

'THE BEST THING I'VE READ IN AGES'

STUART MACBRIDE

EVERYONE IN MY FAMILY

HAS

**KILLED
SOMEONE**



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original.
A must read'**

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HAS
KILLED
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Aleesha Paz.
At last this one's yours.
Though they always have been, and always will be.

Do you promise that your detectives shall well and truly
detect the crimes presented to them using those wits which
it may please you to bestow upon them and not placing
reliance on nor making use of Divine Revelation, Feminine
Intuition, Mumbo Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence,
or Act of God?

*Membership oath of the Detection Club, 1930, a secret society
of mystery writers including Agatha Christie, GK Chesterton,
Ronald Knox, and Dorothy L Sayers.*

- 1) The criminal must be someone mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.
- 2) All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.
- 3) Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable.
- 4) No hitherto undiscovered poisons may be used, nor any appliance which will need a long scientific explanation at the end.
- 5) *Author's note: Culturally outdated historical wording redacted.*
- 6) No accident must ever help the detective, nor must he ever have an unaccountable intuition which proves to be right.
- 7) The detective must not himself commit the crime.
- 8) The detective must not light on any clues which are not instantly produced for the inspection of the reader.
- 9) The stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal any thoughts which pass through his mind; his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader.
- 10) Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them.

Ronald Knox's '10 Commandments of Detective Fiction', 1929

PROLOGUE

Everyone in my family has killed someone. Some of us, the high achievers, have killed more than once.

I'm not trying to be dramatic, but it is the truth, and when I was faced with writing this down, difficult as it is with one hand, I realised that telling the truth was the only way to do it. It sounds obvious, but modern mystery novels forget that sometimes. They've become more about the tricks the author can deploy: what's up their sleeve instead of what's in their hand. Honesty is what sets apart what we call 'Golden Age' mysteries: the Christies, the Chestertons. I know this because I write books about how to write books. There are rules, is the thing. A bloke named Ronald Knox was part of the gang and wrote down a set once, though he called them his 'Commandments'. They're in the first part of this book in the epigraph that everyone always skips but, trust me, it's worth going back to. Actually, you should dog-ear it. I won't bore you with the details here but it boils down to this: the Golden Rule of the Golden Age is *play fair*.

Of course, this isn't a novel. All of this happened to me. But I do, after all, wind up with a murder to solve. Several, actually. Though I'm getting ahead of myself.

The point is, I read a lot of crime novels. And I know most of these types of books have what's known as an 'unreliable narrator' these days, where the person telling you the story is, in fact, lying most of the time. I also know that in recounting these events I may be typecast similarly. So I'll strive to do the opposite. Call me a *reliable* narrator. Everything I tell you will be the truth, or, at least, the truth as I knew it to be at the time that I thought I knew it. Hold me to that.

This is all in keeping with Knox's commandments 8 and 9, for I am both Watson *and* Detective in this book, where I play both writer and sleuth, and so am obligated to both light upon clues *and* not conceal my thoughts. In short: play fair.

Actually, I'll prove it. If you're just here for the gory details, deaths in this book either happen or are reported to have happened on page 14, page 46, page 65, a two-fer on page 75, and a hat-trick on page 81. Then there's a bit of a stretch but it picks up again on page 174, page 208(ish), page 218, page 227, page 249, somewhere between page 243 and page 250 (it's hard to tell), page 262, and page 355. I promise that's the truth, unless the typesetter mucks with the pages. There is only one plot-hole you could drive a truck through. I tend to spoil things. There are no sex scenes.

What else?

My name would be useful, I suppose. I'm Ernest Cunningham. It's a bit old-fashioned, so people call me Ern or Ernie. I should have started with that, but I promised to be reliable, not competent.

Considering what I've told you, it is tricky to know where to start. When I say *everyone*, let's draw the line for that statement at my branch of the family tree. Although my cousin Amy did bring a prohibited peanut-butter sandwich to a corporate picnic once and her HR rep almost carked it, but I won't put her on the bingo card.

Look, we're not a family of psychopaths. Some of us are good, others are bad, and some just unfortunate. Which one am I?

I haven't figured that out yet. Of course, there's also the little matter of a serial killer known as the Black Tongue who gets mixed up in all this, and \$267,000 in cash, but we'll get to that. I know you're probably wondering something else right now. I did say *everyone*. And I promised no tricks.

