in the look on Adrian's face when she gave this cryptic statement.

'Some things are best left unsaid' he retorted, equally obtusely.

'Like where you are teaching now?' Adrian stiffened at this, and again this satisfied her.

'Same school,' he mumbled into his whiskey.

'How long have you been there?' Amelia pushed further.

'About two years now.' Adrian was looking increasingly uncomfortable.

'But you were teaching in a private school before, weren't you? I thought that's what Katherine told us one time,' Amelia said, knowing that Adrian had kept this fact even from his own girlfriend.

Adrian eyed her up suspiciously. He knows I'm lying. He knows I'm onto him, Amelia thought, pleased with herself.

'Wasn't there a scandal around that school? Financial scandal? No, no. It was sexual misconduct allegations, wasn't it? She was poking the bear now.

'That was a different school, I'm sure.'

'No, no, it was definitely that school. St Morwenna's Girls School? Didn't a girl take her own life? Maybe I am confused. Anyway, enjoy the rest of the meal. I hear the dessert is going to be super sexy.' Amelia enjoyed that, she thought as she turned to rejoin the dinner party.

Adrian looked like he had lost his appetite, but not for whiskey. Amelia looked back to see him pour himself another very large glass.

'What was that?!' Linda said, pointing to the trees just outside the huge window.

'Probably the alkaloids in the nightshade vegetables coming to get you, Mum,' said Katherine dryly. She could be funny, thought Amelia, but it was always at the expense of others. She always uses her intellect and humour for evil.

'I thought I saw someone outside in the trees. We are sitting ducks here. No one can hear us scream!' Linda actually put the back of her hand against her forehead like she was a Victorian lady suffering from the vapours.

'Calm down, Mum. We are a mile or so away from the main resort, not in outer space. It's probably just someone out for a walk, or a resort staff member.' Katherine seemed to actually be trying to reassure her mum for once, thought Amelia. But the outburst had left some of them feeling unsettled and vulnerable, it was unclear why, and Amelia thought she could just about make out footprints in the snow going in the direction of the forest, before they started disappearing under the fresh snow.

Back at the table for the fifth course which felt like the 500th, Amelia noticed Nadia getting increasingly fidgety the more she drank. Amelia wished they were closer, physically and emotionally right now, so she could ask her what was going on. They have known each other for decades, but only through Audrey, who had gone to school with Nadia and university with Amelia. They hung out as a threesome often, but Amelia still didn't feel she and Nadia had an independent friendship outside of Audrey. Amelia would love it if they did, she had always really liked Nadia, but Nadia always had a barrier up. Always amiable and warm, but making it clear they were mutual friends of the same person, not friends in their own right. She struggled to remember a time when they had texted each other individually about something not regarding Audrey, and they had never met up without her there too. There was never any jealousy on her part about Nadia's close relationship with Audrey, whom they both counted as their best friend. She was less sure about Dom, though. He was difficult to read, difficult to be around, difficult to have a conversation with. Easy on the eye, though, Amelia would give him that.

Just then, Nadia spilled her wine rather dramatically. Everyone cheered, to make light of this clumsy incident, which Nadia was prone to anyway. But she seemed particularly jumpy that night, and Amelia seemed to be the only one to notice that actually Nadia was clutching the stem of the glass so hard that it snapped, digging into her left palm, which was now bleeding onto the tablecloth.

'Why are you staring at us?' This was Dom with his gruff voice, eyes boring into Amelia, making her pull her gaze away from Nadia's hand, which she had tried to discreetly wrap in one of the napkins. Dom was looking at Amelia aggressively. She

didn't appreciate or like it, but she refused to be intimidated by it. It wasn't the first time however that she felt a slight fear of Dom.

'Sorry, Dom, but she's bleeding.' Amelia whispered, as she could sense Nadia didn't want the group's attention on her and her injury. She looked to Nadia, appealing to her to call her dog off, calm him down before this tension overflowed into a scene of some sort. Nadia seemed oblivious to what was brewing around her in the room. She was just twisting the napkin round her hand, playing with the wound rather than trying to dress it, just staring blankly at the blood dripping down her palm. The rest of the guests had all stopped their conversations and were watching Amelia and Dom, because his glare seemed to be louder than any of their chatter. Amelia felt she could always read the room and her superpower seemed to be bringing people together, making everyone feel comfortable so they could all shine together. But this wasn't working on Dom today. Had it ever?

'Stop making a big deal of everything. This isn't one of your podcast episodes, you know? Why do you do that anyway? How twisted are you that you want to talk about death all the time?' Dom wasn't finished with her yet, it would seem.

Amelia regularly received this question, normally phrased more politely though. People always asked her what the fascination was, hers and the general public, with true crime. She of course had various answers prepared. It was a means of dealing with anxiety, preparing for worst case scenarios, an intrigue into how people can think so differently to you, an interest in science and how forensics help solve cold cases, or in psychology and how upbringings can form your adult personality. But she could also tell when someone asked her this question out of genuine curiosity versus when someone was trying to belittle her. Right now, Dom just wanted to make her feel like she was some kind of freak, and that she absolutely would not accept from him. She chose to brush off the question entirely in order to diffuse this increasingly intense exchange.

'I just like learning from the mistakes of others so one day I can be the best serial killer ever' Amelia quipped, even though she normally didn't like to make jokes about the topic. But she would say almost anything at this point to make this awful conversation disappear. She'd even rather listen to Linda critique the food more. She had had enough of this attitude from Dom now, and she was increasingly concerned about Nadia's wellbeing. She knew Audrey just wanted to bring everyone together for a lovely week and she could tell her friend was finally coming to the realisation that this might have been a beautifully naive wish. Even the friends and couples seemed tense amongst each other.

Audrey stood up and dinged her glass with her wedding ring again. 'Attention, everyone!'

'Another Audrey speech' Katherine said loud enough for Audrey to most definitely hear this time.

'Shut up, sis, you will want to hear this one. Chef has asked us to go to the living room for the dessert aperitif. Salted caramel espresso martini affogato with gold covered coffee beans!'

'I hate coffee,' this from Linda.

'I hate martinis,' and from Katherine.

'Jesus Christ, and I hate gold! What a bunch of whingers!' Daniel, thinking he was being charmingly funny, but getting under Amelia's skin. And his smile was not reaching his eyes, a sign of deception, Amelia always thought.

Amelia couldn't help wondering who complained about getting a Michelin-quality meal paid for by someone else, and cooked for them by a private chef in a luxury chalet in the Italian Alps, but it seemed the answer was almost everyone at this table. Everyone's personal dramas seemed to be making them forget themselves and what Audrey had been through.

She stood up and walked towards the living room, hoping to lead the way and give everyone a chance to cool off in the move from room to room. But she stopped dead almost as soon as she walked in through the double doors to the living room. There on the drinks trolley was a note, on the garnish chopping board, next to the chopping knife which had previously looked harmless and fun and a part of the cocktail process they loved, but now looked sinister and threatening and intentional. The note, on the branded Monte Silente Resort notepaper, read 'Someone in this room is a killer'.

'Ugh, Audrey. A murder mystery game? Really? How lame. Why can't you just let us all just have normal conversations like grown ups,' Katherine whined. Yeah, that's working out great for us, thought Amelia, although she did agree that most party games felt even more forced and awkward than this group's current repartee.

'Trust me guys, my ADHD brain does not have the capacity for murder mystery games in general, and I would never inflict one on me or us at 11.30pm after all that food. I'm ten minutes away from a carb coma. I know how to have a good time and that is not a good time. It's obviously a joke. Or maybe the chalet girl Lola thought we'd enjoy a game. I don't think we made the best impression on her earlier' Audrey blushed.

'Well, fuck the note, where's this cocktail? Well done to whoever for trying to freak us all out but I can't be arsed with this.' Daniel clearly couldn't be arsed being charming nor funny any longer, either.

After the rather delicious dessert cocktail, the party dissipated fairly quickly back to their own rooms. It was now gone midnight and they had all eaten far too much. Walking back to her room, Amelia passed Dom and Nadia's door. They had been the first to retire to their bedroom downing their cocktails and taking the first chance to excuse themselves. Amelia could hear raised voices. Dom seemed to be telling Nadia off for something.

'How the fuck am I meant to relax exactly? We shouldn't have come here' he spat at her, she clearly in tears. Amelia had never seen these two fight, so this was shocking to her.

'You know we couldn't cancel without Audrey asking questions. Or Amelia, she's like a dog with a bone, that one. We had no choice but we have both got to chill the fuck out.' Nadia's words were tough but she sounded like she was begging.

'I can't tell if it is because you are acting suspiciously, but I feel like someone knows.' What was Dom worried about people knowing?

'That's not possible. Is it? Oh shit, is it?!' By the tone, Amelia could tell that Nadia was getting ever more fearful, she could picture her pacing, wringing her hands.

'This is what I was talking about. Your anxiety is fucking palpable. But I think that note was just the start.' So Dom was rattled by the note too. Why did he think it was aimed at them? Amelia agreed that the note did not feel like a game or a joke. She was determined to find the source of it.

'How am I not meant to be anxious when you say shit like that?' She had a point. Amelia was getting more freaked out just listening in on this conversation. Or perhaps it was because she was eavesdropping on a seriously private exchange. She seemed to be witnessing a lot of those this evening.

Chapter 3 Crow's feet and cattle drives

Day 1 - Linda

Across the hall, in Linda and Tony's room, the conversation was very different, in that there was no conversation. Tony was lying in bed, reading *Lonesome Dove*, a western classic that he had read annually since its release in 1985. The problem was it took him the best part of a year to read this 900 page book. Meanwhile Linda was in the en suite, staring at herself in the bathroom mirror, focussing on every crow's foot and every open pore. She was fixated on this one line that went out a bit then down from her left eye, convinced it was deeper than the day before.

She knew she had an overall negative demeanor, but that was because everyone around her was such a disappointment to her all of the time. She could see Tony's reflection in the mirror, reading that stupid book again. Although she noticed he hadn't actually turned a page in the last twenty minutes.

It took 200 pages before the story even started properly and the cowboys started the cattle drive. Linda had tried to read *Lonesome Dove* some time in the 1990s when it became clear it would become a bit of an obsession for Tony. This was one of the moments when the guilt of her affair made her want to try to connect with her actual husband. She gave up after the first few pages, when the author went on far too long for her liking about pigs on porches. She even tried then to watch the TV series, which was a bit easier with the likes of Tommy Lee Jones and Robert Duvall dressed as cowboys. But even that only lasted one and half episodes before she lost steam and forgot she was even watching it.

Nowadays, she made no effort to connect with her husband. There was nothing to connect with. He was lacking in any form of personality. He was a good father, sure, even to Katherine, who wasn't even biologically his.

He didn't know that of course.

Linda thought he might suspect over the years that this was the case, but he never asked her and she was never going to confess. She sometimes wondered, like now, what she would do if Tony got the balls to leave her. She would find it tough to be on her own, and Tony was insipid and boring, but he was useful, doing all the cooking, cleaning and driving. And he'd had the foresight to prepare a decent pension plan which they lived off comfortably. She pondered as to what his motivation was for staying. Probably something noble, like keeping the family together. Maybe he had his own secret reasons for not starting a new life without her?

Linda missed the passion she had with Katherine's dad. That seemed to be the one time in her life when she was a little bit less let down by everyone and everything around her. Of course, her friends and family and husband noticed the shift in her outlook. Her friends thought it was because she felt more confident after some weight loss. But the weight loss was from all the sex, chuckled Linda to herself. One even asked if she was dying, thinking her change in mood was due to a shift in perspective on life itself. Like she needed to be dying to have a smile on her face! And Tony had asked her if she had started taking some kind of anti-anxiety meds, saying he was so happy to see her finally happy. But she presumed he suspected more than this. Theirs had never been a passionate relationship. And it was even

less passionate as a marriage. Linda had been so keen to get out of her tiny, boring village in Kent, away from her small-minded parents who had no desire to travel the world and better themselves in life in terms of status, finances or lifestyle. So she married the first man who came along who could take her away from that world. She didn't realise it would be straight into another world that dissatisfied her. Or at least she only realised it too late, having already fallen pregnant with Audrey. Tony would always be a provider, making sure his family was comfortable, but he had no ambition beyond that. He had no desire to be super rich or hob nob with the elites.

Linda let out a little shudder and gasp as the thought of how Katherine's real father used to touch her, how different it was from Tony, who never instigated any sexual relations with Linda, especially since she made it clear early days that she had no interest in that. Not with him anyway. She knew it wasn't fair to resent Tony for it not working out with Katherine's dad. That man had refused to leave his wife for Linda, even though she was prepared to end her marriage for him. Linda couldn't bring herself to tell him she was pregnant. She couldn't face the double rejection. Or worse, the prospect of him being with her only because she had fallen pregnant. But Linda couldn't help displacing the regret and sadness into anger towards her husband, moreso when he just let her treat him like shit. A real man would stand up to her, and the fact he didn't made her want to trample on him more.

Chapter 4 The Things We Don't Say (Adrian POV - Day 1)

Meanwhile, Adrian was in the room he was sharing with Katherine. It smelled quite strongly of expensive face creams and hair oils, the the cloud of fragrance that seemed to follow everywhere Katherine went, often making Adrian feel nauseous if he stood downwind from her. He didn't know where Katherine was, probably laughing too hard at Daniel's jokes. He didn't know whether his girlfriend thought she was being discreet, but between Amelia's questions and that bastard note, he just wanted to get away from the group and be alone in his room, even if that meant leaving his girlfriend to flirt with her brother-in-law. He was sure it had never gone past the flirting stage. He knew his girlfriend could be cold-hearted, he appreciated the distance this afforded him in their relationship. She could be affectionate and loving, but in small doses, and the rest of the time, she did not bother with too many questions and conversations. Just what he wanted. Adrian was under no illusions about his girlfriend either. If it served her to sleep with someone else, she would in a heartbeat. But even she wouldn't be so brutal as to sleep with her sister's husband, right?

What possessed Audrey to think this holiday with this group of people was going to be a good idea? Maybe the chemo had fucked with her head. He knew the illness had really taken a toll on her mental health. She clearly wasn't thinking straight. He had tried to convince Katherine to think of a reason why they couldn't go, and failing that, why he alone could be excused. That angered her. She was angry at him a lot these days. Of course it didn't help when he once made the mistake of telling her she was getting as bitter and twisted as her mother, yet even less fun to be around. The relationship had taken a steep nosedive after that. Adrian had been sure Katherine was on the cusp of dumping him for ages now. For a while he thought she might even know what happened at his last school. But every time it seemed like she was an angry glance or a cross word away from actually cutting the cord, she would do a Jekyll and Hyde and suddenly get overly affectionate. If you could call a shoulder squeeze overly affectionate. This was even more unsettling to Adrian than when she was being short with him. He went with it of course, because the bitch knew how to please a man sexually, that was for sure. Plus he lived in constant fear of his secret coming out, and if it did, he knew it would look better for optics if he was in a steady relationship with a woman like Katherine, rather than a single man, living alone like a weirdo. Adrian climbed into his bed. At least it was comfy. He pulled the duvet up right to his neck, as if it would offer some protection against the monsters he had let in. Shame he wasn't sharing it with someone who didn't despise him at times. A naked Amelia flashed into his mind. Why had she been weird with him today? And why did that turn him on so much, as well as make him panicky? He knew counselling would probably be beneficial for him, but he was always worried about how much he would or could share with even a mental health

professional. And he didn't want anyone judging him, least of all someone he was paying £75 an hour to on a teacher's salary.

Adrian rolled over to turn the bedside light off when he noticed something. Not another note? Yup, it was. All of this felt very school playground and Adrian was meant to be on holiday from all of that. He picked up the note and squinted at the writing in the dark.

'Do they know what you did? What you are?'

He suddenly felt sick to the stomach. He stared at the note in the dim light, holding it like it might burn him. The handwriting looked feminine, which for some reason scared him more. Was this meant for him? Or Katherine? It was on his side of the bed, but who would know that? When did they leave it here? Were they all unknowingly playing some stupid role playing game?

It didn't seem like an Audrey thing to do. She was right when she said she didn't have the attention span or motivation for such things. He had seen her cry at enough family gatherings because she couldn't take in instructions for even the most basic of board games, Linda shouting at her that she must be 'retarded' obviously didn't help. Adrian had once tried to explain to her that we don't use that word anymore. Big mistake. Linda swiftly informed him that she would use any word she damn well pleased and that she wasn't going to follow all these bullshit trends. Let someone get pissed off because she used the wrong pronouns. Audrey asked her if anyone had actually got mad at her for using the wrong pronoun. Linda admitted no, but she doesn't interact with 'those kinds of people'.

So who was leaving these notes? Did someone really know something sinister? He wouldn't exactly call himself a killer. I mean, not really. So was the note on the drinks trolley about one of them being a killer couldn't be about him. And why was this one placed 20cm from where his head would lie at night?

Katherine walked into the room at this point and he immediately recognised her frame of mind. She didn't speak, but her body language said it all. She confirmed it when she came over to him, scowl on her face, yet sliding her hand into his boxers. In public, Katherine was all adoring with him, wanting to show the world she was in a perfect relationship, that he was far more thoughtful and gracious and complimentary and even intelligent than even he could admit he was. Any kindness felt performative, though, and to everyone, not just him. But more often these days she seemed to hate him but want to fuck him. At first, it was exciting. The sex had never been better. Like make-up sex but without an actual argument, Katherine writhing into positions he never even knew were possible. But now he was a bit over the look of disgust and disdain that accompanied these wild nights of passion. And they never seemed to improve their relationship the next day. Katherine would always revert back to being snappy with him, rude to the wait staff and non-empathetic towards her friends and family, including her own sister during her cancer treatment. She had even made multiple

comments about not believing her sister was actually sick. That was low, even for her. If he hadn't been so reluctant to enter the grim dating pool again, with more risk of people finding out about his past, he might have dumped himself at that point. It really was kind of ugly for a woman to be so competitive and mean.

Adrian removed her hand as delicately as possible from his penis, which was betraying him by standing to attention already. The thought of getting hate-fucked by Katherine was still somewhat alluring, but actually he was exhausted from with courses of food and underlying friction. And of course, the anxiety of someone knowing what he had done.

'I'm so tired, honey, I wouldn't do you justice.' Adrian tried to excuse himself.

'Pathetic. What kind of man doesn't want sex?' She started to undress, Adrian's eyes on her, he feeling guilty and paranoid, she feeling frustrated and resentful. Adrian got out of bed, went into the en suite, scrunched the note up real small and hid it in the bottom of the bin, under some of Katherine's used face wipes. Nothing said functional couple like mutual contempt, weaponised sex, and one of them hiding anonymous threats under refuse. This would just be another one of his secrets to add to the ever-growing list.

Chapter 5 Hot Tub Confessions and a Pact is Formed (Amelia POV, Day 1 – Night)

Outside, the unlikely duo of Tony and Amelia were sitting in the hot tub, secluded from view of the house by the fabric covered trellis above it, wisps of chiffon fluttering in the light breeze like spirits. Tony was already in the hot tub when Amelia rounded the corner in her swimsuit and towel wrapped around her. It had been a strained evening and she thought a final glass of prosecco covered in that warm bubbly water would help her unwind and ultimately get to sleep quicker. She had not expected to see Tony in the tub, and as he had already seen her clearly ready for a jacuzzi session, sprinting to the spa area in the cold, too fast to retreat on spying Tony, she felt rude making excuses and turning around. So in the hot tub with her best mate's elderly and awkward father she went. As she slid, she felt every bubble rising and the jets on her back, her muscles relaxing in the heat, but no amount of warmth would reach her core.

She wondered if he felt as weird about their odd encounter as she did, or whether the strange events of the day were preceding any other tensions. Desperate to relieve the uncomfortable tension, Amelia asked Tony how he was doing. She expected a typically stoic and bland response of 'fine'.

'My wife is an emotional executioner and my life is miserable. I have 20 years maximum left on this planet, and I can't wait for them to come to an end' he surprised her with the response. He was clearly drunk and wanting to talk. Great. This will be fun for me. Amelia felt well out of her depth. She couldn't agree with him more, but she didn't feel like having this conversation with her friend's dad, and about her friend's mum as well. Does she give advice? Just listen? Try to change the subject? Leave!? She had been in unpleasant relationships in the past, but nothing she deemed actually toxic, not like Linda and Tony's fucked up marriage. She was here, half-naked, with a man whose name she barely thought about and whose pain she'd never imagined. She didn't know if she wanted to escape or stay and watch him unravel.

'And that Adrian, he is just a flesh suit of a man.' Not knowing exactly what the insult even meant, this still peaked Amelia's interest. And also inspired a snort giggle. Flesh suit of a man? Wow. Amelia didn't know Tony had it in him to be that harsh.

'Oh, you're not a fan? Why not?' she probed, wanting more. She had her own opinions of Adrian, and they too were not favourable. Could she have found an ally here?

'What a pathetic, creepy, waste of space' was Tony's response.

'Interesting. Takes one to know one,' thought Amelia harshly. Although whereas Tony came off as a harmless loser, Adrian had something more self-serving about it. The hot tub was steaming and the snow was falling around them into the bubbling water. Amelia watched each snowflake melt as it touched the water, sometimes before it even reached the water. She felt deeply unsettled. The smell of Tony's cologne mixed with the chlorine was not helping.

Tony poured them each a glass of whiskey. Amelia hated whiskey, convinced it made her an angry drunk and not enjoying the taste anyway. But something about Tony's demeanor and

sudden desire to share made her want to encourage this interaction further. Rarely did she have such access to someone she would consider so victimised, and she was intrigued by what would make someone endure so much for so long.

So she took the glass from him and gulped down half of its contents, hoping to get tipsy enough to forget how much she hated the flavour. Nope, that wasn't working. The air was cold on her shoulders, the whiskey feeling hotter sliding down her throat than the water she was poaching herself in.

'I always thought Adrian was harmless. Dull as dishwater, but harmless. Right?' Amelia tried to remember everything she had learned about gentle persuasion and leading questions from her research into crime investigations.

Tony scoffed, clearly disagreeing with Amelia's statement as much as she did herself. seemed even more loose now after another shot of liquor. She had already heard him say more words in this hot tub than in total ever before. And he seemed to take issue with Adrian too, and her enemy's enemy was her friend. Or at least potential co-conspirator.

'Why do you hate him so much?' Amelia raised an eyebrow.

'Oh, I don't hate him. I don't hate anyone.' Amelia sighed, thinking Tony must already regret being so open, and going back to giving bland, wet answers. She was wrong. He continued, 'But he isn't man enough to stop Katherine making all her mistakes.' News to Amelia. What mistakes? She wondered how she could keep Tony talking and sharing. No need, he wasn't done yet anyway.

'I mean, I blame Daniel just as much. He is going to blow this family apart with what he is doing to my daughters. And I've spent my whole married life sacrificing everything to keep us together,' he spat out, bitterness seething off him and infecting the mood.

As far as Amelia was aware, Daniel had been the perfect husband during Amelia's cancer treatment. According to Audrey, it had brought them even closer together. But Tony was implying, no, outright saying, that all was not well behind closed doors. She had never seen such anger from Tony, and it was unsettling, but also a relief to know this man was human and not oblivious to the treatment from his wife and others. Sometimes it pootled about like he didn't even notice that the way Linda spoke to him was almost inhuman and definitely abusive.

'I mean, sleeping with sisters,' he sneered.

Amelia did a literal spit take, dribbling brown liquid into the tub. 'Who is!?' This was a Tony she had never seen before. That whiskey had gone to Amelia's head, but was Tony trying to tell her that Daniel was having an affair with Katherine?

Tony seemed to be watching the realisation dawn on her face. He just nodded grimly, but Amelia felt part of him enjoyed shocking her.

'How long has this been going on?' Amelia whispered. 'Does Audrey know?' Amelia demanded, growing fiercely protective of her long-time friend who definitely didn't deserve this from the two people who should be there for her the most. But this did confirm what she

had suspected, spying them in the hallway and their attempts at physical contact when they thought no one was watching. But flirting and having a full-blown affair were two very different things.

'I don't know. But I know the signs of infidelity. Trust me.' Tony stated sadly. What's that supposed to mean? Amelia almost didn't want any more secrets. She was already thinking eight steps ahead to having to tell her friend her husband was cheating with her own sister. She couldn't face having to also reveal that her mum was cheating on her dad.

'I don't know if she suspects he has been unfaithful, I doubt she thinks even Katherine would do that to her. I know they have never been close. But this?' Tony faltered, the anger turning into silent tears.

They sat in silence, watching the snowflakes disappear into the water. Amelia had no idea what to do with this new piece of information, or with her friend's dad crying in his Speedos next to her, but it explained so much about the atmosphere of this trip so far. Tony seemed to dislike Adrian almost as much as she did. And it would be so lovely to finally be able to share with someone the secret that had been burdening her for so long. And why not with Tony who had just unveiled his own secret. And it seemed he wasn't done sharing yet.

'I know everyone wonders why I put up with the way Linda treats me. Trust me when I say she wasn't always like this. She used to like me, maybe even love me. But she had expectations in life that I couldn't meet. I know there are others who met those expectations for her along the way. I turned a blind eye because to be honest, the love was long gone anyway. I didn't want my girls coming from a broken home. And anything that lightened her mood even temporarily was a blessing to me,' explained Tony, unprompted.

Amelia wasn't shocked by what Tony was saying. It wasn't a surprise that Linda might have strayed during her marriage. They had been married over 40 years and she was clearly unhappy during most of them. That, combined with little to no respect for her husband meant it was almost inevitable she would have affairs. She was however unclear who else would want to spend intimate time with such an unpleasant, pretentious woman, but she was not like that around people she actually thought worthy of her. Just like Katherine, Linda could be sweetness and light to people that she believed to be her peers in life. And Amelia hated to admit it of such a vile human, but she was very also still stylish and attractive.

'I don't even know if Katherine is mine. By the time she was born, we were barely speaking, let alone doing that thing you need to do to conceive a child. And she definitely seems to have taken after her mother 100%. I mean she can be a total bitch.' Tony muttered. Amelia flinched at this curse word coming from the man who had never said a firm word before in her presence, let alone a swear word. Amelia noted the infinite sadness, but also relief of unburdening so visible on Tony's face. Would she feel like that if she shared with Tony how she was feeling about her holidaymates?

'But why do you still stay with her, Tony? The girls have been grown for ages,' asked Amelia.

What the hell was she supposed to do with this information about Katherine's biological father. How could she keep this from her best friend Audrey? How could she tell her?

'I didn't want to leave the girls. Both girls are mine, regardless. And I didn't want them to know their mother was an evil bitch,' said Tony.

'I think they are well aware of that' thought Amelia. She sat in silence for a moment, processing the whirlwind of new information she had just received from Tony.

'Why do you hate Adrian?' Tony surprised her with this question. She thought she hid her disdain well.

'I don't hate him!' she gasped.

'Come on Amelia, I have known you for over twenty years now. I have never known you to dislike anyone. Everyone thinks I am a pathetic doormat of a man, but I see all. I see the way you look at him. You can barely contain the look of disgust in your eyes. Maybe others don't see it, but I do,' Tony remarked. Amelia cocked her head, looking at Tony objectively. Could she tell him? Maybe it was the whiskey, maybe it was the need for connection. She decided she would.

'He hurt someone in my family badly. I don't think I want to say more.' Amelia looked away and up, trying to hold back the tears. They surprised her every time she thought about Clara, the pain still as raw as the first day.

'Come on, that's not fair. I showed you mine, now you show me yours.' Tony teased. Was he flirting with her? Did she like it? Fuck, she must be really drunk if she couldn't tell whether she was enjoying this conversation or not. Tony was looking weirdly attractive to her. He always had the kindest eyes. Even stranger was her inclination to actually share why she hated Adrian so, a secret she had held for so long. Maybe this was just unresolved daddy issues, Amelia just longing for support and protection. Maybe because he was finally showing some backbone or an opinion of sorts.

'I don't want anyone else knowing this,' she stammered. Would she regret sharing? She didn't feel like waking up tomorrow with a vulnerability hangover as well as anxiety.

'Amelia, what happens in the hot tub, stays in the hot tub' He winked at her. And actual wink. Definitely flirting, despite the serious subject matter. 'I just told you Daniel is sleeping with my two daughters, and one of them might not even be my daughter because their mum is a slut. I think any secret of yours will be safe with me.' He had a point. These revelations would bind them in secrecy. And in this moment, Amelia was not opposed to sharing. She had never talked about her link to Adrian with anyone, not even her husband, Lucian. She would appreciate offloading, and even a fresh perspective.

'Remember my sister Clara? Well, she was my half-sister. I brought her once to your house for a barbeque,' she started.

'Yes of course, she was so lovely and so shy. Such a delicate little thing. We were so sorry to hear what happened to her. Some people are too innocent and beautiful for this world.' Tony said, staring up into the sky. Amelia flinched at these words. Clara should still be in this world, ameliorating it with her innocence and beauty.

It was still so painful to think of sweet, sweet Clara. The product of her mum's second marriage to a much richer man than her own father, Clara was almost twenty years younger than her, and had been sent to a very prestigious boarding school for her secondary education. Despite not living with Clara, and only seeing her occasionally during the holidays, Amelia was besotted with her little sister, and she was the first to notice the change in Clara towards the end. She had always been quiet, but happy. Very quickly she became quiet, but withdrawn and troubled. Their mum blamed it on hormones. It was true, she had a massive growth spurt that summer, going from adorable child to beautiful young woman before their very eyes. Amelia could just about remember what a confusing time that had been for her, people treating her like a kid when she felt like an adult, and people treating her like an adult when she just wanted to be a kid, free of all responsibilities.

But Amelia had always been convinced it was something else, something more than the usual dose of teenage angst. She did try to ask Clara if she was being bullied, or struggling with the workload at her demanding school, whether there was a boy involved. Clara would always insist there was nothing wrong, but then she took her own life at fourteen years of age. Amelia was left with an unbearable sense of guilt that she hadn't dug deep enough. She had just accepted Clara's silence. But perhaps she should have asked her one more time, forced her to open up. Hell, maybe even hacked her phone or social media accounts to see whether there was something sinister going on. She might not have done enough at the time, but she would not let her sister down again, though.

'Adrian taught at Clara's school. He knew her,' she revealed. She felt like this was the point of no return. This alone didn't explain why she disliked Adrian, and if she left it at that, she knew Tony would wonder why she hadn't mentioned to Adrian, or anyone else, that he taught at her sister's school.

'Oh. That's an odd coincidence. Have you talked to him about her? He might be able to shed some light on her frame of mind at the time,' Tony suggested. He wasn't getting it, brain clouded with drink. Amelia would have to lay it all out. 'No. He doesn't know who I am. We had different surnames.'

'Do you blame the school and teachers for not picking up on your sister's depression? I can understand you feeling like they should have kept a better eye on her.'

'No, it's nothing like that. I don't blame Adrian for not paying her enough attention. I blame him for paying her too much attention. Oh, and also, he killed her.' There it was, out in the open. Amelia's secret spilled out over the low gurgle of hot tub bubbles.

Tony looked at her for a beat. His expression was skeptical, which made her instantly very angry, like she wanted to smack him. Maybe it was the whiskey doing its thing, but she knew she was always hyper sensitive when it came to Clara.

Now Tony was the one who looked intrigued but uncomfortable, and she was feeling low, but also enjoying sharing with, but also shocking her new partner in crime. Confused, Tony sought more information. 'But I thought she hanged herself at home during the holidays.'

Again, Amelia flinched. She had been the one to find her sister and that was an image that had never left her, tormenting her when she closed her eyes every night, even when she

blinked during the day. She knew instantly something was wrong when Clara hadn't met her in town for enchiladas, her favourite, the day after she got back from boarding school for summer holidays. When Clara didn't answer her phone, Amelia had driven round to her mum's house, checking each bus stop on the way, and let herself into a deathly quiet house. She still remembered every emotion running up the stairs to Clara's bedroom, shouting her name the whole way, worried about what she would find but hoping to find her just oversleeping.

