

Prologue

January 2015

Discarded medical equipment litters the floor: surgical tools blistered with rust, broken bottles, jars, the scratched spine of an old invalid chair. A torn mattress sits slumped against the wall, bile-yellow stains pocking the surface.

Hand clamped tight around his briefcase, Daniel Lemaitre feels a sharp wave of revulsion: it's as if time has taken over the building's soul, left something rotten and diseased in its place.

He moves quickly down the corridor, footsteps echoing on the tiled floor.

Keep your eyes on the door. Don't look back.

But the decaying objects pull at his gaze, each one telling stories. It doesn't take much to imagine the people who'd stayed here, coughing up their lungs.

Sometimes he thinks he can even smell it, what this place used to be – the sharp, acrid scent of chemicals still lingering in the air from the old operating wards.

Daniel's halfway down the corridor when he stops.

A movement in the room opposite – a dark, distorted blur. His stomach drops. He stares, motionless, his gaze picking over the shadowy contents of the room – a slew of papers scattered

across the floor, the contorted tubes of a breathing apparatus, a broken bedframe, frayed restraints hanging loose.

His skin is prickling with tension, but nothing happens. The building is quiet, still.

He exhales heavily, starts walking again.

Don't be stupid, he tells himself. *You're tired. Too many late nights, early mornings.*

Reaching the front door, Daniel pulls it open. The wind howls angrily, jerking it back on its hinges. As he steps forward, he's blinded by an icy gust of snowflakes, but it's a relief to be outside.

The sanatorium unnerves him. Though he knows what it will become – has sketched every door, window and light switch of the new hotel – at the moment he can't help but react to its past, what it used to be.

The exterior isn't much better, he thinks, glancing up. The stark, rectangular structure is mottled with snow. It's decaying, neglected – the balconies and balustrades, the long verandah, crumbled and rotting. A few windows are still intact, but most are boarded up, ugly squares of chipboard studding the facade.

Daniel thinks about the contrast with his own home in Vevey, overlooking the lake. The contemporary blockish design is constructed mostly of glass to take in panoramic views of the water. It has a rooftop terrace, a small mooring.

He designed it all.

With the image comes Jo, his wife. She'll have just got back from work, her mind still churning over advertising budgets, briefs, already corralling the kids into doing their homework.

He imagines her in the kitchen, preparing dinner, auburn hair falling across her face as she efficiently chops and slices. It'll be something easy – pasta, fish, stir-fry. Neither of them is good at the domestics.

The thought buoys him, but only momentarily. As he crosses

the car park Daniel feels the first flickers of trepidation about the drive home.

The sanatorium wasn't easy to get to in the best of weather, its position isolated, high among the mountains. This was a deliberate choice, engineered to keep the tuberculosis patients away from the smog of the towns and cities and keep the rest of the population away from them.

But the remote location meant the road leading to it was nightmarish, a series of hairpin bends cutting through a dense forest of firs. On the drive up this morning the road itself was barely visible – snowflakes hurling themselves at the wind-screen like icy white darts, making it impossible to see more than a few metres ahead.

Daniel's nearly at the car when his foot catches on something – the tattered remains of a placard, half covered by snow. The letters are crude, daubed in red.

NON AUX TRAVAUX!! NO TO BUILDING WORKS!!

Anger spiking, Daniel tramples it underfoot. The protestors had been here last week. Over fifty of them, shouting abuse, waving their gaudy placards in his face. It had been filmed on mobile phones, shared on social media.

That was just one of the endless battles they'd had to fight to bring this project to fruition. People claimed they wanted progress, the tourist francs that followed, but when it came down to actually building, they balked.

Daniel knew why. People don't like a winner.

It's what his father had said to him once, and it was true. The locals had been proud at the start. They'd approved of his small successes – the shopping mall in Sion, the apartment block in Sierre overlooking the Rhone – but then he'd become *too much*, hadn't he? Too much of a success, a personality.

Daniel got the feeling that, in their eyes, he'd had his share

of the pie and was now being greedy by taking more. Only thirty-three, and his architectural practice is thriving – offices in Sion, Lausanne, Geneva. One planned for Zurich.

It was the same with Lucas, the property developer and one of his oldest friends. Mid-thirties, and he already owned three landmark hotels.

People resented them for their success.

And this project had been the nail in the coffin. They'd had it all: online trolls, emails, letters to the office. Planning objections.

They came for him first. Rumours began circulating on local blogs and social media that the business was struggling. Then they'd started on Lucas. Similar stories, stories he could easily dismiss, but one in particular stuck.

It bothered Daniel, more than he cared to admit.

Talk of bribes. Corruption.

Daniel had tried to speak to Lucas about it, but his friend had shut the conversation down. The thought nags at him, an itch, like so many things on this project, but he forces the thought away. He has to ignore it. Focus on the end result. This hotel will cement his reputation. Lucas's drive and his compulsion for detail have propelled Daniel to a spectacularly ambitious design, an end-point he hadn't thought possible.

Daniel reaches the car. The windscreen is thick with fresh snow; too much for the wipers. He'll have to scrape it off.