Have I killed someone? Yes. I have.

Who was it?

Let's get started.

MY BROTHER

CHAPTER 1

A single beam of light rotating through the curtains told me my brother had just pulled into my driveway. When I walked outside, the first thing I noticed was that Michael's left headlight was out. The second was the blood.

The moon had gone, the sun yet to rise, but even in the dark I knew exactly what the dark spots were, flecked on the shattered headlight and smeared alongside a hefty dent in the wheel arch.

I'm not normally a night owl, but Michael had called me half an hour before. It was one of those phone calls that, as you blearily read the time, you know is not to tell you about winning the lottery. I have a few friends who occasionally call me from their Uber home with a roaring tale of a good night out. Michael is not one of them.

That's a lie, actually. I wouldn't be friends with people who called after midnight.

'I need to see you. Now.'

He was breathing heavily. No call ID, from a pay phone. Or a bar. I spent the next half hour shivering, even in a heavy jacket, wiping circles in the condensation on my front window to better see his

approach. I'd given up sentry duty and retired to the couch when his headlight flicked the back of my eyelids red.

I heard a growl as he brought the car to a stop, then killed the engine but not the electrics. I opened my eyes, savoured the ceiling for a moment, as if I knew that once I stood up my life would change, and went outside. Michael was sitting in the car, head on the wheel. I cut the lonely spotlight in half as I walked in front of the bonnet to knock on the driver's window. Michael got out of the car. His face was ash grey.

'You're lucky,' I said, nodding to his busted headlight. 'Roos'll mess you up.'

'I hit someone.'

'Uh-huh.' I was half asleep, so only barely registered he'd said *someone* and not *something*. I didn't know what people said in these situations, so I thought agreeing with him was probably a good idea.

'A guy. I hit him. He's in the back.'

I was awake now. *In the back?*

'What the hell do you mean *in the back?*' I said.

'He's dead.'

'Is he in the back seat or the boot?'

'Why's it matter?'

'Have you been drinking?'

'Not much.' He hesitated. 'Maybe. A bit.'

'Back seat?' I took a step and reached out for the door, but Michael put an arm out. I stopped moving, said, 'We need to take him to the hospital.'

'He's dead.'

'I can't believe we're arguing about this.' I ran a hand through my hair. 'Michael, come on. You're sure?'

'No hospital. His neck turned like a pipe. Half his skull is inside out.'

'I'd rather hear it from a doctor. We can call Sof—'

‘Lucy will know,’ Michael cut me off. His mention of her name, said so desperately, made the subtext clear: *Lucy will leave me.*

‘It’ll be all right.’

‘I’ve been drinking.’

‘Just a bit,’ I reminded him.

‘Yeah.’ The pause lingered. ‘Just a bit.’

‘I’m sure the police will under . . .’ I started, but we both knew the name Cunningham said aloud in a police station practically shook the walls with the spirits it summoned. The last time either of us had been in a room full of cops was at the funeral, among a sea of blue uniforms. I’d been tall enough to coil myself around my mother’s forearm, but young enough to stay glued there all day. I briefly imagined what Audrey would think of us now, huddled in the freezing morning arguing over someone’s life, but pushed the thought away.

‘He’s not dead because I hit him. Someone shot him, *then* I hit him.’

‘Uh-huh.’ I tried to sound like I believed him, but there’s a reason my dramatic résumé consisted mostly of non-speaking roles in school plays: farm animals; murder victims; shrubbery. I went for the door handle again, but Michael kept it blocked.

‘I just grabbed him. I thought – I don’t know, it was better than leaving him in the street. And then I couldn’t think what to do next, and I wound up here.’

I didn’t say anything, just nodded. Family is gravity.

Michael rubbed his hands across his mouth and spoke through them. The steering wheel had left a small red dent on his forehead. ‘It’s not going to matter where we take him,’ he said at last.

‘Okay.’

‘We should bury him.’

‘Okay.’

‘Stop saying that.’

‘All right.’

‘I meant stop agreeing with me.’

‘We should take him to the hospital then.’

‘Are you on my side or not?’ Michael glanced towards the back seat, got back in the car and turned the engine on. ‘I’ll fix things. Get in.’