Not the case. She opened the bedroom door to find her baby sister hanging from the creaking beam, swaying slightly, y grossly in contrast with the boy band posters on the walls, and glow in the dark star stickers on the ceiling. The paramedics said she had probably only been dead for about twenty minutes when Clara found her. Twenty minutes that could have saved her life. She could have stopped it. Should have. Did Clara hope that Amelia would notice her tardiness sooner and get to her in time to save her? Amelia still struggled to sleep in a bedroom with beams, looking up at them from the bed giving her near panic attack levels of anxiety. She remembered one uncomfortable night sleeping on a park bench because the room at the inn they had booked for the Harrogate Crime Writing Festival weekend had beams in it, as well as the same style four poster bed Clara had and adored. Every hotel room in the town was booked up for the festival, and they had arrived on the last train, so she slept on a park bench and took a train home the next day. She had spent the rest of the weekend in tears, re-watching some of Clara's favourite films (Toy Story and Breakfast Club and finally working up the strength to open Clara's memento box her mum had passed on to her. Amelia had up until this point worried it would be too much for her to see what photos and memorabilia Clara deemed precious to her. Now she knew it would be too much, but she was in a pit of despair, and desired to feel all the bad stuff, hoping to cry it all out so it didn't hurt anymore, but knowing that's not how grief worked. It was that weekend that she found the diaries

'She wrote about this boy in her diaries. He chased her for months but she wasn't interested at first, not because she didn't think he was handsome and funny and smart. I assumed she meant he had a girlfriend, until she mentioned it was her teacher. Adrian had groomed her.' Amelia refused to call it a relationship, or Adrian Clara's boyfriend. This was before Adrian and Katherine started seeing each other, but she didn't think a relationship between a grown adult in a position of care sleeping with a minor should ever be called a relationship. It wasn't about love, it was about power and abuse. It was rape. She didn't even like the term statutory rape, because that implied that her sister had been tricked into wanting to be raped. And as a fan of calling a spade a spade, she would prefer to call a pedophile a pedophile.

Amelia thought back to the passages she had read, Clara noting how Adrian started by complimenting her on her work, then her hair, then her growing breasts. She had to read how he had suggested she might need some more tutoring to keep up with the demands of the intense curriculum, and that this of course should happen in his quarters. Clara wrote about how the meetings quickly turned sexual, with Adrian strongly hinting that if she pleased him, he would do everything in her power to keep her in the school, despite what the other teachers were saying about her. And didn't she want that, to make her family proud? He had identified her weak spot and took advantage of it to get what he wanted from her.

'Why am I not surprised? I am so sorry, Amelia.' Tony reached for her hand stretched out on the side of the tub, stroking it. He was no longer flirting, just showing genuine support to someone who had also been dealt an unfair hand in this world and was struggling to cope with it. 'You think this caused her to take her life?'

'He emotionally manipulated her for two years. She was only twelve when he first raped her. Twelve! I was playing with Pogs when I was that age! She was nowhere near emotionally or physically mature enough to go through that. She struggled, I could tell from her diary entries she knew it wasn't right. She was unhappy and uncomfortable. She just wanted to go out riding her bike with her mates. Every time she tried to pull away, not be alone with him, he would manipulate the situation so she had to be around him, telling her she would lose her place at the school if she didn't keep him happy. That she was close to getting kicked out despite her good grades, because the teachers thought she was just not special enough. That her parents would be so disappointed if she got kicked out. That her whole future depended on her staying at that school.' Amelia felt the rage build inside of her as she remembered reading the words of her dead sister, and how she had been toyed with and then broken by this seemingly trustworthy man.

'Did the school know? The police?' inquired Tony. Amelia could tell this was hurting him, perhaps he was imagining if it was one of his daughters.

'I confronted the head of the school. But she was new, not around while my sister attended their school. They said there was no proof, just the overactive imagination of a child writing her in her diary. It didn't help that she was so creative in her English classes. She even won an award for a short story she wrote. I told the police too, but they seemed to think there was no point raising the case. It was a case of 'he said, she said' and she was dead, so could no longer actually say anything. But Adrian wasn't teaching at the school the following term though so I know they must have paid him off and hushed it all up. I regret not pushing it with the police but my mother didn't want the extra attention, and they all got it in my head that without concrete evidence, there wouldn't be a conviction anyway and Clara's name would get tarnished for nothing. I couldn't bear that for her. But as the years went by, I couldn't bear her not getting justice either. I have been keeping tabs on Adrian ever since. Perhaps too much, because on a night out with your girls, I suggested we go to a bar that I knew he was at. I had seen on his Instagram story he was out with his mates. For a teacher with a bad reputation, he was surprisingly sharing on social media. I was following him under a fake account. I couldn't help myself. I wanted to know how his career was going, if it looked like he was doing the same to other girls, and see how a man like that could just go out for drinks on a Friday night with friends, without a care in the world, when my sister was dead. So we go to the bar he has just posted himself at, and it backfires dramatically, because he actually caught Katherine's eye and she went over to speak to him. I wanted to just observe him from afar. Believe me, the plan was to one day confront him, not to accidentally get my friend's sister dating him. She wasn't even meant to come out with us that night. She was obviously just bored.' It actually felt good to let it all out. Amelia couldn't stop the tears now though.

'Does Katherine know about this?' asked Tony. Of course his main takeaway would be that his daughter was now dating a predator, even if she might not be his biological daughter.

'Oh I doubt she would be dating him if he confessed to her that he's a paedophile and someone's dead because of him, right?' Amelia scoffed. 'And I know me and her are hardly best friends, but I feel like she would say something if she knew her boyfriend had abused my sister.'

Another silence followed, both deep in their own thoughts, staring at the crescent moon. Later, Amelia would never be able to explain why what followed in the conversation felt like such a natural next step. She always wondered how people with weird plans or hobbies or desires broached the subject with another person. The fear of being rejected, laughed at, or worse, sectioned or reported to the police. But the cocktail of emotion, secrets shared and whiskey made what came next feel bizarrely normal.

'What if we took matters into our own hands?' Tony asked, now with his eyebrow raised.

Amelia looked at him. What was he suggesting? Revenge of some description? She was not opposed to the idea. She made sure she pulled a face that she hoped looked confused, but not put off, and wanting to know more, but from him. Let him reveal his cards first before she reacted or responded.

'How about a little mutual back scratching? Have you ever seen Strangers on a Train?' he continued, with the air of testing the water.

Amelia continued to look at him, intrigued, but disturbed. 'Sure. Hitchcock. Criss-cross. Murder swapping.'

'Exactly! No motive, no connection. We provide each other with an alibi. You and I are not close enough to ever be suspected of working together. Clean. Clever.' Who was this Tony? She kind of liked him. He swirls his drink. 'You kill mine, I kill yours. Nobody suspects a thing.'

Amelia laughs. 'Right. Sure.' But her smile faltered when she saw his expression. He's watching her too closely. Not grinning. Serious. Deadly serious, it seemed. 'I mean... wouldn't that solve a few problems?' he asked, looking down with what Amelia suspected now was mock shyness.

She hesitated, then asked, 'Who would I be killing, then?' She didn't know how to exit this conversation, nor was she convinced she wanted to. He didn't need to pause for thought. 'Daniel.'

A small silence, but a massive tipping point. Amelia could choose to laugh this off and change the subject. Or she could lean in and take it further. She thought about her relationship with Daniel. They had shared a lot of times together as a foursome. She supposed she owed her relationship to Daniel in a way. She wouldn't have met Lucian without him. She didn't really have an issue with Daniel. Well, not until she found out he was cheating on his wife. As disgusting as that was though, it wasn't enough to inspire her to kill him for it. But she supposed that was the whole point of the murder pact. No one would be looking at her with suspicion for his death. She wondered what Audrey would struggle with more, the death of her husband, or finding out he was sleeping with her sister?

Adrian was a different story though. She had always enjoyed fantasising about his death. In her daydreams, she had poisoned him, run him over, stabbed him, shot him, pushed him out of a roller coaster, and killed him in ways so creative, she really should have been working as a writer on the Final Destination franchise. She told herself this was a healthy coping mechanism, that she would never act on these desires. She just took comfort in imagining Adrian suffering, as he had made Clara suffer. But now, hearing Tony talk about 'eliminating' their problems made it sound so simple, so easy. They were so isolated in this cabin, it felt other-worldly, like the rules didn't apply or even exist here. And for some inexplicable reason, the thought of ending the lives of these evil men was not freaking her out in a way she thought she would if someone had told her she would soon be discussing a double murder pact. So she just asked, 'And I assume you'd be handling Adrian?'

Tony nodded. 'He's not who he pretends to be. And he is definitely not meant for my daughter. I foresee only trouble in her future with that one. You've only solidified this thought for me.'

Amelia nodded in agreement, so he went on, explaining how Daniel inserted himself into his family - his wife, his daughters - and how Tony knows, deep down, that Daniel is manipulating them all, playing a sick game. Tony thought he was a sex addict with a need for control. And if he needed to exploit women to get what he wanted, so be it. In fact, he probably preferred it.

Amelia was trying to get a read on Tony. How serious was he? He was definitely serious about his hate for Daniel. But actually killing him? He had to be just ranting, right? She was sure they were just venting their frustrations, letting off steam, not seriously contemplating murder.

'This would make a great podcast episode,' Amelia jested. Of course, she would never tell anyone, on or off air, about this conversation, aware that even in jest, it was twisted. She might be desensitised to discussing horrific murders because of her podcast, but she was well aware most people were not. But still, this was fun in some fucked up way. She felt unburdened, and found herself genuinely entertained as Tony finally let his guard down. 'How would you do it, Tony?' she asked, genuinely curious to see how much thought he had given it.

'I would probably poison Daniel. Something untraceable. It's the woman's way, so it would throw investigators off. However, if you were to kill Daniel for me, might I suggest a good stabbing or 'accident.'

Amelia had often covered lady poisoners on her podcast. She was fascinated by them, often desperate women surviving the only way they saw possible. That's not to excuse their evil acts, but understanding the motivations was always so nuanced. It always amazed Amelia what people were capable of when they felt trapped, or like they had no other options. Stabbing someone appealed to her far less, much more messy and unpredictable. And she had zero confidence in her bodily strength or chances in a physical confrontation.

'I would want a painful death for Adrian. He would get no mercy from me. People who do that to children don't deserve any compassion. I would maybe injure him severely and let him bleed out. Maybe castrate him. Maybe recreate the scene from that movie where the

women castrate the guy and feed him his own penis. But I would have to make sure he definitely died before someone found him to help him. Or perhaps I would make it look like a suicide. There is poetic justice in that, don't you think? Of course he would leave a suicide note, confessing what he did to Clara.' Amelia disclosed some of her favourite Adrian murder fantasies.

Tony stared off into the dark woods for a moment, then at her. 'These people are parasites, Amelia. You've got your reasons for wanting this. I've got mine.' He goes quiet, lets the silence stretch. Turns out Tony could be very dramatic when he wanted. And he seemed to have given this as much thought as Amelia has, albeit just a flight of morbid fancy for her. Until now. Did she want this?'

Amelia felt very aware that they seem to be straddling the line between imagination and reality, 'Adrian does deserve some reckoning,' she ventured.

'Exactly. So... we mete out the consequences.' Tony whispered ominously. She was still unsure if he's serious or playing out some twisted thought experiment. The moment lingered, perhaps a moment too long. Amelia laughed, forced now. 'You've got a wicked imagination, Tony.' He just stared back, opening up the space for her to talk, to share her thoughts, to ramble. To meet him on the other side of the line.

Amelia, suddenly more sober, pushed back gently, 'Wow, Tony, you have given all this a lot of thought, considering we just formulated this 'plan' five minutes ago? Like, we are just playing around here, right?' Tony doesn't answer straight away.

The bubbles suddenly seemed too loud, the water too hot. Did she hate Adrian enough to consider this? Had Tony identified something with her she didn't know was there? Was she longing for this exact form of closure? It was incredibly biblical, an eye for an eye.

'You're drunk.' she whispered.

'Sure,' he said, his confidence coming back out of nowhere. 'But I'm not wrong.'

Amelia was feeling like the world was falling away from beneath her and she didn't understand why. Was she losing who she thought she was as a person? Was her moral compass slipping, making her feel unmoored?

The guilt of what happened to Clara, the anger that Adrian could just go on and live a fantastic life, it was all-consuming sometimes and she felt like she couldn't breathe. The steam blurred Tony's features, but his eyes were sharp. Calculating, despite the amount of whiskey she had witnessed him guzzle. Amelia felt her heart thud, not from fear, but from recognition. This wasn't just a drunken ramble. He had meant to tell her his secrets. To get her to this point. What if this was the first time someone finally understood what justice for Clara would look like for her?

Tony raises his glass toward her. His voice low and even, 'To us. And our pact that no one will ever see coming.' They clink glasses.

'Tony, you're so funny,' says Amelia, not actually meaning it. This was suddenly the least hilarious conversation she had ever been involved in.

'Who's laughing? The world would be a better place without them, Amelia, and you know it. No one understands our pain. And no one understands the only thing that will make it better, if they are no longer walking on this earth.' Tony snarled now.

'Agreed, but you and I are not actually going to kill them.' Amelia was finally realising the extent of his anger.

'Course not' he said, with a wink-wink-nudge-nudge air to it. She felt like she needed to clarify.

'Are we just joking about killing two people on this holiday, yes or no, Tony?! This was just cathartic, right?' Amelia's relief at unburdening her secret was short-lived. She didn't think she would ever be in a position where she had to confirm for definite that they were not going to murder anyone. Tony just hoisted himself out of the hot tub. She looked at his wrinkly old man body, his flabby inner thighs and paunch hanging over his swimming trunks, and couldn't believe she was questioning whether this man she had known for ages, who she always thought of as spineless, might be capable of murder. The sight of his loose skin and his grey chest hairs somehow reassured her that she had nothing to worry about. She got out of the tub too, shivering as she wrapped herself quickly in her towel, self-conscious in her skimpy bikini.

Tony said goodnight like he hadn't just almost convinced her a double murder pact was a good idea and walked towards the chalet. Amelia watched him disappear inside, standing alone for a moment longer. She still didn't understand exactly what had just happened. But she still felt unsettled.

Unseen by either of them, someone crouched in the shadows just below the deck steps, quietly slipped away into the trees. They had heard everything. And they now know exactly what had been put on the table. They were definitely not laughing.

Chapter 6: The Morning After the Pact Before (Amelia's POV, day 2, the morning after)

The morning sun was blinding through the large country kitchen windows. Some of the guests had gathered already, having breakfast around the cluttered kitchen island. The room was filled with the smell of coffee and freshly baked croissants, but the atmosphere was not pleasant, as clashing personalities forced cheer for the sake of harmony of the group.

This is the scene Amelia walked into. She was hungover and distracted. Her eyes immediately went to Tony, trying to get a read of him. Did he look like he had killed anyone in the night, for example? Well, Adrian was sitting next to Katherine, his hand resting gently on her knee, clearly not murdered. Never did she think she would be relieved to see his smug face. It only lasted for a second, though. Then she remembered what he had done to her sister, and suddenly she cared less again about whether he lived or died, almost wishing their secret murder pact to be real.

So it had definitely just been all a twisted joke, just two people with a lot on their plates and minds, drunkenly playing out a twisted scenario they would never dream of fulfilling in real life, perhaps exactly because they knew they would never actually murder anyone for real. Amelia tried to convince herself of this, but still struggled to relax. There was still the creepy note from last night and she still had no idea whether it was part of some game or something more sinister. She knew Audrey hated murder mystery games, neither she nor her close friends had the attention span to remain in character and pay attention to story lines when they just wanted to drink and chat and dance. She was also a bit of a scaredy-cat, unable to watch horror movies, and only listening to Amelia's podcast episodes that didn't involve actual murder. So it seemed unlikely she would have requested the resort staff to put on some sort of immersive experience which could quickly make this deluxe chalet feel like an isolated cabin.

And even without the threat of Tony enacting their deranged pact, he had revealed more than enough secrets to guarantee this holiday was going to be at the very least awkward. Amelia didn't know what to do with everything she had learned the night previous. Her best friend's husband was having an affair with her sister, who was actually potentially only her half sister, because their mum had also had affairs. Sure, it could be summarised easily in one sentence like that, but that one sentence had the potential to destroy the lives of both sisters. And Amelia wasn't sure she wanted to be the messenger, definitely not while they were all contained in a small space.

Tony seemed calm and unbothered, though. Well, unbothered by murder. He seemed extremely bothered by Linda, who was explaining to him that he couldn't even make cereal correctly. 'Where was the Tony from the hot tub last night?' thought Amelia. 'Why had he been so quickly replaced by this amoeba of a man who can't tell his supposed loved one that he likes adding the milk first?'

Daniel was in full host mode. Amelia could barely tolerate his voice this morning, partly because of her whiskey hangover, but mainly because she had just learned he was a lying, cheating scumbag who didn't deserve the love and kindness of her best friend. It was true you never really knew people. Audrey was nowhere to be seen. For someone who was the

actual host, she seemed distant from the group, spending a lot of time on her own, or sitting to the side, just watching. Amelia hoped she was OK. She knew her friend excelled in masking her real emotions.

‘Hungover, Amelia?’ Adrian smirked.

‘Fuck off’ is what Amelia thought, visualising grapping his coffee mug from him and swilling him with its hot contents. ‘No, why?’ she responded sweetly.

‘You were just knocking them back yesterday. No judgement, just thought you might be feeling it today,’ Adrian jeered.

Clearly judgement, thought Amelia. What business was it of his? He had made it clear many times that he preferred his women demure, which to Amelia meant he wanted his women attractive but submissive to him. Not really what Katherine was like. Even when she was fawning all over Adrian, for whatever reason Amelia could not begin to fathom, no one could ever describe her as submissive or demure with it.

‘You can talk, whiskey boy,’ that, from Tony. Everyone turned to him, shocked. Amelia’s back straightened. Linda even stopped making her chamomile tea. Daniel raised an eyebrow, perhaps it was the first time he had heard such forceful language from his father-in-law. Adrian shifted uncomfortably on his bar stool.

Well, at least I don’t need to worry that he’s going through with our ridiculous pact, or he’d be more subtle about his dislike for Adrian surely, thought Amelia.

Audrey finally entered, flouncing in a tropical palm patterned kimono covering a sage coloured bikini.

‘The cancer diet really worked well for you, Audrey,’ Katherine quipped, rather meanly.

‘Thanks, sis.’ Audrey did a twirl for the room, clearly deciding not to let her sister’s spite get to her today. Daniel smacked her ass and then gave her a deep kiss. All very awkward in front of people, especially her father and mistress. And was Daniel looking at Katherine while kissing Audrey, to make sure she was watching? Amelia hated watching her friend kiss a man like that, and with such a smile on her face, when she knew Daniel could wipe that smile off in an instant. She had her fill of the show of surface normalcy with something ugly clawing just beneath, so she took herself outside with her coffee.

Sitting on the garden table, looking over the forest and the mountains, she wondered how she ever thought this trip would be a good idea. It reminded her about the podcast episodes she had done on family annihilations, where one family member lost it completely and killed them all. She supposed she felt she owed it to Audrey to come along. Audrey, who had been there for her when her sister Clara had killed herself, and who had been through so much recently herself. She didn’t feel like she had a strong enough excuse to say no. She and Lucian were comfortably well-off. They worked for themselves so they could easily travel. But even though she had her doubts before flying out, she didn’t realise it would be this tense and awkward. She genuinely had thought she was the only one with any strong

negative emotions towards anyone else in the group, but clearly there were a whole bunch of dynamics and power plays she had been previously naive to.

She reached in her furry leopard print coat pocket for her cigarettes. She wasn't a regular smoker, just when she had a lot to drink, was enjoying a coffee, after a meal, was feeling stressed, happy, sad or angry. So maybe she was a regular smoker. She wasn't sure exactly what combination of emotions she was feeling right now but she definitely felt like a cigarette. But out with her lighter came a folded up bit of paper, again, clearly torn from the resort notepads that were dotted around the house. Amelia drew in a breath and said a prayer hoping this was the note from yesterday that someone had shoved in a pocket, her pocket, to hide it away so they could move on with the evening.

But it wasn't the note from last night. It carried a new message.

'Think your pact is a game?' it read.

Amelia felt anger and annoyance. Who was messing with their heads? Was it someone in the group, or some outsider spying on them? Someone was clearly eavesdropping on her and Tony last night. They must have been fairly close to hear them whispering over the bubbles. The thought some someone so twisted standing so close to her creeped her out. Or was the note from Tony?

She rubbed the edge of the paper between her fingers. It felt too deliberate, too crisp. She'd seen notes like this before, not in real life, but in cases. Messy ones. True crime podcaster Amelia kicked into action. Who had access to her coat? Was this meant for her? Was this in itself a game? Did she recognise the handwriting? Was she the only one who had received such a note? And who should she tell about this new note?

She looked out towards the trees. Snow muffled everything but the sound in her head was deafening. After some deep breathing techniques picked up in her latest round of cognitive behaviour therapy, as well as a second cigarette smoked while staring at this note, Amelia calmed herself enough to rejoin the group. She walked in on Tony convincing Adrian to go on a snowshoe hike together. Fuck. The two of them alone on the mountain sounded like a recipe for disaster.

'What an unexpected pairing.' Lucian whispered to her, as he put his arm around her and pulled her in close. Married for five years, they were still affectionate towards each other. They were actually an odd pairing themselves, Lucian initially appearing very corporate and financey, and Amelia gave off a far more eccentric vibe. Lucian had been married before, and his first wife was far more 'expected' of him, Amelia always thought, when her imposter syndrome wanted to torture her into believing she wasn't worthy of what she had in life. But Lucian and Amelia matched on intellect, values and enjoyment of life. Most importantly, they shared the same humour and laughed together constantly. She loved her husband dearly and predicted she would be particularly clingy to him during this bizarre holiday, needing him for emotional support and light relief. Not of *that* kind probably. Although they still have a very active sex life, when he tried it on with her last night, she could not shake her conversations with Tony in order to relax enough and get in the mood. He then teased her, joking that she must have been 'satisfied' by her fancy man Tony in the hot tub. Even though she knew he was joking, Amelia snapped at Lucian that that wasn't funny. Sensing she was

on edge, Lucian backed off, on the jokes as well as on trying it on. She spent the rest of the night trying to sleep, getting anxious about not sleeping, and then that stopping her further from sleeping.

Amelia felt her anxiety rising again. Why was Tony, who according to last night's conversations, hated Adrian and now knew about why she hated him too, want to go on a bonding outing alone with him? Was he planning something more sinister? Was he actually going through with their pact? Was this related to the note she just found?

Amelia wanted to get Tony alone before they left for this inevitably doomed hike, but before she got a chance to, they were out the door. Who had thought this was a good idea? She looked around, and clearly no one did. Katherine and Linda also looked uncomfortable at the idea of their hike. Day two and Amelia was exhausted from this. She needed to retreat to her room. But before she reached it, she herself got cornered. Linda chased her down in the narrow hallway, grabbing her arm, and not softly.

'What's wrong, Amelia? You're normally the life and soul of the party.' This may have sounded to an outsider like concern on Linda's part, but Amelia has witnessed this woman's expert level passive-aggressiveness for decades now. Translation: tell me the gossip, so I can delight in the misery of someone else's problems. I need the distraction from my own miserable life.

'The party's only just started, Mrs Gallagher.' Funny how Amelia had always called Tony by his first name, but Linda 'Mrs Gallagher'. She had never inspired the warmth or closeness to call her anything but this. Her arrogance, her too-perfect hair, her judgemental glances, they were all designed to keep people like Amelia, and even her own family, at a distance.

'You just seem troubled. Problems at home maybe? Must be hard to keep someone like Lucian interested in you. I bet he gets offers left, right and centre. I wouldn't like to have such a rich, attractive husband. Too much competition.' Linda said, not even trying to hide the bitchiness anymore.

'Is that why you are with someone you couldn't care less for.' thought Amelia, but she stayed silent, aware that anything she said in response to that catty remark would be twisted and used as ammo to fuel whatever evil narrative Linda wanted to relay to others later.

'You can really tell a lot about people when they are stuck in the snow together, can't you' Linda continued, her whisper was soaked in all the malice of a Bond villain, then she turned back down the hallway towards the group in the kitchen.

Amelia's paranoia instantly grew off the back of this odd encounter. It might have been the first time she and Linda had a private conversation, and it felt sinister. Was that a warning she just received? Or a threat? Was Linda the one who was spying on her and Tony in the hot tub?

Back in her room, Amelia actually managed to nap, thanks to Diazepam given to her by a friend at home when that friend's mother lost her long battle with illness and left behind a drugstore-worth of pharmaceuticals. 'They're prescription,' Amelia would tell herself, 'just not my prescription.' She was at first nervous about taking something that would make her lose

control in this environment, but her need for sleep and a break from it all won out. She knew she would be in knots until Tony and Adrian returned safely. *If* they both returned safely.

Amelia woke up four hours later and realised it was nearly lunch time, according to Audrey's schedule of organised fun. Amelia really didn't mind the schedule, even though it reminded her of Monica from *Friends*. She appreciated that a loose plan was necessary to keep a large group like this together, fed and watered. There needed to be some method to the madness.

She walked into the kitchen at almost the same time as Tony walked in through the back door. He had clearly just returned from the hike, he was in full ski gear and covered in a dusting of snow, even on his eyelashes. His cheeks were red and his demeanor seemed cheery.

'Where's Adrian?' asked Katherine, holding a cocktail of some description. 'Great,' thought Amelia. If Katherine had already started drinking, she would be well on her way to wasted by dinner time, and she was a spiteful drunk. And where was Adrian?

'He decided to take a different trail home,' replied Tony, looking around the room. 'Is he not back yet? I was sure his trail was the more direct route.'

'What do you mean he took a different trail?! Dad! How could you let him go off on his own?! In this weather! He's not like you, he can't just *manage* in these environments! Go back and look for him. Now!' Katherine was shaking, she was so mad. Amelia couldn't tell if it was because she genuinely cared about Adrian's wellbeing, or whether she was just annoyed at her father for being so careless with her toy.

Amelia's stomach had dropped at this news, though. It did seem incredibly irresponsible to separate on the hike, murder pact or not. Neither of them had been to this resort before, or the Alps on the whole. And whereas Tony had grown up in a Scouting family, Amelia was pretty sure that Adrian was not really the outdoorsy type. And the snowfall had not let up overnight. The least innocuous explanation was that Tony was indeed silly enough to take a city boy into the wilderness, while it was snowing, sending him off on his own. Or had Tony decided to actually go ahead with their murder pact? She tried to catch Tony's eye to get a reading of what his game plan was. He was either actively avoiding eye contact with her or was really interested in the view out the window.

'He'll be fine, Katherine. Stop babying him. It's not snowing that bad anyway,' Tony mused. He seemed pleased with himself, which terrified Amelia.

'It is piling up higher than me! It's a fucking blizzard, Dad!' Katherine snapped. This shocked Amelia. Was this true? She had to look outside herself to see that in fact the snow had picked up so much that the road down to the resort was slowly disappearing underneath it. Amelia hoped they had a system in place for clearing the roads, or they could get stuck here.

Katherine stormed out of the kitchen, presumably to go upstairs to look out of the window to see if she could catch sight of her boyfriend through the snowstorm. Audrey followed her, a bit of a grin on her face. Amelia could tell she found this situation quite amusing. Amelia

might too if she wasn't worried it meant Tony had smothered Adrian to death in the snow, a concern she never previously would have had.

This left Amelia and Tony alone in the kitchen. She closed in on him and demanded 'Tony. Is he coming back?'

'Probably!' Tony said, his voice light, but there was something stiff about the way he was brushing snow off his coat. Like someone performing cheerfulness with a script they didn't believe in. He then walked out of the kitchen before she could ask him anything further. Amelia was baffled, unable to tell if that was Tony being dismissive or manipulative.

Sure that Adrian would make a comment about her drinking habit if he was there, and almost wishing he was actually there for once, Amelia grabbed for a bottle of wine.

Chapter 7 The Storm Inside (Audrey POV - still day 2)

Lunch was a picky affair, everyone randomly sampling leftovers from the chef's meal last night, combined with an assortment of different flavoured humouses and breadsticks. Audrey could tell no one really felt an appetite, apart from her dad, who had fashioned together a steak sandwich he was wolfing down.. By mid-afternoon, they were congregated in the living room. Adrian had yet to return and Katherine had the floor.

'Dad, we need to call the police. What if he is in trouble? What if he is lost or freezing to death as we speak?' she sobbed.

Audrey could sense, because she has seen it many times before, that her immediate family were about to descend into all out warfare any minute now. Her dad would sit there dejectedly, being ground down by her mum, Katherine would be spouting vitriol at whoever had enraged her. Audrey herself would be trying to play peacemaker, being ignored by all. Her friends were here, so that would add an extra layer to the embarrassment factor. She had also known her mum and sister to take jabs at innocent bystanders like her friends in past arguments. She hoped that wouldn't happen here today. Soon, Tony would skulk off into a corner, Katherine and Linda would be shouting at Audrey because they viewed her mediating as interfering, and she would eventually lose her cool and start crying and shouting back. Audrey was determined not to let this ruin her long-planned reunion. She clenched her teeth and braced herself for the verbal assault.

'Audrey, why would you make us all come so far to this death trap of a resort during snowstorm season? You are so unbelievably selfish,' screeched Katherine.

'You didn't have to come!' Audrey shot back.

'Oh sure, because what kind of dick would I be if I didn't come along to my own sister's cancer party,' Katherine hissed at Audrey. Audrey breathed in real deep. She was going to rise above it, if she didn't break down in tears first. She had no idea why her little sister held so much resentment towards her. Audrey remembered one of her birthdays, maybe her seventh. Katherine had cried until she got her own cake, even though she had already been given the first and biggest slice. She had always been given the bigger slice.

Then Adrian stormed into the room, soaked, furious and limping slightly. He explained he had got lost and slipped on some ice. He started berating Tony for letting him go off on his own, Katherine for not calling for help sooner, the resort for not having clearly marked paths, the universe for bringing such bad weather and even the private chef for cooking such a heavy meal that left him feeling bloated, impeding his otherwise excellent hiking skills.

Typical narcissist, thought Audrey, everyone else's fault but his own. After all, wasn't it his stupid idea to split up from Tony? But Audrey's reality was shifted. She was now becoming aware of all of the splits in the relationships, something she was oblivious to or ignoring on purpose before the trip. Although she was surprised to see that Amelia looked so relieved to see Adrian come back safely. She knew her friend to be caring, but she didn't think Adrian's short absence would worry Amelia as much as it seemed to.

And what of Nadia and Dom? She still couldn't work out what was up with those two. They had barely joined in, and there was an even bigger black cloud hovering over Dom than normal, encompassing Nadia too this time.

During her illness, Adrey needed to believe that everyone was there for her, a united, unchanging group ready for her to re-enter, and that when she recovered, they would all want to celebrate with her. She still wasn't sure who she was now that she wasn't 'the brave one with cancer'. She needed this time with everyone to figure out her new role in her own life.

As Katherine sat by Adrian, stroking his hair and whispering to him, infantilising him as always, while shooting evils at her father, Dom moved towards the window. He did so silently, yet everyone's eyes followed him. He had always been an imposing presence, despite rarely speaking, or perhaps because he rarely spoke.

'What was that?' Dom said gruffly, pointing out the window

'What?' Nadia joined his side instantly. She was on edge, it was clear.

'Someone just ran into the woods' Dom growled. Audrey had never known a man who actually growled when he spoke. Sometimes he just growled sounds instead of words, and that was even more unnerving.

Lucian and Daniel also gathered by Dom. Neither could see anything. They tried to tell him perhaps it was an animal, or one of the resort staff. A gardener maybe? But Dom was already on his way to the front door to see for himself.

