

# ONE BY ONE

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LIZ

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It is almost noon. We have been skiing all morning. The wind is mounting. Erin disappeared back to the chalet long ago, leaving me alone with Topher and Eva and the other adrenaline junkies. We have done the green run, Atchoum, back to the bottom of the bubble twice, and a long blue down into St Antoine, then back up the funicular. My legs feel like jelly with being continually on edge. My face is stinging with cold and my armpits are damp with sweat inside my many layers. My breath comes fast, misting my scarf with wetness, and I am simultaneously freezing and much too hot.

We gather, panting at the bottom of the Reine lift and I can hear the relief in Ani's voice when she whispers, 'Yay! Lunch!'

And then Topher says, as I *knew* he would, 'Come on, time for one more before we break for the afternoon. Let's go up to the top of La Dame. Second stop on the bubble lift. Which of you pussies is with me?'

My heart begins thumping in my chest.

'Wouldn't it be better to stop before we're all too tired?' Miranda says. I can tell she does not want to do this, but she doesn't

want to be the party pooper. ‘I mean, it’s the first day, and we’ve got all week to get skiing in.’

‘I agree,’ Ani says. She lifts her ski goggles. Beneath, her face is red and blotchy with a mixture of cold and exertion. She looks tired. ‘Plus, I just, like, really think it’s too big a run for me?’

‘It’s a fucking blue,’ Topher says dismissively. ‘Come on! It’ll be fun. There’s a black that peels off from the top, La Sorcière, and the blue is just the top section of that run we did before, Blanche-Neige. We can split into two groups and take whichever one you fancy. Blue for the babies, black for the big boys and girls.’

‘Topher,’ Eva says, wagging her finger, but her annoyance is pretend. She looks in her element, tall and slim on her improbably long skis. She is wearing a bright red ski jacket – scarlet silk, that looks like a splash of blood against the white snow, and the sight gives me a weird pang, because I remember buying that jacket for her, back when I was her assistant. I got sent out to Harrods with her credit card and instructions to pick it up. I remember it so clearly, like it was yesterday.

I think, suddenly, of the fairy tale for which the blue run is named – Blanche-Neige – Snow White. Skin as white as snow, lips as red as blood, hair as black as ebony. The hair is wrong. Eva’s hair is almost as white as snow too. But today it is tucked into a black beanie, making the comparison almost spookily accurate.

‘Come on ...’ Topher cajoles. ‘We can’t get back from here to the chalet anyway, it’s all uphill, so unless you want an hour of sidestepping, we might as well go to the middle station anyway. Just a little bit further doesn’t make much difference ... does it?’ He lifts his goggles, and turns the full force of his charm on Ani. ‘Ani? Give this old man one last wish?’

Ani gives a little sigh. Then she caves like wet snow.

‘Oh ... OK. I suppose you only live once. You’ll make sure I get down in one piece, won’t you, Inigo?’

He smiles and nods.

‘Miranda?’ Tophers says, smiling at her with all his considerable persuasive force. When he turns it on, it is not hard to understand how he got where he did. There’s something about Tophers that is very, very hard to say no to. ‘Miraaaanda . . .?’

‘Fine,’ Miranda says, rather grumpily. ‘If we’ve got to go up anyway, I suppose it won’t make much difference.’

And then Tophers turns to me.

‘Liz?’

So here it is then. Why do I always seem to end up being this person – the person everyone else’s fun hinges on, the person who’s required to make a decision? I can feel myself shrinking beneath their gaze – but I have no choice.

‘Fine,’ I say, but my voice sounds strained and tense, even to me.

‘OK!’ Eva says briskly. ‘Right, let’s regroup at the top, and if anyone gets lost, we’ll meet at the shortcut back to the chalet – does everyone remember where the path splits off? That big pine Erin showed us, the one with the fluorescent padding.’

There are nods and murmurs of assent.

And then it is happening. People are unclipping their bindings and shuffling forward in stiff heavy ski boots, clutching poles and skis, shoving through the turnstile barrier. There is no queue at all. The weather is too poor for that. All the sensible French are huddled in cafes having *vin chaud* and raclette, and we are the only people heading up the mountain, on this lift at least. I feel my heart do that sickening skipping rhythm as the bubble looms nearer and I shuffle ahead, pushing past Ani with an assertiveness that’s out of character for me. I cannot afford to get left behind.

