



The Hunting Party

Lucy Foley studied English Literature at Durham and UCL universities and worked for several years as a fiction editor in the publishing industry, before leaving to write full-time. *The Hunting Party*, an instant *Sunday Times* and *Irish Times* bestseller, is Lucy's debut crime novel, inspired by a particularly remote spot in Scotland that fired her imagination.

Lucy is also the author of three historical novels, which have been translated into sixteen languages. Her journalism has appeared in *ES Magazine*, *Sunday Times Style*, *Grazia* and more.

 /LucyFoleyAuthor

 @lucyfoleyauthor

 @lucyfoleytweets

Also by Lucy Foley

The Book of Lost and Found

The Invitation

Last Letter from Istanbul

THE HUNTING PARTY

LUCY FOLEY



HarperCollins *Publishers*

HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd
1 London Bridge Street,
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

This paperback edition 2019

1

First published in Great Britain by HarperCollinsPublishers 2019

Copyright © Lost and Found Books Ltd 2019

Lucy Foley asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-00-829715-2

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.

The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

Typeset in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.



MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC™ C007454

This book is produced from independently certified FSC™ paper
to ensure responsible forest management.

For more information visit: www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

*Should old acquaintance be forgot
And never brought to mind?*

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.

Lucy Foley

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.’

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,

Lucy Foley

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.

The Hunting Party

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

I’ve planned this trip, so I feel a certain ownership of it – 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

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.'

The Hunting Party

Her tone suggested otherwise. *For goodness' 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

Lucy Foley

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. I'm so excited.

KATIE

So we're finally here. And yet I have a sudden longing to be back in the city. Even my office desk would do it. The Loch Corrinn station is laughably tiny. A solitary platform, with the steel-covered slope of a mountain shearing up behind, the top lost in cloud. The signpost, the National Rail standard, looks like a practical joke. The platform is covered in a thin dusting of snow, not a single footprint marring the perfect white. I think of London snow – how it's dirty almost as soon as it has fallen, trodden underfoot by thousands. If I needed any further proof of how far we are from the city it is this, that no one has been here to step in it, let alone clear it. Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas any more. We passed through miles and miles of this wild-looking countryside on the train. I can't remember the last time I saw a human structure before this one, let alone a person.

We walk gingerly along the frozen platform – you can see the glint of black ice through the fallen snow – past

the tiny station building. It looks completely deserted. I wonder how often the ‘Waiting Room’, with its painted sign and optimistic shelf of books, gets used. Now we’re passing a small cubicle with a pane of dirty glass: a ticket booth, or tiny office. I peer in, fascinated by the idea of an office here in the middle of all this wilderness, and feel a small shock as I realise it isn’t empty. There’s actually someone sitting there, in the gloom. I can only make out the shape of him: broad-shouldered, hunched, and then the brief gleam of eyes, watching us as we pass.

‘What is it?’ Giles, in front of me, turns around. I must have made a noise of surprise.

‘There’s someone in there,’ I whisper. ‘A train guard or something – it just gave me a shock.’

Giles peers through the window. ‘You’re right.’ He pretends to tip an imaginary cap from his bald head. ‘Top o’ the morning to ya,’ he says, with a grin. Giles is the clown of our group: loveable, silly – sometimes to a fault.

‘That’s Irish, idiot,’ says Samira, affectionately. Those two do everything affectionately. I never feel more aware of my single status than when I’m in their company.

The man in the booth does not respond at first. And then, slowly, he raises one hand, a greeting of sorts.

There’s a Land Rover waiting to pick us up: splattered with mud, one of the old kind. I see the door open, and a tall man unfolds himself.

‘That must be the gamekeeper,’ Emma says. ‘The email said he’d pick us up.’

He doesn’t look like a gamekeeper, I think. What had I imagined, though? I think, mainly, I’d expected him to be old. He’s probably only about our age. There’s the bulk, I

The Hunting Party

suppose: the shoulders, the height, that speak of a life lived outdoors, and the rather wild dark hair. As he welcomes us, in a low mumble, his voice has a cracked quality to it, as though it doesn't get put to much use.

I see him look us over. I don't think he likes what he sees. Is that a sneer, as he takes in Nick's spotless Barbour, Samira's Hunter wellies, Miranda's fox fur collar? If so, who knows what he makes of my city dweller's clothes and wheeled Samsonite. I hardly thought about what I was packing, because I was so distracted.

I see Julien, Bo and Mark try to help him with the bags, but he brushes them aside. Beside him they look as neat as schoolboys on the first day of the new term. I bet they don't love the contrast.

'I suppose it will have to be two lots,' Giles says, 'can't get all of us in there safely.'

The gamekeeper raises his eyebrows. 'Whatever you like.'