But as he reaches into his pocket for his key he notices something.

A bracelet, lying beside the front tyre.

He bends down, picks it up. It's thin and made of copper. Daniel twists it between his fingers. He can make out a row of numbers engraved on the interior . . . a date?

Daniel frowns. It has to belong to someone who'd been up there today, surely? Otherwise it would already be covered in snow.

But what were they doing so close to his car?

Images of the protestors flicker through his mind, their angry, jeering faces.

Could it be them?

Daniel makes himself take a long, deep breath, but as he pushes the bracelet into his pocket he catches a glimpse of something: a movement behind the ridge of snow that's built up against the wall of the car park.

A hazy profile.

His palms are sweaty around his key fob. Pushing down hard on the fob to open the boot, he freezes as he looks up.

A figure, standing in front of him, positioned between him and his car.

Daniel stares, briefly paralysed, his brain frantically trying to process what he's seeing – how could someone have moved so quickly towards him without him noticing?

The figure is dressed in black. Something is covering their face.

It resembles a gas mask; the same basic form, but it's missing the filter at the front. Instead, there's a thick rubber hose running from mouth to nose. A connector. The hose is ribbed, black; it quivers as the figure shifts from foot to foot.

The effect is horrifying. Monstrous. Something scraped from the darkest depths of the unconscious mind.

Think, he tells himself, *think*. His brain starts churning through possibilities, ways to make this something innocuous, benign. It's a prank, that's all: one of the protestors, trying to scare him.

Then the figure steps towards him. A precise, controlled movement.

All Daniel can see is the lurid magnified close-up of the black rubber stretched across the face. The ribbed lines of the hose. Then he hears the breathing; a strange, wet sucking sound coming from the mask. Liquid exhalations.

His heart is pounding against his ribcage.

‘What is this?’ Daniel says, hearing the fear in his voice. A tremble he tries to stamp out. ‘Who are you? What are you trying to do?’ A drip trickles down his face. Snow melting against the heat of his skin, or sweat? He can’t tell.

Come on, he tells himself. *Get control of yourself*. It’s some stupid prick messing around.

Just walk past and get into your car.

It’s then, from this angle, that he notices another car. A car that wasn’t there when he arrived. A black pick-up. A Nissan.

Come on, Daniel. Move.

But his body is frozen, refusing to obey. All he can do is listen to the strange breathing sound coming from the mask. It’s louder now, faster, more laboured.

A soft sucking noise and then a high-pitched whistle.

Over and over.

The figure lurches closer, something in their hand. A knife? Daniel can’t make it out. The thick gloves they’re wearing are concealing most of it.

Move, move.

He manages to propel himself forwards, one step, then two, but fear makes his muscles seize. He stumbles in the snow, right foot sliding out from under him.

By the time he straightens it’s too late: the gloved hand clamps over his mouth. Daniel can smell the stale mustiness of the glove but also the mask – the curious burnt-plastic odour of rubber, laced with something else.

Something familiar.

But before his brain can make the connection something pierces his thigh. A single, sharp pain. His thoughts scatter, then his mind goes quiet.

A quiet that, within seconds, tips over into nothingness.

***Press Release – under embargo until
midnight, 5 March 2018***

Le Sommet
Hauts de Plumachit
Crans-Montana 3963
Valais
Switzerland

**5-STAR HOTEL SET TO OPEN IN THE SWISS
RESORT OF CRANS-MONTANA**

Located on a sunny mountain plateau above Crans-Montana, high in the Swiss Alps, Le Sommet is the brainchild of Swiss property developer Lucas Caron.

After eight years of extensive planning and construction, one of the town's oldest sanatoriums is set to reopen as a luxury hotel.

The main building was designed in the late nineteenth century by Caron's great-grandfather Pierre. It became renowned worldwide as a centre for treating tuberculosis before the advent of antibiotics forced its diversification.

More recently, it gained international recognition for its innovative architecture, earning the elder Caron a posthumous Swiss Arts award in 1942. Combining clean lines with large panoramic windows, flat roofs and unadorned geometrical shapes, one judge described the building as ‘groundbreaking – purpose-designed to fulfil its function as a hospital while also creating a seamless transition between the interior and exterior landscapes’.

Lucas Caron said: ‘It was time we breathed new life into this building. We were confident that, with the right vision, we could create a sensitively restored hotel that would pay homage to its rich past.’

Under the guidance of Swiss architectural firm Lemaitre SA, a team has been assembled to renovate the building and also add a state-of-the-art spa and events centre.

Subtly refurbished, Le Sommet will make innovative use of natural, local materials such as wood, slate and stone. The hotel’s elegant modern interiors will not only echo the powerful topography outside but will draw on the building’s past to create a new narrative.

Philippe Volkem, CEO of Valais Tourism, said, ‘This will doubtless be the jewel in the crown of what is already one of the finest winter resorts in the world.’

For press enquiries, please contact Lemans PR, Lausanne.

For general enquiries/bookings, please visit www.lesommetcransmontana.ch.

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January 2020
Day one

The funicular from the valley town of Siere to Crans-Montana scores a near-perfect vertical line up the mountainside.