The bubble glides down the last part of the track, slowing dramatically as it enters the shelter of the lift terminal, and a little group surges forward and begins to clamber in as the

plexiglas doors slide back. There are four seats inside each bubble and I watch, counting under my breath as Topher, Rik and Miranda climb in – and then it's my chance. The lift is almost at the barrier where the door will start to close, but I go for it, lumbering towards the doors with my boots clomping on the rubber tiles. I shove my skis roughly in the pigeon holes outside, their bindings tangling with Topher's snowboard – the doors are closing.

'Come on, Liz!' Miranda shouts encouragingly, and I scramble through the gap, sitting down, panting as the doors glide shut and the bubble shoots away up the mountain. Yes. I have done it. I am over the first hurdle.

I squeeze in beside Miranda, crushing my bulky jacket into the narrow gap and she laughs.

'Liz, how many layers are you wearing? You look like the Michelin Man.'

Topher gives a grin.

'Don't knock it, Miranda. Liz might have the last laugh when we get to the top.'

He nods at the window, and I realise he is right. As the lift climbs, you can literally feel the weather getting colder. The condensation on the inside of the bubble begins to bead, and then freeze, spreading into beautiful frost flowers as the lift climbs, and climbs, past the midway station, where the doors slide open invitingly, but no one moves.

Then out again, and up, past the treeline, and up, up, into the clouds. I can feel the little bubble being buffeted by the wind, feel it swaying on its wire, and I have a sudden thrill of fear at what is awaiting us at the top. Oh God, am I *really* going to do this? Can I really go through with it? Suddenly I am not sure if I can. My stomach is sick and clenching with nerves. I have never felt so scared in my life of what I'm about to do. But I have to go through with it. I *have* to.

And then the doors are sliding back and we are stumbling out into a cold so profound that it strikes right through all my layers, even inside the relative shelter of the lift terminal.

We clip on our skis and slide out – into a white wilderness.

It is snowing – hard. The wind is fierce and vicious, driving the snow into our eyes and noses, making everyone fumble to pull down their goggles and pull up their scarves. Between that and the cloud that has descended to wreath the mountain, the visibility is not the miles the brochures promised, it is metres.

I know from the piste map that there should be two runs coming off from here. To the left is the black run Topher wants to do, La Sorcière. To the right is the top part of the blue run, Blanche-Neige. They meet at the second station of the bubble lift, but Blanche-Neige takes its time, curving round the mountain in gentle loops. La Sorcière, on the other hand, follows a more direct route, zigzagging down the mountain beneath the bubble lift. Direct is an understatement. We passed over the run in the lift a few minutes ago, and it looked like a sheer sheet of ice, like the side of a hill, even seen from forty feet up in the air.

I push off, wobbling as I clear the ice from my goggles with my mittens. Ahead is a snow-covered sign that might once have been two arrows, but is now nothing but an indistinct white lump. To the left there is a kind of tennis net thing cutting off the access. By the time I see this, I'm sliding towards it.

'Help!' I shout. There is nothing any of the others can do, and I ricochet into the net, feeling its springiness catch me across the middle. I flail for a moment, my poles pinwheeling, and then I teeter ungracefully to the ground in a clatter of skis.

Rik comes sliding across, laughing, and helps me up.

'You were lucky,' he yells in my ear, over the shriek of the wind, pointing to the snow-blasted *piste fermée* sign tacked over

the net. 'That's La Sorcière. You could have been skiing your first black if they hadn't closed the piste! Or worse.'

He is right. Beyond the net is a steep run, dropping almost vertically away. It curves around the mountain and beyond the edge of the curve is ... nothing. If I had shot off the edge at speed, there would have been nothing anyone could do. I could have been plummeting to my death in the valley a thousand feet below before anyone had a chance to stop me. The thought of that fall makes my stomach lurch with nerves at the thought of what I'm about to do.

I am too out of breath to reply, but I let him haul me to my feet and then guide me back to the others who are standing in a little huddle at the top of the blue piste.

'They've closed La Sorcière,' Rik calls across to Topher, who nods bitterly.

'I saw. Fucking pussies.'