'You girls go first,' Mark says, with an attempt at chivalry, 'us lads will stay behind.' I wait, cringing, for him to make a joke about Nick and Bo being honorary girls. Luckily it doesn't seem to have occurred to him – or he's managed to hold his tongue. We're all on our best behaviour today, in tolerant holiday-with-friends mode.

It's been ages since we've all been together like this – not since last New Year's Eve, probably. I always forget what it's like. We fit back so quickly, so easily, into our old roles, the ones we have always occupied in this group. I'm the quiet one – to Miranda and Samira, my old housemates, the group extroverts. I revert. We all do. I'm sure Giles, say, isn't nearly such a clown in the A&E department where he's a senior registrar. We clamber into the Land Rover. It smells of wet dog and earth in here. I imagine that's what

Lucy Foley

the gamekeeper would smell like, too, if you got close enough. Miranda is up front, next to him. Every so often I catch a whiff of her perfume: heavy, smoky, mingling oddly with the earthiness. Only she could get away with it. I turn my head to breathe in the fresh air coming through the cracked window.

On one side of us now a rather steep bank falls away to the loch. On the other, though it's not quite dark, the forest is already impenetrably black. The road is nothing more than a track, pitted and very thin, so a false move would send us plunging down towards the water, or crashing into the thickets. We see-saw our way along and then suddenly the brakes come on, hard. All of us are thrown forward into our seats and then slammed back into them.

'Fuck!' Miranda shouts, as Priya – so quiet for the journey up – begins to howl in Samira's arms.

A stag is lit up in the track in front of us. It must have detached itself from the shadow of the trees without any of us noticing. The huge head looks almost too big for the slender reddish body, crowned by a vast bristle of antlers, both majestic and lethal-looking. In the headlights its eyes gleam a weird, alien green. Finally it stops staring at us and moves away with an unhurried grace, into the trees. I put a hand to my chest and feel the fast drumbeat of my heart.

'Wow,' Miranda breathes. 'What was that?'

The gamekeeper turns to her and says, deadpan, 'A deer.'

'I mean,' she says, a little flustered – unusually for her – 'I mean, what sort of deer?'

'Red,' the gamekeeper says, 'A red stag.' He turns back to the road. Exchange over.

Miranda twists around to face us over the back of the seats, and mouths, 'He's hot, no?' Samira and Emma nod

The Hunting Party

their agreement. Then, aloud, she says, ‘Don’t you think so, Katie?’ She leans over and pokes me in the shoulder, a tiny bit too hard.

‘I don’t know,’ I say. I look at the gamekeeper’s impassive expression in the rear-view mirror. Has he guessed we’re talking about him? If so he gives no indication that he’s listening, but all the same, it’s embarrassing.

‘Oh, but you’ve always had strange taste in men, Katie,’ Miranda says, laughing.

Miranda has never really liked my boyfriends. The feeling has, funnily enough, generally been mutual – I’ve often had to defend her to them. ‘I think you pick them,’ she said once, ‘so that they’ll be like the angel on your shoulder, telling you: she’s not a good’un, that one. Steer clear.’ But Miranda is my oldest friend. And our friendship has always outlasted any romantic relationship – on my side, that is. Miranda and Julien have been together since Oxford.

I wasn’t sure what to make of Julien when he came on the scene, at the end of our first year. Neither was Miranda. He was a bit of an anomaly, compared to the boyfriends she’d had before. Admittedly, there were only a couple for comparison, both of them projects like me, not nearly as good-looking or as sociable as her, guys who seemed to exist in a permanent state of disbelief that they had been chosen. But then, Miranda has always liked a project.

So Julien seemed too obvious for her, with her love of waifs and strays. He was too brashly good-looking, too self-confident. And those were her words, not mine. ‘He’s so arrogant,’ she’d say. ‘I can’t wait to hand him his balls next time he tries it on.’ I wondered if she really couldn’t see how closely he mirrored her own arrogance, her own self-confidence.

Lucy Foley

Julien kept trying. And each time, she rebuffed him. He'd come over to chat to us – her – in a pub. Or he'd just happen to 'bump into' her after a lecture. Or he'd casually be dropping in to the bar of our college's Junior Common Room, ostensibly to see some friends, but would spend most of the night sitting at our table, wooing Miranda with an embarrassing frankness.

Later I came to understand that when Julien wants something badly enough he won't let anything stand in the way of his getting it. And he wanted Miranda. Badly.

Eventually, she gave in to the reality of the situation: she wanted him back. Who wouldn't? He was beautiful then, still is, perhaps even more so now that life has roughed a little of the perfection off him, the glibness. I wonder if it would be biologically impossible not to want a man like Julien, at least in the physical sense.