I already knew I’d get in the car. I don’t really know why. Part of me figured that if I was in the car I could talk some sense in to him, I guess. But all I really knew was that my older brother was standing in front of me, telling me it would all be all right, and it doesn’t matter how old you get – five or thirty-five – if your older brother tells you he’s going to fix things, you believe him. Gravity.

Just quickly: I’m actually thirty-eight in this bit, forty-one when we catch up to the present day, but I thought if I shaved a couple of years off it might help my publisher pitch this to a big-name actor.

I got in. There was a Nike sports bag, unzipped, in the footwell of the passenger seat. It was stuffed with cash, not tied together with neat little elastic bands or paper belts like in the movies, but jumbled up, vomiting onto the floor. It felt strange to simply rest my feet on it, because there was so much of it and, assumedly, the man in the back seat had died for it. I didn’t look in the rear-view mirror. Okay, I shot a few glances, but I only saw a black lump of a shadow that looked more like a hole in the world than an actual body, and I wussed out every time it threatened to come into focus.

Michael backed out of the drive. A shot glass or something rattled across the dash, fell and rolled under the seat. There was a faint waft of whiskey. For once, I was glad my brother was into hotboxing, because the weed smoke lingering in the upholstery masked the smell of death. The boot clanged, latch broken, as we bounced over the kerb.

A horrible thought shot through me. He had a shattered headlight *and* a busted trunk: like he’d hit something twice.

‘Where are we going?’ I asked.

‘Huh?’

‘Do you know where you’re going?’

‘Oh. The national park. Forest.’ Michael looked across at me, but couldn’t hold my gaze, so he threw a furtive look to the back seat, apparently regretted it, and settled on staring forwards. He’d started to shake. ‘I don’t really know. I’ve never buried a body before.’

We’d driven for over two hours by the time Michael decided he’d taken enough dirt roads and pulled his rumbling cyclops of a car into a clearing. We’d hopped off a fire trail a few kilometres back and wound our way off road since. The sun was threatening to rise. The ground was covered in glittering, soft snow.

‘Here’ll do,’ said Michael. ‘You okay?’

I nodded. Or at least I thought I did. I mustn’t have moved at all, because Michael snapped his fingers in front of my face, forcing me to focus. I summoned the weakest nod in human history, as if my vertebrae were rusted shackles. It was enough for Michael.

‘Don’t get out,’ he said.

I stared straight ahead. I heard him open the back passenger door and shuffle around, dragging the man – a hole in the world – out of the car. My brain was screaming at me to do something, but my body was a traitor. I couldn’t move.

After a few minutes Michael came back, sweating, dirt on his forehead, and leaned in over the steering wheel. ‘Come help me dig.’

My limbs unlocked at his bidding. I expected the ground to be cold, to hear the crunch of morning ice, but my foot instead went straight through the white cover, up to my ankle. I looked closely. The ground wasn’t snow coated, it was blanketed in spider webs. The webs were strung between high stiff grass, maybe a foot

off the ground, crossing over each other in such a thickness and with such a pure white, it looked solid. What I had thought was glittering ice was the twinkle of fine threads in the light. Michael's footsteps had punched through the net like holes in powder. The webs covered the entire clearing. It was majestic, serene. I tried to ignore the lumpy shape in the middle of the webbed clearing, where Michael's footprints ended. I followed Michael, and it was like wading through a levitating fog. He led me away from the body, presumably so I wouldn't have a breakdown.

Michael had a small trowel but he made me use my hands. I don't know why I agreed to dig. The whole drive, I'd thought that Michael's fear, that small dose of shakes he'd shown when we'd left, would settle in. There was supposed to be a moment when he would realise what he was up to his neck in and turn the car around. But instead he went the other way. Driving out of the city, into the dawn, he'd become calmer, stoic.

Michael had laid an old towel over most of the body, but I could see a white elbow, sticking out like a fallen branch above the webs.

'Don't look,' Michael would say whenever I glanced over.

We kept going for another fifteen minutes in silence until I stopped.

'Keep digging,' Michael said.

'He's moving.'

'What?'

'*He's moving!* Look. Wait.'

Sure enough, the webbed surface was twitching. More significant than wind through the clearing. The impression had changed from solid snow to a rippling white ocean. I could almost feel it through the threads, like I was the spider that spun it, the central nerve.

Michael stopped digging and looked up. 'Go back to the car.'

'No.'