'Should we wait?' I hear Miranda shout. Her voice is barely audible beneath the howling of the storm. 'It's fucking freezing!'

'I think we have to,' Rik says. 'We can't go without Ani and Carl, they're not very experienced.'

'They've got the others to babysit them,' Topher grumbles, but Rik shakes his head.

'What if they come up separately and try to follow? Look.' He points down the mountain where a bubble lift is emerging from the clouds, a single figure inside, or maybe two sitting close together. It's impossible to make out at this distance. It might not even be one of our party. It is so far below that the figure looks absurdly small.

I am shaking. My heart is pounding. I can't go through with this. But I have to. This might be my last chance – I have to say something. Now. Now.

'I can't do this,' I force out. Topher looks across at me, as if surprised I've spoken.



‘What did you say?’

‘I can’t do this,’ I say louder. I am breathing very fast, and my voice is high and squeaky with a barely contained fear. My pulse is going a mile a minute. ‘I can’t. I just can’t. I’m not going to ski down. I *can’t*, Topher.’

‘Well, how do you plan to get to the bottom,’ Topher says sarcastically. ‘Toboggan?’

‘Hey, hey.’ Rik has been trying to consult his phone, but now he looks up. ‘What’s going on here?’

‘I can’t do it,’ I say desperately, as if, if I just keep repeating this one phrase, everything will slot into place. Maybe it still will. Maybe it will all be OK. ‘I can’t. I can’t ski down in this. I’m going to die, I know I will. You can’t make me do it.’

‘Liz, it’ll be fine.’ Rik puts a hand on my arm. ‘I’ll take care of you, I promise. Look, you can snowplough all the way down if you want to, I’ll guide you, you can hold my sticks.’

‘I. Can’t. Do. It,’ I repeat doggedly. If I just keep repeating this, it will be OK. They can’t *make* me ski with them. I *know* Topher. He’s not a patient man. Very soon he will get pissed off with trying to persuade me and give up.

‘Fuck,’ Topher says irritably. He wipes the snow from his goggles and looks at Rik. ‘So what then?’

‘Liz –’ Rik begins, and I feel that hard thing rise up in my throat, choking me, like it did at the meeting. The bubble with the single figure in it reaches the terminal. I think I am going to be sick. It’s now or never.

‘I can’t do it!’ I scream, and suddenly, out of nowhere, I am crying. The noise astonishes me – great ugly sobs, racking me. I lift up my goggles to scrub at my eyes with my frozen gloves, and the wind is so cold I can feel the tears running down my nose freezing as they reach the tip. I swipe away the frozen drops, feeling them crackle against my skin. ‘I can’t fucking do it!’

‘OK, OK!’ Rik says hastily. ‘Liz, don’t panic, it’ll be fine. Look, we’ll sort this out.’

There is a schussing sound behind us and we turn to see a figure skiing down the slope towards us. It is Inigo, his green jacket unmistakable even with his goggles down and his scarf pulled up. Behind him, Tiger has shuffled out onto the bank immediately outside the lift. She is sitting on the snow, fastening her snowboard bindings.

‘I’m going back,’ I say, gulping down my sobs. I point down the mountain, where the empty bubble lift Inigo came up in is returning back to the valley. ‘I’m going to talk to the lift attendant, make him let me back in. I’ll explain I can’t do it, that it’s all been a mistake.’

‘Liz, this is fucking ridiculous,’ Topher explodes.

‘What’s the matter?’ Inigo’s voice is muffled from behind his scarf, barely recognisable.

‘It’s Liz,’ Topher says angrily. ‘She’s having some kind of existential crisis.’

But I’m not. I’m calm now. I know what I have to do, and this is all going to be OK. There is another bubble lift coming up the mountain, with another figure inside it. I can do this. I know what I need to do, and no one can stop me. I begin to sidestep up the slope.

‘Liz,’ Rik calls, ‘are you sure?’

‘Yes,’ I yell back, though I’m not even certain they can hear me over the wind now. ‘I’m quite sure. I’ll meet you back at the chalet.’

And as I step inside the terminal building and the bubble lift doors open, a sense of peace enfolds me. I know what I have to do, and it’s going to be OK. Everything’s going to be OK.

