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THE HUNTING PARTY

Written by **Lucy Foley**

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The Hunting Party

Lucy Foley



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NOW
2nd January 2019

HEATHER

I see a man coming through the falling snow. From a distance through the curtain of white he looks hardly human, like a shadow figure.

As he nears me I see that it is Doug, the gamekeeper.

He is hurrying towards the Lodge, I realise, trying to run. But the fallen, falling snow hampers him. He stumbles with each step. Something bad. I know this without being able to see his face.

As he comes closer I see that his features are frozen with shock. I know this look. I have seen it before. This is the expression of someone who has witnessed something horrific, beyond the bounds of normal human experience.

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I open the door of the Lodge, let him in. He brings with him a rush of freezing air, a spill of snow.

'What's happened?' I ask him.

There is a moment – a long pause – in which he tries to catch his breath. But his eyes tell the story before he can, a mute communication of horror.

Finally, he speaks. 'I've found the missing guest.'

'Well, that's great,' I say. 'Where—'

He shakes his head, and I feel the question expire on my lips.

'I found a body.'

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Three days earlier
30th December 2018

EMMA

New Year. All of us together for the first time in ages. Me and Mark, Miranda and Julien, Nick and Bo, Samira and Giles, their six-month old baby, Priya. And Katie.

Four days in a winter highland wilderness. Loch Corrin, it's called. Very exclusive: they only let four parties stay there each year – the rest of the time it's kept as a private residence. This time of year, as you might guess, is the most popular. I had to reserve it pretty much the day after New Year last year, as soon as the bookings opened up. The woman I spoke with assured me that with our group taking over most of the accommodation we should have the whole place to ourselves.

I take the brochure out of my bag again. A thick card,

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expensive affair. It shows a fir-lined loch, heather-red peaks rising behind; though they may well be snow-covered now. According to the photographs the Lodge itself – the 'New Lodge,' as the brochure describes it – is a big glass construction, über-modern, designed by a top architect who recently constructed the summer pavilion at the Serpentine Gallery. I think the idea is that it's meant to blend seamlessly with the still waters of the loch, reflecting the landscape and the uncompromising lines of the big peak, the Munro, rising behind.

Near the Lodge, dwarfed by it, you can make out a small cluster of dwellings that look as though they are huddling together to keep warm. These are the cabins; there's one for each couple, but we'll come together to have meals in the shooting lodge, the bigger building in the middle. Apart from the Highland Dinner on the first night – 'a showcase of local, seasonal produce' – we'll be cooking for ourselves. They've ordered food in for me. I sent a long list in advance – fresh truffles, foie gras, oysters. I'm planning a real feast for New Year's Eve, which I'm very excited about. I love to cook. Food brings people together, doesn't it?

This part of the journey is particularly dramatic. We have the sea on one side of us, and every so often the land sheers away so that it feels as if one wrong move might send us careering over the edge. The water is slate-grey, violent-looking. In one cliff-top field the sheep huddle together in a group as though trying to keep warm. You can hear the wind; every so often it throws itself against the windows, and the train shudders.

All of the others seem to have fallen asleep, even baby Priya. Giles is actually snoring.

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'Look,' I want to say, 'look how beautiful it is!'

I've planned this trip, so I feel a certain ownership – the anxiety that people won't enjoy themselves, that things might go wrong. And also a sense of pride, already, in its small successes . . . like this, the wild beauty outside the window.

It's hardly a surprise that they're all asleep. We got up so early this morning to catch the train – Miranda looked particularly cross at the hour. And then everyone got on the booze, of course. Mark, Giles and Julien hit the drinks trolley early, somewhere around Doncaster, even though it was only eleven. They got happily tipsy, affectionate and loud (the next few seats along did not look impressed). They seem to be able to fall back into the easy camaraderie of years gone by no matter how much time has passed since they last saw each other, especially with the help of a couple of beers.