Slicing through snow-covered vineyards and the small towns of Venthône, Chermignon, Mollens, Randogne and Bluche, the route, over four kilometres long, takes passengers over 900 metres up the mountain in just twelve minutes.

Off-peak, the funicular is usually half empty. Most people drive up the mountain or take the bus. But today, with the roads almost stationary thanks to heavy traffic, it's full.

Elin Warner stands on the left of the packed carriage, absorbing it all: the fat flakes of snow collecting on the windows, the slush-covered floor piled high with bags, the lanky teenagers shoving through the doors.

Her shoulders tense. She's forgotten how kids that age can be: selfish, unaware of anyone but themselves.

A sodden sleeve brushes her cheek. She smells damp, cigarettes, fried food, the musky-citrus tang of cheap aftershave. Then comes a throaty cough. Laughter.

A group of men are jostling through the doorway, talking loudly, bulging North Face sports bags on their backs. They are

squeezing the family next to her further into the carriage. Into her. An arm rubs hers, beer-breath hot against her neck.

Panic pushes through her. Her heart is racing, thudding against her ribcage.

Will it ever stop?

It's been a year since the Hayler case, and she's still thinking about it, dreaming about it. Waking up in the night, sheets damp with sweat, the dream vivid in her head: the hand around her throat, damp walls contracting, closing in on her.

Then saltwater; frothing, sloshing over her mouth, her nose . . .

Control it, she tells herself, forcing herself to read the graffiti on the wall of the funicular.

Don't let it control you.

Her eyes dance over the scrawled letters weaving up the metal:

Michel 2010
BISOUS XXX
HELENE & RIC 2016

Following the words up to the window, she startles. Her reflection . . . it pains her to look at it. She's thin. Too thin.

It's as if someone's hollowed her out, carved the very core of her away. Her cheekbones are knife-sharp, her slanted blue-grey eyes wider, more pronounced. Even the choppy mess of pale blonde hair, the blur of the scar on her upper lip, don't soften her appearance.

She's been training non-stop since her mother's death. Ten-K runs. Pilates. Weights. Cycling on the coast road between Torquay and Exeter in the blistering wind and rain.

It's too much, but she doesn't know how to stop, even if she

should. It's all she's got; the only tactic to chase away what's inside her head.

Elin turns away. Sweat pricks the back of her neck. Looking at Will, she tries to concentrate on his face, the familiar shadow of stubble grazing his chin, the untamable dark blond tufts of his hair. 'Will, I'm feeling hot . . .'

His features contract. She can see the blueprint of future wrinkles in this anxious face, a starburst of lines around his eyes, light creases running across his forehead.

'You okay?'

Elin shakes her head, tears pricking her eyes. 'I don't feel right.'

Will lowers his voice. 'About this, or . . .'

She knows what he's trying to say: *Isaac*. It's both; him, the panic . . . they're intertwined, connected.

'I don't know.' Her throat feels tight. 'I keep going over it, you know, the invitation, out of the blue. Maybe coming was the wrong decision. I should have thought about it more, or at least spoken to him properly before we let him book.'

'It's not too late. We can always go back. Say I had problems with work.' Smiling, Will nudges his glasses up his nose with his forefinger. 'This might count as the shortest ever holiday on record, but who cares?'

Elin forces herself to return his smile, a quiet sting of devastation at the contrast between then and now. How easily he's accepted this: the new normal.

It's the opposite of when they first met. Back then, she was peaking; that's how she thinks of it now. At the pinnacle of her early-thirty-something life.

She'd just bought her first flat near the beach, the top floor of an old Victorian villa. Bijou, but high ceilings, views of a tiny square of sea.

Work was going well – she'd been promoted to DS, landed a big case, an important one – and her mother was responding well to the first round of chemo. She thought she was on top of her grief for Sam, dealing with it, but now . . .

Her life has contracted. Closed down to become something that would have been unrecognizable to her a few years ago.

The doors are closing now, thick glass panels sliding together.

With a jolt, the funicular lurches upwards, away from the station, accelerating.

Elin closes her eyes, but that only makes it worse. Every sound, every judder, is magnified behind her eyelids.

She opens her eyes to see the landscape flashing by: blurry streaks of snow-covered vineyards, chalets, shops.

Her head swims. 'I want to get out.'

'What?' Will turns. He tries to mask it, but she can hear the frustration in his voice.

'I need to get out.'

The funicular pulls into a tunnel. They plunge into darkness and a woman whoops.

Elin breathes in, slowly, carefully, but she can feel it coming – that sense of impending doom. All at once, her blood feels sticky moving through her yet also like it's rushing everywhere at the same time.

More breaths. Slower, as she'd taught herself. *In for four, hold, then out for seven.*

It's not enough. Her throat contracts. Her breath is coming shallow now, fast. Her lungs are fighting, desperately trying to drag in oxygen.

'Your inhaler,' Will urges. 'Where is it?'

Scrabbling in her pocket, she pulls it out, pushes down: *good*. She presses again, feels the rush of gas hit the back of her throat, reach her windpipe.

Within minutes, her breathing regulates.