ERIN

Snoop ID: LITTLEMY

Listening to: offline

Snooscribers: 10

It's nearly half past one. They said they'd be back by one at the latest, and Danny is shouting expletives from the kitchen as the minutes tick past and his risotto clogs.

At 1.45 he sticks his head out the door with a face like thunder, and I shake my head.

'There's only one thing I hate more than fucking stealth vegans, and that's wankers,' he growls, and disappears, the swing door clacking behind him.

And then, suddenly, there's the clatter of ski boots on tiles, and I hurry into the lobby to hear noises from the ski entrance, the unmistakable sounds of people clumping along a hard floor, clanging open the heated ski lockers that line the corridor.

'Eva?' someone calls irritably. 'Eva, where the fuck are you?'

No answer.

Then the insulated door to the lobby swings open and Topher comes in wearing ski gear and thick socks, looking pissed off.

'Oh, it's you,' he says shortly, when he sees me. 'Where the fuck is Eva?'

‘Eva?’ A retort about his rudeness hovers on the tip of my tongue but I swallow it back. ‘Sorry, Topher, I have no idea.’

He stops, halfway to the stairs.

‘You mean she’s not here?’

‘No, you’re the first back.’

He stands there, quite still, the expression on his face wavering between irritation and concern. Then he calls over his shoulder.

‘Miranda, she’s not here.’

‘You’re kidding.’ Miranda is the next out of the door. Her face is bright pink, with the painful flush that always follows extreme cold. ‘Huh. Well . . . I guess at least that means we didn’t freeze our arses off for no reason. But what do you think could have happened?’

‘Maybe the lift closed before she could get on, and she skied back down into St Antoine to get the funicular?’ Topher says, but Carl has come out now and is shaking his head.

‘She got on before me, mate. She was on that lift, I’d swear to it.’

‘And I saw her,’ Ani says. They gather in the lobby, sweaty and confused, melting snow dripping from their jackets. ‘I told you, Carl and I were coming up in the lift and I *saw* her skiing down.’

‘What’s the matter?’ Rik says, coming through in his turn, shaking the snow off his black salopettes. Miranda turns to him, and now her face is definitely worried.

‘Eva’s not here.’

‘She’s not here?’ Rik’s expression is blank. ‘But – but that’s not possible. There’s nowhere else she could be.’

They all begin talking at once, offering up different theories, many of them totally impossible based on the geography of the resort.

‘Hold up, hold up,’ I say, and amazingly they all fall silent. Somehow, they want leadership, and I am the closest thing to it.

‘Start from the beginning. When was the last time you were all together as a group?’

‘At the bottom of the Reine ski lift,’ Ani says promptly. ‘We had a discussion about whether to break for lunch there, or do one last run. Topher made the point that it was uphill from the ski lift to the chalet, so we had to do *a* run, and we agreed to go up to the top station and do either La Sorcière or Blanche-Neige, depending on ability.’

I bite back my reply to this. La Sorcière is a bitch of a run. I’ve been skiing all my life, and there’s no *way* I’d do it in this weather. Even Blanche-Neige with this visibility is no joke for inexperienced skiers. Not for the first time it strikes me that Topher is kind of a jerk.

‘But when we got up there Liz had some kind of breakdown,’ Topher says bitterly.

‘Toph,’ Rik says sharply, with a jerk of his head towards the ski door, and I look over Topher’s shoulder to see Liz plodding wearily across from the boot room. She is covered in snow and looks utterly exhausted, even more so than the others.

‘When we got to the top the weather was pretty extreme, and Liz decided to take the lift back down,’ Miranda says smoothly, but looking at Topher’s mutinous face I can well imagine the discussion that decision must have entailed. Part of me is amazed at Liz’s strength of mind, that she didn’t let herself be bullied into trying the run. But fear can make people amazingly resilient.

‘The rest of us waited up there for the others,’ Topher says. ‘But Eva never came.’

‘But she *did*,’ Ani puts in. ‘We saw her, Carl and I. Didn’t we?’ She nudges Carl, who nods.

‘Yeah, no doubt about it, mate. We saw her get on the bubble a few lifts ahead of us.’

‘A few?’ Topher says. ‘How’s that? There was no queue at all.’

Carl reddens.

