

**MURDER ON  
MONT BLANC**

**Kate Miller**

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**For Kevan and Alexander**



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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction and any resemblance between the places in the novel and real locations in Haute Savoie are entirely in the reader's imagination.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate Miller fell in love with the Alps when she went to work in France on leaving school, and she has spent as much time as possible in the mountains since then. In her writing career, Kate has been a journalist and magazine editor, and is a playwright and creative writing tutor. She is a member of Hertford Writers' Circle and co-organiser of the Herts Book Festival. *Murder on Mont Blanc* is her first novel, with more Marie-Laure mysteries to come.

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## CHAPTER

### *One*

**Les Souches, near Chamoix-sur-Arve, Haute Savoie, France.  
Tuesday 3 February 1931**

Marie-Laure stared at the brandy placed in front of her. She had never drunk brandy in daylight before. All she could see was, not his face, but a pine cone, splattered with blood, lying in the snow. *The bastard*, she said to herself. *The stupid bastard*.

And the day had started so well.

\* \* \*

*I'm going to work*, Marie-Laure Monaghan told herself as she came out of the forest and stopped to put on her skis. An icy wind off the glaciers on Mont Blanc hit the back of her neck and she shivered. But as she looked across the valley of white snow and black pines to the towering rocks beyond, excitement rose up in her. *I'm going to work*.

It was not yet eight o'clock and the sun was still behind the mountains. Below her was a stretch of snow, at the bottom a row of buildings, including a café where glass doors gave access to a small terrace with views up the slope. Beyond the buildings was the road to Chamoix. Until three years ago, this modest hillside had been the field where the pigs were kept. Now it was a ski piste. A nursery slope admittedly, and one crisscrossed with tracks and pitted with holes where beginners had been overcome by gravity, but recognisably a piste. It had its part in the unstoppable craze for skiing which was sweeping the French Alps, bringing money and glamour to downtrodden villages, dragging the bemused inhabitants out of their dark chalets and turning the deathly Alpine winter into a season of speed and fun.

And for Marie-Laure, this slope was now her workplace. She buckled on her skis, then hesitated, suddenly aware that anyone in the café would be able to look out and watch her descending. New pupils could be seeing her, their ski instructor, arriving for work. Suppose she fell? Her face burned with imagined humiliation. It

was too early for pupils to have arrived but her fellow instructors might already be there. The thought of them gave her a fierce determination to ski the short slope beautifully. So she did.

At the bottom, she took off her skis and leaned them on the newly-built rack. She knocked on the glass doors and Pierrot let her in. She went to warm her hands by the iron stove that filled the café with welcome heat.

The place was quiet. 'Where's Harald?' she asked.

Pierrot shrugged. 'Out for an early run I suppose,' he said. 'No lessons until half past nine.'

'Actually I'm giving an early morning lesson,' she informed him.

Pierrot shrugged again, with what she was sure was a deliberate lack of interest. She continued, determined not to let him spoil her important day, 'I'm expecting my client in about fifteen minutes, so can I have a cup of coffee first?'

Pierrot gaped at her. She wasn't sure if he was being rude or just stupid. Probably both. He was a gangly youth who opened up the café for Harald in the mornings, manned the bar at night and helped out with ski lessons during the day. He wasn't exactly an instructor, in her view.

'You want some coffee?' he said. 'I thought all you English girls drank tea.'

'I'm not English,' she said firmly. 'We've been through this already.'

Pierrot poured a café au lait and placed it in front of her on the bar. She sipped the coffee, looking out at the snow as she waited for God's Gift. The clock ticked to 8.15.

8.20.

'He's late,' Pierrot said, boldly stating the obvious. 'Who is it anyway?'

'It's Monsieur Siebert. Um, quite a loud man...,' Marie-Laure searched for words to describe him without sounding ungracious. So what if he was a balding show-off who fancied himself as God's Gift to Women, and had pinched her bottom when he booked the lesson? A paying pupil was a good pupil.