Nick and Bo, Nick's American boyfriend, aren't so much a feature of this boys' club, because Nick wasn't part of their group at Oxford . . . although Katie has claimed in the past that there's more to it than that, some tacit homophobia on the part of the other boys. Nick is Katie's friend, first and foremost. Sometimes I have the distinct impression that he doesn't particularly like the rest of us, that he tolerates us only because of Katie. I've always suspected a bit of coolness between Nick and Miranda, probably because they're both such strong characters. And yet this morning the two of them seemed thick as thieves, hurrying off across the station concourse, arm in arm, to buy 'sustenance' for the trip. This turned out to be a perfectly chilled bottle of Sancerre, which Nick pulled from the cool-bag to slightly envious looks from the beer drinkers. 'He was trying

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to get those G&Ts in cans,' Miranda told us, 'but I wouldn't let him. We have to start as we mean to go on.'

Miranda, Nick, Bo and I each had some wine. Even Samira decided to have a small one too, at the last minute: 'There's all this new evidence that says you can drink when you're breastfeeding'.

Katie shook her head at first; she had a bottle of fizzy water. 'Oh come on, Kay-tee,' Miranda pleaded, with a winning smile, proffering a glass. 'We're on holiday!' It's difficult to refuse Miranda anything when she's trying to persuade you to do something, so Katie took it, of course, and had a tentative sip.

The booze helped lighten the atmosphere a bit; we'd had a bit of a mix-up with the seating when we first got on. Everyone was tired and cross, half-heartedly trying to work it out. It turned out that one of the nine seats on the booking had somehow ended up in the next carriage, completely on its own. The train was packed, for the holidays, so there was no possibility of shuffling things around.

'Obviously that's my one,' Katie said. Katie, you see, is the odd one out, not being in a couple. In a way, I suppose you could say that she is more of an interloper than I am these days.

'Oh, Katie,' I said. 'I'm so sorry – I feel like an idiot. I don't know how that happened. I was sure I'd reserved them all in the middle, to try to make sure we'd all be together. The system must have changed it. Look, you come and sit here . . . I'll go there.'

'No,' Katie said, hefting her suitcase awkwardly over the heads of the passengers already in their seats. 'That doesn't make any sense. I don't mind.'

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Her tone suggested otherwise. *For God's sake*, I found myself thinking. *It's only a train journey. Does it really matter?*

The other eight seats were facing each other around two tables in the middle of the carriage. Just beyond, there was an elderly woman sitting next to a pierced teenager – two solitary travellers. It didn't look likely that we'd be able to do anything about the mess-up. But then Miranda bent across to speak to the elderly woman, her curtain of hair shining like gold, and worked her magic. I could see how charmed the woman was by her: the looks, the cut-glass – almost antique – accent. Miranda, when she wants to, can exert *serious* charm. Anyone who knows her has been on the receiving end of it.

Oh yes, the woman said, of course she would move. It would probably be more peaceful in the next carriage anyway: 'You young people, aha!' – though none of us are all that young any more – 'And I prefer sitting forwards as it is.'

'Thanks Manda,' Katie said, with a brief smile. (She sounded grateful, but she didn't look it, exactly.) Katie and Miranda are best friends from way back. I know they haven't seen as much of each other lately, those two; Miranda says Katie has been busy with work. And because Samira and Giles have been tied up in baby land, Miranda and I have spent more time together than ever before. We've been shopping, we've gone for drinks. We've gossiped together. I have begun to feel that she's accepted me as her *friend*, rather than merely Mark's girlfriend, last to the group by almost a decade.

Katie has always been there to usurp me, in the past. She and Miranda have always been so tight-knit. So much

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so that they're almost more like sisters than friends. In the past I've felt excluded by this, all that closeness and history. It doesn't leave any new friendship with room to breathe. So a secret part of me is – well, rather pleased.

I really want everyone to have a good time on this trip, for it all to be a success. The New Year's Eve getaway is a big deal. They've done it every year, this group. They've been doing it for long before I came onto the scene. And I suppose, in a way, planning this trip is a rather pitiful attempt at proving that I am really one of them. At saying I should be properly accepted into the 'inner circle' at last. You'd think that three years – which is the time it has been since Mark and I got together – would be long enough. But it's not. They all go back a very long way, you see: to Oxford, where they first became friends.

It's tricky – as anyone who has been in this situation will know – to be the latest addition to a group of old friends. It seems that I will always be the new girl, however many years pass. I will always be the last in, the trespasser.

I look again at the brochure in my lap. Perhaps this trip – so carefully planned – will change things. Prove that I am one of them.

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