'He forgot his crossbow' joked Adrian, although no one laughed at this Viking reference. Perhaps they might have in a different context, because it was actually a bit funny for Adrian, thought Audrey. She wasn't concerned about someone potentially being outside. They were on a large resort, after all. There would be other holiday makers out hiking, and staff going about their business, even in this weather. She was more worried about the growing tension inside. But she could tell some of the others were spooked.

Dom came back into the living room almost immediately though. Maybe he really did forget his crossbow.

'There's no way I am going out there. You open the door to a wall of snow.' Dom barked. Not like him to admit he wasn't capable enough to do something, Audrey mused. The snowstorm must be really bad.

'Come on, mate, it was probably nothing,' Daniel tried to amiably pat Dom on the shoulder, but had to reach on his tip toes and still only really got his lower bicep.

'I'm not crazy,' Dom shouted and stormed out, presumably to his room, followed closely by Nadia. It must be exhausting having to follow that sulking man-child around all the time, constantly reassuring him and having your mood brought down by his, thought Audrey. But it was worse than simple immaturity. In all honesty, Dom's unpredictability scared her.

As the distracted couple ran out, the lights flickered, just for a second. The group paused to look at each other, and then they were plunged into darkness. There was a scream, and then the generator kicked in and the lights returned, although at half the intensity. A power saving mode of some kind, no doubt.

Audrey looked around and took a head count, half expecting the lights to come back on to a body on the faux fur rug. But they all seemed to be alive. Unfortunately. She laughed to herself. She was struggling with all this. It had actually been Audrey who had screamed and she was embarrassed by how primal and guttural it was. She didn't even realise it was her when it happened. 'Sorry for the scream, you know how I feel about the dark, and that felt like a scene from a horror film,' she chuckled, but nervously.

'Well, you picked this holiday.' Katherine snapped.

'I didn't expect all this fighting and a snow storm' Audrey was annoyed that Katherine seemed determined to make every conversation awkward. If they just made the most of it, they could have a proper cosy holiday, eating well and watching movies in front of the fire. But she was determined to piss on everyone's parade.

'A snow storm in the Alps, who would have thunk it? Why do people always think I am the less intelligent sister,' Katherine continued. Wow, she really was turning into their mother, this thought making Audrey sad.

'Girls, remember you love each other. And at least we know the generator is working,' Tony tried to appease his girls. Audrey turned to look at the forest where Dom claimed he saw a figure, but she couldn't even see the trees anymore, visibility had dropped so significantly.

They all jumped as there was a knock on the front door. They heard it swing open, aided by the strong gale outside, and then watched a windswept Lola the holiday rep walked in, fake smile plastered on her face. She looked stressed. Either she really doesn't like us or she is about to give us bad news that she wants us to believe isn't so bad really. Or both. Audrey blushed slightly at the sight of Lola, remembering what she had previously walked in on. She wondered if this visit by Lola would be worse.

'Hi everyone, how has your stay been so far? Anyway, I am in a rush because this storm is coming in fast, so I need to get back to the main building. I am afraid that the roads are blocked out of the resort, and actually your road down to the resort will probably be unusable within the hour. The authorities are advising everyone to stay indoors until further notice. The generators are all in great working order, as you can see, but I am afraid the phone lines are down. Signal is poor up here, we know, and the wifi doesn't work on generators, so if you do need anything urgent, there are flares in the shed with the ski equipment. If we see a flare, we will try to get a snow mobile or a helicopter out, so please only use these in the utmost emergencies. Needless to say, your excursions are all postponed for a couple of days, maybe more.' Lola was speed talking, clearly keen to get back to safety as soon as possible. And with that monologue at 100 miles an hour, she turned and walked out before anyone in the group had a chance to protest or ask questions.

'So we are trapped and there is no means of communication.' Linda moaned. Audrey has to agree that this was quite scary.

Adrian started breathing heavily. 'We are not safe here!' Audrey recognised the onset of a panic attack and ordered Katherine to take him to their room for a lie down before dinner. She could hear him repeating 'we are not safe, we are not safe' as Katherine guided him down the hallway. Audrey was left wondering the millionth time why her sister, who normally went for alpha males, like her Daniel, ended up with someone so nerdy and, well, wet. Was she repeating the patterns of their mother?

'Look, we have enough food to last a lifetime, we have games, we have DVDs.' Audrey tried to gee everyone up and not let her expensive holiday which she had put so much pressure on for it to be completely ruined by a bit of snow. She was fighting the urge to be angry at everyone for not making more of an effort to be in a good mood. It felt like being on holiday with a whole group of sulky teenagers. She wondered if this was what it was like when Adrian chaperoned school trips. They were ruining everything for her.

'If the DVD player even works on this crazy power saving generator.' Linda was always one to find a cloud to every silver lining.

'And if we want to watch Terminator 2 or Police Academy 4 on repeat.' Audrey sent a pleading look to her husband, silently begging him to help her, rather than rile her mother up even further. 'Which I absolutely do!' he stated, catching her meaning. Audrey looked at her husband Daniel gratefully for this comment. She needed him to rally the troops into good cheer. She needed that Daniel this week. Her partner.

'Anyway, Citizens on Patrol was arguably the best Police Academy. Bobcat Goldthwait was a comedic genius in it.' Lucian joined in. Audrey knew she could also rely on him to help lighten the mood.

'Is he dead? He seems like the type who would be dead by now,' pondered Daniel.

'Let me Google.' Oh, fuck, no wifi.' Lucian said. 'We should write a list of all the things we have to remember to Google when we get back online.'

'I bet it will be in the hundreds by the time we are reconnected.' Daniel joked, 'if I think how many times a day I ask Siri things.'

AAudrey wanted to join in and help keep the conversation away from what they were stuck not doing to what they could enjoy still on their holiday, but she suddenly felt like she had been hit by a truck. This was a hangover from her illness, the sudden bouts of exhaustion. She sometimes used this as an excuse to just go off and be on her own, but right now, she could genuinely do with a nap. She told everyone she was going to go rest for a bit in her room.

She walked slowly to her room, taking in the shabby chic decor of the chalet in a bid to elevate her mood. Hers wasn't the master suite, she had sacrificed that room, with the private sauna, super king bed and huge balcony, to her parents to keep her mother happy. Not that it worked, she complained the sauna was too hot, the balcony too high, and the railing on it too low. She seemed to like the huge bed though, appreciating the distance from her husband even while sleeping.

Audrey opened the door to her room and could instantly sense someone had been in it. Weird how you know, she thought. A big clue was the fact that her room had been ransacked. It actually didn't look like they were looking for anything. Just messing everything up.

Katherine. That's where Audrey's mind immediately went to. Her sister's lifelong grudge against her was incredibly tiring, especially as she seemed to be the favourite anyway.

Audrey refused to let this holiday become about Katherine and the million reasons she hated Audrey and everyone and everything else, so she decided she wasn't even going to bring this up to anyone. She set about tidying up the room, standing the ornaments up again, straightening the furniture and TV, making the bed. And it was while making the bed that Audrey noticed a note on the pillow. It looked like it was from the hotel notepad by her bed. The same as the other notes.

'He's lying to you.'

Audrey stared at the bit of paper. It looked like the same writing and style as the one the group found last night. Same downward strokes and feminine, almost beautiful, handwriting. She knew not everyone believed her, but she really hadn't planned a murder mystery game, and doubted anyone else had. And she doubted the resort would have organised one without her approval. So she had no idea who was responsible for the note last night, or this one today. The fact that her room had been torn apart made it all the more disturbing. There was no subtlety in this person's aim of unsettling her. They had also been 100% successful in this mission.

So who was leaving these notes? Who was lying to her? Dad? Daniel? Lying about what? Was this Katherine's attempt at regaining all the attention she thought was rightfully hers? But this wasn't Katherine's style, too messy, Audrey had to admit. Katherine would write an even bitchier note and proudly put her name at the bottom of it. And it definitely wasn't her handwriting. Did it look like Adrian's? She couldn't remember ever seeing his handwriting to compare it. Suddenly, Audrey was fuming. Dom? Was he annoyed that Daniel didn't believe him about seeing someone outside? This felt a little childish for anyone in their group.

And how dare Katherine sabotage this holiday? Wasn't it enough that she barely made an effort when Audrey was ill. She had even supposedly spread rumours that Audrey was faking her illness. Katherine only needed to visit Audrey once during the height of her illness, or take her to chemo once, to know she really had actual cancer. Of course, she never did any of those things.

Audrey made the decision again not to mention this to anyone in the group, not about the ransacking of her room, nor the note left specifically for her it seemed. She was refusing to let this be the focus and derail the holiday she was determined to have, even if it killed her.

Chapter 8 - I Know Your Secret (Nadia's pov, still day 2, evening)

Nadia was exhausted from moderating Dom's mood all the time, as she knew Audrey suspected. It had been worse the last few months, since the accident. He was even more silent and moody, even with her, whereas previously they at least had fairly free-flowing communication when alone. She could tell her friends were shocked when she relayed stories of her time with Dom, not expecting that he could be silly and chatty and funny. But he always had been with her. She remembered the time Audrey and Amelia were practically pissing themselves laughing when she told them she and Dom had gone to play mini golf. She got that it was a funny visual, her huge bulk of a boyfriend playing mini-golf, but she couldn't help but feel a bit offended at the way and length of time they laughed at this. It felt like they were taking the mick a bit. Like they didn't think her relationship was a good, solid union, or that they could do normal coupley stuff.

It was lucky she was the type that did not need external validation. Much. But it would be nice if she felt like her friends understood her and her life choices, including her partner, a bit more. They had been together five years, hardly a flash in the pan. So she would have thought they would have made more effort to get to know Dom.

Although, in their defence, he was incredibly difficult to get to know. He was not in the market to make friends, as he regularly told people. He was not sexist at all, but Dom had little in common with anyone, but especially women. There were very few topics of conversation that both Dom and her friends could partake in together. But Nadia had hoped this holiday would, if not bring her partner and friends together, show her friends how strong her bond was with Dom, especially as Audrey had invited and paid for them to come on this trip. Both Nadia and Dom hated that they needed financial assistance to come along, but there was no way they could have afforded this extravagant holiday on their own, nor would it have appealed to them to come on such a trip if it hadn't been to celebrate Audrey's remission. And saying no felt like it would look suspicious.

In any case, her friends' relationship with her boyfriend was the least of her concerns at the moment. Dom was on the verge of walking out of this chalet. Where he thought he was going to go, she had no idea. She suspected he didn't either. But now that it was physically impossible for him to leave, she knew this would impact his mood even further. And it would do his ego, or their relationship, no good if he left, and then had to return again because of this bastard snow storm.

Dom barged through their door into their bedroom, his frame nearly filling its frame, and he needed to duck to avoid smacking his head. Nadia scuttled in behind him. He threw himself backwards on the bed. She winced, convinced he would crash right through the frame.

'I hate that Daniel, I hate that Lucian. Why those girls, who are actually lovely, brainless, but lovely, are with them, I have no idea,' Dom ranted. Nadia caught her breath. She would need to talk him off the ledge before his mood darkened further. But it was harder to do when he was slagging off her friends. Maybe if he condescended to spend time with them and talk to them, he would see that they in fact have very many brains. Nadia was constantly in awe of their achievements and accomplishments, which they managed to do while supporting others and showing kindness.

'Well, we know more than most couples that no one fully understands other people's relationships,' Nadia tried to justify. She went to lay beside him, stroke his hair and rub his back to soothe him.

'I want to go home' Dom stated, but his body was getting less tense and she could sense he was getting sleepy. It was normally physical touch or food that eased the dark clouds of his mood. All men are just giant babies, she thought, wondering whether she would be burping him next.

'Well, we can't, so how do we make this more bearable?' Nadia implored. She tried to hint at sexual undertones, even though subtlety in this arena was not her forte. She was only being lowkey about it now because she was not really in the mood and she was hoping he would think of some other way to feel better about being here.

'Kill them all' Dom jested. He turned to her, there was a glint in his eye that he got when he was teasing her, but that same glint also appeared when he was mad. Nadia's head felt like it was spinning. She didn't want him to be joking about murdering people. She wanted him to say something comforting, not chilling.

'Dom, you know I don't appreciate jokes like that anymore' Nadia started crying, which was rare for her, so Dom took note. He softened instantly, and now he was the one running his hands through her short hair. He wrapped his albatross wings of arms around her. He kissed the top of her head. Nadia remembered a time when she had to explain why she loved this act so much. She felt like he initially did it just to please her, not really understanding why it made her feel so protected and safe. Who doesn't love a forehead kiss? But he seemed to grow to love this simple way of making her instantly reassured and happier. Nadia was saddened by the fact that it wasn't working today.

'I feel like we are just walking around with massive signs on our foreheads saying 'look at us, we killed someone' Nadia sobbed. She hated herself for being so weak, but she had been carrying the stress of this secret for months now, and all her feelings had been catapulted to the fore by this weird family holiday that wasn't even her family.

'Shhh, shhh, shhh, you know that's not true.' he whispered in her ear, his breath tickling her neck.

'Dom, we killed someone.' Nadia felt exasperated.

'Oh yeah. No, I know. That bit is totally true. I mean no one can tell that by looking at us. I promise. It's our secret to give away if you are not careful. And anyway, we didn't mean to. There was literally nothing we could have done.' Dom countered.

'You know that's a lie. That's just what we tell ourselves to make ourselves feel better.' Nadia was trying to regain control of her breathing, she hated getting to the point of being inconsolable. She didn't want to totally lose her shit and have a full-blown anxiety attack. 'We could have got out of the car to see if he was ok, we could have called for help. We could have done almost anything apart from what we did which was drive away like we

never hit a man and continue with our normal lives. Except we aren't, are we? Nothing has been normal since. We can't sleep, I can't eat. We don't laugh or fuck anymore. I am being torn apart by this. I don't know how to get past this. How are you acting so normal? Well, normal for you. Is this not affecting you at all?'

'We absolutely cannot tell anyone,' he interjected. 'They might have let us off if we had said something immediately. You weren't drinking much or speeding. He was dressed in black, walking down a country lane at night, pissed as fuck. But we will never be able to explain away waiting two months after finding out he died to tell the authorities it was us who hit him. Nadia, I need you now more than ever to stay strong. People think I am the strong one, but we both know it is you. You deal with me and my shit every day. I know I'm not easy to live with. And all the bullshit your friends come at you with? You just take that in your stride. You've got this. Literally all you have to do is do nothing.'

Nadia freed herself from his embrace. She needed air. She got up off the bed and walked over to the window. She was still shaking. She opened the balcony door and stepped out. She could feel Dom's eyes following her. She stared out at the view, or rather the lack of view. Her balcony was more of a juliet balcony, a ledge, and luckily was shielded by the one above, so she was only getting a light dusting of snow. But she couldn't see beyond a few centimeters past the railing. She could smell fag smoke wafting up, so she imagined Amelia was at the back door smoking like she thought nobody knew.

Nadia felt so uncomfortable in herself ever since that night. She always prided herself on her driving, having been one of her first school friends to learn and save up for a car. She knew her friends made fun of the speed at which she liked to drive, but she had always hated those country lanes at night. If anything, she took them too slow. She also knew that everyone around where her mum lived drove to the pub and back, usually well over the limit. She often heard them boast about 'five and drive', that being the number of pints they felt they could down and still supposedly get home safely. There were rarely footpaths along those roads for the people not drink-driving, choosing to drink-walk instead. She avoided driving around there as much as possible, especially at night. Easy enough to do as she avoided her family as much as possible. But they had been obliged on this occasion, as it was her mum's birthday. Thank fuck they didn't have her mum in the car too. That would have been the only way to make this nightmare even more hellish.

It was less than a mile from the pub that she turned a corner sharply, as it had appeared at the last minute in her field of vision. She saw the man's bewildered face as it smashed into her windscreen, his right cheek pressed against the glass. She thought she heard the sound of his bones fracturing and splintering, but it could have been the sound of her lights smashing, or her bonnet crumpling. It could have been something she had imagined, having replayed the scene over and over in her head. She saw him slide off the front of her car as she slammed on the brakes, and fall into the ditch between the road and the hedges fencing the road in. The movies were wrong. They never accurately depict what happens immediately after such an accident. No one sprang into action. There wasn't an immediate buzz of activity or even conversation. They sat in silence for what felt like whole minutes, Nadia hearing only white noise.

She eventually looked at Dom. He was pretty pale normally, part of his Viking chic, but he seemed to whiten even further. She looked at the man in the ditch, limbs bent at impossible angles.

Fuck! She recognised him. He had been in the pub earlier! It was one of the locals who everyone knew, but no one counted as a friend. He was a postman or something which enabled him to clock off every day by noon and was always in the pub drunk by early evening. He had been there that evening, singing along to the live band loudly and badly, disturbing most of the people there, but not enough for anyone to risk confronting him. It's not that he was a violent drunk. Quite the opposite. He was known to break down in tears at the slightest comment that reminded him that his wife left him, that his kids wanted nothing to do with him, that he rented a room from an elderly woman who regularly soiled herself. He was responsible for cleaning her up when this happened, even though his rent did not reflect this.

'His name's Will. Will Price' Nadia declared, when she could finally speak. It had felt like she had sat in silence for hours. It was probably three seconds.

'Shit, Nads. What do we do?' Dom, for once, was shaken. Nadia didn't know what to do when Dom panicked. He was normally her rock.

'You tell me! I've never exactly done this before' Nadia was reaching hysteria very quickly. This felt more like what happened in the movies.

Tears ran uncontrollably now down Nadia's face, and she was gripping the steering wheel so tight her rings were digging into her fingers.

'Drive.' Was all Dom said. One word. A decision. One that would take them down a path they could never return from. He was already collecting himself and stepping back into the role of leader of the pack.

'What?' Nadia gasped. Was he suggesting they leave this man in the street, and without even checking if he was still alive. Perhaps he just needed medical attention. Although she could see the inside of his cranium from where she was sitting, and his neck at an impossible angle, so she could tell even from within the car that no amount of medical attention would save Will now.

'Nads, we will talk about this later. But right now, I need you to focus and listen to me. Just drive. Let's go home and figure this out together. As a team.' He said this so calmly it almost made sense to Nadia. It seemed like the most obvious, the easiest thing to do. She would never be able to explain, even if she did ever tell anyone, why she did as Dom said then. She never understood the expression before, but in that moment, she lost her mind. She could not have made a decision to save herself. Her brain and her body were like jelly, and she had turned to her partner and protector to make it all right again. The fear of going to jail was overwhelming in the true sense of the word, in that she could only think of how to avoid it happening. So when he told her to drive and leave the scene of the accident, she did it, assuming he had a plan.

Sometimes she tells herself she thought he was going to call an ambulance on their way home, or something less murderous than doing nothing. But she knew she was just telling herself that to make herself feel better about being such a shit human. Because on that drive home she didn't think about Will at all. She was in shock, hardly thinking at all, but what few thoughts she had revolved around getting home and not having to deal with police or jail or investigations or Will's family or her family or the judgement of her loved ones.

Dom didn't call anyone on the way home. When they arrived, he ran her a bath as she stood naked in the bathroom, staring at the one crack in the third tile from the left of the sink basin. She should be grateful that she could lean on him in times of crisis. She was. And yet, there was something frightening in how quickly he had taken charge. Something rehearsed, like he had been in this situation before. She realised she didn't know very much about him, only what he had told her of his past, which had not been verified by cross-reference.

He rolled her a spliff, something he learned to do when she was in an anxious state, and sat on the bathroom floor next to her as she soaked for hours. Dom fetched her more weed, and topped up the hot water as required, but not requested, as Nadia was mute from shock. Eventually, he stood her up, wrapped her in a large bath towel and carried her to bed. He stroked her hair that whole night as she oscillated between crying so hard she couldn't catch her breath, silently weeping, seeing ghosts in the shadows on the ceiling and sleeping fitfully.

The next morning, Dom made her breakfast, and as he placed the plate with scrambled eggs on toast in front of her, he grunted, usual Dom style 'Eat, you need your strength to act normal. And let's agree never to tell anyone about this. Perhaps we should never discuss it between us again either. Too risky.'

But Nadia couldn't eat. Something about the consistency of the eggs reminded her of Will's face on the windscreen. Nadia knew that Dom was trying to protect her. She was aware of the fact that he wouldn't cope without her. He needed her perhaps even more than she needed him, or at least in a different way, and she didn't care if that was toxic codependency. And they now had this secret binding them together for eternity. Not that she would ever use it to blackmail him into staying with her. She wondered if he would do that to her, though. He always took care of her. He hadn't forced her drive away. Not really.

She remembered Dom once slipping a rose into her boot at the end of a shit week, while she was at work. She'd melted then, thinking no one had ever treated her better. He had even gone out of his way to find out where her meetings were that day in order to jimmy her boot open and leave her that flower and note saying 'I am always with you.' But now, she wondered, was that love, or control dressed up in kindness?

'Dom, can you hand me my jacket please?' She called from their balcony back into their room. Previously, it had been warm in the sun, despite the layer of snow covering the ground. But now that the snowfall masked the sky, the sun, the view, and everything, she was chilled to the bone. The storm seemed to reflect Nadia's internal chaos. The silence between flakes, the isolation of their room, the enclosing whiteness. She felt like she would go mad. She wanted to scream into the void.

She saw his hand reach out through the sliding door, passing her her black fleece-lined leather jacket. Most of Nadia's clothes were black. They matched her mood, she felt. She put it on, zipped it up and shoved her hands into her pockets. She fingered her tourmaline crystal she always kept in her pocket these days. It was meant to ward off evil and protect her from negative thoughts, those of others as well as her own. She used to believe in its power. Now it just felt warm from her pocket, like it had absorbed her shame and was feeding it back to her. Piece of shit rock, she thought. Clearly broken.

But what was that? There was a wedge of paper in her pocket that she didn't remember being there previously. Probably a receipt she had spat gum out into. As she pulled it out of her pocket, she recognised the logo of the resort at the top of the paper. Not a receipt, and not a bit of paper she remembered putting into her pocket herself. Unfolding it, it contained a simple line, in delicate handwriting despite being etched in thick marker pen.

'I know your secret. Vroom Vroom.'

Her reaction was visceral. She staggered forward, clutching the note. Nadia promptly leaned over and threw up over the balcony railing with such force she nearly followed over herself.

Wiping her mouth, she tried to catch her breath. She debated what to do next. Why had she also received one of these notes? Was it someone playing a game? Was that game innocent or worse? Should she tell Dom? Did he send it? Who else could possibly know what happened that night?

Nadia didn't recognise the handwriting, but she could smell something on the paper. Not her perfume, and not one she recognised as belonging to her friends. Not Dom's deodorant. What was it?

She walked back into the bedroom and threw the note into the fire.

'What was that?' Dom asked. He eyes her suspiciously.

'Just a bit of litter I found on the balcony.' Nadia could tell he didn't believe her.

'Bit of litter? Bit excessive burning it, isn't it?' Dom raised an eyebrow. 'You sure it wasn't a love note from Lucian?'

Nadia forced a smile. Dom was doing that thing where he was making jokes but he was really not finding it funny, trying to probe the edges to find out what was really going on. 'If it was Lucian, he's got terrible handwriting.' She sped up towards the bathroom, hoping to hide behind the pretext of taking a long bath, hoping he would forget about the 'litter,' his mood, the shut-in by the time she got out, but knowing he wouldn't have. Perhaps if she took long enough, he would be asleep by the time she got out.

She knew this wasn't the last of the notes, the last one received nor the last time Dom would mention it. She had never lied to him before and she could tell he could see straight through to her soul.

Chapter 9 - The madman in the room (Dom's pov, dinner time, day 2)

Dom sat at the dinner table, eyeing up the others in the group, especially his own girlfriend. She had convinced him to come down and eat with the others, to not do so would attract even more attention onto them. He agreed with her in principle, but he also wanted to gauge all their eyeballs out with his fork.

He didn't believe Nadia for a second about this bullshit litter on the balcony. Why throw litter in a fireplace when he counted at least three bins in their room? She was the one he needed to trust the most, so he didn't like the thought of her betraying this trust. In fact, the thought was making him angry. She had no reason to lie to him. All he ever did was to protect her.

The reason he knew Nadia was lying was because he too got a note. He was justified in not telling her though, because again, all he ever did was to keep her safe from this world. She just made it so damn difficult sometimes!

The note he received was in his washbag. His read 'You think you're in control. You're not. The others know. They're waiting.' The author of this note was right. He did not feel in control and he hated it. This was something else that was contributing to his growing rage this evening. He knew some of these fuckers were playing games, he just didn't know who or what games. He didn't for a minute think that anyone knew their secret, just that someone was shit stirring with all of them. He also resented being around people who thought he was stupid, because it made him feel just that. He knew he wasn't academic or financially savvy. But he could read people and he knew all of these people hated each other and had secrets from each other. It was starting to feel like a matter of survival to figure out what those secrets were.

'Talk about killer snow' joked Daniel. Dom hated Daniel the most. Pretentious, showy, arrogant twat. Who talked about killer snow? Was that even a phrase? Dick.

Dom knew he saw a figure running into the woods earlier and Daniel was the main opponent to this, convincing the rest of the group that Dom must be seeing things, or that he was such an idiot he would mistake a deer for a human, even in heavy snowfall. Not able to get this earlier moment out of his head, and despite no one else raising it, Dom said 'I know what I saw, Daniel. There is someone out there watching us, circling us like prey.'

Dom had said this disproportionately loudly, so he had interrupted several side discussions amongst the group. All eyes turned to him, as they usually did whenever he deigned to speak. It happened rarely, so often felt significant.

'Ok, big boy, calm down. I'm sure you did. Like I said, it was probably a gardener.' Daniel scoffed.

'You think in this weather they thought it would be urgent or prudent to trim the bushes?' Dom jeered back.

Daniel laughed. 'I don't know, I'm hardly one for manual labour.'

'Don't think you can gaslight me like you gaslight your wife, you prick.' Dom retorted. Several people gasped. Even Amelia, who Dom was sure would agree with her.

Nadia placed her hand on his arm and asked him to lower his voice. Daniel was not the type to ever back down or apologise. But neither was Dom. He shook her hand off. He was not to be appeased tonight. And the fact that Nadia was trying to calm him down rather than jumping to his defence was another act of betrayal in his eyes.

Dom continued 'you might be able to convince Audrey that your word is God but I am not one of your little bitches.'

'Hey!' this was from Audrey. 'Are you calling me a little bitch?' She laughed, trying to diffuse the situation by making a joke of it all. She clearly did not find it funny, but Dom didn't care. He never had a problem with Audrey, not much time for her either though, but right now he was fuming and social etiquette was not going to be the thing that stopped him making his position clear. He saw something, and anyone who doubted this was a fucking idiot. It felt dangerous for them not to heed his warning.

Dom slammed his fist on the table, toppling over several nearby wine glasses and smashing the plate in front of him. 'You're all gaslighters. You're doing it to each other and you're doing it to me. We are not safe here.'

'Did you learn a new word from *Oprah*? No one here is gaslighting you, pal. Now let's talk about something else.' Daniel drawled. Belittling prick, thought Dom. He looked to Nadia for support, but he got none. She was staring intently at her plate, pulling her sleeves over her hands and twisting the cuffs round in her fingers. A nervous habit he often found endearing, but right now found infuriating. Dom scraped his chair back and started pacing. 'We are being watched. How is it in your interest to ignore me when I tell you this?'

Some of the guests were getting genuinely perturbed by this now. Lucian stood up and approached Dom to impeach him to sit down and enjoy the meal. But Dom turned on a dime, moving faster than anyone would expect considering his large bulk, and slammed Lucian up against the fireplace. He didn't mean to do this with such force, but he often underestimated his own strength, and overestimated the weight of other, smaller men. Lucian's head smacked against the mantle and he slumped to the floor. Amelia screamed and ran to her husband's side. Lucian was fluttering his eyes and holding his hand against the back of his head. He pulled his hand away but there was no blood. Dom hated the asshole so much in that moment, but was relieved. He didn't want another death on his conscience, but he was just so fucking mad at this group of people, playing happy families when they were all twisted liars. And potentially sitting ducks.

'Do you all think this is a joke?' Dom shouted at no one and everyone in the room.

'Obviously not, you just nearly killed my husband! Nadia, take him upstairs til he calms down.' Amelia was rarely seen to be angry, so when it happened, people paid attention. This holiday was bringing out all sides of everyone's personalities, it seemed. Nadia went up to her boyfriend, but before she could convince him to follow her to their room, Dom picked up one of the vases from the mantle and threw it across the room. Everyone watched as it

smashed against the wall and splintered blue coloured glass onto their plates on the table. He went to pick up another vase and threw it after the first, but this one grazed Linda's bouffant blonde helmet of a hairdo. Those of the group who had been frozen in shock or fear seemed to snap out of it at this act.

'Dom!' This was Nadia, and this did actually stop him in his tracks. He hated when he disappointed her, and his rages were the most common source of that let down. But what she never understood was when he got this worked up, there was nothing he could do but ride it out and let it take him where it wanted him to go. And this time, even her voice aggravated him. Nadia often said he had a temper, but she never said his perspective was wrong. And right now it felt like even she couldn't understand where he was coming from. He felt alone and, if he was honest, afraid and vulnerable. He picked up the poker from beside the fireplace and started swinging it in the general direction of Daniel, the primary antagonist in Dom's narrative. He did derive some satisfaction from the look of fear in Daniel's eyes. This spurred Dom on. Daniel was not a fighter, and it was obvious he stood no chance against Dom, so this was the first time he felt in control of a situation in months.

But so angry was he that he didn't see the inoffensive Tony come up behind him, grab the arm wielding the fire poker, bend it back behind his body in such a manner he dropped the weapon. This gave Daniel enough time to swing a punch at him. This was a punch that ordinarily wouldn't even register, but held back at an awkward angle by the freakishly strong Tony, the strike got him right across the nose, which erupted instantly in blood.

Losing a moment in time through panic at the sight of his own blood, suddenly Dom found himself face down on the carpet, someone pushing his head into the shag pile. God, he hated these people. He didn't even care at this point who was causing this shame, he wanted to be gone from all of them. Even Nadia. Why had she put him in this environment? He had felt like a caged animal right from the beginning, and now he was being treated like one.

'What do we do now? Do we light one of the flares? He tried to kill my mother!' Katherine screeched. Her voice had always been an irritant to Dom, never more so than now, though. Even if he had hit her head with that vase, it would have bounced off her rock solid hairdo anyway, probably ricocheting and killing someone else in the room.

'What a brute' Fuck off, Linda, you pretentious whore.

'No one will come, we are mid-storm now. There is no way a helicopter or anyone is reaching us in this weather.' Tony was right. He seemed the least bothered by his wife's close call with the vase.

'We need to contain him then. I am not spending a moment longer with him roaming this house. He's a madman' Katherine all but gasped like a black and white movie star on her deathbed.

'Guys! What the actual fuck! He's not a madman. Daniel, you fucking provoked him, now get the fuck off him and let him go.' Nadia, finally defending him, but Dom wouldn't forget how long this took. It also seemed to have little effect on the group. They still seemed intent on locking him up.

'Nadia, he literally tried to kill Lucian.' Audrey said. Unsurprising, really, that she did not defend Dom. He had just called her a little bitch not ten minutes previous.

'I have Valium, maybe we dose him up?' That was Amelia. Dom aggressively tried to shake Tony off at this point. He had never liked mind-altering drugs, especially ones that dampened his emotions.

'Amelia, you are not drugging up my boyfriend. Look, I am sure he's got it out of his system now, right Dom?' Nadia turned to him, beseechingly.

'They can all get fucked, Nads.' was Dom's response, while still trying to shake Tony off his back..

'Charming.' Daniel scoffed again. Dom had never known anyone to scoff before, but Daniel was a professional-level scoffer.

'Look mate, we get it, Daniel is a prick. We all think so.' Tony laid on his most fatherly voice.

'Hey!' Daniel seemed genuinely surprised and offended by this. Tony shot him a look as if to tell him to shut up. Daniel did.