Michael walked over and peeled off the towel. I followed, and saw the body in full for the first time. There was a dark glistening stain above one hip. *Someone shot him, then I hit him*, Michael had said. I wasn't sure; I'd only seen gunshots in the movies. The man's neck had a lump in it as if he'd swallowed a golf ball. He was wearing a black balaclava, but it wasn't quite the right shape. The fabric was bulbous in the wrong places. When I was a kid, a bully at my school used to put two cricket balls in a sock and swing it at me. That's what the balaclava looked like. I got the feeling the fabric was the only thing holding his head together. It had three holes, two for the eyes, which were closed, and one for the mouth. There were small red bubbles pooled on his lips, pulsing. The froth of bubbles was growing, spilling onto his chin. I couldn't see any of his features, but I could tell from his mottled, sun-damaged arms and the engorged veins across the backs of his hands that he was at least twenty years older than Michael.

I knelt, interlocked my hands, and gave a couple of rudimentary compressions. The man's chest caved in a way I knew it shouldn't, right down the sternum, and for a moment all I could think of was that his chest was like the bag of money, unzipped down the middle.

'You're hurting him,' Michael said, putting his hand under my arm and pulling me up, before guiding me away.

'We have to take him to the hospital.' I made one last, pleading stand.

'He won't make it.'

'He might.'

'He won't.'

'We have to try.'

'I can't go to the hospital.'

'Lucy will understand.'

'No.'

'You must have sobered up by now.'

‘Maybe.’

‘You didn’t kill him – you said he was shot. Is the money his?’

Michael grunted.

‘He clearly stole it. This makes sense. You’ll be okay.’

‘It’s two hundred and sixty grand.’

Reader, you and I already know it’s actually two hundred and sixty-seven grand, but it still struck me that while he hadn’t had time to call an ambulance, he’d had time to roughly count the cash. Otherwise he’d have said two-fifty, a round figure, if he was guessing. He’d also said it like an appeal. I couldn’t tell from his tone if he was offering me any, or if he was just stating a fact that he thought was important to the decision.

‘Listen, Ern, it’s our money . . .’ he started to beg. So he *was* offering.

‘We can’t just leave him here like this.’ And then as firmly as I’d ever spoken to him in my life, ‘I won’t.’

Michael thought for a minute. Nodded. ‘I’ll go check on him,’ he said.

He walked over and crouched by the body. He was there a couple of minutes. I was glad I’d come; I still believe it was a good thing to do. An older brother doesn’t listen too easily to his younger brother, but he’d needed me here. And I’d made it okay. The man had been alive the whole time, and we’d get him to the hospital. I couldn’t see much, Michael being tall, but I could see his squatted back and his arms, stretched out towards the man’s head because he knew to cradle the neck in case of a spinal injury. Michael’s thin shoulders moved up and down. CPR, kick-starting the man like a lawnmower. I could see the man’s legs. I noticed one of his shoes was missing. Michael had been there a long time now. Something was wrong. We’re on page 14.

Michael stood and walked back over to me. ‘We can bury him now.’

That wasn't what he was supposed to say. No. No. That was all wrong. I stumbled back and thumped onto my arse. Sticky threads snaked my arms. 'What happened?'

'He just stopped breathing.'

'He just stopped breathing?'

'He just stopped.'

'He's dead?'

'Yes.'

'You're sure?'

'Yes.'

'How?'

'He just stopped breathing. Go wait in the car.'

MY STEPSISTER

CHAPTER 2

We'll get to my story, I have to tell you about some others first, but I wish *I'd* killed whoever decided our family reunion should be at a ski resort.

I am normally resolute in declining any invitation that comes with an Excel spreadsheet attached. But over-preparation is a specialty of my Aunt Katherine's, and the email invite for the Cunningham/Garcia Family Reunion, complete with animated pixel snowflake, listed attendance as mandatory. I'm well known in family circles for being ready with an excuse – not that people have really minded my absence for the last three years – be it a sick animal, a busted car, or a time-sensitive manuscript.

Katherine was taking no chances this time. The invitation promised a fun and secluded weekend where all of us could catch up. She'd bolded the words *all of us*, as well as the word *mandatory*. Evasive as I am, even I can't argue with bold type. And while *all of us* didn't mean me specifically, I knew who it did mean, and that meant I was going. Besides, in between filling out the spreadsheet with my allergies, shoe size, how I like my steak cooked and my car numberplate, I'd allowed myself the fantasy

of a snow-capped village and a weekend filled with crackling fires and log cabins.