‘Well, look, there’s no point in beating about the bush. I – well, I fluffed getting on the bubble if you must know. Ani and I were supposed to be getting in after Eva, but I tripped over my bindings. Fell over, and the lift doors closed and Eva went up with my skis still stuck in the rack. It took me a minute to get myself sorted again, and then Ani and I caught the next lift after that.’

‘Could she have got confused and got off at the first station?’ Miranda says with a frown, but Ani shakes her head.

‘No, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. I saw her, when we were coming up in the bubble. It goes right over that black piste – the really steep one that Topher wanted to do.’

‘La Sorcière,’ I put in, and Ani nods.

‘That’s the one. And I saw a skier coming down it. She stopped for a second on the ridge and kind of raised her hand, waving at me. And I realised, it was Eva.’

‘How could you tell at that distance?’ Rik says sceptically. ‘It could have been anyone.’

‘I recognised her red jacket. It’s, like, really distinctive. No one else here has one like it, and we were the only people on that lift.’

I look around the circle, and she’s right. Topher is in mustard and khaki, Rik and Carl are both in black. Miranda is in a kind of purple jumpsuit. Inigo has a green jacket and black salopettes. Tiger is wearing kind of shabby surfer chic that looks like an eighties denim bomber jacket and cargo pants, but I suspect is actually pretty expensive snowboard gear. Liz is wearing a faded navy-blue all-in-one that’s too big for her and looks as though it was borrowed from a friend. And Ani herself is wearing the bright sea-blue jacket and white salopettes that I noticed earlier. None of them could possibly be mistaken for Eva.

‘When we got off at the top my skis were waiting,’ Carl says. ‘She must have taken them off the lift and then skied off.’

‘Didn’t you notice she wasn’t at the top?’ I ask, and Rik shakes his head, looking rueful.

‘No, the visibility was really poor and well . . . look, if you must know there was a bit of . . . well, argy-bargy at the top.’

Argy-bargy? What the hell does that mean? I’m about to ask, when Miranda butts in.

‘You might as well say it plainly, Rik. The lift attendant came out to tell us the avalanche warning had gone up to red, and they were closing the whole mountain, but half the party ignored the warning and deliberately skied off before they could get the nets out.’

‘I’m so sorry.’ Inigo at least has the grace to look embarrassed. ‘It was a total misunderstanding. I thought he was saying now or never, so I, uh, pushed off.’

‘So wait, some of you skied home,’ I say slowly, ‘and some of you took the bubble back down?’

Nods all round the circle.

‘Naturally we stopped for a bit at the big pine by the shortcut back to the chalet to see if anyone was catching up, but when we saw people travelling back down in the bubble, we skied down to the bottom of the lift,’ Topher says. ‘So we waited there for another twenty minutes, only for the bastards in charge of the resort to close *that* lift too. At that point we concluded Eva had fucked off back to the chalet, but since we were now downhill from the chalet with no functioning lift, we had no choice but to ski down to St Antoine and get the funicular back up.’

‘OK . . . OK . . .’ I say slowly, trying to make sense of it. ‘So the last time anyone is absolutely certain they saw her, she was skiing La Sorcière?’

Ani nods, turning to Carl for confirmation, who says, ‘That’s the size of it.’

‘But La Sorcière was closed,’ Topher explodes. ‘That was the whole fucking problem.’

The whole fucking problem is that your colleague and co-founder is missing in extreme weather conditions, I think, but I don't say it. I am thinking about La Sorcière, about its treacherous, icy slopes, and the way the loose powder builds up on the sheet ice beneath, making every turn a throw of the dice between a painful skid and a mini avalanche. I'm thinking of its brutal moguls, hidden by the drifting snow between, and the impossibility of even seeing the icy hummocks beneath their blanket of snow, let alone judging those knee-juddering turns in bad visibility.

Most of all, I'm thinking of the sheer drop at the side of the run. A precipice lies just metres from the side of the piste in places; in conditions like this, you could simply sail off the edge into nothingness. *That* is why they shut La Sorcière first, out of all the runs in the resort. Not because they're risk-averse, or health and safety nuts, or don't trust experienced skiers to navigate it. But because the twists and turns are a death trap in low visibility. But then I remind myself that the worst section of the drop is right at the start of the run, and Ani saw her skiing further down. It's small comfort, but I'll take whatever comfort I can get right now.