Tony continued 'But you can't act like that with ladies around. You're making them nervous, and I am sure that goes against your warrior code of honour or whatever. We are all stuck here together for the foreseeable, so can we all try to be a bit more patient with each other and a bit less violent?' Tony, like him, rarely had the floor, so Dom actually listened. And he was intrigued to hear that Tony wasn't a fan of his own son-in-law. Or was he just saying that to appease Dom?

'I say we lock him in that equipment shed.' Daniel again, puffing out his chest. He's scared of me, thought Dom. Good. He's right to be.

'Won't he freeze? I mean I'm not saying no, but we can't let him die out there.' That pussy, Adrian. Always silent until he piped up with something stupid.

Dom looked at Nadia. He couldn't bring himself to ask for her help in this situation, not even with a pleading glance. And he couldn't read her expression in that moment either, her eyes completely blank. He hated when he scared even her, but that always made him even more mad, that she would be intimidated by him when everything he did was to look after her. But this distant glare from her was worse. What did it mean? Dom's heartbeat was thudding in his ears, and he could feel that his nose was still bleeding. It was bad enough that they had tackled him and pinned him down like a wild fucking animal. But she had let them. The one person who was meant to be on his side. Just standing there, watching, letting them all overreact and treat him like a beast.

And Lucian was absolutely fine, he wasn't even bleeding. Neither was that bitch, Linda. Dom was the only one bleeding! Lucian was already standing up and walking around. That should have been the end of it. If they had been left to their own devices, they would have settled it like men and moved on already. Once Dom had shown his dominance and the other two prats had accepted it, of course. Why wouldn't they let Dom stand up too? He thrashed

about again so viciously even Nadia took a step back, not cowering exactly, more like absolving responsibility.

The way they were talking about him, looking at him. Looking *down* on him. Like he was a bomb about to go off. He knew they never thought of him as one of them, but now they were looking at him like he was a threat to them. But Dom wasn't dangerous. He was just right. He *had* seen someone outside. Why were they so determined not to believe him? He wasn't crazy and he still didn't understand why no one would listen to him. Why were they all so determined to believe no one could be outside looking in?

Dom started to panic now because they were still discussing what to do with him, and none of the options were to get Tony off his back and let him just stand up like a normal human fucking being. Nadia's look was what stung the most though. He saw it all in her eyes now. Shame and horror. He never meant to strike fear in her, even when he got like this. But it made it worse when she couldn't even back him up in the slightest. Not shush him, or tell him to calm down. Like anyone has ever calmed down from being told to calm down. But to unconditionally be there for him, believe in him, believe him.

Instead, Nadia had backed away and started whispering with the others, she was nodding at what they were saying, her arms crossed, her face closed off. He tried getting her attention, calling her name. But he was struggling to breathe from the shouting and the pressure on his back from Tony's knees.

'Nads, please,' he managed to ask. But she was gone. Still in the room, but lost to him. He'd seen this side of her before. Normally so forgiving, warm and understanding, once someone finally crossed that line with her, they were dead to her. It was like she could no longer connect with them on any emotional or intellectual level. They just didn't register in her orbit at all. She was looking at him like she didn't even know him. Like he wasn't the one who held her all night when her dad died, or supposedly made her orgasm harder than any man ever had. Like he hadn't covered up a murder for her. Like she didn't owe him anything.

When Daniel repeated that they should lock him in the shed, Dom managed a laugh. Surely they had been joking earlier. It was below freezing out there. And it was a fucking shed! He looked at Nadia again, waiting for her to snap out of it and tell them all to fuck off. But that didn't happen. She didn't object. She just stood there silently, biting her lip, looking out of the window like the snow might save her or give her answers. And then she said it. Words he was sure would haunt him for the rest of his life.

'Just until he calms down.'

That hurt worse than Daniel's chickenshit punch. Worse than any hit he had ever taken. Because Nadia was his person, his anchor, and he had just been cut loose. He could handle a night in a shed. He had suffered far worse in his life. But he didn't think he would ever recover from the betrayal of his partner agreeing to this.

Tony, Daniel and Lucian started lifting him off the floor and dragging him towards the kitchen, presumably to take him out the back door to the equipment shed on the other side of the back garden. Dom called them cowards, traitors, cunts. He called Nadia worse names, because her disloyalty was the worst. He got a smack on the back of the head from Tony at

this though, and a swift word about respecting women. But Dom had stopped noticing what he was saying, he was just panicking now. He couldn't let this happen. What was the point of his massive bulk of a body, all those muscles, if he could easily be overpowered and imprisoned by these two dickheads and an old man.

And it was Nadia who opened the back door for them, guided them through the snow to the shed and then even opened that door, enabling them in their torture of her own boyfriend. Lights sputtered on. At least he wouldn't be left in the dark. And the shed was well insulated, not as cold as he feared. But it was only about six metres squared. He felt about seven meters squared in the space. They had already slammed the door closed behind him before he had managed to gather his thoughts and assess his surroundings. He heard the lock click. He wasn't done shouting. This couldn't be happening. He knew this holiday was going to be shit, but this was next level. And Nadia had let it happen.

Whatever they had between them, it was now broken. Maybe not permanently, he tried to reassure himself, but how could it ever be the same again. This could only have happened because she was in a weird place since the accident, and because of peer pressure from her idiot friends. OK, OK, he supposed his aggressive behaviour hadn't helped his cause. OR his relationship, with Nadia or anyone else here.

He sat down on a shoe bench, made for putting skis or snow shoes on. He was surrounded by snow gear. There were windows, but what good would it do his position in the group, and with Nadia, if he smashed a window or the door to get out? They wouldn't let him back in the chalet. They would be even more afraid of him, and then who knows what decisions to do with him they would escalate to. He would probably be forced to stay in this shed with broken windows, exposing him to the elements. He didn't even think he could fit through the window frames anyway.

He sat listening to the wind, which was loud, but the silence from the house behind him was louder still.

She had let them incarcerate him. She had chosen them over him. That was the final twist of the knife in the back, and she didn't even flinch while she did it.

Chapter 10: Discovery of the Body (Audrey's POV - day 3)

Audrey woke to a strange sense of stillness, but one that was anything but peaceful. She'd had troubled dreams all night. She remembered with a jolt that they actually resorted to locking one of their group up in the shed. She was worried when they were discussing what to do with Dom that Nadia would oppose anything they suggested, in defence of her boyfriend. But she seemed almost the most keen to lock him up, perhaps most aware of what he was capable of in that heightened state of anger. Even Audrey was shocked that Nadia had not tried to defend him more. Their friendship would surely be affected by this move. All of their relationship with Dom definitely would. Not that they had one to speak of. But there was no way Nadia and Dom could stay together after what happened last night.

But they had decided to leave him out there overnight, and assess what to do in the morning, all hoping he would have calmed down. But how could he possibly calm down in a shed, and just be released to continue the holiday with the people who caged him up like a beast? In other circumstances, she was sure Nadia and Dom would have just found alternative accommodation or even flown home yesterday. But looking at the snow out the window, Audrey could tell they would still be confined to the chalet for at least another day. She could barely see the balcony railing out the window.

Audrey couldn't just lie in bed, despite checking the time and learning it was 4.37am. Daniel was still fast asleep next to her. She didn't like to wake him with her fidgeting when she had a troubled night's sleep. She rose, and walked over to the window. The generators were clearly still holding. She had a view of the shed in the back garden and she thought she could see Dom outline pacing back and forth through the window. Even with the little oil heater she noticed in there, he must have been freezing. Audrey wondered what had become of them that they actually did this to him. They were apparently a mob of people who were capable of locking another human being in what was essentially a garden shed during a snow storm. He had been terrifying, though. Like a furious bucking bronco. It had been for the safety of the rest of them, right? Either way, she was relieved to see him still locked up.

The storm seemed to be worsening, something Audrey would not have thought possible. She could almost feel the weight of the snow pressing on the roofs of the outhouses. Visibility had become so poor, what few shapes she could make out became menacing. It was deeply claustrophobic.

Audrey shook herself off, and took herself downstairs to the kitchen. She activated the Nespresso machine and propped up on the breakfast bar. Reaching for her phone, she noticed she still had no signal or wifi.

But then she heard a knock on the door. Who would possibly be outside in this weather? Had Dom escaped and then was politely knocking on their front door asking to be let back in like nothing happened? Audrey doubted that very much.

She shuffled in her slippers to the front door, she asked who it was. No answer. She was reluctant to open the door and let the cold and the snow in. She was now doubting whether

she even heard a knock. No, she was sure. All the events from the last few days were making her doubt herself. She still heard nothing from outside but she couldn't not open the door and check. She pulled just one of the massive double doors open and was greeted by the now infamous wall of snow, but what she didn't see was any person who might have been responsible for knocking on the door.

What she did see was a dark, lumpy shape a bit further down the drive, just a few steps from the door. It was already half-buried by snow, but something compelled her to go look closer.

Audrey walked over cautiously. The snow was crunching loudly under her feet. She had to hold her arms up around her head to protect it from the snowfall, which was so cold and so intense, it felt like she was being repetitively slapped in the face. She nearly gave up and retreated, unable to even make it even a couple of meters, but then she recognised the lavender fabric as her mum's ski jacket. Audrey wondered how Linda would be able to lay blame on Audrey for her coat being left outside. Perhaps she would claim it was Audrey's responsibility to do a sweep of the property each night, inside and out, arranging everyone's belongings for them. That sounded like something she would say, rather than take accountability for her own forgetfulness.

Audrey contemplated for a moment what she hoped to prove to her mum with this trip. Perhaps that she was not the failure her mum always made her out to feel? Even getting cancer had made her feel like a disappointment, like she couldn't even keep her cells healthy. She had a good life, a solid husband, a decent income, one her mum was envious of anyway, and she had beaten cancer, for fuck's sake. Why wasn't her mum more proud of her?

But when had Linda even been outside so far to lose her coat? And how would she not notice losing it in the middle of this weather? Maybe an animal had dragged it further down the driveway?

As Audrey approached the coat, intending to retrieve it before her mum could find a way to blame her for it being left out there, Audrey saw that it wasn't just Linda's coat lying in the snow, but Linda's corpse, twisted, partially dressed, limbs and neck and unnatural angles. In fact, Linda's neck had been slashed nearly clean through. Her whole head seemed to be attached only by a flap of skin and perhaps a tendon or two. Blood was soaked into the snow, it had frozen into grotesque dark crystals.

Audrey looked down at her mum's mutilated body and froze for a beat, her cold breath caught in her throat. All she could hear in her mind was 'no no no no no.' And then she screamed.

She backed away from her mother's body, slumped into the ground, not caring that she was getting soaked through by the snow and the ice. This is how the others found her when they ran out to investigate the scream.

It had taken them a while to slowly find their way out to Audrey and the grisly scene. Most had been asleep, so they came out in various states of undress. Audrey barely noticed them anyway. She couldn't look away. She vaguely heard her sister cry out next to her, Nadia

gasped and someone grabbed Audrey's arm, trying to pull her up out of the snow and away from Linda's body. Oddly, she thought she heard Amelia mutter 'But that's not Daniel or Adrian.'

Audrey looked around for her husband, who she wanted right now. She noticed it was actually Daniel who was helping her to her feet. She fell into his arms, but was still looking at her mother, dead in the snow. The sight wasn't computing for her. Her mother was so full of life. Bitter and jaded, sure, but loud and vivacious.

Her father. Where was her dad? She knew her parents' marriage was far from harmonious, but this was his wife of 45 years, lying dead in the snow. Murdered? Fuck! Murdered! Tony was standing between her and her sister. She looked at his face. It seemed emotionless, but she knew that face well and she could see that he had paled. He tried to speak, but she could hear no words from his mouth. They both had so much to say to Linda, and now neither would ever get a chance.

Then Lucian shouted, 'Where's Dom?' his tone was accusatory.

'You think he did this? Get fucked, Lucian! He's been locked in a shed.' Nadia was back on Team Dom with a vengeance, it seemed. Or perhaps incarcerating him was OK, but accusing him of murder was a step too far for her.

'Are we sure about that?' Lucian almost squared up to her, so unlike him. But then it was unlike them to find one of their group murdered.

Audrey heard this exchange between Lucian and Nadia, but it barely registered. She was fighting back nausea, and the urge to scream and shout and lash out. She, too, suspected Dom. But then there wasn't one person she didn't suspect at this point in time. Her mum was vile, and every single person she had invited on this doomed vacation had some issue with her, from minor to life-destroying. But it was still her mum, nonetheless, lying in the snow with her head hanging at an impossible angle and her lipstick smeared. That would embarrass her more than having been murdered, Audrey thought to herself.

Lucian and Daniel went off through the house to the garden, and to the equipment shed where they had left Dom locked up. Amelia said she was going to check if the phone line was working yet. The rest of the group just stood in silence, quite quickly getting covered in a layer of snow. Some couldn't look at Linda's body and others couldn't look away.

Tony awoke from his state of shock, perhaps for the sake of his girls.' We need to get those flares.' Adrian nodded grimly, and took it on himself to run indoors to fetch them from the kitchen.

At that moment, Amelia came back out to the front porch and shouted over the wind that the landline was still down and she couldn't get any signal on her phone either. Daniel, Lucian and Dom came out behind her. Dom looked pale, shivering, confused. Audrey wondered if it had been wise to send Daniel and Lucian to release him, the two men he seemed to take the biggest issue with. Or whether it was wise to keep him locked up overnight, for that matter. They had clearly told him what had happened, but judging by his reaction, it hadn't prepared

him for what he saw. Although Audrey distrusted everyone, she did feel Dom was the most logical suspect. She had seen his uncontrollable rage last night. And the equipment shed was hardly built to contain prisoners. Had he been able to escape and kill her mother? But why? His expression of shock looked real. Was it too real?

Audrey watched Nadia rush to him, pause when she reached him, as if assessing his attitude towards her, and then lunged into a full body hug. He returned it. They would be ok. I guess a dead body puts your problems into perspective, thought Audrey bitterly, aware her problems were just beginning.

Adrian rushed back out at that moment, carrying a bag which she presumed contained the flares. Audrey remembered Lola's warning that even if the flare was noticed by the resort staff or authorities, they may still not be able to reach the chalet mid-storm, and they definitely looked mid-fucking-storm.

Audrian passed the bag of flares to Tony. He seemed the most obvious choice to set one off, being the most outdoorsy and also the most widowed by recent events. Tony took the bag and reached in for a flare. He pulled one out and handled it for a moment, turning it round in his hand, his expression increasing in confusion.

'What's wrong, pops? Do you know how to set it off?' Daniel enquired. Audrey could tell her husband was trying to act cool, but flapping underneath. He was great in a board room, less so in nature, and even less so with murder, it seemed.

'Someone's *sabotaged* them!' Tony said, stunned. He held a flare up for all to see, water dripping from the end. 'Someone's filled this bag with water. None of these will work.'

Audrey felt a fresh wave of terror wash over her. They were totally cut off. No one was coming to rescue them any time soon, from the murderer, from the weather, from each other. Whoever did this to her own mother was still out there, or worse, staying in the chalet with them. It wasn't just her experiencing rising levels of panic. She could see Adrian pacing anxiously, Amelia giving up all pretences of being non-smoker and sucking deeply on a cigarette. Even Daniel looked outwardly flustered. She heard someone sobbing, her sister behind her. Others were bickering about what to do next.

Audrey interjected it all, 'What do we do with Mum?' She had realised now that it was her responsibility to hold this wayward bunch together, if they were going to survive whatever was happening here. Someone had to be thinking for the group as a whole, not just for themselves. She had brought them all together on this ill-fated holiday. She had to keep them together if they were to survive.

'I guess we have to leave her, it's a crime scene.' That from Amelia.

'You're a podcaster, with no qualifications, honey. You're not the law. This is my mum. I'm not just leaving her here' Katherine was brutal, even in her grief. Or perhaps more so because of her grief? Or is she trying to get us to disturb the scene and destroy evidence in the meantime, thought Audrey. She then chastised herself for letting her mind really run riot. Of

all the folks there, her sister was the one who had least motive to kill their mum. Katherine might have been the only person Linda actually liked.

Audrey agreed with her sister that they couldn't leave their mum like this, to get covered in the snow, while they all just went inside and carried on with their holiday. 'What if she gets eaten by a wild animal?' asked Audrey.

'She'll freeze!' Adrian asked. And he is supposed to be teaching the next generation? Lord help us all, thought Audrey. The thin thread of patience she had with everyone had well and truly snapped now. 'She's already dead,' she responded, almost without expression.

'Maybe we can cover her with a tarp?' Pragmatic Daniel was back after his initial flirtation with shock and incompetence. Audrey was glad of this, relieved to have her partner back. She would need him.

They all turned and watched as Linda's legs started to disappear under the freshly fallen snow, erasing the scene and any evidence as they argued. It would not be long before her whole body was covered in fresh drift. Could they really just wrap her up in a tarp and hide her away? What choice did they have? And would the murderer be pleased with this decision, if they were amongst them now? Be pushing for it? Audrey's head was in a whirl.

After much back and forth on the most surreal topic Audrey had ever been involved in, they finally settled on moving her to the ice store in the back garden. As far as Audrey could tell when she explored the chalet on arrival, it was no longer used for anything, but was definitely cold enough to preserve a body.

Amelia insisted they took hundreds of photos of the scene before disrupting it. It made total sense to capture this for the investigation that was sure to follow, but no one initially volunteered to be the one to photograph a corpse, not to mention have these images living forever on their cloud. But finally, Daniel agreed to do this. She was so thankful for him then. She still struggled to look away from her mum's face, battered and bloodied, but she knew she wasn't looking at the scene objectively enough to capture things that might be crucial later on.

Meanwhile, Dom went back to the equipment shed to fetch a tarp he had used as a blanket when locked up overnight. He hadn't confronted anyone about his forced imprisonment yet. Even he could tell that now was not the time. But Audrey was sure they had not heard the end of it.

Daniel and Lucian tried as best they could, with their limited experience in dead bodies, to wrap Linda up respectfully in the large blue plastic, while Audrey looked on with revulsion. Then Dom, and surprisingly Adrian, helped them lift the roll and carry it through the front door towards the kitchen and the back garden and ice store beyond. Tony stood silently watching. Audrey too couldn't bring herself to help. They could see Linda's straw-like blonde hair sticking out of one end of the grotesque roll. That would be the last sight she would ever have of her mother, thought Audrey.

That's how I will always remember her, either wrapped up in a tarp or eyes open, mouth frozen mid-scream, thought Audrey, shuddering. She was suddenly all too aware of the freezing cold temperature, and she remembered she was just in light pyjamas and a bathrobe. She had been planning to have a quiet cup of coffee, not find her mother viciously slain.

Then Adrian slipped. Audrey would have put money on his being the weakest of the four morbid pallbearers. He was normally so useless. Like a too-small side table that barely holds a mug of tea. She had been indifferent towards him previous to this trip. She counted this as a win as it was more likely she would fucking hate any partner of Katherine's. But he had really started to grate on her this holiday. What was the point of him? What did her sister see in him?

As Adrian fell to one knee, his end of the tarp roll lowered, the end with the hair protruding. Audrey watched in shock as her mum's head slid out of the tarp and landed with a wet thud on the kitchen floor. Her eyes were open and coincidentally aimed at where her two daughters stood, horrified.

Both Amelia and Katherine screamed in tandem. Audrey fell to the floor crying. Nope, that's how I am going to remember my mother, she thought, as she heard Nadia throwing up in the kitchen sink behind her.

Chapter 11 Pressure cooker (Tony's POV day 3)

They were all gathered in the living room. Katherine was actually allowing her sister to comfort her, resting her head on Audrey's shoulder while Audrey stroked her arm. Tony looked on, proud of his daughters for putting aside their differences in their hour of need. Perhaps this would bring them closer? That would be a silver lining. Well, one of the silver linings. On the other side of Katherine, Adrian held her hand and stared blankly. Was he in shock? Or hiding something? Tony always suspected something more sinister lying behind Adrian's stillness. His hot tub chat with Amelia had revealed he was right to feel like that. But even Tony hadn't suspected the grooming of children.

Someone had made Tony a coffee with lots of sugar, but he had let it grow cold, gripping the mug in his hand. The snow was still lashing noisily against the window, the wind whistling an eerie tune just for them. It was odd that they had even managed to hear Audrey's scream over the noise from outside. She must have been really frightened.

Inside, the room felt too warm. Too cramped. Nadia and Dom were sitting awkwardly on the loveseat in the window. Ironical, thought Tony, as she had just agreed to let him be locked up outside all night. But that betrayal seemed to be forgotten in the wake of the murder. At least temporarily. Daniel and Lucian were pacing the room, discussing the sabotaged flares. Was it someone in this group? Was it something that happened before they arrived? Could it have been an accident? No one thought that.

Trust amongst them all was completely shot. Tony made the decision to only trust his two daughters going forward, and even then, only with specific things. There were times when he doubted even them. Katherine was entirely self-serving, she took after her mother, and Audrey was distracted and besotted by her husband.

Tony was aware that grief, shock and fear made people act in unusual ways. And now that it was confirmed that there was no signal, no means of communicating with the outside world, no help coming, and a possible murderer in their midsts, there was a fuck ton of fear going round.

Tony thought back to his wedding day. He knew even then that Linda held disdain for him. He was starting to become aware of her unrealistic aspirations in life, and that he would never be able to meet her expectations. But he loved her. And he loved her for one single moment, a moment of weakness as she described it. A moment of pure vulnerability and beauty was how he viewed it. They had gone for a walk in the forest. 'A walk in the forest' was obviously a 1970s euphemism for outdoor sex. There weren't many places to get down to it with both of them living with their parents. They were lying on the blanket post-intercourse, still naked, sweat drying on their skin. Linda suddenly rolled over onto her stomach, her attention bewitched by something. He followed her gaze and saw that she was mesmerised by a dung beetle making his way on top of a 5cm wide ball of, well, dung. She watched that dung beetle on his path for several tens of metres, and he watched her. As the dung beetle balanced his way out of view, he noticed her eyes well up.

'What's wrong, honey?' Tony asked, concerned. She didn't answer at first, she just wiped her eyes on the corner of the blanket. She looked embarrassed that he had caught her crying.

Finally, she said, 'It just... it reminded me of my mum.' Tony blinked, unsure what beetles and poo had to do with her mother.

Linda gave a short, humourless laugh, like she could hear his thoughts. 'She used to say life is a constant uphill battle pushing shit around, but that we should still try to do it with purpose. That beetle, he wasn't going to give up, was he? I don't know. It just got to me. It's silly, I know.'

In that moment, Tony felt like he learned more than he had ever known about Linda. And just like that, the moment passed. She sat up, lit a cigarette, and never cried in front of him again, even when she was pregnant. But Tony never forgot it. Because for that one unguarded moment, he saw something raw and tender in Linda. He thought about that moment often.

Lucian and Daniel were discussing now whether to try to go get help, or wait it out. Tony couldn't help but think of the Two Ronnies, watching these numbnuts trying to regain control of a situation that was always beyond their grasp.

'No one knows we need help though!' screamed Dom. Tony wished he would stop shouting. It was contributing to the rising panic in the room. Everyone was giving side eye, voices were getting more peaked, people were talking over each other, alliances seemed to be forming. It was turning into the Hunger Games. And Tony was trying to come to terms with the fact that he was now a widower.

He looked over at Amelia. She too was standing alone now, staring at her feet, clearly holding back tears. He wanted to go over and talk to Amelia, ask her questions. Had she taken their murder pact seriously? But he was worried about the attention this would draw. The whole point of their pact was that no one would suspect them of killing each other's enemies because they didn't really have a personal connection. Best to keep his distance and try to confront her with his concerns later, when he could be sure no one was observing them. Was that even possible in this chalet, especially with everyone now on guard?

It wasn't even 7am and the group looked exhausted already, completely shaken.

'Maybe she interrupted someone?' Nadia asked.

'Doing what though? What would any of us be doing that we would want to hide so badly we would kill for it?' Amelia pondered. It seemed those furthest from the victim emotionally, were more keen to delve beneath the surface. Linda's family members were scared to look.

'Of course you think it's one of us, Amelia. You have such the suspicious mind! Unless you are trying to deflect and it's you.' Katherine sounded exasperated.

'Why would I kill your mum, Katherine? She hardly plays a strong role in my life. And I seriously doubt I feature in her Will.' Amelia made a good point. Surely dealing with the repercussions of a murder would be more annoying than dealing with the difficult Linda on a week-long holiday?

'I told you there is someone outside.' Dom was determined to die on this hill, it appeared.

'Who here benefits, financially or otherwise, from her death?' Nadia asked. Tony was struggling to stay present and focus, but this definitely brought him back into the room. It was a very interesting question. He wasn't sure whether they should discuss this, but how could they not? How were they meant to stay in this chalet together without talking about what happened?

As it happened, of course he was the main beneficiary of Linda's death. Not only was the house and the other assets his now, but he was free of the constant nagging, infantilising and emasculating. That was priceless. Would the others think it was worth committing murder for? Maybe. But he seriously doubted anyone in the group thought he would be capable of this.

'Sorry to have to say this, but it is usually the spouse, and we all know your marriage was far from loving,' Amelia chimed in. Whatever had happened in that hot tub, whatever was agreed or not agreed, he thought at the very least it had brought them closer, made them a team of sorts. Apparently not.

'I did not kill my wife and mother of my children.' Tony was uncomfortable with the realisation that he would be the prime suspect unless he eliminated himself from enquiries. And there was no way to do this. He had been alone in his room since he said goodnight to everyone, including Linda. He had gone to bed before her but he assumed she was following him shortly.

'But if she was murdered, what if it happens again?' Audrey whispered, but it cut across like a scream.

Tony could sense Amelia bristle at this from across the room. She turned her back to the room, getting lost in the view of the storm. Tony was desperate to speak to her, because he could tell by the way she was avoiding eye contact with him more than anyone else, that she had her doubts about his innocence. He wanted to grab her by the shoulders, shake her and tell her he didn't kill his wife. And before she dropped any more silly comments about how it is usually the husband. He didn't need more eyes on him. He couldn't bear the thought of his daughters doubting him.

The tension was flaring in the room. The accusations were beginning to fly now. Nadia was asking about Daniel's dodgy finance deals. Was that true? It wouldn't surprise Tony that a man who could sleep with sisters could also rip off strangers.

Daniel retorted by raising Dom's anger issues. Had Dom escaped his prison during the night? Had he taken his anger out on Linda? What was she even doing up and about? The questions were flying around the room now.

'That shed is hardly Fort Knox. I am sure you could easily have got out and back in again without us noticing. And why weren't you more angry when we let you out? If that was me, I would have decked you as soon as you opened the door.' Daniel had grown some cojones and decided to swing them around in the direction of Dom, his holiday nemesis.

People seemed reluctant to point any blame at Linda's daughters. Perhaps that felt in too poor taste. But Tony would put money on either of his girls being capable of murder under the right conditions. Wasn't everyone?

Tony remained silent, and scanned the room like a chessboard. This was his super power. He was cataloguing everyone's tells and their theories.

Tony finally let himself catch Amelia's eye. She had been signalling to him all morning, but he felt it too soon for them to be seen having tete-a-tetes. She was now indicating now that she wanted him to meet her outside the room. But now was not the time. Everyone was far too paranoid and no one's movements would go unnoticed. He gave his head a mini shake. She appeared to bristle at this rejection. He actually didn't think it was time for anyone to be separating themselves from the group, for private chats or otherwise, and he sincerely hoped Amelia didn't start losing her cool and drawing suspicion onto herself.

'We need to all stay together. No one can go off on their own, especially outside. We need to all stay safe and we need to not let this fucker have the opportunity to strike again.' Tony decided it was time to speak up. He was the oldest, most experienced person here, with the most experience in nature, and it was his wife who had just died, after all. He thought he was best placed to instil a sense of order and reassurance. He was hoping to secretly convey this message double-fold to Amelia, so she understood he was not shutting her out, just avoiding drawing attention to their new-found...what? Friendship? Arrangement?

'We should all sleep in here at night too. We should get some of the mattresses in here and try to get some rest. I don't know if we need to sleep in shifts, but we should definitely each try to get some kip when we can. We don't know how long we are stuck here, and we don't know what we are up against yet.'

That sent a chill through the group, but there was communal assent. They went off in their couples, clearly deciding to place faith in their own partners, to fetch things from their rooms, leaving Tony alone in the room. 'Great start, idiots,' he thought. It's like they had forgotten he was on his own now his wife had been murdered.

He set the coffee cup down finally, next to the plate of dry toast someone had also made him. What was that? A piece of paper protruding from under the plate. Tony recognised it as the resort headed notepaper from the pads lying around in each room. He stared at it for a moment, trying to remember who brought him the toast, who had come near him since it had been presented to him. They had all been swilling around him at various points, offering him comforting gestures and refreshments. He pulled the paper out from under the plate. Neat handwriting, a single line.

'Who's next?'

Chapter 12 Another body discovered (Amelia POV day 3)

The tension was coiling tighter with each passing hour, and there had been around ten of them so far since they found Linda. And the storm outside wasn't letting up either. If anything, Amelia thought it was picking up force. The wind was louder and the visibility, well, there was zero visibility. They were stranded and trapped. She hadn't even had a cigarette for hours, which was strange considering they had found an actual body. But she was nervous even standing on the back doorstep.

The room was darkening. They had managed to find more candles, and the generator allowed for a handful of lamps working at a dimmed capacity. The fire in the hearth was the main source of heat and light, but no one was keen on stocking up the chopped firewood any time soon, that being located outside in one of the outbuildings.

Amelia was trying hard to stay calm, for herself and for her friends, but her nerves felt like live wires. And the lack of trust and cohesion in the group was palpable. It was tense when people were talking, and even worse when there was silence.

She turned to observe Audrey. She was worried about her friend who had already been through so much. She too was standing alone, staring at her feet, clearly holding back tears. She seems too torn up to be responsible for this death. But was she maybe cracking because she had just committed a murder? Was she capable of the violence he witnessed on his dead wife's corpse? Surely it would take a man's strength to slash someone up so much their head falls off? Then, Audrey walked out of the room. She really shouldn't be doing that on her own, thought Amelia.

Amelia looked over at Tony. He was doing a great impression of standing there like a lemon. Amelia knew it was cruel to think that of someone who had just lost their wife, but looking at him, you would never have thought that 12 hours previous he was discussing the best way to bump people off in this very group. She had been trying to extract him from the group all morning so she could ask him outright if he had done this to his own wife, and reassure herself they were just joking around last night about a double murder pact. But he had first avoided eye contact with her entirely, and then indicated that it was not a good idea for them to be seen alone together. She understood, but she was desperate to clarify a few things for own peace of mind, if peace of mind was even possible in this situation.

Maybe he didn't kill Linda and he suspects her? Is that why he is keeping his distance from her? And what about the notes? Does someone know about the pact? Think they were more serious about it than they were? Planning on using it against them or for their own motives?

These concerns were interrupted by a sound so high-pitch, Amelia didn't even recognise it as human at first. It was the sound of pure terror. She and others in the group rushed to where the sound had come from, the boot room off the kitchen. There stood Audrey.

It was cold in this room. The side door was open. Amelia could smell fuel. Audrey had clearly been outside. She could barely say words, but managed to direct them, Amelia, Nadia, Tony and Lucian, to the firewood store outside. Their boots crunched on the snow and Amelia

wondered why Audrey had come outside in the first place, and what she was going to show them. It was clearly going to be horrendous, judging by the state of her. Maybe worse than the sight of her own murdered mother.

The state of her best friend, all the years of watching true crime documentaries and hosting her podcast, interviews with actual serial killers, nothing could have prepared Amelia for what she was met with in the firewood store. The door was open, and the stench of charred flesh leaked out into the cold air. But no one was in the right frame of mind for a barbeque. So where was that smell coming from?