But when her head clears they're there, in her mind's eye.

Her brothers. Isaac. Sam.

Images, on loop.

She sees soft child faces, cheeks smattered with freckles. The same wide-set blue eyes, but while Isaac's are cold, unnerving in their intensity, Sam's fizz with energy, a spark that draws people in.

Elin blinks, unable to stop herself thinking about the last time she saw those eyes – vacant, lifeless, that spark . . . snuffed out.

She turns to the window but can't unsee the images from her past: Isaac, smiling at her; that familiar smirk. He holds up his hands, but the five splayed fingers are covered in blood.

Elin extends her hand, but she can't reach him. She never can.

2

The hotel minibus is waiting in the small car park at the top of the funicular. It's a sleek dark grey, the smoky tint of its windows smeared with snow.

Discreet silver lettering is etched on to the bottom left of the door: *le sommet*. The letters are lower case, understated, a fine, blocky font.

Elin allows herself to feel the first twinge of excitement. Up until this point she's been carelessly dismissive of the hotel in conversations with friends:

Pretentious.

Style over substance.

In truth, she'd carefully peeled off Isaac's Post-it, taking pleasure in the pristine brochure beneath, running her fingers over the thick matt cardboard of the cover, savouring the novelty of each minimalist page.

She'd felt something strange, an unfamiliar mix of excitement and envy, a sense of having missed out on something indefinable, something she wasn't even aware that she wanted.

In contrast, Will had been openly effusive, raving about the architecture, the design. He'd scoured the pages then gone straight online to read more.

Over lamb madras that night, he'd quoted details at her about the interior design: 'influenced by Joseph Dirand' . . . 'a

new kind of minimalism, echoing the building's history' . . .
'Creating a narrative.'

She's always been amazed by Will's capacity for absorbing this kind of intricate detail and fact. It makes her feel safe, somehow, secure – sure that he has all the answers.

'Miss Warner . . . Mr Riley?'

Elin turns. A tall, wiry man is striding towards them. He's wearing a grey fleece embossed with the same silver lettering.

le sommet

'That's us.' Will smiles. There's an awkward fumble as the man reaches for her suitcase at the same time as Will, before Will extracts himself.

'Trip okay?' the driver asks. 'Where have you come from?' Scooping up the cases, the man hoists them into the back of the minibus.

Elin looks to Will to fill the gaps. She finds small talk like this an effort.

'South Devon. Flight was on time . . . never happens. I said to Elin that it's Swiss timekeeping keeping easyJet on point.' Will smiles – dark eyes rueful, eyebrows raised. 'Shit, that sounded clichéd, right?'

The man laughs. This is Will's *modus operandi* with strangers – neutralize them with a mix of sheer enthusiasm and self-deprecation. People are invariably disarmed, then charmed. Will makes moments like this . . . easy. But then, she thinks, hovering behind him, that's what first attracted her to him – it's his thing, isn't it?

Effortless.

To him, nothing's insurmountable. There's no bravado in it, it's just how his mind works – rapidly breaking an issue down into logical, manageable chunks. A list, some research, a phone call or two – answers found, problem solved. For her, even easy,

everyday things become something to be agonized over until they swell out of all proportion.

Take this trip: she'd stressed over the flight – the close proximity to other people at the airport and on the plane, the possible turbulence, delays.

Even the packing had bothered her. It wasn't just the fact she'd needed to buy new stuff but the questions over *what* she should buy – what weather eventualities should be covered, the most suitable brands.

As a result, everything of hers is brand new, and feels like it. Pushing her finger down her trousers, she tucks in the itchy label she meant to lop off at home.

Will had simply thrown things in his bag. It had taken less than fifteen minutes, but he still somehow manages to look the part: battered hiking boots, black Patagonia puffa jacket, North Face trousers just the right side of worn in.

Somehow, though, their differences complement each other. Will accepts her and her foibles, and Elin's acutely aware that not everyone would. She's grateful.

With an expansive, easy gesture the driver slides open the door. Elin clammers inside, casting a sidelong glance at the back.

One of the families from the funicular is already there: a pair of glossy-haired teenage girls, heads down, watching something on a tablet. The mother is holding a magazine. The father, thumb to screen, is scrolling through his phone.

Elin and Will settle into the middle two seats. 'Better?' Will says softly.

It is: clean leather seats, no loud, abrupt voices. And best of all, a marked absence of damp bodies packed tight against hers.

The bus crawls forwards. Turning right, it bumps over the uneven ground and out of the car park.

Moving slowly, they reach the end of the road and come to

a fork. The driver takes the right turn, windscreen wipers moving rapidly to dislodge the falling snow.

All's fine until they meet the first bend. With one quick movement the bus swings round to face the opposite direction.

As the bus straightens with a jerk, Elin stiffens.

The road is no longer flanked with snow or trees, not even a strip of grassy verge. Instead, it's clinging to the very edge of the mountain, with only a thin metal barrier between her and the vertiginous drop to the valley floor below.

Beside her, she feels Will tense, knowing what he'll do next: try to cloak his unease with laughter, a low whistle between his teeth. 'Bloody hell, wouldn't fancy my chances driving this at night.'

