

# COLD HELL

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## Chapter 1

Before

The sun is setting behind the mountain and the wide ski slope is being cast in shadow. Tiny figures in colourful outfits zigzag down the white slope towards the valley. It's closing time for the lifts; some people hurry before the chairlift stops. In the crisp air at an altitude of almost two thousand metres, silence reigns. A girl huffs; her hair is short at the nape of her neck but her fringe falls over her eyes. She closes the door to the workshop where – in an emergency – you can fix a ski, tucks the key ring with a small compass attached into her pocket, and huffs again.

A little further on, before the turn-off to the run leading down to the valley, a boy in a yellow tracksuit crouches down and takes off a glove to free his fingers and work out why his boot is moving loosely in the bindings. He discovers that one of them needs tightening, so he can't go down. If he hurries, will he perhaps manage to catch the chairlift? He looks around; all he needs is a screwdriver, or even an iron washer or a flat pebble to add some thickness. If he skis slowly, he might just make it down.

After

The edge of the mountain is like the lower jaw of a toothless monster; then the slope drops away sheer, dotted with uprooted tree trunks – the dark remnants of a powerful storm – and sharp rocks. On the opposite side, where the ground rises amidst pines and boulders, two young people trudge along as if in desperation; one wears a yellow ski suit and the other a fuchsia helmet. They cling to the tree trunks, planting their boots on the rocks; their breath, warm from the exertion, steams in the morning chill; their eyes, glistening with fear, dart left and right in search of handholds. They are fleeing; they have no choice but to flee, and to flee they must climb, and the climb is gruelling. The snow falls thick and fast, in large, silent, persistent flakes.

Now, Saturday, up the mountain

It is the hour that heralds the evening. There is light, but soon it will be possible to descend the snow-covered slope, whilst the snowcats are already finishing their work. When the men dressed in black take to it, the Montagna Regina ski resort in the Dolomites is quiet, clean, tidy, already at rest for the night.

At an altitude of almost two thousand metres, there is a small repair workshop, an equally small medical centre and a large, spartan self-service restaurant, deserted from 6.30 pm to 6 am.

Theo was born down in the valley and was breastfed in that self-service café, which has always been run by her family; she'd even go down the slopes at night, and she actually sleeps on her skis because she keeps them under her bed when she's not using them.

That afternoon she had a row with her brother Rudi because he was supposed to be closing up there, but instead he had a date with a girl and had handed the keys over to her. It's always up to her to do him favours. Not that there's much to do up there, but you have to wait until everyone's gone and then set the timers on the fridge and ovens, and put the bread and brioche in to rise. The resort was designed by Frank Bauer, the deputy mayor, a brilliant architect and engineer.

Theo sees dark shadows passing in front of the self-service window and snorts: if there's still some nuisance about, she can't leave! But then, after kicking the door in, they come in and she instinctively ducks under the bar counter.

The hail of bullets ravages the place, not the ski lifts, nor the seats or the engines; they wreak havoc on the grey Formica tables and chairs, riddling the posters on the walls depicting the mountain peaks, the coffee machine, the glasses, and the glass doors of the cake fridge. The hail of bullets rains shards of glass and ceramic, along with splashes of liqueur, down on Theo, and she finds herself breathless. It has all been so unexpected and absurd that she feels as though she is dreaming or imagining it. It is as though a myriad of explosions had taken the mountain, the crisp air, the cold, and the usual silence by surprise.

But they keep firing; they seem intent on reducing everything to rubble. Theo runs the fingers of her right hand over the steel of the counter that is miraculously shielding her, then stares at the smartphone she is clutching in her left hand. She slides the camera out and starts recording.

When everything finally falls silent, she hears boots approaching and someone slamming something onto the shelf above her; she imagines it is the weapon. She has the feeling that whoever it is is staring at the mess of cake and glass right behind the counter. She pulls the phone back, holding her breath, then the figure shouts a sharp command in a powerful voice: 'Let's go!' and steps back.