Amelia peered over Tony's shoulder. What she saw would haunt her for the rest of her days, holding a place in her nightmares next to the image of her sister hanging by her neck. Inside was a body, curled up in a way that suggested it suffered unspeakably in death.

She knew instantly why Audrey had reacted so. She could tell from the remnants of clothing stuck into the charred flesh, and from the gaudy oversized Rolex digging into his melted wrist, that she was looking at Daniel's remains. Or cremains.

She was no doctor, but his neck looked broken. And he'd clearly been set alight on purpose. Very little around him had been touched by the fire, which must have burned hard and fast before extinguishing itself. Worst of all, parts of Daniel's face were missing, but his lipless mouth was frozen in a perpetual scream. Same with his crotch.

'I've heard of this. Someone has put a shotgun cartridge in his mouth and his pants before setting him on fire. The cartridges have exploded with the heat of the fire.' Amelia realised as she said this that perhaps this expert knowledge in torture and death might place her in the limelight of suspicion. But it was too late. She had already revealed these cards.

She braved another look at Daniel's body. One final act of desecration. Who could have hated him so much? That was a clear message, right? A warning. To obliterate his face and his genitals?

Audrey was being escorted out of the room by Nadia, leaving Lucian, Tony and Amelia in the firewood store with the body.

'Do we do the same thing? Take pictures and move him to the ice store?' Tony. Shit. This was his intended victim in the pact. Had he gone through with it?

'We could leave him here.' From Dom, clearly still holding resentment towards the now-dead ringleader of the group who locked him up in an outhouse overnight during a storm. Fair. But come on, a bit of perspective, big guy.

'I think we need to move him to the ice store as well. He will be better preserved. And anyway, we need to be able to get in here for logs.' Amelia knew she wasn't showing much sympathy to the victim, especially considering Lucian next to her was clearly rocked by the death of his friend, but it was hard to have empathy with someone who was cheating on her friend, and when the fear of a murderer amongst them taking the forefront of her concerns.

Amelia's stomach turned. She read about death and murder all the time, researching it and talking about it on her podcast. But she had never even seen a dead body before this trip, and now she was on her second violent murder victim in less than 12 hours. It was a bit much, even for her.

Amelia tried to collect herself and put into action everything she had ever learned from being a true crime podcaster. She always mocked herself on the show for not having any qualification to discuss this topic, no background in law or law enforcement. But she had picked up a thing or two. She tried looking at the scene objectively, even though it was her friend's husband before her.

She stared at Daniel's body. Who would benefit from killing Linda *and* Daniel? Was this even the same killer who got Linda? It was clearly an escalation of violence, but also looked so totally different. The thought of two people out there knocking them off one by one was too much to bear for Amelia. And who was next?

Tony and Lucian returned from the ice store. The holiday morgue, thought Amelia. She heard there was a morgue at Disney Land, and on cruise ships too. The group was exploding into chaos. Those not crying were pacing or screaming at each other. Accusations were being thrown around like shrapnel. Who left Daniel on his own to get murdered? Who would want to murder him?

'At least you know it wasn't me now. I have been in the living room with you all morning. I guess it worked out well that you didn't trust me to be on my own.' Dom almost chuckled to himself, as if now was the time for such cockiness.

Amelia's head was full of noise. She couldn't focus on anything that had happened that day, or anything being said by the group now. She hoped to seek comfort from Lucian, but he was in his own downward spiral right now, and she wasn't confident she could help him with that either. She also hoped to seek answers from Tony, but that seemed even less likely now, since he was actively avoiding her and now there was another body.

She looked at Tony in that instance. Had they put the wheels into motion and now they were on a path neither of them understood? Was one of them in charge, or were they both pawns? The motive for either murder was still unclear to Amelia. And a motive for both? Even more obtuse. She wondered if there were more deaths on the horizon and shuddered.

Panic was rising within her, and not slowly. She wanted to shout her innocence. But of course, she couldn't without revealing why she thought suspicion may lie with her in the first place. No one else must ever find out about their stupid pact. The note-writer already knew, and that was one person too many. The whole point of it was invisibility, yet she felt more exposed than ever. And if anyone else suspected that she and Tony were tethered in some way, bound by their shared secrets, then it would all unravel. *She* would unravel.

But the fear lay heavy in her gut. This was no longer about suspicion. Or guilt. This was now about survival. Someone was killing them off, with no logic for her to lean on. There were no rules anymore. No mercy was being dispensed.

And who was to be next?

Chapter 13 Someone else is playing (Lucian POV day 3)

Lucian and Tony dragged Daniel's body outside, leaving behind a trail of smeared blood in a ditch they were creating in the snow behind them. Someone found yet another tarp. Lucian would never look at another tarp in the same way. In fact, he wasn't sure he had ever consciously looked at a tarp previously. His luxurious London lifestyle didn't call for many tarps. He found himself wondering what the word 'tarp' was short for, or what people even used them for other than wrapping up dead bodies when you were unable to get emergency services to you. Before this supposed holiday, his life had been relatively tarp-free. Man, did he miss his tarp-free existence. Is this what delirium looked like? Hyper-fixating on tarps and their uses so you don't think about the fact that your best friend has been butchered and barbecued?

Lucian's hands were frozen, not just from the snow, but from the shock and the feel of Daniel's cold skin against his. He couldn't believe his friend, his best friend probably, was dead. And now he was moving his mutilated body into an ice store, to go with the other dead body they had only just found that morning. Oh, and they were stuck on the side of a mountain, with no signs the snowstorm would let up soon. He felt like he was in someone else's nightmare, someone else's because his own mind could never have dreamed up something so fucked up. Someone actually *blew up* his friend's penis.

That felt like a vengeful act. Yes, Daniel was a asshole at times, and he had a habit of putting that penis in places it should not go, but he didn't deserve that. Of course Lucian wasn't oblivious to Daniel's bad behaviour. In fact, Daniel regularly boasted to Lucian about the women he was sleeping with behind his wife's back. Lucian hated when Daniel used him as a cover, pretending they were together when he was actually with some woman, or expecting Lucian to lie for him to Audrey, and by default, his own wife Amelia. Everyone always assumed they were alike, because they both had fabulously quaffed hair, liked their designer clothes and worked in finance, but Lucian had never cheated on Amelia. He loved his wife dearly, despite how odd a couple they made, and never felt the need to seek anything extra elsewhere. He often begged Daniel to stop his wayward ways, or at least leave Audrey if he couldn't be faithful to her. He thought Daniel might have been on the cusp of actually taking his advice and setting Audrey free, but then she got diagnosed with cancer. There is simply no way to divorce your wife when she has just been diagnosed with cancer. Even Lucian agreed it was not the right time.

But Lucian hated it even more that they were just covering up Daniel's body and tidying it away like it was nothing. He was surprised how quickly they had become desensitised to dead bodies, and storing them in the outhouse like it was a thing they just all did now as part of their routine. Wake up, brush teeth, move the body, have breakfast, move another body. They always say your first kill is the worst, and every one after that gets easier. Maybe it was the same with your first mutilated corpse discovery? Of course, at least one of them was responsible for these bodies. Were they finding this easier or more difficult? Were they gaining pleasure from watching the repercussions of their murders play out? Was there a sick, twisted enjoyment from watching this small group of friends and family not only dwindle in size, but turn on each other?

Lucian and Tony wordlessly re-entered the chalet after placing his friend's body in the ice store, and walked into the group discussing barricading the doors. Yes, it felt like an obvious step, but it could also potentially involve locking them in even tighter with the actual killer. This sparked the debate yet again about whether the killer was amongst them or watching them.

He felt that this group was descending into madness. It had only flimsily been held together previously through family ties and friendships with Audrey, but any trust or respect or care seemed to be disintegrating under the weight of suspicion.

A natural leader, but unable to find his voice through his grief, Lucian thought about how far outside his comfort zone he was, and then snorted back a laugh despite himself. 'Outside his comfort zone' had been agreeing to this holiday in the first place, with Audrey's wacky friends and family in tow. This was something else. He felt like he was frozen, mentally, physically, emotionally. He sensed they all felt it, too. They were looking to him for some sort of guidance or leadership, and he was unable to offer any. Fear filled the room like an oppressive mist and Lucian had no desire to clear it and take on any decision making or responsibility in any way. Nothing had prepared him for this and he did not want to step up.

Lucian turned to Tony and instead looked at him in a manner to suggest it was his responsibility as the village elder, to step up and take the reins. Another internal snort. The thought of Tony being decisive was funny even in this context. The prospect of him telling his daughters what to do, laughable. At least he didn't have to battle with his wife anymore. That was unfair, thought Lucian. He often wondered how Tony put up with Linda, but he was sure Tony didn't prefer her dead. Or that he would have killed her for a little bit of peace.

But people had killed for less.

Lucian took a step back from the group. He needed a moment and just instantly could not bear to be around any of them. Their looks of confusion were irritating him and he didn't trust himself not to lash out at one of them, making it worse. He wanted to be alone, take time to grieve. But he knew he couldn't just yet. He was already feeling the loss, but he wasn't ready to cry. He read enough self-help books, well, one when his first wife disappeared, to know he could not process his trauma until he was outside of the trauma. And they were not 'post' their trauma yet, not with the killer potentially there sitting at the breakfast bar, or making sandwiches to keep everyone's strength up. Lucian was too full of rage and confusion, and he knew they weren't safe. He decided 'fuck the group' and that his priority would be ensuring that he and Amelia were safe.

Daniel really should still be here. Making jokes. Sleazing over his sister-in-law. Complaining about his mother in law. But she was dead too and he was lying in an ice store next to her, all shredded up.

Lucian scanned them all. Was anyone reacting inappropriately? What was appropriate in this situation? Was anyone too quiet? Too loud? Too composed? But everyone looked fucking broken. Everyone looked sad and scared. And everyone looked suspicious.

But then he saw it. A glance between his wife, Amelia and Tony. What was that glance? He didn't understand it but he knew it was something. Amelia and Tony barely had a relationship outside of Tony being Amelia's friend's dad. Why were they having a silent conversation with their eyes? It didn't seem like flirting. Christ, who could even think about flirting about 20 metres from bodies. Let alone the mutilated corpse of his recently decapitated wife?!

Lucian made a mental note to come back to this and ask his wife in private. Like he would forget to ask. He needed to know what that meant. He needed to understand how everyone really fit in with each other. Because obviously he had missed something. Was he being paranoid? He didn't think so. He had always prided himself on being extremely rational. To a fault, Amelia would quip. He also thought of himself as observant and great at reading people. But he lost all confidence in these skills here. Was he being purposefully kept in the dark about certain things? He was almost sure of it. Despite all the problems between various members of this party, he had missed that there was someone pissed off enough and calculated enough to kill.

Lucian leaned against the back wall, staring over their heads and out of the window, allowing the heavy snowfall to mesmerise him temporarily. It was erasing everything, covering tracks and burying truths, but it was not yet smoothing out the horror of this holiday.

He turned to where his wife was standing, where she was rubbing Audrey's back and stroking her hair and trying to comfort her through something so unimaginable. When Amelia stepped away to let Nadia take her place, Lucian called her over. Looking back at Audrey, presumably making sure she wouldn't be missed if she went to her husband for a moment, she then headed towards her husband's direction. He opened up his arms, wingspan impressive, and enveloped her in a hug.

Amelia very quickly went from fairly composed to sobbing in his armpit, trying to hide it from the rest of the group. 'I'm sorry, I know you are struggling with the loss of Daniel too. I don't even know who to console, everyone is suffering so much. This is dreadful.'

'Amelia, it is not your job nor your responsibility to fix this or be there for everyone all of the time to the detriment of yourself.' At times Lucian envied her for the compassion she had, but most of the time all it seemed to do was cause her pain. This was one of the times where that level of empathy was a curse in his eyes, bringing nothing but sorrow to this woman too full of kindness. He breathed in the scent of her hair.

He took a decision then. Despite his conviction mere minutes ago to step back and focus on himself and Amelia, he decided he actually needed to step up and take charge, as nobody else would. Not effectively, anyway. If Daniel wasn't here to do it, he would have to be. He was done waiting for someone to figure out what the fuck was going on. And he was sure as fuck not just going to sit and wait for the snow to clear and help to come save him, probably too late. He would be the one to find out who had killed Daniel. And Linda. And stop them doing it again. He didn't give a shit about most of the people here, not really. But he wanted justice for his friend and he wanted to keep himself and Amelia safe. Those were his only priorities now.

The killer had already made one clear mistake. He had left Lucian standing. And now Lucian was going to get them.

Chapter 14 Watching the watchers (Audrey's pov - overnight day 3/4)

Audrey felt like she hadn't stopped shaking all day. Her muscles were sore from it, like she had run a marathon. She would rather run a marathon than live through this a second longer. She thought having cancer was a buzzkill. Try having your mum and husband murdered on your remission holiday.

She looked around the room. Could someone in the room really be filled with so much hate to have killed?

'From what I can see, I am the only one you can all trust right now. Isn't that ironic' Dom declared. He came across arrogant even while being a murder suspect. Or especially because he was a murder suspect?

'How the fuck so?' This was Lucian. Audrey could always tell he hated Dom as much as Daniel did, but was far too diplomatic to show it. But it seems diplomacy goes out the window when your travel companions start killing each other.

'Well, if you remember correctly, *Lucian*, you had me locked up when Linda was murdered.' Audrey couldn't tell why Dom said his name like that, like he didn't believe he was called Lucian, or like he thought Lucian was a stupid name. Maybe he just hated Lucian as much as the feeling was reciprocated.

'Are we sure it's the same murderer?' Everyone turned to Katherine. She hadn't said much all day, had clung to Adrian like he was her saviour and protector, despite himself being white as a sheet and not displaying any kind of strength or conviction.

This statement from Katherine sent a shiver throughout the room, it seemed to Audrey. Not a single person there could contemplate or comprehend one murderer, let alone two. How could they possibly go from a slightly unusual but fairly functional social network to two predators and the rest as prey?

'Do you think we have gone from zero to two murderers amongst us in one day? Maybe we are all guilty and this is some sort of *Death on the Orient Express* situation?' Audrey wished Dom would stop with the snide comments and the inappropriate jokes. Would any jokes be appropriate now? If anyone could manage an appropriate inappropriate joke right now, it would probably be Daniel. Especially if someone else got their penis blown off.

She was finding it difficult to follow the conversation. She was finding it difficult to believe this wasn't some kind of chemo haze. There were so many times during her illness and treatment that she felt disconnected from reality, unsure what was actually happening and feeling so little control over it anyway that she struggled to feel invested in her own life.

The words flying around her were not landing, she was only barely grasping that the tension was rising, as was the panic and the distrust. She could barely take note of who was saying what, and anyway they were all repeating themselves and each other, then changing their minds and saying the exact opposite.

'This isn't helping. Yes, someone here may be a murderer. But isn't it more likely someone else is targeting us? We need to stick together.'

'We need to sleep in shifts.'

'And we need to mix up the pairings. We don't know who is doing this, and who they may be working with.'

'Who do we pair together then? Do we split up couples?'

'No!' This was Lucian. The intensity and out-of-character volume of his voice brought Audrey back fully into the room. 'I am not having my wife stand guard with a possible killer. Not happening. Absolutely not.'

Audrey wasn't sure sleeping in shifts was the solution. She couldn't imagine any of them sleeping anyway. But she saw it for what it was, a desperate attempt to reassure the group the rest of them would make it out alive. They all wanted to feel like they had regained some control. She believed it was her father who suggested it originally. Poor dad. Audrey had listened to enough true crime podcasts, Amelia's included, to know the husband was always suspect numero uno. But surely no one in law enforcement would look at her dad and think he could ever hurt a fly, let alone a battleaxe of a woman like Linda.

Everyone looked exhausted. The discussion of pairs keeping watch was still ongoing, but it seemed everyone was more comfortable in standing guard with their own partner, where possible, i.e. where they hadn't already been slaughtered.

As Audrey wondered who she would be paired with, Nadia suggested they let her off watch duty as she had suffered the most.

'What about me? I lost my mother, you know.' Katherine huffed, sounding more like a sulky teenager complaining about not being allowed to go to a party, than a grown woman who was grieving. Perhaps that's what grief looked like on some people.

'It's not a competition, dear.' Audrey's head whipped round. Was that really her dad? Was that said with compassion, or was it means as a snide comment? He was patting her on the back and smiling kindly, so she guessed compassion, but she wasn't 100% certain. It hit Audrey how their whole family dynamic was going to change. Her dad might be able to be a whole new person now. It was not to be celebrated at this point, but it was a reality that he already seemed more vocal and forthcoming. Granted this was a very unusual circumstance. Perhaps this was what her father was like in a state of emergency.

'Well I want to be paired with Dom on watch. He's the strongest.' Katherine had dropped Adrian's arm she was clinging to and turned to Dom, pouting. What the hell is this, wondered Audrey.

Nadia was obviously thinking the same. 'Well, that's a 180! You wanted him locked up yesterday.'

'I didn't say I liked him or trusted him. But he's right, he's the only one who probably couldn't have killed mum, and therefore probably didn't kill Daniel either. And I would definitely put my money on him beating anyone else in this house.' Katherine spat this out spitefully, now suddenly shooting daggers at Adrian, as if she had decided in the last few seconds he wasn't a real man and wasn't worthy of her. 'Also, he was absolutely no reason to want to kill me, so I must be safe with him.'

That's probably exactly what went on in her fickle little mind, thought Audrey. She only cares about people as long as they are useful to her. And in this scenario of being picked off one by one by a psychopathic killer or two, she preferred her chances with a Dom over an Adrian.

'Do we believe Dom didn't leave the equipment shed all night.' Lucian asked the room.

'Well I am definitely not being paired with that prick.' Dom pointing at Lucian. 'Or Adrian. I'd rather be paired with one of the girls. They'd be better in a fight.'

'I wish Ronnie was here, she would know what to do.' This was Katherine. But why was this coming out of Katherine's mouth? Audrey's stomach dropped and she looked towards Amelia to see her reaction.

Audrey hadn't heard Ronnie's name in years. Ronnie was Lucian's first wife. She disappeared 15 years ago, when they were all entering their 30s. No body was ever found, neither were any answers. Audrey had been close with Ronnie. They had been friends in their own right by the time she disappeared. They'd shared drinks and confessions and laughter. Amelia had even joined them a few times. She had probably met Ronnie before she ever met her future husband, Lucian.

Amelia had since lived in the shadow of Lucian's missing wife. And she was missed. Missed at parties, at functions. Amelia hadn't slotted into the same role of Lucian's wife. She very much had to carve out her own spot. Audrey could often sense Amelia crumpling under the self-imposed pressure of being as good for Lucian as Ronnie was, without being anything like Ronnie.

And Katherine had idolised Ronnie, her chic, elegant ways. Ronnie had always given off the impression of just having gotten back from holiday in Cannes or the Maldives. Probably because Lucian and her had usually just gotten back from a holiday in Cannes or the Maldives. She gave off the impression of being an Instagram yummy mummy before ever having kids herself or Instagram even existing. Their lifestyles and preferences were outwardly much more aligned than Lucian and Amelia's. They seemed the more obvious couple. But when Ronnie disappeared, Lucian did face intense scrutiny. People did always suspect the husband until someone else could be proven guilty, and no one ever was in the case of Ronnie. It wasn't even known if she had come to any harm or died. Even seven years after her death, when she was legally declared deceased because no one had had word from her or spotted her anywhere, her loved ones still didn't feel they had confirmation that she wasn't still out there somewhere.

Rich in his own right, when Ronnie was declared dead, Lucian did inherit their shared homes fully, as well as her wealth, which had been passed down enough generations to mean it used to be enormous, had dwindled a bit in the hands of incompetent ancestors, and then been built back up ten-fold by her late energy trader father.

But Katherine had never been so close to Ronnie to warrant her missing her when in crisis. Wanting her when her mother got killed despite being in the same room as her own sister. And it felt incredibly tactless and, well, rude, to mention a woman missing for so many years she was pronounced legally dead. Audrey didn't think her sister had any negative emotions toward Amelia but she knew she took no pleasure in her name being brought up randomly, as it often was.. Katherine was always intentional with her words, so you know if she hurt your feelings, it was because she meant to hurt your feelings.

'Hang on, did you kill her too, pal?' Dom barked at Lucian.

'This isn't the Staircase, Dom. I didn't kill anyone here and I didn't kill my ex-wife. Either you think I'm stupid, or you think I am capable of getting away with murder. Which one is it?' Lucian actually squared up to Dom. The rage in his expression made Audrey actually fancy his chances in getting in at least some damage before the Viking took him down completely.

Audrey looked at Lucian, really looked at him. Had she suspected him of killing Ronnie at the time? Even for a moment? She didn't remember if she ever actually thought Ronnie was dead. Did she think it now that more people in Lucian's circle had been killed? Only of perhaps neglecting Ronnie's feelings so that she wanted to leave. Her friend had always had a wild side to her, and she was always inclined to do everything in the most dramatic way possible. So she was totally the type to just disappear rather than have a simple conversation to end her marriage. That was what Audrey ultimately thought happened. And it had been easier to believe this and feel anger towards Ronnie for abandoning her too, than to suspect her friend of murdering her.

She remembered the aftermath, Amelia and Lucian having to wait for the declaration of death before they could get married. What motive could he possibly have for killing her mother though? Apart from the fact she pissed everyone off. He would only have had to endure her for a couple of days and then not see her again for ages. And Linda was nice to him. And Daniel? Why would Lucian kill his best mate?

Audrey didn't think she could ever be shocked again, not after the last few days. So the question as to whether Lucian killed Ronnie 15 years ago no longer sounded absurd to her. Neither would any answer surprise her now. She was doubting everything she knew about him. Everything she knew about any of them, to be honest. She thought the worst that would happen this week was that she got a bit stressed around her mum and sister, Dom would be a bit of a downer, stomping around silently, and perhaps the boys got too competitive over a game of Monopoly. How did they get here?

She thought back to their life together, when Lucian and Ronnie were married, when Daniel was alive. She replayed old memories with fresh, albeit jaded, eyes. Had Lucian been controlling with Ronnie? Ronnie often complained about not being allowed to do exactly what she wanted. But Audrey didn't think that Lucian was particularly coercive in his control.

In fact, when Ronnie relayed arguments, Audrey struggled to find words of support when she mostly could see Lucian's side more than her friends. Of course two full time chefs on staff was a ridiculous expense for a two person home. And most husbands would have a problem with their wife jetting off on holidays on their own and only informing their husband of the plan upon arrival, especially when they were chartering private jets on their credit card. Audrey remembered one particularly drawn out argument where Ronnie couldn't believe Lucian was mad that she had skipped his mother's 60th birthday party to go to Paris and spend £180,000 on new bags and shoes, all in nudes and beiges.

And Audrey definitely didn't think he had ever been violent with her. Quiet the opposite in fact. She had witness Ronnie slapping Lucian several times. Normally on occasions when he told her no. But had she missed something back then like she clearly was now? *Had* he killed his wife, her friend? Was she being a sentimental fool to think he wasn't capable?

Thinking back, there were times when Ronnie had turned up to brunch with bruises around her wrists, even her neck. But she had claimed they were from particularly rough sex, and not always with her husband. Did Lucian find out why Ronnie was insistent on keeping both chefs? She called one Weekday and one Weekend, not because of their shift patterns, they were both expected to be available to cook at any time. This was how she divided her romantic time between them, as she explained. Even though her loyalties lay with Ronnie, Audrey hated keeping this secret from Lucian, and Daniel obviously. She never wanted to enter that conversation with Daniel, as she had always suspected something had happened between him and Ronnie. And she wasn't altogether convinced it happened before she and he got together.

Did Lucian discover these affairs? Did he have the same suspicions about Ronnie and Daniel? Where was he when Daniel was killed? She had been trying to rest in the living room, the rest of the group all milling around her, fussing, making things worse. She didn't remember seeing Lucian, but that's not to say he hadn't been there. She was losing track of who was where when and what was said at what time. She was losing control and she was losing perspective.

She had insisted on getting up and going for a walk to clear her head, but she was told she was only allowed to walk around the inside of the chalet. But it was when she was in the kitchen that she heard two popping sounds, like firecrackers but louder. She now knew this was the shotgun cartridges placed in and around Daniel's body exploding from the heat of the fire someone had set his body on. She rushed out to the direction of the sound and it had taken her a while to locate the firewood shed, completely hidden behind a curtain of snow. She only reached it by following the smell of the fire.

She knew she wasn't about to find anything good. But just as she had not expected to find the near-decapitated body of her mother early that morning, she was not prepared to see the burnt, curled up body of her husband. Her gregarious husband. But now she was expecting to see mutilated corpses at every turn.

And then the lights went out. They could no longer hear the sound of the generator. Had it run out of fuel? Do generators run on fuel? Presumably you didn't plug them into the wall, seeing as the whole point of them was to provide energy when the electrics failed. Who

would have thought the humming of the generator had been so soothing, yet another comfort Audrey was only aware of once it was gone.

'Can someone get that generator working again please' pleaded Audrey, panic rising in her voice even in this short sentence.

'None of us are generator engineers, Audrey!' Katherine, snidey as always. It never helped the situation.

The darkness was suffocating and thick. Night had well and truly fallen so there was no respite from it. Audrey could feel her breathing become shallow. She knew the signs of an oncoming panic attack all too well, and now was not the time to have one. She had started getting them all the time during her treatment, and they wiped her out emotionally and physically for hours after. And she was already completely broken in both respects. She tried to focus on her breathing. Box breathing. Breathe in for four seconds, hold it for four seconds, breathe out for four seconds. They didn't tell you in her cognitive behaviour therapy that this probably wouldn't work if you had just seen the mutilated bodies of your mum and husband and were trapped in a house waiting to become the next victim of an unidentified killer. They didn't give you any exercises for that. But she was determined to try anyway.

She heard someone stumble and scream. She tried to place her hand on her sister's arm. She thought it was her sister. Katherine had been standing next to her before the lights went out. She heard her sarcastic remark coming from her side just moments earlier. She wanted more than anything to comfort her sister, for them to set aside petty differences and rivalries in order to support each other during the worst time of their lives. She felt her sister shrug her hand off. Audrey was spiraling. She needed her sister right now, she hated to admit. The number of people left in her life to comfort her was dwindling, fast. And she was feeling incredibly vulnerable in this darkness.

She could just about make out her dad coming into the room then. When had he left? 'I couldn't figure out what's wrong with the generator but I found the candles.' Bless her father.

They set about lighting candles around the room. The shadows playing on people's terrified faces did nothing to alleviate the tension, distorting peoples faces and throwing misshapen shadows up onto the walls. Audrey watched this grotesque shadow puppet theatre numbly, zoning out of what was being said and done around her. But she couldn't stop her mind going. Her body was completely still, while her mind was jumping around at a million miles an hour.

The night went on like this forever, she felt. She lost track of who was meant to be on watch when. They were all up, unable to sleep anyway. But just after three, her attention was jolted back into the room by a sudden crash. Something heavy hit the floor and made a loud moan sound. Instinct took over from their exhaustion and fear, and perhaps their common sense too, and Audrey and several others ran towards the sound, in the dark hallway outside the living room. Thankfully, someone had remembered to carry a candle with them, their shadows bouncing wildly on the walls as they tried to locate the source of the sound.

Then they saw him. Lucian was slumped against the hallway wall, blood dripping down his temple. His shirt is torn, his extinguished candle by his side. A metal stool Audrey recognises from the breakfast bar in the kitchen lies on its side besides him. He was conscious, but disoriented. He could barely focus his eyes or say a word to them.

‘Who did this, Lucian?’ Tony asked urgently.

Lucian shook his head slowly, grimacing, clearly in a lot of pain. ‘I was just coming out of the bathroom. I didn’t see who did it.’

‘Who was in the living room with us when it happened?’ Her father turned to her and asked, although Audrey couldn’t be sure he had been in the living room when it happened, or whether he joined us in the hallway when they came out to investigate. Wow, the paranoia really had set in. Was the closest they had been to discovering the killer?

Audrey looked around for the first time at the group that had followed the sound into the hallway. Thankfully Amelia was not with them. She wanted to get Lucian tidied up before he went to his wife. There was no need to freak Amelia out further. Like Audrey, she had been borderline panic attacking all day. Audrey knew that despite her chirpy exterior, her friend also struggled with depression and anxiety for many years. In fact, a recent ADHD diagnosis had helped explain the lifetime of struggles Amelia had had. It had made Audrey sad at the time to realise how much easier Amelia’s life might have been if she had received that diagnosis as a child. But ADHD wasn’t a thing when they were kids. It would have spared Amelia a lot of self-doubt, confusion, frustration. It would have helped her navigate her school and university in a way where she was going with the flow, not working against herself, trying to make herself think and work like everyone else, getting frustrated that it wasn’t possible for her. At least Amelia hadn’t taken to self-medicating her undiagnosed neurodiversity like so many, with drugs and other addictions to give that dopamine hit the brain was craving. Was Lucian understanding about all this? Audrey could remember him being quite dismissive about the diagnosis and what it meant to Amelia. It meant she could be kinder to herself on her bad days, and find ways to have more good days. ‘Well you’re not getting extra time in your exams or a free laptop, so what does it matter at your age?’ he had quipped.

Weird tangent for my brain to go off on, thought Audrey.

She looked at Lucian properly as Tony was examining his head wound. He looked so fragile. Such a long way from the charming, joking Lucian she had known half her life. He looked like a frightened, middle-aged man, shaking like a leaf, bleeding from his head, some snot dangling from his left nostril. That unsettled her. She didn’t like when she realised she was older than she felt, and she didn’t like realising it of her friends either. None of them were prize fighters or soldiers. Even Dom’s muscles were just glamour muscles, she was convinced, not actually useful for anything apart from flexing at women. They were sitting ducks. Such a cliché and it had never been truer.

And Lucian was her friend, confirmed by the fact he now was one of the only people she knew couldn’t be behind both murders, as he had been attacked himself. She didn’t really think he was responsible for Ronnie’s disappearance at the time or now. It was just paranoia

setting in. Who could blame her? But she knew she needed a moment with Lucian. She had questions for him. What was she missing, then and now? But not now. Not while the fear was so palpable coming off of him. And not when she was feeling such guilt for doubting all that she had ever known about him, her closest tie to her dead husband.

Tony and Adrian were helping Lucian to his feet and guiding him back to the living room. At that point, Amelia came rushing out and stopped dead in her tracks when she saw the state of her husband. She then rushed towards him. But where had she been all this time?

'What happened?!' She screeched. This was it, she was going to tip over into full-blown panic mode.

And Lucian sensed it. 'I'm fine, but someone got me on the back of the head.' Tony lowered him on the sofa.

'Did you see him? Who was it?' Amelia was trying to touch his face, stroking his cheek, kissing his forehead. He was grimacing though, the injury clearly more painful than even the amount of blood would suggest. But it was clear he was willing to endure it to get a small bit of comfort from this contact with his wife.

Looking around the living room, Audrey didn't think their level of suspicion of each other could possibly grow, and yet here they were, eyeing each other up even more than before.

'We need to work out which one of us was not here when Lucian got attacked.' Audrey surprised herself with this statement. It was not like her to take charge and be so forthright, more used to first her mother and sister, then later Daniel being the one to do so.

'Well, I was here with Dom.' Nadia was quick to announce.

'Hate to say it, but that's true. I was looking at them thinking what a weird couple they were when I heard Lucian fall.' said Katherine. Was it still called a backhanded compliment when you gave someone an alibi, but in the most offensive way possible? Audrey wasn't aware of a specific term for that. A backhanded alibi, perhaps. Christ, maybe she was ADHD too, she could not stop her mind bouncing around. But that must be normal when you are being targeted by a killer, surely.

'Can everyone just stop wandering off on their own, please?' she asked. 'Can we start going to the bathroom in pairs, please.' She looked at Amelia, assuming this is where her friend was when her husband was attacked.

'And can we please try to get some rest.' Tony requested. 'We are going to start turning on each other and making stupid decisions if we are exhausted.'