'No choice. It's the only way to get to the hotel.' The driver glances at them in the rear-view mirror. 'It puts some people off coming.'

'Really?' Will puts a hand on her knee, presses too hard and gives another forced laugh.

The driver nods. 'There's forums about it online. Kids have put videos up on YouTube, filmed themselves going round the bends, screaming. The camera angles make it look worse than it is. They stick their phone out of the window, point it over the edge, down the drop . . .' His words fall away as he looks intently at the road ahead. 'This is the worst part. Once we're through this . . .'

As she looks up, Elin's stomach plummets. The road has narrowed further, now barely wide enough to take the mini-bus. The tarmac is a murky white-grey, shiny with ice in places. She forces herself to look straight, towards the ragged horizon of snow-capped peaks ahead.

It's over in a matter of minutes. As the road opens up Will's grip on her leg eases. Fiddling with his phone, he starts taking photographs through the window, forehead creased in concentration.

Elin smiles, touched by the care he's taking. He's been waiting for this moment – the views of the landscape, the first glimpse of the hotel. She knows these images will be toyed with on his laptop later. Critiqued. Tweaked some more. Shared with his arty friends.

'How long have you been working for the hotel?' Will says, turning back.

'Just over a year.'

'You like it?'

'There's something about the building, the history, it gets inside your head.'

'I looked it up online,' Elin murmurs. 'I couldn't believe how many patients actually—'

'I wouldn't think too much about that,' the driver cuts her off. 'Digging up the past, especially with this place, you'll send yourself mad. If you go into the details about what went on . . .' He shrugs.

Elin picks up her water bottle. His words echo in her mind: *it gets inside your head.*

It already has, she thinks, picturing the brochure, the photographs online.

Le Sommet.

They're only a few kilometres away.

3

Sliding her phone back into her pocket, Adele Bourg pushes her vacuum cleaner through the door of Room 301.

Not that it's actually called 301. Le Sommet is too . . . self-aware for that.

They'd rejected just about every Alpine cliché: the faux-fur chalet vibe, 'traditional' menus – and that included getting rid of the mundanity of room numbers.

Instead, this room, like the others, is named after a peak in the mountain range opposite.

Bella Tola.

Adele can see it now. Through the vast windows, its jagged summit punctures the sky. The sight burns. It was one of the last climbs she did before she fell pregnant with Gabriel. August 2015.

She remembers it all: sun, a cloudless sky. Neon-framed sunglasses. The scrape of the harness against her thighs. The grey rock, cool beneath her fingers. Estelle's tanned legs high above her, contorted into an impossible position.

Gabriel, her son, now aged three, was born the following June, the result of a short-lived fling with Stéphane, a fellow student and mountain-lover, during a weekend in Chamonix. Everything stopped then – climbing, hiking, studying for her business degree, pissed-up nights with her friends.

Adele loved her son wholly, absolutely, but sometimes she

struggles to remember who she was before. What her world was like before it had been deconstructed, reassembled into something else entirely.

Responsibilities. Worry. Final reminders stacking up on her desk. This job, the mundane rhythm of her days – changing sheets, wiping surfaces, the sucking up of other people’s debris.

Adele swallows hard, bending down to plug the vacuum into the wall. Straightening, she looks around. It won’t take long, she thinks, assessing the damage.

Adele likes this bit, the calculation of time and effort required. It’s an art, the one part of the process that requires her to engage her brain.

Her eyes slide across the minimalist set-up: bed, low-slung chairs, the abstract swirls that count as paintings on the left-hand wall, the cashmere throws in muted shades.

Not bad, she thinks.

These people were neat. Careful. The bed is barely rumped; the complex arrangement of throws across the bottom still undisturbed.

The only visible mess is the half-empty cups on the bedside tables, a black jacket slung on the chair in the corner. She studies the woven badge on the upper arm. Moncler. Probably 3,000 francs for that.

Adele always thought that kind of carelessness – flinging the jacket on the chair – only came with wealth. It was the same with the rooms. Most of the guests seemed oblivious to the intricacies and detail that elevated them – the bespoke furniture, the marble bathrooms, the tufted, hand-woven rugs.

She was always dealing with somebody’s thoughtless filth – stained bedsheets, sticky food trodden into rugs. Adele pictures the slimy, wrinkled sack of the condom she fished out of the toilet last week.

The thought stings, like a graze. Adele pushes it away, plugs her headphones into her ears. She always listens to music when she works; fixes her tasks to the beat.

Her favourite playlist is old-school rock, heavy metal. Guns N' Roses, Slash, Metallica.

She's about to switch it on, then stops, noticing a change outside, a subtle darkening to the sky, the very particular leaden grey that precedes heavy snowfall – ominous in its uniformity. Snow is already falling relentlessly, drifts forming around the hotel signage.

Tiny darts of anxiety flicker in her chest. If the storm gets any worse, she might have problems getting home. Any other night, it wouldn't matter – her childcare is flexible, but today Gabriel leaves for his week with his father.