'Has anyone tried her mobile?' I say. Inigo nods.

'Several times. There's no reception.'

Danny comes out of the kitchen at that point, looking royally pissed off. *What about my fucking risotto?* he mouths at me over the heads of the guests, and I hurry across to him.

'Eva's missing,' I tell him in a low voice, and his expression switches instantly from irritation to concern.

'What, really missing? Not just gone AWOL?'

'I don't know, it's hard to tell. They've all acted like complete fuckwits. They split up, no one kept track of who was in which party, and Eva seems to have gone off by herself to ski La Sorcière.'



‘Alone?’ Danny’s jaw drops. ‘But, there’s a red avalanche warning. Why the hell didn’t the *pisteurs* shut the run?’

‘Apparently they did. She must have ducked under the netting or something, or somehow got lost and traversed across to the wrong run.’ Though I can’t think quite how that could have happened. There is no obvious interconnection between Blanche-Neige and La Sorcière. That’s part of the problem with the black run. It is hemmed in by a sheer cliff on one side, and a sheer drop on the other. There is no way out once you’re going down, it’s all twists and turns. ‘I don’t know. But Ani is pretty convinced she and Carl saw Eva skiing down it. I mean, I know she’s good, but that’s just foolhardy in weather like this.’

Danny’s face is really grave now.

‘And no one’s seen her since?’

I shake my head.

‘Do you think we should call the PGHM?’ I ask. This is the specialist branch of mountain police who operate in the higher mountain ranges – a combination of gendarmes and mountain rescue.

‘I dunno,’ Danny says. He pushes his bandanna up his forehead and rubs fretfully at the furrow between his brows, trying to think. ‘It’s not impossible she’s just got lost and gone down the wrong route. With the lifts shut it’d take her a while to get back. I reckon they’ll tell us to give it a few hours before we panic. Should we try the ski pass office first? Maybe they can tell us if her pass has been used on any lifts?’

I want to kiss him. It’s not just a good idea, it’s a great one. But when I go to the phone in the lobby and dial the number on the back of the lift pass, I get only the insistent beep-beep signal of a busy line.

I go back to the little group huddled in the lobby, who are looking hot in their ski gear, and increasingly worried.

‘We think the best thing is to check in with the lift pass office and see if Eva’s used her pass anywhere. I’ve tried phoning, but the line’s engaged, so rather than hanging around here, I think I’m going to hop down on the funicular and talk to the office in person.’

‘I’ll go,’ Tophers says immediately.

‘Do you speak French?’

I know the answer before I ask the question, and his face changes to chagrin as he shakes his head.

‘I totally get why you want to help,’ I say, trying to be gentle, ‘but I think it would be better for someone who speaks French to go. If she’s not used her pass, that’s probably the point where we need to report her missing to the police and we’ll definitely need a fluent speaker for that. You should all change into dry clothes and get some food into you, and I’ll be back really soon. Meantime, keep trying her number.’

They all nod, soberly.

‘I’d better tell Elliot,’ Tophers mutters, and I remember with a shock of surprise that Elliot was the only member of the group not skiing. He is still holed up in his room, presumably working on his coding update, or whatever he’s doing up there alone.

They all disperse, talking quietly under their breath to each other, and I grab my coat from the locker and hurry back to Danny to explain the plan.

‘So you’ll have to serve up alone, is that OK?’

He nods.

‘Yeah, of course.’

He disappears into the kitchen to begin plating up.

I put my coat on and open the front door.

LIZ

Snoop ID: ANON101

Listening to: offline

Snooscribers: 0

I am upstairs in my room, changing out of my skiing clothes when it happens. At first it is just a noise, and then I feel the ground begin to shake, like an earthquake.

I turn to look out of the window. I see what looks like a wall of snow coming down the valley towards us. But not a wall – that implies something solid. This is something else. A boiling mass that is air and ice and earth all rolled together.

I scream. I do the only thing I can, even though it is stupid. I fall to my knees with my arms over my head, as if that pathetic gesture might protect me.

I stay there shaking for a long time, before I dare to get up, my legs trembling. Did it miss us? Did it stop?

From far away I can hear other voices, shouts, screams, cries.

Somehow, I force my legs to work, and I stumble out into the corridor.

‘Jesus Christ!’ Topher is shouting. He is running towards the stairs. ‘What the hell just happened?’