Sleep seemed like an improbable dream to the group. But they tried to get comfortable on sofas and cushions on the floor. They travelled in pairs to the kitchen for supplies, and to the bathroom from that moment on.

Audrey sat upright in the armchair, looking over at the sofa where just hours ago she had fooled around with her husband before everyone arrived. She felt up against an evil force she did not understand, and she was confused how their 'dream holiday' could turn to this.

Audrey guessed that at some point she did sleep, but she sure as fuck hadn't woken up feeling rested. It was the sunlight through the window that had woken her. It was a blessed relief to see it. Perhaps that meant the snowstorm was letting up. Maybe the snow might melt a bit? To her dismay, it was still snowing, but it looked less intense than yesterday. Any relief was dissipated however by the height of the snow on the ground, a good meter she expected.

She looked around the room to do a quick headcount. She saw Dom and Nadia huddled on the floor, already awake, whispering to each other. Such a weird vibe coming off them all weekend. Audrey had never known her friend to be so shifty. Nadia was always open, always over-sharing. Now she was all hush hush and shhh shhh.

Adrian was sitting upright on the sofa, his head laying back, eyes closed. Katherine was lying on the sofa with her head in his lap. She was silently crying, her eyes red. She saw Audrey looking at her and she gave her a dirty look and rolled over so she was now with her back to her sister.

Her dad was already awake, staring out of the window. Amelia and Lucian were nowhere to be seen. Perhaps they had gone against the group advice and gone to sleep in their bedroom. Audrey would not be surprised if they needed some time after that attack on Lucian. At least they were probably together.

Was that really all that was left of their group?

Audrey lay there, wondering if they should try the phone, or their mobiles, when she heard the scream. She was getting strangely used to the screams. And she was getting better at identifying who they had come from and what they could mean. She would put money on Amelia. And another murder.

Chapter 15 Spanish Donkey (Tony's pov day 4)

It felt to Tony that when they did move around the chalet, it was always as a group and rushing towards the sound of a scream. Here they were again, running together towards the kitchen like lemmings. The back door was open. Jesus, when would these people learn? It's like they kept forgetting there was a killer on the loose, picking them off one by one. Maybe it was just natural selection of a few of them got picked off. Better for future generations of humanity.

The air blasting in from outside smacked them like an actual physical being. The snow may have eased off slightly but the temperature seemed harsher than ever. Tony hung back. He was older, after all, and the cold did affect his joints so terribly. And anyway, he wanted to gauge the others' reactions. He knew whatever sight met them when they stepped outside would be grim. He was curious to see who was shocked, who was less so. Those were the moments that mattered.

They all stepped outside. The group pace had slowed as they communally realised they were not prepared for what they were probably about to find. Audrey was the first to reach her friend, putting her arm around Amelia. Tony could see fag butts piled high, like a nicotiney Andy Goldsworthy art installation, on the window sill by the back door. So this is where Amelia would disappear to. We all know smoking kills, thought Tony, but would she insist on continuing this despicable habit, even though she risked her life every time? And a much more current and present danger than future lung cancer. Silly girl.

Amelia collapsed into Audrey's arms and just pointed round the side of the chalet. Dom rushed round the side of the house, and stopped dead at the mouth of the alley. He screamed. More of a squeal, actually, Tony internally chuckled to himself. He actually didn't mind the giant loaf too much. He was harmless. Brainless, but harmless. And he actually adored Nadia. She was so quick and so funny, she would never find anyone who could compete mentally. So he understood her logic in not even trying and just settling for brute force in a partner instead. It still tickled him to hear Dom cry out like a little girl though.

But focus on the task at hand, Tony! He took a few steps forward to join Dom, and peered round the side of the house.

Lucian, or rather the left half of Lucian, was lying crumpled like a broken ragdoll in the alley between the chalet and the ice store.

'Girls, take Amelia back to the living room.' Tony shouted. It was too late for Amelia, but Tony did not want his girls to have this scene emblazoned on their retinas. They did as he said, and it surprised him. He was unused to being in a position of authority, even with his own daughters, and he was even less used to people taking him seriously. It would take some adjusting but he would get used to it. He was starting to really like it.

'But where's the rest of him?!' Dom had recovered enough to assess the sight in front of him and realise there was only one side of Lucian's body piled unceremoniously in the snow.

'Look at that thing tied to his leg' Tony pointed. It looked like a block of metal. 'It's weights from the mechanism to lift stuff up the mountain, the chair lifts and cable cars and stuff. They use them as decoration around the chalet. Pretentious. Why is it on his leg?'

'Look at that!' Dom was pointing to the side of the chalet. Blood was dripping like paint down the roof, and smeared in patches down the side of the house, like Lucian had been thrown, or slipped from the top of the roof. Blood was also still dripping off the guttering, turning the previously-idyllic icicles red.

'I know what this is. It's the Spanish Donkey. It was a method of torture.' Dom murmured. 'I know where the rest of him is.'

He was pale and looked reluctant to share. No wonder, Tony thought. What kind of person admits to knowing ancient torture techniques when everyone is a murder suspect? It was not painting Dom in the best light.

'What the fuck is a Spanish Donkey, Dom! Make some sense for once!' Adrian demanded. Tony had forgotten all about him. Unsurprising, really, he thought. He had already resigned himself to the thought that he and Dom were the only ones left to take care of the women. He had obviously relegated Adrian's standing in the group to that of a child, or perhaps pet. And he did so wish that these young folk would cut back on the swearing. He knew they were just panicking, but there was no need to be so vulgar. It particularly bothered him around his girls. And it sounded pathetic coming from this scrawny upstart. Tony was convinced he only went into teaching so someone would have to respect him and listen to him. This was a sentiment Tony understood, sure, but even he wouldn't degrade himself so low by seeking validation from children where he didn't get it from his family.

Tony actually also knew what a Spanish Donkey was. He had first learned of it on a family holiday to Gent in Belgium when the kids were young. It was one of the holidays Linda didn't join them for because 'it wasn't her thing'. He had always preferred those holidays, just him and his daughters, carefree and so much lighter without the constant weight of criticism from Linda. Of course she never allowed them much of a budget for these holidays without her, but it didn't matter to him, and he hired a caravan and took the girls along the coast of Belgium. They had spent the morning on the beach in Ostend, and when the weather had turned slightly, they had returned to Gent and visited the castle. There was a long standing torture exhibition there, and one of the exhibits was about the Spanish Donkey. He knew Dom was into his medieval whatnots, so he wasn't surprised he knew about this ancient torture technique too.

The Spanish Donkey was brutal, as most torture methods tend to be. It consisted of a triangular wooden structure which a person would be forced to straddle like a horse. Weights were hung from the victim's ankles, pulling the body downwards. The more weights were added, the deeper the pain, until eventually the peak of the 'donkey' would slice into the victim's genitals and the pressure would eventually tear the body in two.

'Someone has used the pitched roof of the chalet to split him in two. The other half of him will be on the other side of the building.' Tony tried to explain to Adrian, while putting hand on his shoulder. He realised he was trying to reassure Adrian while telling him the most

gruesome thing the boy had ever heard. He didn't like the boy, but he could do without Adrian descending into hysteria. He could hear Amelia sobbing loudly and Audrey comforting her. Eerie how the sound travelled up here on Monte Silente.

Questions were running through his head. Who would they blame for this? Dom seemed like an obvious choice. Would the mysterious dead wife be raised again? In name, spirit or physically? Tony didn't know much about this Ronnie. He had of course met her a handful of times when Audrey had been friends with her. Unlike some of Audrey's other friends, he had never taken to Ronnie. She seemed distant, aloof, perhaps snobby. She seemed like she was condescending to spend time with Audrey, doing her a favour, gracing everyone else with her presence. He thought of her as a young Linda, and perhaps for that reason, Linda and Ronnie never got along either. It was probably why they never saw much of Ronnie. Linda always used to say Ronnie thought she was better than everyone else in the room. And they all knew Linda liked to be the only one who thought she was better than everyone in the room.

To be honest, Tony had all but forgotten Lucian had been married before, and that she had disappeared in suspicious circumstances. It wasn't odd that that had come up last night, with all the accusations and paranoia and suspicion flying around. But was Ronnie a factor in terms of what was happening right now? It would be a shock. But then it still wouldn't be the weirdest thing happening to them on this trip.

'Rinse and repeat, I suppose. Pictures and ice store?' That's it, Dom, keep making light of it all. It's only making you seem even more suspicious. Although Tony understood the brain trying to process the unthinkable with humour.

Dom took the photos of Lucian's body, or rather body parts, seemingly the least disturbed by the sight of a person he once knew in pieces. He was the one who liked Lucian least, Tony supposed. Tony took photographs of the blood on the exterior walls of the chalet, and the roof and gutters. He prided himself for the artistic composition in some of the photos and hoped the police recognised this too.

They didn't go up to the roof through the attic. The obvious way for Lucian and his killer to get onto the roof, they decided against unsettling the only preservable crime scene any further.

They couldn't find another tarp. I guess the resort was not expecting them to need quite so many. Tony rushed indoors and took the sheet off his double bed and brought it outdoors. Then he paused and got another sheet out of the airing cupboard. It would probably be easier to transport the two halves of the body separately.

'Won't this contaminate the body with your DNA?' asked Dom when Tony arrived and explained what they were going to use and how they should wrap and move the remains. Plural. So Dom knew something of modern forensics, and not just medieval torture. Just enough to make him annoying, or dangerous?

'It's too late for that anyway, it's not like we are wearing hazmat suits while we transfer this body.' dismissed Tony.

The two bedsheets Lucian was wrapped in were already soaked in blood. They soaked through almost instantly and Tony and Dom had pulled the two morbid packages along on the ground rather than carry him, so as to not get covered themselves. Not very dignified, thought Tony, but then neither was being sliced in half at the testicles.

Dom and Tony lay Lucian's remains in the ice store next to his best friend and Linda. The floorspace was such that they actually had to lay him partly on top of Daniel's tarp. Any more bodies and they would need to start piling them up like Jenga.

Later, their shrinking group congregated again in the living room, Amelia was inconsolable. She kept trying to make a break for the ice store, saying she just wants to be with Lucian. That kind of grief and shock is too messy to be faked, thought Tony. An odd match, he always thought, but she clearly loved her husband dearly. This would be harder for her to get over than he initially suspected. But he also suspected she would be fine without him, and then she would thrive without him. Someone had done her a favour. Not such an obvious favour as removing Linda from his own life, but Amelia would be fine. He would keep an eye on her.

Amelia stopped sobbing for a split second when her eyes met Tony's, like she suddenly remembered how this all might have started, with their pact. He could tell she was trying to read him. Was he responsible for any or all of this? But Tony had never taken that pact seriously. Of course he wasn't going to kill Adrian. He already knew about Clara, he knew everyone's secrets. Tony went to comfort Amelia, but she recoiled from him. That pissed him off. Not the rejection, but the possible exposure. They were meant to present a united front. Or rather a distant, amicable, but not co-conspiratorial, front.

She suspects something. She thinks I am responsible. Tony thought It's all fine and dandy joking about murder pacts in the jacuzzi, but when people actually start dying, suddenly there is a problem. Didn't she make a living from this kind of thing anyway? He could see her making a whole podcast series on this. He could also see it doing really well. He was surprised she wasn't live reporting. After all, there was no guarantee she would survive this holiday to come out and make a podcast about it.

The group were discussing motives now. Dom was asking everyone for a list of their enemies, so they could discuss if any were serious contenders.

'It's either one of us, or someone who hates one or more of us enough to kill. So everyone have a think about who hates you?' Dom urged. He really wasn't all that stupid. Or perhaps his intellectual strength was in survival.

'Are we sure it's the same person killing everyone? I know we all know each other, but who would want all of these people dead?' Katherine asked.

'And each method has been so different.' Adrian pointed out unnecessarily. He really was a waste of oxygen.

'Guys, I don't think I can cope with the thought of more than one killer out there. Or in here.' said Audrey.

'It doesn't make any sense. Who could have got Lucian up onto the roof during a storm without help. We are looking for at least two people, and I think at least one of those people is in this room with us now.' Dom, getting smarter by the second, thought Tony.

'If every death is so different, perhaps we need to look at what message they are sending with each death and style of death.' Tony raised. That should keep them busy and distracted for a while.

Tony had no intention of contributing any theories of his own though. He watched as the group splintered. Distrust blooming even in the icy cold atmosphere. No one really was looking at him though, literally, or with suspicion for the murders. So against, he thought.

He watched as they first starting listing everyone they had ever wronged, and it was a long list for each of them. From school years to work life, it seemed everyone in that room, when pressed, could confess to stepping on more than one person, being unkind to several more, and being an outright bully in many cases. Shame on them, thought Tony. Even his own daughters surprised him with their level of cruelty and their lack of compassion at times. Less so Katherine. She shocked him less, not because she was less cruel, the opposite, but because Tony was very aware how many of her mother's cruel traits she had inherited.

But what was that, sticking out from under the cushions he had been lying on on the floor all night. A note. Again, on the Monte Silente Resort notepaper. And this one was addressed to Tony, written in scratchy pen, as if in a hurry or up against a wall, somewhere uncomfortable. He sidled over to it, wanting to read it first before deciding if he was going to share it with the others.

'They think they are unravelling the mystery. But I know you are the knot.'

Tony slipped the note into his shirt pocket before anyone else could see.

Chapter 16: Suspicion splits the group even further (Dom's pov day 4)

Dom knew he had fucked up the minute he mentioned the Spanish Donkey. Why did he do it? It was one of his favourite techniques, though. And they were so suspicious of him already that it probably didn't matter. But just because he read about it one time, dedicated several blog posts to it, built a reconstruction in his shed and discussed it frequently down the pub, didn't mean he took an actual human up onto the roof and split him in half.

The sight of Lucian filled him with nausea and horror. Just far too much blood. He thought he loved that about this form of death. In reality, it was just unnecessarily messy. Obviously, Dom had seen a dead body before. And having to pick Lucian's extremities and intestines and whatnot and pile them up in those bedsheets made it much harder to clear away this body.

Dom had overheard Katherine whisper to Adrian that only someone obsessed with murder would know what that technique was called. Rich, considering they had someone in the group who made a living from talking about crime. And it was the spouse of the victim! Wasn't it always meant to be the partner? Why was no one more suspicious of Amelia? He always thought she was one of the more switched on members of this group of friends. If she had to go for a drink with any one of Nadia's friends on his own for whatever reason, it probably would be Amelia. After all, they both had morbid interests that probably overlapped a bit somewhere. Was she calculating enough to kill though? Were all the other murders just to hide her real intended target, her husband? She was the only one alone with him and she hadn't yet calmed down enough to give them a full account of what had happened. Why was no one asking her? He was getting impatient and frustrated with this group of insipid sheep his beloved Nadia called friends. He would have handled this entire situation differently if he was in charge, or with people he actually cared about. Of course, if he was in charge, he wouldn't be on this blasted holiday.

He felt bad having Audrey pay for his contribution to this holiday, but she was aware that neither he nor Nadia could afford it otherwise, wouldn't have chosen it and didn't want to go in the slightest. He also knew Nadia felt indebted to him. She had been driving the car when the accident happened after all. Or the 'incident' as they had since taken to referring to it as. She needn't feel obliged to him though, he would never hold that against her. Unless she tried to leave him, perhaps. Or have him locked up in a shed outdoors. But he had always said he was hers til the end of time, and he meant it. He never thought he would find a woman who met all his needs and desires. But Nadia was sexy, funny, smart. She was the partner he had whom he thought of as his best friend. So when he said he would do anything to protect her, anything, that was not just empty words.

Dom felt everyone's eyes on him, and he felt his once strong confident self shrinking under their judgement. He noticed their growing unease and distrust was also aimed at Nadia, and that bothered him even more. He regretted that they were acting so out of character since their arrival. He would be suspicious of them too! They had been quieter than usual, off on their own, whispering in corners. And then those notes! Was the person writing the notes trying to help them or was it the murderer? If it was someone trying to help them, why not just fucking say who is killing them all? Had other people received more notes that they also

weren't sharing, because those notes revealed more about the recipient than they would like to make public?

He was currently contemplating how much to tell Nadia about his suspicions, that the person he *knows* he saw in the forest is the same person leaving them all notes, who knows what they did. He was worried that this spate of killings was somehow linked to their fatal hit-and-run. How could it not be? And he felt that the person tormenting them was the killer and that person was manipulating them entirely to their advantage, and plucking them off one by one. Maybe he would be last, or Nadia because she was the driver? Perhaps they wanted to make Nadia suffer unbearably before taking her life too? Or maybe they would leave her alive, knowing she was indirectly responsible for the death of all her friends? That would be the worst form of torture for her.

In Dom's mind, there could be no other motive for killing anyone in this group. As annoying as he found every single one of them to varying degrees, he could not imagine their vanilla existence inspiring enough rage or vengeance to spark this chain of events. Even Lucian and Daniel had uncontroversial careers in finance, never having lost anyone significant amounts of money, or been accused of insider trading or false accounting. And trust that he had spent many hours searching. He hated to admit he had major insecurities upon finding out that Nadia's friends' partners all seemed to be typical rich finance bros, so he was hoping to find any little bit of dirt on them to level the playing field or make him feel more equal to them. He knew this was his chip on his shoulder, but it came from a lifetime of people looking down on him, not literally of course, because of his upbringing, his size, his tattoos, his hair, take your pick.

But if he and Nadia were the ultimate targets, something made no sense to Dom. According to Nadia, the man they hit, Will, had no close friends or family. If anything, he felt like the local community would feel a sense of relief at his absence. Sure, he had kids, but they weren't even speaking to him anymore, hadn't done for decades. Dom was sure the news of his violent death would have upset them somewhat, but to the extent that they would seek revenge in this manner? And the only one negatively impacted was the little old lady Will lived with. The one whose nappies he had to change. She had hardly followed them to another country to the top of a mountain to kill them off, one by one. He almost laughed out loud at the thought of her trying to manage a walker and dragging Lucian up the stairs to the roof somehow to slide him in two parts down the pitch.

Shit, Dom, think of something sad quickly. If you start giggling like a schoolgirl now, these pricks are for sure going to think you are a psychopathic murderer.

That night Nadia hit Will with her car, they had chosen the path of silence, and that's the path they needed to maintain. You couldn't backtrack halfway through. This secret, once let out, would destroy what little trust the group had of them. And he was under no illusions that any of that trust was due to him. The only reason he hadn't been excommunicated entirely from this cabin was because of their love of Nadia. But if they found out she had already taken a life, and then covered it up, they may decide to lock both of them up in that blasted equipment shed again, where he would struggle to protect Nadia from the cold, let alone the killer.

Dom thought with such sadness how their relationship had been strained since that night. The fact that there was a killer targeting them had taken precedence over the fact his own girlfriend had let him be locked up like a beast outside. But Dom wouldn't forget this any time soon. For sure, everything on this trip was more than enough justification for him never to have to see any of this fucked up group of people again. Well, whoever of them survived this trip anyway. He hoped this trip was at least enough for Nadia to cut them off too, but he knew she loved Amelia and Audrey too much, and would want to be there for them in their time of grief. Sometimes her compassion was annoying to him.

But ultimately he understood that she wouldn't have had the final decision about whether they locked him up, and her current mindset was to fly under the radar, rather than draw attention to herself. She had told him how worried she was about being around her closest friends so soon after the 'incident', because she knew they would be able to tell something was up with her. And Dom knew this to be true. But he would have appreciated a bit more resistance from his one true love before she let them imprison him.

But they needed to stick together more than ever now. He held her close to him, kissing her forehead. He used to hate this gesture, thinking it too nauseating and soppy for him. But he learned to get such joy from this simple act that had such a positive effect on his girlfriend. Not this time though, she barely reacted. But at least she knows I'm here for her, he thought.

But was that a slight tensing of her body as his lips met her forehead. Wait, does she suspect me!?

He could hear the others discussing the murders, who would commit them and why. They would never figure it out. This constant need to discuss it was pointless. To be fair, what else were they going to talk about? The weather?

The theories being bandied about were that there was only one real intended victim, the others being red herrings. That there were multiple killers working together, or working apart. That someone knew something about someone in the group that no one else knew. Basically, none of them had any idea. Supposedly. He knew none of the relationships were as solid as they pretended. He always thought Daniel was too cosy with other women, including Audrey's sister and friends. He remembered one birthday do, the first he had tagged along to when he started dating Nadia, where Daniel had placed his hand on Nadia's ass at the bar, knowing Dom was standing right behind them. Dom was about to get involved, but there was no need. Nadia grabbed Daniel's hand, and twisted his whole arm behind his back. Dom heard her hiss into Daniel's ear that if he ever touched her again like that, she would castrate him and give his penis, all gift wrapped with a bow, to Audrey. Just as quickly as she had subdued him, she let him go, and asked cheerily what shot he would like.

Sure, that was the moment he fell head over heels in love with Nadia, in a way he never imagined he would for a woman. He had mocked others for being weak enough to do so. But maybe he needed to look closer at his girlfriend. After all, he already knew she was definitely a killer, even if that was an accident. And killing supposedly got easier after your first one.

Dom had noticed with interest that not only were some relationships falling apart, or falling apart further, such as the sisters, but other alliances seemed to be forming. There were inexplicable looks being passed between Tony and Amelia. That was weird. He'd noticed it after Linda's death. Were they having an affair? Dom genuinely didn't think so. Amelia seemed besotted with Lucian and he figured Tony would be too scared to cheat on Linda. So what was it?

He focused back on Nadia in his arms. 'I know you got a note too. What did yours say?' He whispered in her ear. He felt her whole body tense against him. 'It's important I know. We need to work out what we are up against. And we need to do this together, or we've got no chance.'

Nadia pulled back and looked him in the eye, fearful and frustrated. She felt so distant to him. He was isolated, desperate. He didn't know if he could count on Nadia as an ally or a liability. She had her friends here, he had no one but her. It was how he felt every day, but it was amplified here, trapped on the side of a mountain in a foreign country with someone killing them all.

Dom was terrified of both the killer, but also the possible exposure of their secret. They would both no doubt serve time for it, and if Nadia still wanted to be with him on paper, in reality they would be separated as they served their sentences. Hers would no doubt be longer than his, and he wondered if she would resent him for that. Would she have been better off just calling the police when the accident happened. He had convinced her not. He knew she had had two glasses of wine with lunch and then two spiced rums and coke at the pub with dinner. She had a high tolerance to alcohol, but she was also so small, he was sure she wouldn't pass a breathalyser test. He suggested what he suggested, not to have a hold over her for eternity, but because he just wanted her with him for that eternity. Not in some grotty cell in a women's prison far away from him, where he would only be able to see her once a week, they wouldn't be able to have any physical contact. He still thought they had made the best decision for them. They just needed to make sure their secret never came out.

If they think I am the killer, how long before they find out what we are really hiding, Dom thought.

Chapter 17 - The woman in the snow (Ronnie pov, Day 5)

Morning eventually came to them all. Those of them left. The night had been long. Ronnie watched them through the window from the tree line. She was cold to the bone. She never knew what that meant until this week. She had been staying in an old cabin on the property, it looked like staff quarters that had not been used in a while. She remembered coming across it when she and Lucian had come here on Audrey's recommendation.

Luckily she had direct access to the chalet, stealing food when required, and heat. And more importantly, leaving notes for her guests. This had been harder to do during the snowstorm. That was some unexpected weather. They could send people into space, but they still couldn't accurately predict a revenge-plot-destroying-fucking-blizzard. She had witnessed so much more than she expected though. It was amazing what people shared when they thought everyone else was accounted for elsewhere, and they weren't expecting another person in the building. Far too trusting and naive. And stupid. Man, where they all so fucking stupid. How had this once been her social circle?

And Ronnie thought it was absolutely hilarious when they actually started discussing her. That was unexpected too. A pleasant surprise. Good old Katherine for always saying the most provocative, hurtful thing she could think of. Ronnie needed to pay closer attention to why Katherine would mention her in front of Amelia in such a way, saying she missed her. They weren't even close. Truth be told, Katherine was always an annoyance to her. Yes it was flattering how she clearly admired Ronnie. But she was always sidling up to her at parties and trying to instigate gossip sessions to enforce a bond or create some kind of link between them. It wasn't that Ronnie didn't like gossip. It was that she didn't care about most of the people Katherine talked about, nor found them useful enough to want a bit of dirt on them to be used in the future.

She had long felt the distance grow between her and her husband, Lucian. Sex was never the problem. But over time they seemed more attracted to what being together looked like, two attractive, wealthy, stylish people living the dream life. In reality, she found him dull. What he found funny, she found immature. His friends, apart from Daniel, that little devil, were ignorant or basic. And having to pretend to be friends with Audrey and the likes was such a deathly bore, it was almost tortuous. So she had simply disappeared. She got to the point where she didn't feel she owed any single one of them an explanation or a goodbye. Not even her own husband, or even Daniel, who she had grown so incredibly close to.

New identities are an easy acquisition when you have money, and people are discreet in Monaco. So when the glamorous widow Mrs Rosamund Pickering came to town, everyone whispered behind her back, she was aware, but it was a place where everyone had their dirty little secrets, and revealing someone else's would give them the motivation to do the same back. No one wanted that.

But after more than a decade, and after a breakdown in her most recent relationship in Monaco, she couldn't fight the temptation to check in on her dear old husband, Lucian. She of course already knew he had her declared legally dead and had inherited her money, or at least the small fraction of her fortune that he knew about. It had been surprisingly easy, considering Lucian worked in finance, to hide so much of her estate from him. But the private

detective she had on retainer keeping an eye on her life back in the UK brought to her the information that Audrey had recovered from cervical cancer recently and they were all due to go to the Monte Silente Resort to celebrate, including her husband and Amelia.

Like everyone else, Ronnie had been surprised when Lucian started seeing Amelia. Oh, she was nice enough, quite entertaining. But he would never have thought he would be attracted to someone so obvious and borderline vulgar, with her big, bottle-blond hair, full make up, big breasts and garish dress sense. Ronnie didn't even know it was possible to have so much leopard print in one wardrobe until she met Amelia. She would almost have preferred her husband to end up with Katherine, at least she had a bit of style, seeing as she tried to copy that of Ronnie. Also, a podcaster? What kind of career was that? Ronnie hoped she had a miserable life, trying to fill her shoes.

Ronnie had enjoyed her little adventure, arriving in the area several days before them to start setting the scene. She was relieved when Lola the ditzzy holiday rep had interrupted Audrey and Daniel getting intimate on the first day, because she still missed him, the only person she missed even slightly, and even after all these years, it still irked her, the thought of him with anyone else. At least he needed a lot of convincing to get involved. For the millionth time since she left her old life, she wondered if Daniel could be convinced to do the same. But it was too risky, and as much as she could envisage a life with him, he wasn't worth risking it all for. And there was always the danger that once she had him fully, she would get bored of him too.

But then she found Linda. That wasn't her doing, but she knew if she was discovered there on the mountain with them after all those years in hiding, how could she not be the main suspect. Fully intending to return home at that point, she realised the weather was such that there was no way down the mountain. She had no means of calling her local contact Gianni in the village to come get her, there was no signal, and she doubted he would be able to get up the track, even with his snow plough.

And these murders had shaken her, and she felt incredibly vulnerable and isolated. She felt unsafe and yet again wondered if she should reveal herself, face the wrath of the group for her (what she hoped would now be considered) relatively minor antics, and be able to join the group rather than remaining alone in the woods, no one knowing where she was or expecting her back anywhere after. She was also aware that might be even more risky, seeing as the killer might be one of the remaining people living in the chalet.

She opened the front door of the chalet. The group had finally taken to locking it, but of course she had a key. She also had all the architectural plans for the resort, spies on the staff and in the village. She stumbled into the living room. The group looked tiny in number compared to their day of arrival. Ronnie was pale, gaunt, but nowhere near as disheveled as the people she had just walked in on. They all looked at her, and the realisation of whom they were looking at dawned on them one by one. Except for Dom, who had never met her. Shame, he excited her. Audrey froze, Katherine, melodramatic as always, screamed. They had literally just seen a ghost walk into the room.

Amelia, that pathetic bitch, stepped in front of Audrey, as if to protect her. She doesn't need protecting from me, Ronnie wanted to scream. Tony, strangely, grabbed for a fire poker. Oh, shit, they think I'm the killer. Even brave, feisty Nadia grabbed Dom's arm for protection.

Ronnie raised her hands up, trying to show them she had no weapons

'It's not me doing this! Hear me out!' she shouted at them, desperate to convince them to give her five minutes to try to explain. 'Look, I'll stay on this side of the room, I won't come anywhere near any of you. If you just give me a moment, I want to tell you what I know. But I need you to believe I am not the killer.' pleaded Ronnie. Her life depended on convincing this group to let her assimilate. At least til they could get off this mountain.

Katherine was the first to step towards her, arms outstretched. 'Ronnie, darling, where have you been? Of course no one thinks you are capable of murder. But what are you doing here? We thought you were dead. All these years without you, they've been miserable. I have missed you so much. Remember the time we hung out at -'

Ronnie interrupted her there. It was so like Katherine to have someone come back from the dead after fifteen years and to give a monologue instead of actually letting that person answer any of her questions. Katherine just didn't care enough about other people. Ronnie understood, there were very few people she cared enough about to listen to.

'I had a mental break, that's why I left.' Not true, but Ronnie didn't think the truth would be appropriate in this moment, that she was bored of her life and her husband and so she just ghosted them all because she didn't respect any of them enough to say goodbye. And she needed to endear herself to them, fast, if they were going to let her stay with them in the chalet until they could be rescued. She definitely didn't want them to lock her up in a shed like they had done to Dom. Even she was shocked at how quickly they turned on each other.

'When I recovered, I was too embarrassed to face any of you, and Lucian, poor Lucian, had already started dating *her*.' Ronnie gestured at Amelia, she hadn't meant to, but she couldn't help the slight snarl in her expression. It was noted by all in the room. Dammit. But surely she was allowed to feel a little bit of animosity towards the woman now married to her husband, even if she had abandoned him.

'So you know he's dead?' Amelia addressed her directly. Married her husband and then addressed her directly. She had some nerve. 'Why are you here, Ronnie? Why now?'

'You know me, darling. I get bored. I wanted to see the old gang again, see what you were all up to. Audrey, glad you beat the cancer, old girl.' Why was Audrey looking at her like that when she was saying something nice? These people really were too sensitive. 'I've been staying in a little building round the back of the garden but it is awfully close to where you keep stacking dead bodies, and it is slightly terrifying being out there alone when there's a psychopath about. Of course it might not be any safer in here, but at least you have heating. Please let me stay. I promise I am not the big bad murderer.' Any humility Ronnie had entering the chalet had quickly evaporated and she felt like her old self again.

Ronnie had that knack of asking for help but in a way where she insulted everyone she needed anything from. She also had the knack, she knew, of following her comments with a dazzling smile and a flick of her hair, and getting exactly what she wanted. Money from billionaires, discounts at designer stores, anything was possible when you gave off an air of not needing it.

'But where have you been? Why didn't you tell us you were OK?' This, from Katherine almost made Ronnie laugh out loud. Why would she ever inform Katherine of her movements?

'I settled in Monaco. But I always had you all in my thoughts' she lied.

'You selfish bitch!' Everyone turned in shock as Amelia spat these words out with more venom than anyone had ever heard from her. 'Lucian spent the rest of his life wondering if you were really dead, why you would leave him, what happened to you. You just leaving like that absolutely tortured him. And now he is dead. And you want us to believe that it is just a coincidence that you're back at the exact same time as someone else entirely is trying to kill us all? Oh, Lucian.' The tirade descended into almost incomprehensible sobs.

Ronnie could tell no one believed her innocence. Fair enough. She had laid a lot on them in a short space of time. After all, she herself was meant to be dead. Or at least long gone. She was faced with a barrage of questions. Where had she been hiding? Was she armed? Why did she leave without a word or a trace? Why was she back? Why had she followed them there? It was tiresome to Ronnie. She got that this was all new to them, her being alive and all that, but people were getting killed. Surely that takes precedence over her absence for a few years?! It was time to come clean or they would never believe the bits she was genuinely *not* guilty of.