She needs to be back in time to say goodbye, a goodbye that always sticks in her throat as Stéphane watches, face impassive, his hand already enclosing Gabriel's.

A dark, irrational fear engulfs her each and every time he leaves – that he might not come back, might not *want* to come back, that he might choose, after all, to live with Stéphane.

Adele can see that fear now, reflected in the glass. Her dark hair is scraped back into a high ponytail, revealing a pinched face, her almond-shaped eyes narrowed with worry. She turns away. Seeing yourself like that – shadowy, distorted – it's like looking into the darkest parts of your soul.

Glancing back at her phone, she's about to press play when from the corner of her eye she notices something on the balustrade.

A sliver of something shiny amid the snow.

Adele pushes open the door, curious.

Freezing air fills the room, along with tiny flakes of wind-blown snow. Walking over to the balustrade, she picks it up.

A bracelet.

Turning it between her fingers, she can see it's made of copper, similar to the ones people wear for arthritis. Tiny numbers loop the interior. An engraving.

It must belong to one of the guests. She'll put it on one of the bedside tables so they'll see it when they come in.

Adele goes back into the room, closing the door behind her. Putting the bracelet on to the nearest table, she steals another glance at the heavy snowfall, the growing drifts circling the balcony.

If she's late, Stéphane won't wait for her. All she'll find is a silent apartment and an emptiness that will consume her until Gabriel is home.

4

‘Elin, are you going to come . . .?’ Will’s last word is lost against the sound of the flag above, flapping in the gusting wind.

Thick flakes of snow plummet from the sky, settling on her face.

Her stomach clenches. Despite Will’s presence, and the hotel in front of her, she can’t help but be struck by their isolation – the absolute remoteness of the location. The drive from town had taken more than an hour and a half. With each minute ticking by, the winding roads drawing them further up the mountain, Elin couldn’t shake her growing sense of unease.

The journey had taken longer than usual because of the snow, but she still can’t escape the fact that they’re a long way from civilization. Apart from the hotel, all she can see is a mass of trees, snow, the shadowy bulk of the mountains looming over them.

‘Elin? Are you coming?’ Will starts walking, bumping their cases across the snow towards the entrance of the hotel.

She nods, hand locked tight around the strap of her bag. Standing there, in front of the hotel, she can feel the strangest thing – a disturbance in the air, a curious restlessness that has nothing to do with the falling snow.

Elin looks around. The driveway and the car park beyond are empty.

No one's there.

Everyone from the funicular has gone inside.

It's the building, she thinks, absorbing the vast white structure. The more she looks, the more she senses a tension.

An anomaly.

She hadn't noticed it in the brochure Isaac sent. But then, she thinks, those photos were taken from a distance, highlighting the scenic backdrop: the snow-covered peaks, the forest of white-frosted firs.

They hadn't focused on the building itself, how savage it looks.

There's no doubting its past – what it used to be. There's something brutally clinical about the architecture, the air of the institution in the stark lines, the relentless rectangular planes and faces, the modernist flat roofs. Glass is everywhere – dizzying, whole walls of it, allowing you to see right in.

Yet, Elin thinks, stepping forwards, something's at odds with that clinical feel, details not visible in the brochure – carved balustrades and balconies, the beautiful stretch of wooden verandah on the ground floor.

This is the anomaly, she thinks, the tension she's picked up on. This juxtaposition . . . it's chilling. Institution butting up against beauty.

Probably deliberate, she thinks, when they designed the building, the intricate decor an attempt to conceal the fact that this was not a place where someone came for fun.

This was a place where people had struggled with illness, a place where people died.

It makes sense, now, her brother celebrating his engagement here.

This place, like Isaac, is all about facades.

Covering up what really lies beneath.

5

‘**S**hit,’ Adele mutters, wiggling her key in the lock. Why wouldn’t it turn? It’s always like this when she’s in a hurry . . .

The door to the changing room swings open, a rush of cool air. Adele flinches, drops her keys.

‘You okay?’

A flicker of relief. She knows that voice: Mat, a white-blond Swede, one of many foreign staff that the hotel employs. He works behind the bar. Over-confident. Pale green eyes that first rake over you, then look right through you.

‘Fine.’ Crouching, she scoops up the key fob. ‘I’m in a rush, that’s all. It’s Gabriel’s week with his dad. He takes him back to his place tonight. I wanted to be back to say goodbye.’ Finally managing to open the locker, she pulls out her bag and coat.

‘They’ve just announced the funicular’s down.’ Mat jams his key into his locker. ‘Won’t be running until morning.’

Adele looks through the window. The storm is raging now, wind howling as it batters the side of the hotel.

‘What about the buses?’

‘Still running, but they’ll be busy.’

He’s right. Biting down on her lip, Adele checks her watch.

She’s meant to be in the valley in an hour. If she hurries, she might make it.

After saying goodbye, Adele lets herself out the side door.

She pauses, shivering, stunned by the force of the wind. It's strong, blowing icy pellets of snow into her face and eyes. Her cheeks are burning from the cold.

Pulling her scarf up around her nose, Adele walks out on to the small track leading to the front of the hotel.