Theo breathes a sigh of relief when she hears them leave and closes her eyes, leaning against the inside wall of the counter. She opens them again and checks her smartphone,

which is still recording. He mutes the audio and watches the video: there are men dressed in black, their faces hidden by full-face helmets, firing like madmen, and then the gloved hands of the one who's leaning over her. He pokes his head out and, seeing that there's no one left, reaches for the window to see where those mad criminals are heading. She gasps.

There are two snowmobiles parked there and three men with submachine guns slung over their shoulders – or whatever they are; he doesn't know much about them – talking amongst themselves, and a little further on, a young lad in a yellow tracksuit, with one ski on his foot and another in his hand. His helmet lies on the ground; his cheeks are flushed red and his mouth is agape in astonishment. He looks frozen, whilst the blokes argue and argue.

She fiddles with her smartphone, trying to start another recording, but someone grabs her by the collar of her jacket and drags her out like a sack.

"Damn! I found her too!" he shouts, throwing her to the ground in front of the group. The light is fading and the cold stings Theo's face.

The man takes her smartphone, then goes over to the boy in the yellow ski suit, holds out his palm, and the boy hands over his iPhone too. His face is still livid and warm breath escapes from his still-open mouth, but he seems to have recovered from the shock.

The man in black places the two phones against a wooden bench and smashes them to pieces.

"They come with us," says the one with the powerful voice; outdoors it is lower and hoarser, his English rough, with a harsh accent.

Theo's eyes widen in fear, whilst the boy closes his mouth and swallows several times.

## Chapter 2

### Downstream

The Edelweiss used to be just a bar; now it's also a bed and breakfast. Small and cosy, it's all dark, weathered wood that smells of beeswax. Elga Nardelli inherited it from her parents and, when she retired from competitive skiing, she began running it. Her children, Theodora and Rudi, help out, just like in families of yesteryear. They have only three rooms to let and, now that the season is drawing to a close, a week before the ski lifts shut down, in a March that is still bitterly cold, only two are occupied by the Demattei family: the double room and the adjoining one with two single beds.

Elga is busy preparing aperitifs for the Dematteis, who are from Rome and are sitting on a floral sofa in front of a low table, in the small room to the left of the entrance. Anna has her eyes glued to her iPhone; Guido, her husband, and Giulia, their daughter, are reading a novel. They are waiting for Alberto, their other son, to return before going out for pizza; he has sent a message. The binding on his ski had come loose, so he stopped to fix it, came down as soon as it was sorted, and joined them at the B&B. He is a responsible thirteen-year-old and they trust him. They trust him and wait; there's no anxiety in the family.

Elga sets the aperitifs down on the low table and then goes into the small room at the back with the service entrance, where her son, Rudi, is putting his skis and boots away on the rack. She finds him mopping the snow off the floor with a cloth; then he closes the door, hangs his jacket on the coat rack and takes off his woollen hat, revealing a thick head of chestnut-coloured hair.

Elga has hair the same colour, which falls to her shoulders, and eyes the same pale green as her son's. They are both of the same height, rarely smile and are both reserved; they look very much alike.

"Why hasn't Theo arrived yet? It's started snowing and it won't stop for a while".

"Hasn't she come back yet?" he asks, and she shakes her head. "Don't worry, Mum, she won't get lost," he continues. "I'll put my phone on charge and see if she's sent me a message," he concludes and heads towards the wooden stairs leading to the first floor where the guest rooms are; on the second floor, however, the owners sleep.

### Upstream

Theo gets up; the snow is soaking her thermal trousers and as she brushes it off, she feels her fingers are frozen. The boy in the yellow ski suit doesn't move.

"What about the boy with the ski boots?" asks one of the tall, thin men; they can only be distinguished by the shape of their bodies and the way they speak.

"His business," replies the one with the hoarse voice, who seems to be the leader.

"Not on my snowmobile..."

"Take them off..."

"Do you want him alive?"

At that sentence, Theo jumps; in fact, both kids feel their hearts leap into their throats. They understand the English spoken by those men perfectly well; their pronunciation and manner of speaking are so basic that it is clear it is not their native language. The girl quickly suggests, "There are hiking boots in the shop..." and points to the workshop next to the self-service restaurant.

The man with the hoarse voice turns to look at her as it begins to snow.

"What's your name?" he asks.