'Look, admittedly I did come here to snoop on you all innocently, and perhaps stir shit. I have been watching you since you got here. But I never intended to kill anyone!'

'So why did you start?' Adrian asked. Who the fuck was he, anyway.

'I didn't! That's not what I meant. I am telling you, someone else is doing this. And they might be here in this room. But it is not me!' Ronnie was getting desperate again, realising her precarious situation. Her earlier cockiness she was regaining was quickly dissipating. She had no way of proving she was not guilty of these horrendous acts and they knew it. Would they lock her up?

'You want us to believe you have come back from the dead to play pranks on us but not kill us, and by coincidence someone else has come along to kill us all in the same week you resurrect from the dead? I am with Amelia on this one. I don't believe in coincidences. And you have been spying on us but somehow have now seen anything to indicate who is murdering us all' Adrian had found his voice. Perhaps as one of the two people who had not known Ronnie before her disappearance, he felt like he was an objective bystander. But he could fuck right off.

'Yeah, OK, say anything with that sarcastic tone and it sounds unbelievable. Anyway, who the fuck are you, Adrian? You think you can date Katherine for five minutes and that puts you in charge of this whole group?' Even Ronnie knew this was a bit rich coming from the woman who faked her own death to escape said group. But she needed to discredit him before his stance gained momentum amongst the others. Was now the time to reveal what she knew about him and Clara? She was surprised her private detective hadn't uncovered that for her before this trip, but luckily Amelia's whiskey voice travels far and wide and she was able to easily eavesdrop even from afar on her hot tub confessions with Tony.

'Where the hell have you been? How could you just abandon everyone with so many unanswered questions? You wanted to leave? Fine! But did you have to do it in the most traumatic way for all of us? We mourned you!' That was Audrey finally regaining her ability to speak, and Ronnie was surprised that it actually stung a bit. Ronnie had actually never meant to hurt her. The weight of her actions may possibly be scratching at the surface of Ronnie's emotions. She realised that it was time to come clean if she had any hope in this group believing her motivations for leaving, and for coming back, while simultaneously not thinking she was a psychopathic killer. A tall ask. But here she goes...

'I wanted to destroy Daniel. I wanted to take everything from him like he took everything from me.' OK, Ronnie realised this was probably not the best point to lead with. 'But I did not kill him.'

'So Daniel's managed to go 45 years of his life without ever getting destroyed or killed and now you are trying to tell us that two people, you and someone else entirely, were after him in the same week, 1,000 miles from home?' Big Dom wasn't so dumb after all.

'What do you mean, destroy him? No, wait, what do you mean Daniel?!' Audrey looked so baffled, bless her. If her world hadn't already crumbled to the ground, it was about to get completely stomped on.

'Because I loved him.'

Ronnie didn't think people's mouths actually dropped open when they heard shocking news. But looking around the room, it was actually a thing. Except for Tony. Did he know already?

'I never wanted this to come out, that's why I just left. Even after this week, I never wanted Audrey to know about us. I would rather die than hurt her.' Ronnie turns to Audrey, preparing to lay it on thick to save her skin. 'You really were my best friend, my family. And I have missed you so much since I left. I have never found anyone who cared about me and loved me so unconditionally.' Ronnie realised as she said this, that it was actually true. Audrey's eyes filled with tears again. Ronnie could tell Audrey wanted to believe her, but also knew it would be much harder once Audrey heard the next bit.

'I was sleeping with him, Audrey. No, that makes it sound superficial. We were in love. Well, he said he loved me. Yeah, it was while I was married to Lucian. While you and Daniel were still dating. When I finally worked up the courage to tell Daniel that I loved him, he broke it off. He said he loved you, Audrey, and that he would never break up his friend's marriage. When I threatened to tell you both about us, he got so angry. He threw me against the wall

and held me up by my neck. He told me he would rather see me dead than let that happen. That's when I realised I meant nothing to him. I had been the fucking idiot who had jeopardised everything, my marriage, my friends, my home, my whole life, for a man that didn't give two shits about me. He wasn't risking anything either, because you always suspected him of being unfaithful and I don't know why, but you always turned a blind eye. I guess that's why I thought it wouldn't be that much of a betrayal to you if I slept with him. That's how I rationalised it anyway.'

'What about Lucian then? You were sleeping with his best friend!' Katherine seemed to have more skin in the game than seemed appropriate. There was no way it was because she cared this much about her sister's feelings. She was hardly being discrete about her feelings for Daniel. Maybe she was pissed off that Daniel had eyes for anyone else.

'Me and Lucian were done already. I knew I would never be enough for him. He needs an Amelia. Needed. Someone exciting an spontaneous and fun and funny. I wasn't that. I never would be. I was so hurt and angry when I heard you two got together. But I wasn't surprised.' Ronnie acquiesced, knowing it was time to show some modesty if she was to be admitted into the supposed safety of the group.

'I knew anyway' whispered Audrey. Ronnie wasn't sure she heard correctly.

The rest of the group melted away and it was just Audrey and Ronnie talking now, no audience.

'How? We were so careful. I never wanted to hurt you' Ronnie had not wanted Audrey to find out at the time, not because Audrey's feeling were any kind of priority to her, but she didn't want to have to deal with the fall out. All those emotions and tears and wah wah wah. And that just from Lucian.

'Don't bullshit me now, Ronnie. My feelings were never a real consideration.' Audrey had some long-festering venom in her voice.

'Why didn't you say something then?' Ronnie had always been confused by Audrey's reluctance to raise her suspicions with her husband.

'Because if it wasn't you, it would be some other floozie. At least you were a devil I knew.' This stung Ronnie and she could tell that, in turn, pleased Audrey. But Audrey was totally right. Ronnie prided herself on not being some naive little girl, and yet she seriously let herself believe she had been special to Daniel, even thinking it after all these years of watching him put his dick in anyone who would let him. She had been a total idiot.

'Wait, how do you know so much about what has been going on with us?' Tony clearly felt uncomfortable with all this emotion and wanted to get back to the task at hand.

Audrey weighed up how honest to be in this moment, deciding she needed to go all in for any chance of being forgiven enough to be enveloped by these people she had betrayed. 'I have been following you, on and offline. I even have a private investigator keep tabs on you.'

Wow, you do share so much of yourselves without realising. Except for you Adrian, and we all know why that is, don't we?'

'Because I am a teacher!' Shouted Adrian, sounding exasperated. Ronnie could tell he was worried she knew his secret and would reveal it. She did know, and she might do.

'Yeah, sure, Adrian, because you are a teacher' smirked Ronnie. She wanted him to know she had a hold over him, guaranteeing his vote to be allowed to stay in the chalet tonight.

'What is she talking about, Adrian? Ronnie, why are you always talking in riddles?' Katherine whined. Ronnie would take great pleasure in breaking her trust in the man she was inexplicably smitten with.

Ronnie ignored Katherine's pathetic pleas, Ronnie turned to Audrey, her best bet, and laid it on thick, 'it' being outright lies. 'When I heard you were sick, Audrey, I wanted to reach out so bad. I used to go to the hospital when I knew you were in for chemo and sit in the waiting room so I could be near you. It tore me apart. Daniel didn't seem to be putting in any effort into caring for you. And even your family and friends were shit at helping you. And the truth is, I missed you all. When I saw you were planning this holiday if and when you recovered, I saw a chance. I wanted to reveal to you what a monster you were married to, in a way that even you couldn't turn a blind eye. No, no that sounded like I think you're a doormat. It's not that at all. You are the kindest, most empathetic person I know, and that's why abusers gravitate to you and take advantage of you. I mean, just look around at all these fuckers. Tony excluded perhaps.'

Even Ronnie wasn't sure of her exact motivations for tracking these people for all these years. They were of course not the only people she had kept tabs on from her old lives, for there were a few. But it was the group of people she was most invested in. It was like some sick form of entertainment for her, a soap opera made just for her. She supposed the habit of trying to dig up dirt on people for future use was one that died hard. It was part of the reason she had had to make so many quick getaways in the past. Blackmail was an efficient way to make a lot of money and fast, but occasionally it caught up on you. Yes she had left London because she was bored of Lucian and could not be bothered with a divorce, but had also got in the cross hairs of a particular banker with a penchant for young girls. Turns out he was not happy to be tapped endlessly for finances. She didn't even need the extra money, she just enjoyed wielding such power over men.

But Ronnie had to admit herself that she didn't understand the desire to gatecrash this holiday. She had never been clear on whether she would reveal herself to the group at any point. But the potential to observe all of them in one place for an extended period of time felt too delicious to her, especially considering all she had learned about them over the last few years.

She didn't think she had the serious intention of revealing her affair with and love for Daniel. She knew deep down that even if she had meant anything to him at the time, she was long forgotten to him. And Audrey seemed intent on never leaving him. But at this point she was willing to say anything to not be forced out into the cold again. She didn't think Audrey had it in her heart to send anyone back out in that weather to stay in an inadequate shed, but she

wasn't certain. She had been seemingly fine with locking Dom up in it. And murder can change a person.

'But the storm coming in fucked everything up. And then when you all locked Dom away overnight, I got scared and stayed hidden. I mean if you would do that to him, what would you do to me if I revealed myself. But then the murders started. I don't feel safe out there alone. What the fuck, guys? What have you done to make someone this mad at you?'

The room was silent. They had all been wondering that too, each with many reasons why someone would want them dead, but not knowing why someone would also be targeting others here too.

Ronnie could see they were no closer to being convinced to let her stay in the cabin, so she continued, unsure whether this was going to secure her safety or send Audrey over the edge, or both. 'But Audrey, I needed to tell you something. Whether you forgive me or not, I wanted you to know the truth about who was surrounding you, so you would know who to trust and who to cut off. I admit I am one to talk, and I feel bad speaking ill of the dead, but I need you to know that Daniel was sleeping with Katherine.'

That was a lie. Not about Daniel and Katherine having an affair. That had been going on for years. Ronnie assumed it would stop when Katherine met Adrian, but Daniel convinced her easily to carry on. She wasn't the only other female in his life, of course, but Ronnie knew him well enough to know that the outrageousness and audacity of sleeping with his wife's sister was what turned Daniel on.

The lie was that Ronnie didn't really care if Audrey knew this or not. She was just feeling spiteful. And she hoped that this would make it seem like she was on Audrey's side, wanting nothing but the best for her. But really she was just pissed off with Daniel for downgrading from her to Katherine, or Temu Ronnie as she had taken to calling her. Ronnie was of course shocked by Daniel's brutal murder, and she had even cried, but he had hurt her and now she could no longer hurt him back. The next best thing was hurting Audrey in his place. Everyone was looking at Audrey, occasionally glancing at Katherine. She knew they were wondering if she knew about the affairs, specifically the one with Ronnie, and now this. Her own sister. Tony looked so dismayed that Ronnie almost felt guilty for her big reveal.

Katherine was wailing, playing the victim as always. Ronnie could tell the hysteria was forced, aimed at giving Katherine a little bit longer to decide whether to come clean or deny, deny, deny. It is what she would do too. Adrian was doing his best guppy impression, mouth opening and closing as he processed what this meant for him.

Audrey stood silent and calm in the eye of the storm. Did she know already? Ronnie wondered. It was hard to tell by her expression. It was possible she had just completely disassociated from the conversation. Ronnie was not completely heartless, and did feel a bit sorry for this woman betrayed by nearly everyone in her life, her own body with the cancer, her dead husband, her sister. The trifecta. The axis of evil.

'Audrey, tell me you believe me. I even heard them having sex a couple of nights ago here in this chalet!' It was important that she was not the most hated person in the chalet. She

needed to divert a bunch of the mistrust and anger to Katherine's direction. So even though this bit wasn't true, she hadn't heard them, she assumed Daniel and Katherine couldn't resist at least a light fumble in a cupboard somewhere, so it didn't feel like a total lie.

There were audible gasps at that. Audrey fell back into the chair. Katherine looked like she was going to be sick, so maybe Ronnie's lie had been a truth. Audrey was staring at Katherine. What did this look mean? Was she pleading for Katherine to deny it, challenging her to do it? Ronnie wondered again if Audrey already knew. She wasn't sure how Audrey was meant to react to this news, if it was indeed news to her. And she supposed with everything else going on, this otherwise life changing news actually felt quite trivial while they were all fighting for survival and Daniel was dead anyway.

Ronnie even felt a bit sorry for Katherine, being left to face the consequences of this affair on her own, now that Daniel was gone. If there were to be any real consequences. Ronnie knew that on the very rare occasion that Audrey had worked up the nerve to ask Daniel about her suspicions, he had always managed to placate her.

Actually the only person who seemed angry about her revelation was Adrian. She could tell it was definitely news to him that his girlfriend had in fact never been faithful to him. She could tell he wanted answers but the questions were coming to him too quickly. Katherine also did not seem concerned about reassuring him at all. Katherine seemed most concerned with explaining herself to her father. Probably because her mum isn't here, thought Ronnie. If Linda was here, Katherine wouldn't give two shits about justifying herself to Tony. Ronnie wasn't even sure Linda would have had an issue with the affair. She had dropped several comments in the past about how Katherine and Daniel had so much in common and seemed a better matched pair. In front of Audrey, even. Ronnie really had to admire that bitch. There was much to learn from her.

Ronnie's eyes sought out Amelia at this moment. She had just found out her dead husband's ex-wife who had disappeared for 15 years was back now during the same week someone was trying to kill them all. Ronnie didn't want to lose sight of her for fear of what that trauma might drive her to. But Amelia was sitting on the sofa with her head in her hands.

Finally Audrey spoke, and it was directed at Katherine. 'You're sick.'

'I tell you who's not sick. You. And you never have been!' Katherine sounded borderline hysterical. Ronnie really did have no respect for women who could not control their emotions. Sure, she had been called sociopathic before, but it really did stink of weakness. The only emotions Ronnie displayed in public were specifically designed to elicit a specific response from her given audience.

She also knew Katherine had no evidence to suggest Audrey had lied about her cancer. If she hadn't seen many signs of her sister's illness, it was because she hadn't spent much time caring for her sister in her hour of need. She was only revealing her own inadequacies as a sister with these accusations.

‘Enough!’ That was Tony, surprising everybody. ‘You cannot seriously be accusing your own sister of lying about that. If you had bothered to be around more you would have no doubt in your mind what she had been through.’

‘Did you ever actually see her looking sickly, Dad?’ sneered Katherine.

‘Tell me how someone is meant to look like, according to you, Dr Katherine.’ Nadia was joining in. Ronnie had noticed her standing next to Dom getting more and more worked up but not knowing whether it was her place to get involved. This accusation of her friend faking cancer seemed to be the last straw for her. Ronnie knew she too didn’t have much time for Katherine, and had in fact never gelled with Daniel either. And she was one feisty little madam.

‘You just wanted sympathy and you just wanted to make sure Daniel didn’t leave you. You knew he wanted to.’ Katherine was doubling down on the bitchiness, it seemed.

There was a communal sharp intake of breath. This, from the woman who was having an affair with Daniel, and in front of another woman who was having an affair with Daniel. It really was getting to be a lot for this group of simple people.

Ronnie was no longer the centre of attention, something she hated even when she had not just staged a comeback from the dead. She wasn’t sure what she expected from this week, but this was not it. She should have picked a much less murderous holiday to igatecrash.

Frustrated because she still was unclear about whether she would be allowed to stay indoors or kicked back out into the wilderness to fend for herself, Ronnie felt she needed to up the ante even further. So she started to cry, something no one here had ever seen her do before. If she was a cute crier, she would use this tool more often. But she was self-aware enough to know she was an ugly crier, her face swelling instantly and eyes turning bright red, even when she was faking it.

No one rushed to comfort her, but they did all seem shocked into silence at the sight of it, even Dom and Adrian, who had never met her before. Even they could tell that it was a big deal for this composed woman to crack so badly.

Ronnie made one last appeal to Audrey. ‘You didn’t deserve what Danial and I did to you.’ The closest to an apology that Ronnie could bring herself to give. ‘He never deserved someone as sweet as you. And you were my one true friend.’

At that point, Audrey walked out of the room, clearly overwhelmed. Several people went to follow her, but Nadia glared at them all, stopping them in their tracks, and followed her out. Dom went after her, hanging back slightly, not wanting her to be out of his sight.

Ronnie was left standing by the fireplace, staring at the fire, unsure whether she had just saved herself by revealing herself to the group, or signed her own death warrant.

‘So can I stay?’

Chapter 18 If not a love triangle, then definitely a sex square (Audrey pov Day 5)

Audrey walked down the corridor. She wasn't entirely sure where she was heading, she just knew she had to get out of that room. Ronnie! Ronnie was back! What. The. Fuck. Like there weren't enough weird twists and turns on this holiday to contend with.

Now that she knew this whole time she had grieved the loss of her close friend, she had been fine, living it up in Monaco in fact, and carrying a horrible (what she thought) secret about Audrey's life, she felt a rising rage towards Ronnie. Her 'friend' had been fucking her husband. And decided to tell everyone else now. Did Audrey think she was capable of murder though? Audrey now suspected that Ronnie genuinely wouldn't care enough about anyone to actually kill them. As she had done before, she would just cut them out of her life and never given them another thought, unless she needed them again in the future.

Audrey passed the kitchen, heard the fridge hum in the distance, the murmur of the group behind her. But it sounded muted, like she was underwater. She just needed space. She needed to *think*. Surely there was a way to get a message somehow to the authorities about their situation, 'situation' being the biggest euphemism she had ever used.

Ronnie was alive. Daniel and Lucian were dead. As was her Mum. Mustn't forget her mum. And Katherine and Ronnie had both had sordid affairs with her husband, that now everyone knows about. She reached her room, sat on their bed. Her bed. Daniel was gone. Everything was just hers now. And just focused on her breathing. She couldn't even cry. It was too surreal and she knew she just wasn't processing it. When it would finally hit her, it would break her. That much she knew.

But she recognised the early signs of disassociation. She had been here before. When she first got her diagnosis, for example. BEcause regardless of what her sister said, there was a genuine diagnosis. Despite exaggerating the severity of the cancer, perhaps to keep Daniel by her side, she had still struggled with the news. Nothing felt real and she didn't feel a part of anything or connected to anyone. It hadn't helped that she had received the news from the doctor on the same day that she found out her husband and sister had been fucking each other behind her back for years. Then, as with now, all she could think was 'this isn't real, this isn't happening, this isn't my life. This isn't what I want for me.'

She noticed a crack on the wall in front of her. She tracked it with her eyes slowly, like it was a lifeline. She was trying to push out the trains of thought that were unwelcome to her. Daniel disappearing for hours at a time. Daniel travelling overnight constantly for work. Daniel coming home smelling of perfume she didn't own, but her sister did.

But Daniel was dead now and she would never be able to have him all to herself. Katherine was still alive. Ronnie definitely was. And so was his killer.

'Everyone I thought I knew was something entirely different,' she thought. 'Am I the only person here who isn't a liar?' But she knew that wasn't true either.

There was a knock on the door. Nadia asked through the door if she could come in. Audrey said no. Then she said yes. Maybe she didn't speak at all. She couldn't tell anymore. Nadia popped her head round the door, saw no resistance from Audrey so stepped into the room.

'I didn't fake my illness, Nads. I wouldn't. You do believe me, right?'

'Audrey, don't even waste either of our time trying to convince me of that. Absolutely no one except your twisted bitch of a little sister thinks that. And she doesn't even believe it herself. She's just been busted doing something so despicable, she's trying to divert some of the blame, make excuses for herself, make it more palpable for everyone else.'

'Really?' asked Audrey hopefully. She knew her sister had a habit of deflecting negative attention by throwing whatever shit she could and seeing what stuck. Audrey was just worried some of it was sticking.

Nadia nodded, took Audrey's hand and said 'nevermind about her though. She is so unimportant right now, considering what's happening. Come back to the living room. We are safer with the group.'

'Yeah, but are we?' asked Audrey.

'To be honest, who knows? But it can't be safer in here on your own. Come on, where Amelia and I can look after you at least. She needs you to now. You're the only other person who knows what she is going through right now.' Nadia said, standing up and pulling Audrey up off the bed.

They walked out of the room and were greeted by Dom standing guard outside the door. Audrey and Nadia walked back to the living room, arms linked, with Dom shadowing them. Audrey had to admit it that it must feel nice for Nadia to be able to walk around with her own personal bodyguard, when he wasn't causing a scene anyway. The room fell silent when they walked in. Or perhaps it already was silent.

Audrey spoke, and for once, she felt like everyone listened to her. 'Katherine, did you love him at least?' She didn't even need to specify who she was talking about. She wasn't sure what was worse, if her sister actually had strong feelings for her husband that she couldn't ignore, or if her husband meant very little to her, and she fucked him anyway. But now they all knew about it, and knew that the others knew about it, she had to know.

Katherine tries to say that it's complicated, but Audrey interrupts her. 'No excuses, I'm not asking for justification. Did you love him, yes or no?'

'Yes'

'Audrey nods, and then turns to Ronnie.

'I am not even going to ask you if you loved him, because I don't think you are capable of that emotion. You could never love anyone half as much as you love yourself. You hurt me

more than anyone, Ronnie. Because I would never have expected that from you. And then to let me mourn you for 15 years.'

Ronnie too tried to speak, but Audrey held up her hand, cutting her off. 'But I do believe that you didn't kill anyone.'

Audrey continued ' Right now, in this moment, I don't care who slept with whom. Or what secrets you're keeping. But I do care that someone in this room is a murderer. It has to be someone here. That matters to me more than anything right now, as it should do to you. So if anyone knows who is doing this, or why they might be doing this, or why anyone has been targeting any one of us, dead or alive, tell us now.'

Silence. Liars, all of them, thought Audrey.

Then, Adrian spoke. Of all people. 'We need to regroup. We need to stay calm. We need to take stock. Literally, we need to do a stock take of our supplies. We need to keep windows and doors locked. We need to stay in pairs at least.'

Audrey thought it was weird that he would be the one trying to assert control now. Perhaps the revelation of his beloved girlfriend being unfaithful removed the hold she had over him, giving him his own strength back. Or was he trying to redeem himself in her eyes now that he has been shown he was never enough for her.

Katherine seemed put out by her boyfriend's new found voice and confidence, and huffed off into a corner. She barged into Audrey as she did so, and muttered at her, you think everyone only ever does anything to hurt and betray you, like you are the centre of the universe.'

Audrey couldn't believe her sister's spite towards her. She could, but she couldn't. They had always had rivalry and she could see the damage their mother had caused both of them, but she didn't know where this hatred came from. Maybe sleeping with her husband was an act of revenge.

Audrey took a moment to stare at the mirror above the fireplace. She still could see the damage the illness had caused, the ravages across her face. How could anyone who knew her at all think she would lie about something so serious?

'I survived cancer, I can survive this too.' She asserted to herself. 'But that doesn't mean I need to forgive them. Not all of them. Not yet.'

Chapter 19 The teacher and the bad driver (Amelia pov, day 5)

I thought I was the only one playing detective. Turns out someone has been watching us for years. Ronnie is even more unhinged than the rest of us, thought Amelia. She was surprised she wasn't more shocked at the return of her husband's dead wife. It felt small fry compared to the ripping in half of said husband.

She, too, didn't think Ronnie was the killer though. She looked genuinely scared. This woman whose shadow Amelia spent her whole married life living in was begging to be allowed to stay in her company. But Amelia felt foolish. All the cryptic notes and threats, secrets dragged into the open. She assumed it had been the killer toying with them. But it had all been part of a whole other separate plan to what? Get revenge on this group? Tear down their already fragile relationships? It was Ronnie the whole time. The one she assumed, in all honesty hoped had vanished off the face of the earth, never to return. And, boy, had she returned. But if she wasn't the killer, and claimed she had no intention of physically harming anyone, what had been her end game here? And how far was it derailed by current events?

And hang on, in all the chaos of her return, did anyone actually ask her if she had been the one sending the notes? It actually isn't the next question Amelia wants to ask though.

'Did Lucian know you were sleeping with his best mate?' Amelia enquired. Amelia had on occasion wondered whether he knew more than he had shared with her about his first wife's disappearance, but she had to draw a line in the sand about it at one point, coming to peace with the fact she would never know everything she wanted to know, either because Lucian didn't know himself, or was refusing to share it. Now, finally, and immediately after her husband had been murdered, was the opportunity to get those answers they had both been craving for years.

'I don't know. I don't think so. But I don't know. I know he didn't trust me fully, and he obviously knew what Daniel was like. He knew it was end of days on our relationship regardless. I know he felt it. He was always so much more emotional and sensitive than I was. I didn't need the same level of human connection that he seemed to crave.' Ronnie seemed to be honest in this response. What a novel approach for her. It sounded like a dig though, like she thought this desire for connection was a sign of weakness in her then husband. Perhaps she needed to justify to herself why he would turn to someone so totally different, yet far more empathetic than his first wife.

Amelia caught Tony looking at her oddly. She felt his suspicion burning through her. Why does he think I am the killer when I think he is? That fucking, stupid pact! She would never joke about wanting to kill anyone ever again. She couldn't blame him for not trusting her and she hadn't managed to get him alone long enough to definitely call it off. She assumed it went without saying, but she would have preferred to say it out loud. 'You know, when we were drunk in the hot tub and mildly joking about killing each other's enemies? Now there's an actual killer, shall we just not even joke about it and definitely not do it? Yeah? Cool.' is what she would like to say to him. And also 'Just to be clear, you didn't actually kill anyone, did you? Just checking.'

'Look, I agree with Audrey. I don't care who's done what at this point. We need to focus on surviving this storm until we can get rescued. But we need to be honest with each other now. We need to share anything that might indicate who the fuck is trying to kill us all.' Amelia beseeched the group.

Amelia looked around the group. No takers. Fine. Time to ask Ronnie about the notes.

'Been doing some correspondence while you were here, Ronnie' she asked. The others looked at her quizzically, but Ronnie knew exactly what she meant.

'Ok fine yes, I might have left a note or two. I just wanted you all to see the truth about each other though.' Ronnie was surprisingly quick to confess to being the note-writer.

'Such a saint' chuckled Tony. He was acting oddly. But Amelia knew you could rarely judge how someone was acting in their trauma and grief. There was hardly a rule book and everyone was so different. She remembered reading the French book *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, where the guy got done for killing an Arab on the beach (inspiration for *The Cure* song her and the girls loved so much) because the jury thought he was heartless because he hadn't shed a tear at his own mother's funeral.

But everyone did seem relieved to have found out the source of the notes. Amelia wondered why, as there was still someone brutally picking them off one by one.

'Do we think we are all targets? Or was there one main target and the rest of us are collateral damage?' She threw out to the group.

'Well, Tony hated Linda. We all saw how he looked at her. Is he bumping us off one by one as we raise suspicion of him?' Adrian was more vocal now that he felt a bit more confident about assuaging people of his guilt. Very brave of him to accuse his future father-in-law of murder though, Amelia thought.

'Oh, I might have wanted her dead. But I never killed her.' Tony shrugged.

'Dad!' Katherine and Audrey both shouted at him, shocked by his admission. How they were shocked by it, Amelia did not know. No one else was.

'No, now is the time for full honesty. I hated her. Despised her. She made my life a living hell. And to say otherwise would be disingenuous and probably raise more suspicion around me. After all, it is always the spouse, huh? But this time it is not. Trust me, I have fantasised about her death a million times over, and none of them have involved killing her on holiday with my girls, and them finding her mutilated like that. I don't know how much consolation that is, how convincing that is, but I would not kill her with my daughters around. I had no reason for killing Daniel, and even less for killing Lucian.'

'Did you know Daniel was sleeping with Katherine?' Adrian asked with a pained look on his face, as if he just remembered, in the midst of all the chaos, that his girlfriend has been unfaithful to him.

'Absolutely not.' Tony looked indignant. 'I would have spoken to Katherine about it at least. Probably Audrey and Daniel too.'

'Tony, you know that's a lie.' Amelia turned to him, tried to signal to him she gave him permission to be honest about their silly murder pact.

'Oh, is it, Amelia? Would you like to expand?' Tony, turning to her and scaring her with the anger in his eyes. She had known him to be downtrodden, pathetic, sad, but never angry and bitter. He seemed to be daring her to share their secret.

'It was just a drunken conversation, Tony. Yes, we got wasted in the hot tub that first night and we joked about killing someone for each other so we could get away with the perfect murder. We were just joking. Tony knew all about Daniel and Katherine. He asked me to kill Daniel for what he had done to both his girls, tearing the family apart further. But Linda was not one of the people we were jokingly killing off. So I don't think it's him.'

'Exactly, Linda wasn't on either of our hitlists, and the person you want dead is still here.' Tony goaded.

'Let me guess. I'm that person.' Adrian raised his hand.

Audrey looked confused. Katherine looked even more confused. They obviously didn't know the full story of Clara. Amelia prepared to tell them all from the beginning, careful not to leave any detail out, no matter how painful to relive or hurtful to Katherine. The dam was broken. The truth spilled out everywhere, flooding them all til they could no longer breathe the same air.

'He groomed her. He took advantage of her and she couldn't cope so she took her own life. He was twice her age. He was meant to be in a position of care. And then he abandoned her when he felt she was too much for him. Of course she struggled with an adult relationship. She wasn't too immature, she was a child not ready for that kind of situation!' Amelia had carried this around with her like a stone on her heart. Saying it out loud, especially to her two friends, Audrey and Nadia, was a relief. It had been difficult all the years, sharing only part of her heartache with them, not letting on that she knew exactly why her sister had taken her own life. She never really knew why she hadn't told them when she found out about Adrian from reading Clara's diaries. Or why she didn't say anything when Katherine started dating him. She supposed she wasn't sure how to process it herself, or how she wanted to proceed. And she wanted to decide that without any outside interference, or sensible advice.

When Amelia was clearly finished, spent, the group turned to Adrian. He wasn't denying it. He had actually barely reacted. But Katherine did. She was looking at him like he was a stranger. Everyone was now watching her to see what she was going to do. She was clearly building up to something. A slap, perhaps? No, she just quietly seethed through her teeth 'Clearly, we are over.' Adrian just gave a swift nod of his head.

Amelia thought her anger was a bit rich, considering she had been cheating on Adrian throughout their relationship, but in her defence, which Amelia so rarely came to, paedophilia was so very much worse. Especially when a young girl takes her own life as a result.

'The question is Adrian, did you know who I was? Do you hold resentment towards me? Are you behind this?' Amelia asked him directly. He seemed to have been keeping his nose clean ever since. But Amelia needed to be sure he wasn't out there hurting anyone else. He

had evaded any real justice, and he was still in a position where he could influence vulnerable young minds, not to mention take advantage physically.

'No! I had no idea who you were. And I loved Clara by the way. I know you don't believe me. I never wanted to hurt her and I don't have it in me to commit murder.' Adrian looked genuinely shaken by this accusation. But what Amelia had learned from all the cases she had covered on her podcast was that everyone had it in them to commit murder, it's just each person's threshold of what was an acceptable justification varied. Ask any mother if they would kill to protect their children, all apart from the psychopaths would say yes, in a heartbeat. Others would kill for less noble reasons, or far more minor inconveniences. What was everyone's threshold here? Affairs? Inheritance? Revenge?

There was one more question though. 'Ronnie, what did your investigator find?' asked Tony. The group turned away from Adrian, clearly shunning him after the revelation of his breach of trust of one of his pupils, and looked to Ronnie. They were torn between wanting any pertinent information that might help them get through this nightmare, and being unable to cope with any further confessions or dark disclosures.

'That's it, I swear. You're actually all a very boring bunch of people. Well, until now.' Ronnie laughed nervously.

Amelia questioned the legitimacy of the private detective Ronnie had hired. She had worked with many a retired police officer and private investigator, and had asked them to look into this group of holiday makers as a little test for a project she was working on. What could be dug up about normal people, your own friends. She felt a bit guilty using them as guinea pigs, and had absolutely no plans to share the information wider. She just wanted to test whether this premise for a new show had legs. She was shocked by what had come out.