With every step, her feet sink into the snow. It starts seeping through the thin leather of her boots. *Idiot*. She should have worn her proper snow boots. Her feet will be soaked through in minutes.

Carefully avoiding the bigger mounds of drifting snow, she keeps walking. Feeling her phone vibrating in her pocket, she stops. Pulling it out, she finds a message from Stéphane: *Leaving work now. See you soon.*

Work.

The word stirs up a familiar, bitter resentment. Adele hates herself for it.

She knows it's no good dwelling on what might have been – the climb up the career ladder, the accompanying salary, the travel – but she can't help it.

However she tries to position it in her mind, to make justifications, it's blatantly clear that it's her who has made the sacrifices, not Stéphane. He didn't have to give up his plans when Gabriel was born, his place at college. He graduated with a First and got a job right away at a multinational in Vevey working in brand management. Stéphane was highly rated, doing well. Earning even better.

His girlfriend works for the same company, pulling in an equally impressive salary, Adele can tell. Lise isn't flashy, but the subtly expensive grooming and innate confidence speaks for itself.

This, she can just about cope with – it's a petty, silly envy, nothing more, but it's the potential effect on Gabriel that

bothers her. Adele knows it won't be long before Gabriel starts noticing the differences between his parents' jobs.

Part of her is scared that he'll look down on her – that he'll see her, and what she can give him, as inferior to what Stéphane can provide.

Adele knows it's stupid to think ahead like this because, at the moment, everything Gabriel loves has nothing to do with money: snuggles and books before bed. Hot chocolate with whipped cream. Joint play in the sandpit. Sledging.

She smiles to herself as she remembers the trip last week. Squeezed on to the sledge together, the two of them had built up so much momentum they'd careered out of control into the fence at the bottom of the hill. Gabriel ended up spreadeagled on top of her, laughing hysterically.

The memory instantly puts her anxieties into perspective. *Pull yourself together*, she tells herself, stepping sideways to avoid a fallen branch. *Stop thinking the worst.*

It's then that she feels something on her ankle, a pressure.

Has she caught it on something? Another branch?

Glancing down, she freezes. A gloved hand around her ankle.

There's a sudden tug, jerking her backwards.

Adele lands face first in soft, powdery snow.

Tiny, icy particles fill her mouth, her eyes.

6

The white pendants dangling from the ceiling remind Elin of a hangman's noose.

The wires are so long they traverse several metres, cable hanging slack in the middle before descending further on. The pendant itself is nothing more than a violent spasm of wire forming an intricate loop.

Undoubtedly hideously expensive, an artistic statement she doesn't 'get', but however you see it, it's strange, Elin thinks, to have that in a hotel reception.

Something so sinister in what's meant to be a welcoming space.

The rest of it isn't much better – leather chairs arranged around a narrow wooden table, a large slab of grey stone for the reception desk. Even the painting over the fireplace is bleak: swirls of grey and black paint angrily smeared across the canvas.

'What do you think?' Elin nudges Will. 'An architect's dream?' She can already predict what he'll say later: *boundary pushing, soulful, immersive*.

Elin's absorbed these words by osmosis because to her they hold a kind of poetry. How Will talks about architecture, how he finds all that wonder in bricks and mortar, reveals so much about how he thinks and feels.

‘Love it. Buildings like this had a massive effect on twentieth-century architecture. Features people associate with modernism were used for the first time in sanatoriums.’ Will stops, taking in her expression. ‘You don’t like it, do you?’

‘I don’t know. To me, it feels cold. Clinical. Such a big space, and there’s hardly anything in here. A few chairs, tables.’

‘It’s deliberate.’ Elin hears the slight tension in his words – he’s frustrated that she doesn’t get it right away. ‘The white walls, wood, the natural materials. It’s a nod to the sanatorium’s original design.’

‘So they want it to feel sterile?’ It seems strange to her that anyone would deliberately design something to be devoid of any warmth, comfort.

‘It was a hygiene thing, but they also thought that white-washing helped bring an “inner cleanliness”.’ He makes quote marks with his fingers. ‘Architects then were experimenting with using design to influence how people felt. A building like this was used as a medical instrument in itself, every detail custom-designed to help patients recover.’

‘What about all this glass? I’m not sure it would help me.’ Elin looks through the vast window at the snow being whipped into a fury, the drifts creeping past the frame. Hardly any barrier between her and the outside world. Despite the warmth coming from the fire, she shivers.

Will follows her gaze. ‘They thought natural light, the big views of the landscape, were healing.’

‘Maybe.’ Looking past him, her eyes alight on a small glass box hanging from the ceiling by a thin metal wire.

Elin walks over and finds a small, silvered flask inside. A few words of text are written below – both French and English.

CRACHOIR – SPITTOON. *Commonly used by patients to reduce the spread of infection.*

She beckons to Will. ‘You’re telling me that’s not weird? Hanging here, like some strange art installation.’

‘This whole place is an installation.’ Touching her arm, his tone softens. ‘It’s not that, is it? You’re nervous, aren’t you? About seeing him again.’