‘Erin!’ I hear from below. It is a bellow of fear from a voice I don’t recognise, and then I realise – it is the chef, Danny, calling for his friend. ‘Erin!’

The corridor is full of terrified people. There is a smoke alarm going off, shouts of panic.

Down in the lobby the chef is struggling with the front door which has cracked and bowed beneath the weight of packed snow pressed up against it.

‘Don’t open the bloody door!’ Topher yells. ‘You’ll let all the snow in!’

Danny turns on him. His face is full of fury.

‘My fucking friend is out there,’ he spits over the scream of the alarm. ‘So if you want to stop me, mate, come and try.’

He shoves again. The door gives with a scream of protest, and a mass of snow and ice comes skittering into the lobby. The doorway is still blocked four feet deep, but Danny clambers up the bank and over the top, sinking into the debris. The last I see of him is his legs as he staggers off into the storm.

‘Oh my God,’ Miranda is saying. She is holding on to Rik like she is drowning. ‘Oh my God. Oh my God. What if Eva’s still out there?’

There is no answer. I don’t think anyone can bring themselves to say what they are thinking – which is that if Eva is still out there, she is dead. She must be.

And maybe Erin too.

‘Is the building safe?’ Rik says, with sudden practicality. ‘We don’t want to stay here if it’s about to collapse.’

‘I’ll go and turn off that alarm,’ Tiger says, and she disappears into the kitchen. I hear her dragging a chair across tiles, and then the alarm stops. There is a sudden, shocking silence.

‘OK,’ Topher says. His voice is shaking, but it is so natural for him to take charge that he slips into the role. ‘Um, we should – we should check. We should check the building.’

‘The kitchen side isn’t too bad,’ Tiger says as she comes back into the lobby. ‘I looked out of the window. There’s a couple of windows broken in the den but the snow isn’t particularly high. It’ll be the living-room side that’s suffered, and the pool extension.’

‘We should go upstairs,’ Topher says. ‘Get an overview.’

Tiger nods, and we all troop upstairs to look out of one of the upper windows. What we see makes my knees go weak. We have been *extremely* lucky.

The long single-storey building to the rear of the chalet, which housed the swimming pool, has been crushed and obliterated. The roof has caved in like an empty eggshell. Beams and planks are sticking out of the huge snowdrift that has engulfed the extension. But the chalet itself is still standing. There is a mass of snow, sticks and rubble piled up against the north side, but the structure has held firm. Just a few metres more, and Perce-Neige would have been matchsticks, like the swimming pool building. I can’t see any of the other chalets. The path to the funicular is covered with fallen trees and rumped snow. The funicular itself is out of sight in the gusting snow. Erin is nowhere to be seen.

And then I notice a movement around the side of the building. It is Erin. She is holding on to Danny, the chef, and they are limping over the uneven, debris-covered surface, stumbling on the hard-packed lumps of snow scattered across what used to be the track to the funicular.

They go out of sight beneath the shadow of the building. From downstairs I hear the screech of the buckled front door scraping against the tiles, and Erin’s sob of pain as she squeezes over the drift and down, inside the house.

‘Is it broken?’ I hear Danny saying, breathlessly. As if instructed, we all file down the spiral stairs to stand in a concerned circle around Erin.

‘Is she OK?’ Miranda asks, frowning.

‘What do you think?’ Danny snaps. Erin doesn’t seem able to speak, but she holds up her hand. I’m not sure what she means, but her signal clearly conveys something to Danny, and he shakes his head angrily and stamps off to the kitchen.

‘I’m gonna get you some ice,’ he calls back over his shoulder. ‘See if we can get the swelling down.’

‘I’ve got some arnica in my bag,’ Tiger calls after him. I cannot hear Danny’s reply. It does not sound complimentary.

‘I don’t think arnica is going to cut it, Tig,’ Rik says quietly.

Erin is slumped on the floor of the lobby. Her face is grey. She looks like she is going into shock.

‘What happened?’ Tiger crouches beside her, putting her hand on her arm. Erin looks up at her. She blinks dazedly. She looks like she is unsure why she is here.

‘Erin? Are you OK?’