"Theo."

Then he turns to the boy in the yellow tracksuit, who mutters: "Alberto."

He then nods to her companion, indicating the small wooden building.

"Move!" he says, and with his submachine gun urges the boy in the yellow tracksuit to set off, but he doesn't move; he seems not to have understood. "Did you hear me?" the man insists, and so Theo goes to meet him: "Come on," she urges. The girl's white, frozen hand rests on his arm, and he seems to wake up with a start: "Yes," he replies, throwing the ski he still holds to the ground and unclipping the other from his boot, "let's go."

The two, followed by the armed man, reach the workshop and the girl pulls from her pocket the bunch of keys with the small compass with which, about an hour earlier, she had locked the door. The interior is full of shelves with mountaineering equipment and tools; to one side there is a workbench.

"Move!" urges the man, who remains at the door. The boy goes and sits on a bench and unlaces his boots; Theo picks up a pair of sturdy leather boots with black and red laces. "Try them on and see if they fit," he says, handing them to him.

"Thanks," he replies as the girl picks up a pair of gloves, two hats and two scarves from a basket in the corner.

He takes off his gloves, blows his nose, puts his handkerchief away and slips on his boots.

"Yes, they fit. They're very nice..."

"They belonged to my father."

"I'll give them back to him."

"He doesn't need them anymore; he's gone."

"Oh..." he says as he pulls the laces tight.

"Here," says Theo, handing him a hat and a scarf.

"I've got my helmet," he says, standing up and retrieving his gloves.

"The more layers you have, the better you'll cope out there, on the seat of a snowmobile, in the evening," she pauses, then adds, "and it'll be night soon."

"Whose are they?" he replies, grabbing them hesitantly, staring at her with small dark eyes set in the slender oval of his face. He has very short curly hair. The boy who had seemed like a child to Theo is actually about her own age; he is as tall as she is, but half as thin.

"They belong to people who left them at the self-service restaurant. Do you want to return these as well?" she replies without irony as she snatches a fuchsia helmet from the shelf. The armed man grows impatient and prods them with the barrel of his submachine gun, escorting them out. He hands his weapon to his companion, who climbs onto the back of the first snowmobile. The engine roars in the gloomy twilight amongst the snow-capped peaks. He climbs onto his own, starts it up and moves forward in the seat so there's room for the girl and the boy too. Then he gives the order: "First Alberto, then Theo".

## Downstream

It's already almost dark; the lights of the houses and streetlamps are on in the village of Sottomontagna, at the foot of the ski resort. It's not a well-known place; it's a bit isolated from the other resorts, but it cherishes its tranquillity as a privilege and makes the most of its tourist-friendly location on the slopes of the Montagna Regina – the Queen of the Dolomites, in fact, at least for its roughly four thousand inhabitants.

At the Edelweiss, old Roth is sitting at a small round table to the right of the entrance, between the door and the bar counter, with his wolfhound Müll curled up at his feet. The man sips a sparkling bitter orangeade and has his eyes fixed on a chessboard.

The Dematteis have finished their aperitifs and crisps and are starting to get impatient. Elga is behind the bar, in front of which sits, on a high stool, Cosetta Pretti, who is a few years older than her and has the temperament of a mountain woman. She used to be a professor of palaeontology at the University of Turin and, as her contract wasn't renewed, she went to teach in Canada and North America, but some time later she returned to Italy to retire to a cabin in Sottomontagna. With very short, greying hair, a long face with skin tanned from working outdoors, and a cup of the dark, full-bodied tea served at the Edelweiss in his hands.

Rudi emerges from the back in just a shirt, and Giulia Demattei instinctively looks up at him. At that moment, Marta Mair, the mayor of Sottomontagna and a former competitive skier herself, also enters. Under her large, unbuttoned coat, she wears an elegant trouser suit and snow boots. She looks sombre, with a man in uniform behind her. Following her is Adamo Rossi, a marshal of the Carabinieri from the barracks located in the neighbouring valley, a much more famous and exclusive one. He lives with his family in Sottomontagna, so everyone knows him.

Elga lets her gaze sweep over those who have suddenly filled her bar and turns pale.