I remember Miranda introducing us, at the Summer Ball – when they finally got together. I knew exactly who he was, of course. I had borne witness to the whole saga: his pursuit of Miranda, her throwing him off, him trying and trying – her, finally, giving in to the inevitable. I knew so much about him. Which college he was at, what subject he was studying, the fact that he was a rugby Blue. I knew so much that I had almost forgotten he wouldn't have a clue who I was. So when he kissed me on the cheek and said, solemnly, 'Nice to meet you, Katie,' – quite politely, despite being drunk – it felt like a big joke.

The first time he stayed at our house – Miranda, Samira and I all lived together in the second year – I bumped into him coming out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around

The Hunting Party

his waist. I was so conscious of trying to be normal, not to look at the bare expanse of his chest, at his broad, well-muscled shoulders gleaming wet from the shower, that I said, 'Hi, Julien.'

He seemed to clutch the towel a little tighter around his waist. 'Hello.' He frowned. 'Ah – this is a bit embarrassing. I'm afraid I don't know your name.'

I saw my mistake. He had completely forgotten who I was, had probably forgotten ever having met me. 'Oh,' I said, putting out my hand, 'I'm Katie.'

He didn't take my hand, and I realised that this was another mistake – too formal, too weird. Then it occurred to me it might also have been that he was keeping the towel up with that hand, clutching a toothbrush with the other.

'Sorry.' He smiled then, his charming smile, and took pity on me. 'So. What did you do, Katie?'

I stared at him. 'What do you mean?'

He laughed. 'Like the novel,' he said. '*What Katie Did*. I always liked that book. Though I'm not sure boys are supposed to.' For the second time he smiled that smile of his, and I suddenly thought I could see something of what Miranda saw in him.

This is the thing about people like Julien. In an American romcom someone as good-looking as him might be cast as a bastard, perhaps to be reformed, to repent of his sins later on. Miranda would be a bitchy Prom Queen, with a *dark secret*. The mousey nobody – me – would be the kind, clever, pitifully misunderstood character who would ultimately save the day. But real life isn't like that. People like them don't need to be unpleasant. Why would they make their lives difficult? They can afford to be their own spectacularly charming selves. And the ones like me, the

mousey nobodies, we don't always turn out to be the heroes of the tale. Sometimes we have our own dark secrets.

What little light there was has left the day now. You can hardly make out anything other than the black mass of trees on either side. The dark has the effect of making them look thicker, closer: almost as though they're pressing in towards us. Other than the thrum of the Land Rover's engine there is no noise at all; perhaps the trees muffle sound, too.

Up front, Miranda is asking the gamekeeper about access. This place is truly remote. 'It's an hour's drive to the road,' the gamekeeper tells us. 'In good weather.'

'An *hour*?' Samira asks. She casts a nervous glance at Priya, who is staring out at the twilight landscape, the flicker of moonlight between the trees reflected in her big dark eyes.

I glance out through the back window. All I can see is a tunnel of trees, diminishing in the distance to a black point.

'More than an hour,' the gamekeeper says, 'if the visibility is poor or the conditions are bad.' Is he enjoying this?

It takes me an hour to get down to my mum's in Surrey. That's some sixty miles from London. It seems incredible that this place is even in the United Kingdom. I have always thought of this small island we call home as somewhat overcrowded. The way my stepdad likes to talk about immigrants, you'd think it was in very real danger of sinking beneath the weight of all the bodies squeezed onto it.

'Sometimes,' the gamekeeper says, 'at this time of year, you can't use the road at all. If there's a dump of snow, say – it would have been in the email you got from Heather.'

The Hunting Party

Emma nods. 'It was.'

'What do you mean?' Samira's voice has an unmistakable shrillness now. 'We won't be able to leave?'

'It's possible,' he says. 'If we get enough snow the track becomes impassable – it's too dangerous, even for snow tyres. We get at least a couple of weeks a year, in total, when Corrin is cut off from the rest of the world.'

'That could be quite cosy,' Emma says quickly, perhaps to fend off any more worried interjections from Samira. 'Exciting. And I've ordered enough groceries in—'

'And wine,' Miranda supplies.

'—and wine,' Emma agrees, 'to last us for a couple of weeks if we need it to. I probably went a bit overboard. I've planned a bit of a feast for New Year's Eve.'

No one's really listening to her. I think we're all preoccupied by this new understanding of the place in which we're going to spend the next few days. Because there *is* something unnerving about the isolation, knowing how far we are from everything.

'What about the station?' Miranda asks, with a sort of 'gotcha!' triumph. 'Surely you could just get a train?'

The gamekeeper gives her a look. He is quite attractive, I realise. Or at least he would be, only there's something haunted about his eyes. 'Trains don't run so well on a metre of snow, either,' he says. 'So they wouldn't be stopping here.'

And, just like that, the landscape, for all its space, seems to shrink around us.