‘I don’t know,’ Erin manages. Her voice is shaking. ‘I was walking towards the f-funicular and I heard this n-noise and then it was like – it was like the mountain just came and *swallowed* the lift.’

‘You mean – the funicular is gone?’

There is horror in Tiger’s voice, but her tone only echoes the shock I can see reverberating around the room.

‘Not gone,’ Danny says, coming back with a bag of frozen peas. He scowls around the group. ‘But ... yeah, buried. A big chunk of glass has been stove in. *Shit*. There might have been people in there.’

‘We should, like, call 999?’ Ani says, and Topher nods emphatically.

‘17,’ Erin says tiredly.

‘What?’

‘17,’ Danny echoes. ‘That’s the French number for the police. But I reckon you should try 112. That’s the international number, they’ll have English speakers.’

Ani takes out her phone, and then frowns.

‘I’ve got no reception.’

‘Transmitter’s probably down,’ Danny says shortly. He is pressing the peas very gently onto Erin’s ankle. Her face has gone a strange yellowish white and her eyes are closed. ‘Try the phone on the desk.’

Ani nods, and goes across to the landline phone on the desk next to the stairs, but when she picks up the receiver her face falls.

‘There’s no dial tone.’

‘Fuck.’ Carl speaks for the first time. His broad face is red. He looks angry. ‘Fucking hell, that’s all we need. Avalanche took the line out, I guess. Has *anyone* got any reception? Anything at all?’

There’s a momentary shuffle. Everyone feels for their phones. I get out mine too. The reception bars are greyed out.

‘Nothing,’ Topher says. Others are shaking their heads.

‘No, wait.’ It’s Inigo, his voice cracking with excitement. ‘I just got a bar! I’ve got one bar!’

He dials and then waits, holding up his hand for silence. We all stay totally still, listening.

‘Hello?’ he says. And then, ‘Hello? Hello? Shit, they can’t hear me!’

‘Go upstairs,’ Miranda says sharply. ‘You might get better reception with the extra height.’

Obediently Inigo climbs the spiral staircase and goes to stand at the end of the corridor, at the long window that overlooks the valley, as if the visibility might somehow translate into better reception.

‘Hello?’ We can hear him saying and then, ‘Yes,’ and ‘OK,’ and ‘Chalet Blanche-Neige,’ followed by some information about

our situation. There are long pauses, and many times when he says ‘Can you repeat that? I’m sorry, the reception is really poor, you’re breaking up. Hello? Hello?’

At last he comes back down looking grave.

‘I lost reception in the end, but I spoke to the police operator and I think I managed to give them all the details before I got cut off.’

‘Did you tell them about Eva?’ Topher shoves in, and Inigo nods.

‘Yes, I told them that we lost our friend right before the avalanche and we don’t know if she’s still out on the mountain.’

‘Is someone coming to rescue us?’

‘I don’t know,’ Inigo says, and he looks for a minute like what he is – a PA who has failed to get the result his boss wanted. ‘They said they’re under enormous strain, there are people trapped on lifts and stuff. I’m not sure –’ His voice falters a little at Topher’s expression. ‘I’m not sure that people with food and shelter are their priority right now. They’ve got my number. They said they’d be in touch as soon as possible with more information.’

‘You mean we’re fucking stranded?’ Topher explodes. ‘The fucking funicular’s down, Eva’s missing, and we’re trapped in this godforsaken chalet with an injured woman –’ He indicates Erin. ‘We should be their top priority!’

Inigo says nothing, he just shrugs helplessly.

‘Could one of us ski down?’ Rik says, but Inigo shakes his head.

‘No, they were really clear about that. We should stay where we are. There could be more falls.’

‘Well, we can’t just stay here,’ Topher says angrily.

‘You won’t be skiing on that piste, mate,’ Danny says, looking up from where he’s tending Erin.

‘I’ll have you know,’ Topher says, ‘I’m a boarder and a damn good one.’



‘You could be Shaun White, mate, you still wouldn’t be going down there. You didn’t see it – it looked like a boulder field. There’s no piste left.’

‘So we’re stuck?’ Topher says, furious disbelief in his tone. ‘And they’re doing nothing at all, while Eva could be out there under a thousand tonnes of snow?’

No one answers. No one wants to say the fact that is obvious to all of us – if that is the case, there’s nothing he or any of us can do.