Instead, I had cold knees and was an hour late for lunch.

I hadn't realised the road would be unploughed. It was a clear day with a weak sun breaking up the pack snow just enough to slide the tyres of my Honda Civic around, so I'd had to double back and rent chains for an exorbitant price at the bottom of the mountain, and then kneel in muddy slush on the shoulder to wrestle them on, snot forming stalactites out of my nose. I'd still be there if a woman with a snorkel on her Land Rover hadn't pulled over and given me a mildly judgemental hand. Moving again, I watched the clock creep forward as I alternated between heating the car and using the air-conditioning to defog the windows, but, with the chains on, I couldn't go above forty. I knew exactly how late I was – thanks to the Excel schedule Katherine had emailed around.

At last I saw the turn, a pyramid of loose rocks with a sign for *Sky Lodge Mountain Retreat!* pointing to my right. I imagined the sign had a comma, so it instead read, *Sky Lodge Mountain, Retreat!*, which I thought was good advice ahead of a Cunningham get-together. I had no one in the car to tell my joke to, but it's the type of thing Erin would have found funny once, so she laughed in my head and I took credit for it anyway. I'm aware that it's cute that our names, Ernie and Erin, are practically anagrams. When people used to ask us how we met, we'd say, 'Alphabetically.' I know, it's sickening.

The truth is much more mundane; we'd bonded over being brought up in single-parent households. When we met, she told me her mother had died of cancer when she was young, and she was raised by her father. I'll tell you about my father later. But she already knew about him when we met; infamy is easy to google.

At the turn-off was a squat building that looked like a pub, based on the sign that just said *BEER!* in house-paint. There were stacks of skis leaning against the wall. It was the type of place where

you could lick the windows instead of buying a drink and the sous chef was a microwave. I filed it away as a potential refuge. The weekend was a family reunion, after all; I expected it to be a series of meals scheduled around tactical retreats to private rooms. It would pay to have other options.

Oh. Erin's not dead, by the way. I realise in making an oblique reference to an old flame, it sounds like I'll reveal later on that she's been dead the whole time, because that's what happens in *these* kinds of books, but that's not the case. She was driving up the next day. We were even still technically married. Besides, the page numbers don't line up.

Not long after the turn I realised I was no longer climbing, but going downhill, and soon I broke through the trees to find myself on the ridge of a spectacular valley, at the base of which lay Sky Lodge. Advertised as the highest drive-in accommodation in Australia, which, to be fair, is like bragging about being the world's tallest jockey, it included a nine-hole golf course carved into the mountain-side, a lake brimming with trout to fish from or row across, whatever *fireside comfort and rejuvenation* meant, access to the neighbouring ski resort (lift pass not included with stay, of course), and even a private helipad. I'm quoting from the brochure, because it had snowed heavily overnight and everything, from the road in front of me, to the now par-400 golf course, to the flattened-out tundra a couple of hundred metres downhill from the guesthouse that I assumed was the lake, lay under the same fresh powder. The valley looked both flat, steep, small and endless at the same time.

I gently rolled down the hill, taking it easy. Pure white has a habit of messing with depth perception, and without the small collection of half-buried buildings at the bottom for reference I might not have even noticed the steepness of the incline until braking would have been futile, locking me into a rapid skid to the bottom: where I would have wound up both very dead and very on time for lunch.

The centre of the retreat was a multi-storey guesthouse, painted bright yellow to stand out from the mountain, with a pillared entryway. It puffed smoke from a brick chimney that braced a side wall like a rod, and it had an advertiser's dream amount of snow dappled on the roof. Within the five rows of windows, several glowed with soft yellow light, like an advent calendar. The guesthouse was preceded by a gauntlet of a dozen chalets, built in two rows of six, with corrugated iron roofs that reached all the way to the ground, matching the slope of the mountain, allowing floor-to-ceiling windows on the front face, for unimpeded views of the rocky peak. I would be staying in one of these shark's teeth, but I wasn't sure which one was number 6, my designation on Katherine's itinerary, so I rolled through to where several cars were parked to the side of the guesthouse.