Elin nods, leaning into him, breathing in the familiar, comforting smell of his aftershave – peppery basil and thyme, a slight smokiness. ‘It’s been nearly four years, Will. Things change, don’t they? I’ve got no idea who he is, not any more.’

‘I know.’ He holds her tight. ‘But don’t overthink it. Put the past in the past. You coming here, it’s a fresh start. Not just with Isaac, but with the Hayler case too. It’s time to draw a line.’

It’s so easy for Will, Elin thinks. As an architect, every day is a blank page. He’s always starting over, creating something new.

It was this quality that struck her the first time they met. How . . . fresh he seemed. Unjaded. Elin wondered if she’d ever met anyone truly like that before – optimistic, excited by life. Excited by every little thing.

The day they’d met she’d been running. She’d finished her shift, a shift she’d spent mainly at her desk churning through paperwork, and had decided to run the coast path, from her flat in Torhun towards Brixham. An easy 10K there and back.

Stopping to stretch on the promenade above the beach, she’d spotted Will by the wall, smoke coiling around him, suspended in the salty-still of the air.

He was barbecuing – fish, peppers, chicken that smelled like cumin and coriander.

Elin felt his eyes on her right away. A minute or so later, he called over, made a joke. Something clichéd. *Looks like I’ve got it easier than you.* She’d laughed, and they’d started talking.

She was attracted to him immediately. There was an unusual complexity about his appearance, something that had simultaneously intimidated and excited her.

Scruffy blond-brown hair, black Scandinavian-style glasses, a short-sleeved navy chevron shirt buttoned up to the neck.

Not her usual type.

It made sense when he told her what he did – an architect. He told her details, eyes lighting up as he spoke – he was a design director, his special interests mixed-use developments, waterfront regeneration.

He pointed out the new restaurant/housing complex along the seafront – a gleaming grounded white cruise liner of a building that she knew had been feted, won awards. He shared that he liked peanut butter and museums, surfing and Coke. What struck her right away was how easy it was. There was none of the usual awkwardness you got with strangers.

Elin knew it was because Will was completely at ease with himself. She didn't have to second-guess – he was an open book, and so she in turn opened up to him, in a way she hadn't for a long time.

They exchanged numbers; he called her that night, then the next. No angst. No game-playing. He asked her questions: demanding questions about policing, the politics of the force, her experiences.

Elin soon got the sense he didn't see her the way she had always seen herself. The effect was almost dizzying; it made her want to live up to what he saw in her, or what he thought he saw.

With him, she did new things: galleries, museums, underground wine bars off the quayside in Exeter. They talked art, music, *ideas*. Bought coffee-table books and actually read them. Planned weekends away with minimum fuss.

None of which she was used to. Her life had, up until this

point, been resolutely uncultured: Saturday nights watching TV, reading trashy magazines. Curries. The pub.

But she should have known it couldn't last, that the real Elin would come out eventually. The loner. The introvert. The one who found it easier to run than give her hand away.

It made her angry, in a way, how loosely she'd held it all together, those few months where everything *worked*. If she'd known it was all so finely balanced, so close to crashing down, she'd have held it closer, tighter.

Within weeks, everything changed: it all came together – a perfect maelstrom. Her mother's treatment stopped working. She got a new boss, a challenging case.

Under pressure, she defaulted – closed up, refused to confide what she was feeling. Right away, she felt something shift in their relationship. Who she had become, it wasn't enough for him, didn't make sense.

The boundaries she'd put on the relationship, boundaries he'd seemed happy with at first – the fact she needed her space, her independence, certain evenings where she simply just wanted to *be* – were no longer working.

Elin felt him subtly testing her, like a child probing a wobbly tooth – a work night out, a holiday with his friends. More nights staying over at his.

She sensed that if he couldn't get what he always had from her, then he wanted something else to put in its place – another part of her she hadn't offered up before. Commitment. Certainty.

Will wanted their lives to mix, merge, become enmeshed.

It had come to a head six months ago. In their favourite Thai spot, he asked what she thought about moving out of their respective places, finding somewhere together.

We've been together over two years, Elin, it isn't unreasonable.

She put him off, gave excuses, but she knows his patience

won't last for ever. She has to make a decision. Time is running out.

'Els . . . ?

She turns, sucks in her breath.

Isaac.

Isaac's here.

7

Fear surging through her, Adele scrabbles forwards on her knees.

The grip on her ankle slackens. She hears a grunt, frantic rustling – no words of apology, nothing to indicate that it was an accident.

Someone had been lurking in the darkness. Waiting to trip her up.

Questions crowd her head, but she pushes them aside. She has to get away. Escape.

Hauling herself forwards, Adele pulls herself to her feet, starting to run. She doesn't dare turn back. Her eyes rake over the inky black of the landscape around her.

Think, Adele, think.

Going back to the hotel won't work. She'll have to dig out her pass when she gets to the door – it'll take too long. They'll catch up.

The forest.

If she can get into the trees, the darkness of the tree canopy, then maybe she'll lose them. Running as fast as she can up the small incline leading to the tree line, Adele hears footsteps behind her, and breathing.

She might have the advantage here: she knows this path – she's walked here in the summer. The trail winds lazily up