PROLOGUE

'Is' there no other way?' asks a horrified Niema Mandripilias, speaking out loud in an empty room.

She has olive skin, and a smudge of ink on her small nose. Her grey hair is shoulder length, and her eyes are strikingly blue, with flecks of green. She looks to be around fifty, and has done for the last forty years. She's hunched over her desk, lit by a solitary candle. There's a pen in her trembling hand, and a confession beneath it that she's been trying to finish for the last hour.

'None that I can see,' I reply, in her thoughts. 'Somebody has to die for this plan to work.'

Suddenly short of air, Niema scrapes her chair back and darts across the room, swiping aside the tattered sheet that serves as a makeshift door before stepping into the muggy night air.

It's pitch black outside, the moon mobbed by storm clouds. Rain is pummelling the shrouded village, filling her nostrils with the scent of wet earth and cypress trees. She can just about see the tops of the encircling walls, etched in silver moonlight. Somewhere in the darkness, she can hear the distant squeal of machinery and the synchronised drumbeat of footsteps.

9781526634955_LastMurder_1st_pass.indd 1 18-08-2023 21:17:46

She stands there, letting the warm rain soak her hair and dress. 'I knew there'd be a cost,' she says, her voice numb. 'I didn't realise it would be so high.'

'There's still time to put this plan aside,' I say. 'Leave your secrets buried, and let everybody go about their lives as they've always done. Nobody has to die.'

'And nothing will change,' she shoots back angrily. 'I've spent ninety years trying to rid humanity of its selfishness, greed and its impulse towards violence. Finally, I have a way to do it.'

She touches the tarnished cross hanging around her neck for comfort. 'If this plan works, we'll create a world without suffering. For the first time in our history, there'll be perfect equality. I can't turn my back on that because I don't have the strength to do what's necessary.'

Niema speaks as if her dreams were fish swimming willingly into her net, but these are murky waters, far more dangerous than she can see.

From my vantage in her mind – and the minds of everybody on the island – I can predict the future with a high degree of accuracy. It's a confluence of probability and psychology, which is easy to chart when you have access to everybody's thoughts.

Streaking away from this moment are dozens of possible futures, each waiting to be conjured into existence by a random event, an idle phrase, a miscommunication or an overheard conversation.

Unless a violin performance goes flawlessly, a knife will be rammed into Niema's stomach. If the wrong person steps through a long-closed door, a huge, scarred man will be emptied of every memory, and a young woman who isn't

9781526634955_LastMurder_1st_pass.indd 2 18-08-2023 21:17:46

young at all will run willingly to her own death. If these things don't happen, the last island on earth will end up covered in fog, everything dead in the gloom.

'We can avoid those pitfalls if we're cautious,' says Niema, watching lightning tear through the sky.

'You don't have time to be cautious,' I insist. 'Once you commit to this plan, secrets will surface, old grudges will come to light and people you love will realise the extent of your betrayal. If any of these things disrupts your plan, the human race will be rendered extinct in 91 hours.'

Niema's heart jolts, her pulse quickening. Her thoughts waver, only to harden again as her arrogance takes the reins.

'The greatest achievements have always brought the greatest risk,' she says stubbornly, watching a line of figures walking stiffly in the darkness. 'Start your countdown, Abi. In four days we're either going to change the world, or die trying.'

9781526634955_LastMurder_1st_pass.indd 3 18-08-2023 21:17:46