She hated to do this to her friend. But there are no more secrets, for the benefit of the group. For their survival. 'Ronnie isn't the only one that has come up with some dirt.' Amelia spoke.

'Nadia killed someone.'

Chapter 20 - Take me home, country roads (Nadia's point of view, day 5)

Amelia's words hit like a ton of bricks. She knows about the hit and run. How? Nadia feared it would come out eventually. She didn't think it would be like this, and from her friend Amelia. All she could do was look at Dom, hoping her protector could save her now. But he looked as lost as she felt.

'Nadia, I am sorry, I am only raising it now because someone is literally killing us off. We need to figure out why.' Amelia seemed to feel genuinely guilty for sharing this secret, and Nadia supposed she couldn't blame her. She had felt burdened with the truth since the accident happened, more so since arriving on this holiday of doom where it might be potentially the reason they were all getting bumped off. It was almost a relief that everyone knew now. Well, those of them still left standing. And she knew they needed to be upfront about their pasts in order to combat whoever was targeting them. At least she wasn't a paedophile like Adrian, she thought. Her deep, dark secret was an accident. His was an unforgivable exploitation of a child.

'I read about it, I knew you had been in the area that night for your mum's birthday. You know I can't resist an unsolved murder. An eyewitness had seen a car that sounded like yours speeding near the scene just after the accident. The rest was easy to figure out. The police report indicated red paint like that matching your car found on the body. And most telling, you have been so different since that night. A retired cop pal told me they were leaving the case upon but not putting any resources into solving it. There were so few leads and no loved ones pressuring them to find the driver. Lucky for you, if you can call it that, they were also working on a major county lines drug bust at the time, so their resources were stretched thin. And seeing your behaviour here, it was obvious you were being torn apart by something.' Amelia was clearly asking for her forgiveness for sharing all this with the group. Bizarre considering Nadia had killed a man. Or worse, severely injured him and then left him for dead when getting him help might have saved his life. Was that worse? It was at least a different kind of evil.

Nadia hung her head in shame. She wished she could deny it, and for those words to be true. She wished she could call Amelia crazy, or tell her she was clearly losing touch with reality because her husband had just been split in half. But she knew there was no point. When she opened her mouth, nothing came out. She was annoyed to feel tears streaming down her face, the memories of that night flooding back too vividly. The sound of metal on bone that tormented her ever since. The way her knuckles turned white as she gripped the steering wheel. The way they just drove on.

Nadia had waited for it, but no one ever came knocking on her door. No one knew it was them. But Nadia knew. And Amelia had known. And now the whole group knew. Nadia couldn't look anyone in the eye.

'Wait, what is this about, Nadia? This can't be true.' Audrey clearly could not believe her friend was capable of this.

Nadia had avoided speaking about that night, to anyone obviously, but even to Dom. Vocalising it made it more real. And now here she was, discussing it with seven other people, bringing that night back to life for her. It felt like it had been dragging behind her like a rotting tail, and now it was infecting her whole body. She could feel everyone looking at her differently. Like she was dirty. Like she was dangerous. Did this make them think she was more or less likely to be the chalet killer though? She wondered.

Nadia wanted to scream. She knew it was an accident but that didn't change the outcome. She looked to Dom for support, but he still said nothing. She supposed this was his revenge for her lack of support earlier. Or maybe he didn't know what to say, or was aware that anything he would say would make things worse. Dom's jaw was tight, fists clenched. To be fair, this was his normal stance, but Nadia could tell it was different. He won't speak now until he has to. He is hoping this will blow over. It won't. She left out the part where he told her to drive off. She felt she owed him one after letting them lock him up.

Around Nadia, the room had grown silent, frozen like the weather outside. No one was yelling anymore, no one was crying. That's it, we have been completely broken, desensitised, paralysed by fear, thought Nadia. She felt consumed by the heavy silence, like the kind she imagined settles after a battle.

Nadia finally raised her eyes to Amelia. What was that look on her face? Nadia didn't blame her for bringing up the hit and run. It had been her preoccupying thought too, that these murders were linked to it. That it was her fault people were dying. At least now they could figure it out together. Amelia looked back at Nadia with empathy. At least Nadia hoped that's what the look meant. It could have been pity. And it could have been fake.

It was Adrian who noticed it. Another note.

'I didn't write this one.' Ronnie claimed, clearly anxious to be believed.

'Drop it, Ronnie.' Tony said.

'No, I swear. That's not one of mine. It's not even my handwriting!' Ronnie whined desperately.

It was indeed different from the other notes. Still on the resort headed notepaper, this one was longer, and in different writing to the others.

'Amelia and Tony, go to the ice store. Go alone. If you don't go, more people will die. You will know what to do when you get there.'

Amelia turned to Tony. 'Do we go? Surely it is better if we all stick together?'

'What choice do we have?' asked Tony.

'To not go, Dad! You have a mass killer summoning you to a place piled high with the bodies of his victims. Why are you even considering going?' Audrey yelled at her

father. Nadia nodded in agreement, she did not feel comfortable at all with them taking orders from this twisted bastard. No one seemed to think this note was another one of Ronnie's or that Ronnie was the killer. Nadia wasn't so sure. Ronnie had faked her own death essentially, and disappeared for 15 years, spending that time hacking into their devices, stalking them online and in person. What else was she capable of? Was it really easier to think the killer was one of them, rather than a woman who could abandon her husband and her whole life, only to pop back up by coincidence the exact time and place where they were each getting slaughtered?

'I think we have to go. I would never forgive myself if something happened to you all because we didn't do as he says. And this might be our chance to end this.' Amelia said, looking down at the floor. Nadia could see that Amelia was putting on a brave face, but her eyes were tearing up, giving away how absolutely terrified she was feeling. Nadia would be, in her shoes.

Nadia wondered why the killer was summoning these two in particular, assuming that was who wrote this note. The only logical conclusion, if anything about this situation was logical, was that Tony and Amelia were next on the hitlist.

Nadia's stomach lurched, this wasn't over. In fact, it was getting worse, with the killer now ordering them around, like an evil puppet master.

'Amelia, wait. We have to try to work this out. What would this madman want specifically from you and Tony? Think!' But both Amelia and Tony were already putting on the ski jackets.

'Well we're both fucking widowed because of him.' Nadia was taken aback by Tony's swearing. The only thing he ever used to chastise his daughters for was swearing. 'I'd like to get my hands on him if he is waiting for us in the ice store. Amelia, stay here if you like. In fact, I'd prefer it. But I am going out there.'

Amelia stepped towards Tony and spoke. 'No, I am coming with you. Let's just go.'

And off they went, not quite hand in hand, but walking close enough to get support from each other's presence. Nadia wished she had given her friend a hug before she left, even if Amelia had exposed her as a killer herself. She wondered if she would ever see either of them alive again.

Chapter 21 – Cold storage - Amelia's Point of View (Day 5, continued)

Amelia and Tony didn't speak as they moved together towards the kitchen, the back door, the outside. They moved in sync which Amelia hoped boded well for whatever was waiting for them. She was still not convinced it was the best idea to follow the notes instructions, but Tony seemed determined.

Amelia's stomach had flipped when she had read the note. The killer was no longer hiding in the shadows. He was directing them now. He was testing them. He. They had all started referring to him as male. Could he be female?

Amelia almost hoped this was also one of Ronnie's notes, that she was still playing some elaborate mind game. But Amelia knew this note was different. Sure, the paper was the same, but the handwriting was new, the tone was colder. Ronnie had protested her innocence to the group. Well, for this note anyway. And Amelia believed her. This one felt more serious. This one felt like an execution order. Someone else had taken over the sick correspondence.

She could feel the others watching her and Tony through the kitchen windows as they walked to the ice store. The snow had abated so when she turned around and looked back at the chalet, she could indeed make out their silhouettes.

She looked over at Tony, his expression hard and unreadable as he marched onwards. Did Amelia feel safe with Tony? She didn't think she would ever feel safe again. She definitely didn't trust any of them anymore. She took a pause and Tony looked over at her. He gave the slightest nod, and Amelia knew that was her cue to continue follow him. Did she actually have to go? What if they both just returned to the chalet now? But she knew they needed to play this out to the end. She had lost so much already, she needed to know how this would finish.

As they approached the ice store, the size of a shed and containing the remains of several of their loved ones, she felt the cold even before reaching for the handle. That must be my imagination, right? It can't be significantly colder in there than outside in this snowstorm?

Amelia hesitated before opening the door. I guess this is how I die, she thought to herself. She often wondered this about the victims she covered on her podcast. Did they know the end was near? She hoped not, as the level of fear she was feeling right now was almost physically crippling. She felt like her heart would actually just stop. She pushed the door open. It creaked like in an old horror film. She wished she hadn't reached the door first because she would have much preferred to be behind Tony as they walked in. Amelia and Tony stepped into the freezer full of ghosts. They could see their breath. They could see the bodies. They were still laid out, wrapped up, like some twisted exhibit.

Amelia felt like the sound of her heart pounding was taking over the whole room. The room felt too still, considering its contents. But then what does a death room feel like, she thought.

Tony was the one to spot the note pinned to a crate. Amelia's hands shook as she pulled it free.

'You've all buried the truth for too long. Now unearth it. One of these bodies hides the final piece of the puzzle. Find it and you might just come out of this with your lives.'

Amelia felt sick. 'Does he want us to search the bodies, Tony? What the fuck is this twisted game? I'm not doing that.' It felt disrespectful to do so, but also incredibly messy and gross.

'We don't have to do this. We can just turn around and go back to the chalet.' Tony. said.

'What could he possibly hide on the bodies? What is he trying to lead us to? He's hardly going to be revealing his identity, is he? Not unless he plans on killing us after. Maybe we are safer if we don't find whatever he wants us to find?' Amelia's head was in a whirl, trying to figure out whether this was a bluff or a double bluff or a clue or a run up to their own murders.

'I think I need to know. But Amelia, honey, why don't you go back and leave me to it. Let me see what I can find.'

"I just think it won't work unless we are both here, like he wanted. And he seems pretty intent on killing us anyway so maybe we do play this out and see what happens.' Amelia couldn't believe she was saying this. She knew if this was a film she was watching, she would be yelling at the dumb blonde on screen to get the hell out of there and back to the relative safety of the larger group. She didn't think she would ever be able to explain why they were all making the choices they were making this week. She could only justify it by considering the crisis they were all going through at the time. How was she expected to be capable of rational thought when she had seen her beloved husband sliced vertically down the middle. Poor Lucian, she thought, he must have suffered so badly and been so scared.

'Tony, I need to know who is doing this to us too. And why.' Amelia paused. 'I can't see Lucian again though, not like that.'

'I know, dear, I will search him. I will do all of them if you like. Why don't you go have a seat over there, behind the shelves. There is no need for you to see this. Just keep me company. Ugh. You know what I mean. Give me moral support.'

'Thanks. But no. I can't let you search Linda.' Amelia really didn't want to, but thought it was only fair. Despite Tony's declaration of hate for his late wife, Amelia was sure that it would still pain him to see her in the state she was in. Her head was separate from her body, after all! And even in these cold temperatures, some level of decomposition was bound to have occurred.

Amelia kneeled next to the tarp containing Linda, easily identifiable as the blonde tufts of hair were still poking out the end. Amelia set about unrolling the plastic fabric, being careful to do it slowly so the head wouldn't roll far away. Not a task she ever imagined herself doing.

She could hear Tony on the other end of the room rustling with the bedsheets covering Lucian's remains. Amelia forced herself not to look. She already had that memory of her husband in two parts solidified in her mind as a visual, she didn't need a refresher. She needed to be able to remember him full of life, not cut in two.

Amelia continued with the unwrapping of Linda. She whispered 'sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry' as she finally got to her corpse. Her head was upside down on top of her body, obviously detached from it. Amelia held down some sick. She commenced the search for something, she didn't know what. She started with the pockets.

They checked the bodies one by one, not knowing what they were looking for. Another note, some kind of clue. A weapon? A confession?

'I hate this. I hate this. I hate this' Amelia's mind repeated. Just as she started taking Linda's jacket off, awkwardly, dead weight was a real thing it seemed, she heard footsteps coming up behind her. Concerned Tony was about to see his dead wife in this undignified pose, Amelia turned to tell him to hold on so she could cover Linda up a bit. But as she turned her head, she felt a full blow to her face. Everything went black for a moment, and when she was able to see and think again, she was lying on the floor, on the tarp next to Linda, her face only a couple of inches from Linda's severed spinal cord. She looked up and saw Tony standing over her. He had a shovel in his hands, holding it over his head, ready to strike her again.

Tony had turned on her.

Chapter 22 Confessions of an old man (Tony's pov)

The ice store was colder than Tony expected. Silly, he knew. The temperature was wreaking havoc with his arthritis, even with the adrenaline surging through him. The frost in the air felt like tiny constant pin pricks to his face, and his breath was coming out in puffs of tight clouds. Around him, the bodies lay partially unwrapped, grim reminders of how far things had spiralled out of control.

Amelia lay on the floor in front of him, clutching the side of her head where he had just hit her with the shovel. He admired her, in a way. So persistent, so curious. Of course, it's why she had to die. She looked at him, confused, and then with total realisation.

Tony did wonder whether the others would eventually come for them. He had given them strict instructions to stay put, that they had no choice but to follow instructions if they had any hope of coming out of this nightmare alive.

'I never intended to kill the others. Just Linda. That bitch made my life hell.'

Tony wanted them to search the bodies one last time to make sure there is nothing on the bodies linking the murders to him. Then wanted to kill Amelia because she knew too much and she was too clever. And she was apparently capable of murder herself. Although why she had targeted Daniel, he wasn't sure.

Tony had yet to figure out how he would kill her, and then 'escape' the killer and get back to the chalet without pouring suspicion on himself. But he will find a way. He would probably just accuse Amelia of being the killer when he explained that he had to kill her when she attacked him. Years of pretending to be simpler than he actually was meant that everyone here underestimated him and thought him completely incapable of anything, let alone a convoluted killing spree.

Amelia still didn't speak, staring at him unflinchingly. She really was a brave soldier, to the end. Tony continued. 'I just couldn't take it anymore. Do you know what it's like to suffer more than 40 years of belittling and criticism? If I was a woman, it would more freely be called abuse. But instead, I am pussy whipped, under the thumb. But not properly considered a victim. I even went to the doctor once to talk about it. He laughed at me. Told me to man up.'

Amelia stared silently at him. It occurred to him she might not be able to speak, as it did look like he might have dislocated her jaw. So he just continued.

"Why not divorce her?' I hear you ask,' he chuckled. He was enjoying finding himself again after all these years, and he forgot how fucking funny he could be.

'Well, she would take everything. I worked my arse off all those years to provide her a stable life, and she was going to tear it in two, kind of like your husband over there. We would have had a comfortable retirement, not a lavish one by any means, but we own our house

outright, we have some savings, and my pension is not horrendous. But if we needed to split it all, I would be looking at a life in a bedsit, eating beans and porridge.'

'It's true I would have preferred not to do this with the girls around, but I saw a chance. The snowstorm was a stroke of luck, but I knew we would be isolated, and I knew every one of you had your own secrets to hide and motives that could be exploited.'

Oh and Amelia, beautiful Amelia, then you came to join me in the hot tub, looking all voluptuous and talking about murder pacts.'

Tony approached her, she edged backwards on her backside, trying to get away from him. Her jaw was definitely broken. He knew she was smart enough not to try to scream, no one would hear all the way back in the chalet over the sound of the wind and snow anyway. She was trying to speak though. He thought he could make out 'You talked about murder pacts!'

'Well, you talked about motives for murder. You told me about Adrian and why you would be the perfect scapegoat for me. I just needed to cast the net wider to create confusion, make it unclear who the real intended victim was. You were like a gift that night.'

'It was just necessary to throw you off the track too, but making you think I would be going for one person, when I was after another. I wanted to muddy the waters, obscure the motive. I wanted it to look like a spree, not a revenge hit.'

'But then you got involved and killed Daniel. I have to admit, that really threw me. Was that some kind of message to me? That you still wanted me to target Adrian even though I had killed Linda myself? Quite creative. I didn't think you would have the guts. And you did me a favour. I thought I would have to kill him and pin it on you, but I guess you did have it in you.' Tony's mouth twisted into a smile when he saw the confusion on Amelia's face.

'But I didn't kill Daniel.' she said.

'It's fine, Amelia, you can tell me now. You're going to be dead in a minute. Here's what's about to happen. You lured me in here to kill me, because I suspected you, but I fought back and killed you first. That's the plan, anyway. So you might as well confess and cleanse your soul before you meet whatever god or gods you believe in.'

'Tony. Fuck you. I didn't kill Daniel.' Amelia stuttered out. Speaking was clearly painful for her. But the horror was dawning on both of them that if they were both telling the truth, that there was another murderer on the loose. There was no possible way Daniel's death had been an accident. It was perhaps the cruelest of deaths. And now Tony didn't know who of those left of their group had been responsible. Or if it even was someone in the group.

'I hope they kill you too!' spat out Amelia, literally, as blood spattered forth from her mouth with each word.

Tony decided to allocate that murder to Ronnie. It had to be her. There was no reason to believe her when she denied killing anyone, and she had come in with a pure hatred for

Daniel. She clearly felt betrayed by him. Everything she had done for the last 15 years had been to get revenge on him, so Tony thought she was by far the most likely candidate for his killer. He would deal with her later. Right now he had some loose ends to tie up.

'Well, whatever. You are going to be killed now. And then you will be blamed for killing your friends and husband. I really am sorry Amelia, I genuinely always liked you. You have been a great friend to Audrey over the years. But I have to kill you now.' Tony raised the shovel above his head.

Amelia scuttled further back, and managed to kick Tony in the shin, making him falter.

'That's a good girl. I need it to look like there was a struggle. That the poor old man fought back valiantly. That you wanted me dead because I was on to you, and that I acted in self defence. Imagine how they'll praise me. I'll be a hero!'

Tony relished the thought. The thought of a new life without someone badgering him constantly was what got him through the less pleasant times on this trip, the lying to his daughters, having to make nice with some of these people, some that he knew he would murder shortly. Actually mutilating the bodies had not been as difficult as he expected. He would be the survivor.

Distracted by the thought of his hero's welcome, and with Amelia moving faster than he would have predicted. She got to her knees, and then her feet, and got to the door before Tony realised what was happening, making for her escape.

Chapter 23 - The final blow (Tony's pov)

What Amelia only came to discover when she reached the door was that Tony had locked it behind him when they entered the building. She let out a cry and slumped to the floor. Tony could tell this was her giving up. She knew she was doomed.

Tony advanced towards Amelia. He still had the shovel in his hand. 'Let's make this quick, shall we? I actually quite like you. I don't want you to suffer unnecessarily,' he said almost tenderly. It was true, he was sad that things panned out that not only would he have to kill Amelia, but also pin all the other murders on her. It was to be someone else originally. But if tony learned one thing on this killing spree of his, it was to stay adaptable. This would pan out well though. With that true crime podcast of hers, her fascination with murder was very public. Imagine her search history!

He raised the shovel above his head to deliver the final blow.

Chapter 24 Time to end this (Dom's pov)

Back in the kitchen, Dom couldn't sit still. They had watched Tony and Amelia walk off towards the ice store, still just about to make out their outlines as they reached the building and entered it. That was about twenty minutes ago. They all stood around the kitchen, taking it in turns to look out the window for their return, fussing about and trying to keep themselves busy. How had they agreed so quickly to let Tony and Amelia go off on their own. They were arguably the weakest physically in the group. Nevermind. Adrian definitely was. But how far from reality had they stumbled that they thought it was ok to let the killer order them to their certain death? Who was he kidding? This group had entered mob mentality very early on on this trip, when they had locked him up in a shed overnight. And that was before anyone had even died.

Every instinct in him screamed that something horrendous was happening in that ice store. Why else would the killer, presumably the killer, summon just them? Dom couldn't believe that either Amelia or Tony were responsible for any of the deaths. But if not them, who? The options were slimming down with each new murder. There were fewer and fewer people left to be suspicious of. That didn't bode well for him. He knew his standing in this group was not admirable and he was looking more guilty the more people were being picked off.

'We can't just stay here. At least one of them is definitely getting murdered right now. And do you think we are safe just following the instructions? The killer will come for us next anyway.' Dom put out to the rest of the group. They seemed hesitant though. He couldn't blame them. They were stuck in a shit sandwich, trying to decide which shit option was the least shitty.

None of them wanted to face whatever was happening in the ice store. They also didn't want to stay in the kitchen waiting like sitting ducks. Dom knew he was making sense. He seemed to be converting the others to the idea. Audrey and Katherine were clearly worried about their dad. Well, Audrey definitely was. Adrian was just going to go along with the general consensus because he was an amoeba of a man. Probably why he went after children.

But they were looking to him for more guidance. They wanted him to literally guide them, it seemed. He was the largest, and it was time for him to take charge in battle. They weren't going to take action, it seemed, without someone leading from the front.

'It's time to end this.' Dom rallied his pathetic, terrified troops and opened the back door.

'Guys, there's smoke coming from the ice store!' Dom shouted as he grabbed the firewood axe propped up by the back door, secretly pleased he got to use an axe in his life, and broke into a run towards the fire.

Chapter 25 The viking at the door (Amelia's pov)

Amelia didn't think the bad guys in real life actually wasted time telling their victims about their motivations and methods. But it seemed Tony was a talker. Perhaps what little humanity he had left really wanted to explain to Amelia so that she would understand why he did what he did. But either way, it gave Amelia a chance to survey her surroundings. She tried to block out the pain she felt in her jaw. It threatened to be all-encompassing, stopping her from being able to think at all, let alone rationally. And she needed to focus on getting out of this situation.

Then she clocked the jerry cans of fuel. Probably the accelerant used to set Daniel on fire. They were now within arms reach of her, as they were just to the side of the door she had managed to reach. Tony had locked it. The bastard. She had been so focused on scoping out the ice store when she entered, looking for signs of any one hiding in the shadows, she hadn't paid any attention to Tony when he came in behind her.

This man had taken a lot from her, her peace of mind, her husband. He wasn't going to take her life as well. She was desperate, in any case. It really was a case of either his life or hers. She kicked over the cans of fuel. Before Tony could react, she reached into her pocket and fished out her lighter, grateful that for once she found it first time. That rarely happened. She bent over and used the lighter to ignite some of the spilled fuel. The fire caught fast, faster than she predicted. And closer to her own body than she expected. Not that she had ever taken time to predict or expect such things.

The flames seemed to leap from puddle of spilled fuel to puddle, dancing speedily towards Tony's feet. He just stood there looking bewildered, also not knowing what to do next. He was trapped in a corner, his exit blocked by the fire and Amelia herself. He made some weak-willed attempts to swing the shovel in her direction. But these blows were easy to avoid and deflect. He tried again to aim for her face, no doubt wanting to add to the pain of her broken jaw, but it was so slow and impactless that Amelia actually managed to grab the shovel handle just about the blade. She gave the shovel a pull with all the strength she could muster. This freed it from Tony's hands but also destabilised him. He stumbled forward a few steps. Not far, but far enough to land his right foot in one of the ignited puddles of petrol.

Flames licked at his trouser legs, and she could see panic set in his eyes. He tried to pat out the fire. That's when Amelia chose to lunge.

She would be asked later why she hadn't just used her remaining energy to exit the ice store. She would tell people she didn't know what took over her, but she knew in her heart she needed the bastard to die.

This time, it was she who raised the shovel above her head, and she brought it down hard on Tony's forehead. He fell to the floor. He must have been unconscious at least, if not dead, because his face landed in flames and he didn't flinch or move in the slightest.

Not done with her anger and revenge, Amelia raised the shovel again and hit him once, twice, three more times, on the back of the head and the neck, all the while screaming Lucian's name.

He thought he was smarter than us all, but hadn't seen that coming, thought Amelia.

The flames had taken over much of his body now. She had to get out now. Amelia finally turned, stumbled towards the door, badly injured, but alive, just as Dom broke through the door with an axe.

Epilogue

1 year later

The survivors returned home days later, after hospital stays and police interrogations. They were thinner, quieter, more paranoid than ever before. They carried their newfound trauma, adding it to the old, like invisible luggage. It was bulky and awkward and could not be set down, no matter how far from the chalet they got. Everyone could see they were carrying it, and no one could help them with it.

It's been six months and they all still struggled to believe they had escaped. And arguably, they would never escape. The survivor's guilt, especially for the new widows, was intense. Sleep was hard. Conversations were harder. Everyday normal life was impossible.

They were all subject to constant speculation. Amelia, worst of all. She was arrested while still recovering in hospital, and declared fit to stand trial soon after. She was not given bail, because of the risk of her returning home to Britain, and her court date loomed like one of the mountains none of them ever wanted to see again. She had been charged with multiple counts of murder, arson and attempted murder. She maintained her innocence, claiming Tony killed Linda and Lucian, and that there was even a second killer who got to Daniel. Tony was no longer around to verify or contradict this story, and it seemed the Italian police were really keen to put someone behind bars, and not just lay the blame on someone who had already passed. That seemed an unsatisfactory conclusion for all.

The headlines were still going, here and across Europe. 'Ski You Later,' 'Alpine Killer Queen', 'Slaycation in the Alps.'

The papers called Amelia The Chalet Slayer, Snow Bunny Boiler, The Alpine Assassin, and the one Audrey most appreciated, because of her love of a good pun, the Slay Belle. Yes, she was enjoying the coverage.

No one could agree what happened on that mountain. None of them could say for sure who had killed Linda, or Daniel, or Lucian.

But Audrey knew. She knew something the others definitely did not know. One of the murders was hers.

Audrey had overheard Tony and Amelia in the hot tub that night. Their voices had carried over the steam, half-joking, half-serious, discussing their hypothetical murder pact.

At the time, she had rolled her eyes. Amelia always needed attention, always a fan of conspiracy theories and intricate murder plots. And her dad? Well, her dad liked any opportunity to act like the big man, seeing as he spent his whole life being emasculated by Linda.

When Linda turned up dead the following morning, it had been difficult to pretend she was distraught about it. The shock was real though. She didn't think either Amelia or Tony had the balls to actually go through with it. And the drunken idiots had killed the wrong person.

Or had they? She didn't care, because a plan of her own was already formulating in her mind. This was a window of opportunity.

If everyone was going to run around killing each other, maybe she would take the opportunity to join in. But Audrey wasn't impulsive. She was methodical. And Daniel had it coming. This had actually been in the making for years. Something she had always fantasised about.

The affairs were one thing. She could handle them. She knew when she met him that Daniel was highly-sexed. She didn't have it in her to satisfy all his needs, so if other women would alleviate the work load by job sharing, she was OK with that. Sure, she hated when they were at parties and she could tell that Daniel had been with his colleague's wife he was just introducing her to. Those bitches always had smug looks on their faces, smirking because they thought they held a secret she wasn't aware of. That they could offer Daniel more than she could give him.

But then she found out he had been so careless as to father a child with someone he worked with. This, just after she had to have an abortion so she could safely start chemo. Daniel had seemed pleased that it meant he wouldn't have to be burdened with a child as well as a sick wife.

Throughout her treatment, Daniel had used it as an excuse to go off and do his own thing. He still needed to have a life. He dropped hints that maybe she was exaggerating her illness. He was right about that, but she was genuinely ill. So what if she overstated how close to death she came? And then one more sucker punch. Audrey learned of his affair with her own sister. All while she was ill, as well. That's when the idea of killing him became justified in her mind, necessary even.

Yes, Daniel had to go. Someone that twisted didn't deserve to live a happy life. And with her dad already spiralling, potentially already a killer, she realised she had the perfect camouflage.

When Daniel was found, everyone assumed he was another victim in the killer's spree, not realising there were now two killers on the loose. Sure, they floated the idea a couple of times when they were trying to understand what hell they had got caught up in. But no one wanted to genuinely believe there were two predators coming after them. That was too terrifying to imagine.

And now Tony was dead, and Amelia faced trial for his crimes. Audrey suspected Amelia was telling the truth. If she had to put money on it, she would bet all she had on her father finally snapping and killing his wife, and then Lucian and an attempt at Amelia to cover it up. Amelia was one of the kindest people she knew, and that was difficult to fake, especially for two decades.

But Audrey was happy to let Amelia take the fall, to protect her father's name, and her own freedom. It was going to be hard enough to make the role of a widow sexy, let alone daughter of a serial killer. She also would much prefer her own crime was lumped in with those Amelia was accused of. And soon, there would be no one left to implicate her.

She had loved her father and was genuinely sad that he was not there any longer to see her blossom again post-cancer, post-Daniel. Tony had hated Daniel from the moment they met. Audrey had always sensed this. Audrey didn't even realise he knew about the affair with Katherine. Or that he wasn't Katherine's biological father. Audrey knew, of course. But she didn't think Tony did.

Her father would have approved, if he had lived. This is the thing Audrey told herself often to justify her actions to herself. After all, he was a killer too. She had inherited more than just her brown eyes and dimpled chin from him.

But even Audrey had to admit she wasn't deluded enough to think that Tony would approve of the next phase of her plan. Because this part involved revenge against Katherine. And despite her not being his blood, Audrey knew he did love her brat of a sister too. Katherine, pretty, self-righteous, arrogant. And a liar. She really had been her mother's child, the little bastard.

Audrey let Katherine have her moment in the sun. She got a lot of public sympathy, both parents brutally murdered, and her boyfriend exposed as a paedophile. She gave evidence against Adrian and he was now finally facing charges for his relationship with a minor. Somehow, Katherine's affair with Daniel had stayed out of the papers. But Audrey had no doubt that if and when that came out, Katherine would probably manage to spin that in her favour too. Audrey wondered, not for the first time, if her sister had hired some kind of PR expert to get her through all this smelling of roses. Katherine really hadn't yet paid for her sins.

So Audrey waited and she watched and she planned.

And then last month, she introduced Katherine to Tim. Tim was a charming silver fox, mid 60s but looking very well for his age. Like how rich people and George Clooney looked at age 60, not the man down the pub.

He was charismatic and cultured, but the thing that Audrey knew would be the biggest pull, the thing Katherine would be most impressed by, was that he was seriously loaded. Like Bill Gates wealthy. Ok, maybe not that rich. But properties-on-four-continents rich, personal-charitable-foundation rich, private-jet rich. Everything Katherine loved in a man.

And, as predicted by Audrey, Katherine fell hard. It was inevitable. Tim seemed smitten too. But what old man wouldn't be. Katherine was significantly younger, very attractive, intelligent. She laughed at his jokes and she flipped her hair at the right time.

Audrey encouraged this coupling. It was surprisingly easy. She just told each of them that the other one fancied them. And voila! A date was arranged.

Some people commended on the age difference, or how soon after the tragedy this romance occurred. But Audrey reassured the critics that Katherine needed the support of a good man during this trying time. She also played matchmaker, fed Tim titbits about Katherine that he could use in his wooing of her, dropping hints about Katherine's favourite flowers, jewellery

designer, clothing brand. She spent hours listening to Katherine on the phone talking about how this one was different, letting her sister feel that despite the trauma they had just been through, they were now closer than ever.

This very weekend, they had headed to Monaco for a romantic getaway. Their first night together. Tim was a bit of a traditionalist, not wanting to jump in bed too soon, and Katherine had needed time too. Tim had booked a hotel suite with a sea view. Room service. Champagne. It was obvious to both of them, and Audrey, what would happen for the first time on this trip.

Audrey had sent a text that morning 'So happy for you! You deserve this! Send pics! ❤️'

Far be it from Audrey to tell Katherine she was about to have sex with her own biological father.

Revenge, Audrey had learned, wasn't about blood or fire or spectacle. It was about patience. And precision.

So that little detail could wait. Until just after. Face to face, so that she could watch the truth dawn on them, and see the exact moment they realised nothing could ever undo it.