I recognised a few of them: my stepfather's Mercedes SUV, which had a dishonest BABY ON BOARD sign in the back window, because he thought cops pulled him over less frequently with it; Aunt Katherine's Volvo station wagon, snow-bogged already because she'd driven up a day earlier; Lucy's [REDACTED CAR TYPE], blending in with the snow, the car so often Instagrammed and gloated about as her 'business reward'. My rescuer's Land Rover was also there – of course it was; in a book like this it may as well have had the numberplate 'M33T-QT'. I recognised it from the large plastic snorkel.

Katherine was steaming across the lot before I'd gotten out of the car, leaning into a slight limp caused by a car accident in her mid-twenties. She was the dictionary definition of Baby Sister to my father, the age gap so significant that when my mother pumped out us Cunningham Boys in her thirties, I was closer in age to my aunt than my mother was to her sister-in-law. So, growing up, I remember Katherine as youthful, energetic and fun. She'd bring us presents and regale us with fantastic stories. I thought she was popular, too,

because people would talk about her at family barbecues when she wasn't there. But age gives perspective, and now I know the difference between being popular and being talked about. Intervention came in the form of a wet road and a bus stop. The accident broke a lot of her bones and crumpled her leg, but it also straightened her out. Now, the only thing you really need to know about Katherine is that her two favourite sentences are 'What time do you call this?' and 're: my previous email'.

She wore a bright-blue thermal top under a puffy North Face vest, some type of rustling waterproof pants, and hiking boots that looked stiff as stale bread. All pristine and straight off the rack. She looked like she'd walked into an adventure store, pointed at a mannequin and said, 'That one.' Her husband, Andrew Millot (but we all call him Andy), who had followed her out but kept his distance, was woefully underdressed in jeans and a leather jacket, looking as if he'd spent his time in the same adventure store checking his watch. Without grabbing my bags or my coat, deciding that it was better to be lashed by cold air than Katherine's tongue, I hurried to intercept her.

'We've eaten,' was all she said, which I think was supposed to be both criticism and punishment.

'Katherine, I'm sorry. I had trouble on the mountain past Jindabyne. Fresh snow.' I pointed back at the chains on my tyres. 'Luckily someone helped me put these on.'

'You didn't check the forecast before you left?' She sounded incredulous that anyone would commit such treason to punctuality as to not account for the weather.

I admitted that I hadn't.

'You should have factored that in.'

I admitted that I should have.

She ground her jaw. I knew Katherine well enough to know that she just wanted to have her say, so I stayed silent. 'All right then,'

she said eventually, then leaned in and planted an icy kiss on my cheek. I have never known how to reciprocate a cheek-to-cheek greeting, but I decided to take her advice and factor in the weather – her stormy demeanour – and settled on a *mwah* sound in the air beside her face. She pressed a set of keys into my hand and said, ‘Our room wasn’t ready yesterday so you’re in Four now. Everyone’s in the dining room. Good to see you.’

She took off back towards the guesthouse before I could make small talk, but Andy waited and walked with me, offering me a casual shoulder lean of *hello* rather than taking his hands from his pockets to shake my hand. The cold was bracing, but I was committed to socialising now so my jacket had to languish in the car. The wind was cruel; it found every crevasse in my clothes, invaded and patted me down like I owed it money.

‘Sorry about that,’ Andy offered. ‘You should go easy on her.’ That was Andy in a nutshell, wanting both a blokey alliance and to stick up for his wife: the type of guy who says, ‘Yes, honey,’ at a dinner party but then wobbles his head and goes, ‘*Pfft*, women, right?’ when she’s in the loo. His nose was red, but it was hard to tell if the cause was alcohol or temperature, and his glasses were slightly fogged up. His short, jet-black goatee sat on his face like it had been taken hostage from a younger man; he was in his early fifties.

‘I didn’t do a rain dance last night just to piss her off,’ I said.

‘I know, mate. It’s just a tricky weekend for everyone. So, you know, you don’t have to make fun of her for trying to make it a little easier.’ He paused. ‘Not a big deal, hey – don’t let it get in the way of us sinking a few beers this trip.’

‘I didn’t make fun of her. I’m just late.’ I could see my stepsister, Sofia, having a cigarette on the porch as we approached. She raised her eyebrows as if to say, *it’s worse inside*.

Andy took a few steps in silence, and though I inwardly begged him not to, drew a breath and said, ‘Yeah, but,’ and I decided there’s

nothing sadder than a man trying to stick up for a woman who can stick up for herself, ‘she put a lot of work into those invites, and you didn’t have to make fun of her spreadsheets.’

‘I didn’t say anything.’

‘Not now. When you sent it back. Under allergies you wrote “spreadsheets”.’

‘Oh,’ I said. Sofia overheard and scoffed, ejecting a plume of smoke out her nose. Erin, who’s not dead, would have liked that one too. Andy didn’t need to say aloud what I’d written under ‘Next of kin’ – *it’s a family reunion, so anyone here, unless Avalanche* – for me to feel a right arse. I conceded. ‘I’ll go easy.’

Andy smiled, pleased that his husbandly virtues, if not affectionate, were at least box-ticking.

He headed inside, miming a drink as he left to imply that he’d order me one, affirming our laddish allegiance, while I stopped to say hello to Sofia. Being Ecuadorian, from steamy Guayaquil, she hated the cold, and I saw at least three collars around her neck beneath the coat on top. Her head looked like the bud of a flower, poking out from a ring of collared petals. Even rugged up, one arm was wrapped across her waist to hug herself warm. I knew I was better accustomed to cold than she was, having plunged myself into various ice baths over the years (fun fact: apparently low temperatures increase male fertility), but I didn’t wish to linger in conversation, the cold was burrowing into me.

She offered her cigarette to me, though she knew I didn’t smoke; it’s just something she always liked to do. I waved away the smoke.

‘Good start,’ she said, mocking.

‘Make friends early, I always say.’

‘Glad you’re finally here. I was waiting for you to rescue me – I knew you’d distract everyone. Here.’ She handed me a small, square piece of cardboard, which had a grid printed on it. Inside each box was a short phrase, relating to different family members:

Marcelo shouts at a Waiter; Lucy tries to SELL you anything. I spotted my name – *Ernest ruins something* – in the middle left column.

‘Bingo?’ I asked, reading the heading: *Reunion Bingo*.

‘Thought it would be fun. Just made them for you and me.’ She held her card up; I could see it had a cross already on it. ‘Everyone else is too sour.’ She wrinkled her nose.

I snatched the card from her. It had different statements to mine, as well as a couple of generic events. The grammar was all over the place, random caps for emphasis, absurd parentheses, no full stops. Some were more tongue-in-cheek than others. I could be relied on to be tardy, just as Marcelo could be relied on to chew out hospitality staff, but the bottom right square said: *Avalanche*. I looked back at mine; the same spot said: *Broken Bone (OR Someone Dies)* with an incongruous smiley face. The square that Sofia had already crossed through read: *Ernest is late*.

‘Not fair.’ I gave it back to her.

‘You better catch up. Shall we?’

I nodded. Sofia finished her smoke and flicked the butt off the porch into the snow. But against the sparse, fresh white, it was glaringly out of place. She gave me a forlorn look and then trudged off the porch, bent down and picked it up, pocketing it.

‘You know,’ she said, leading me inside, ‘you’ll have to play nice if you want to make it out of this weekend alive.’

I swear to God she actually said that. And she even winked at me. As if she’s the one telling the damn story.

CHAPTER 3

The guesthouse itself was a hunting lodge masquerading as the Ritz: every surface, banister, and door handle had ornate polished-wood accents; there was soft lighting from wall-mounted electric lamps made of frosted glass moulded into flowers, and the foyer even had a red carpet, complete with a chandelier hanging low from the roof, glittering beside the second-floor walkway. In fact, everything from the waist up was almost elegant enough to make up for the snow-damaged lower half: the hotel equivalent of taking a pantsless video call in a collared shirt. The carpets, well-worn from stomped snow-caked shoes, sat atop a swollen wooden floor that creaked like it wasn't quite nailed down, and the patchwork rugs and hastily plastered mice holes evidenced a building maintained by the motto that it was easier to find quick fixes than to get a tradie up the mountain. Not to mention the damp. The whole place smelled like my car after I'd left my sunroof open during a thunderstorm. Altitude adds several stars to a hotel rating, and while this was a two scraping by as a four, it had a cosy charm.

Conversation evaporated upon my entry to the dining room, where everyone was midway through dessert, and I was greeted