'The pushy poseur with the big moustache?' Pierrot grinned. 'He's probably still in bed with a hangover. If it's the bloke I'm

thinking of, he was in here till past midnight last night, completely legless.’

Marie-Laure’s heart sank. That sounded like her man.

The café was an old-fashioned place, with a tiled floor and hard metal chairs. It took up one corner of a plain, square building which fronted onto the main road. Once, it had been the ‘Bar des Souches’, where men in blue overalls sat over their red wine, smoked their cigarettes, and where women never ventured. But three years before, it had been bought by the famous ski champion Harald Sigurssen, renamed the ‘Café des Sports’ and turned into the hub of his ski school.

There was a rush of cold air as the door opened and Harald entered. He glowered as he looked around.

‘Where is everybody?’

‘Jean-Luc is giving an early lesson,’ Pierrot said.

‘And Raymond?’

‘Er, Raymond is...’

At that moment the front door opened and a bulky figure came in.

‘Late!’ barked Harald.

Raymond took off his coat and offered no apology, just settling himself on a stool at the bar. Pierrot sniggered, like a naughty schoolboy protected by his bigger friend. Harald was prevented from saying more as the front door opened again and five men entered, carrying skis and dressed in tweeds and thick jerseys. Harald raised a hand to get their attention. ‘If you gentlemen would follow me,’ and took them over to his office – a designated table in the far corner of the bar. Marie-Laure knew it wouldn’t be long before he was giving them his usual introductory talk on the benefits of the Harald Sigurssen ski tuition method.

‘Not working this morning Marie-Laure?’ asked Raymond.

‘She’s waiting for her pupil,’ said Pierrot.

‘Oh yes, your rich guy. He hasn’t turned up? What a shame. Maybe he’s not happy with the, er, service you’re providing. Maybe you should have given him what he wanted.’

Marie-Laure sat stony faced.

Egged on by Raymond, Pierrot said, ‘Maybe she did give him what he wanted, and now he doesn’t need to bother with a ski

lesson just to get a poke.'

'What was he like then Marie-Laure?' Raymond persisted. 'Big is he? Hung like a horse, I bet.'

'I wouldn't know,' she said, trying to keep her voice neutral.

'Come on,' said Raymond. 'You're not at the convent now. You won't get pupils by acting like a nun.'

She wasn't going to rise to this. 'He's just late,' she said.

'Oh well, of course, he was planning to do a warm-up run before he had his lesson with you,' Raymond said casually. 'Didn't he tell you? He mentioned it when we were chatting at the bar last night. I told him to drop into the P'tit Alpe while he was up there. Old Pascal is selling his pear brandy from behind the cowshed now. Just the thing to get you going in the morning.'

Suddenly Harald was there behind them. 'Enough! You two,' he pointed at Raymond and Pierrot. 'I've got clients here expecting to start their morning's lesson. Now get going. My ski school has a reputation to maintain.'

'We haven't finished our coffee...' Pierrot whined.

'Fuck off out of here!'

They left and once again the bar was quiet. 'Idiots,' sighed Harald. 'And why are you still here Marie-Laure?'

'I'm still waiting for Monsieur Siebert to appear. Apparently he was very drunk last night.'

'But I saw him,' Harald said. 'An hour ago – more. He was heading this way, carrying his skis. Said he'd booked an early lesson and was going up the mountain road for a practice run first.'

Marie-Laure looked out at the slopes. 'I'll go and find him. He might have gotten lost.' She got up and reached for her jersey.

'Surely he can look after himself,' said Harald. 'He told me he'd been a telemark champion in the Jura and was just coming to us for a little refresher course.'

'He told me that too. But in truth he can barely stand up on his skis.' She pulled her jersey over her head and started for the door. 'I'd better go and track him down.'

'Yes, that'd be for the best,' Harald said grimly. 'If he breaks a leg he might not pay.'

\* \* \*

Outside she picked her skis off the rack. At nearly two metres, they

were much taller than her. Catching sight of her reflection in the café window, she considered the effect, with dissatisfaction.

The top half wasn't too bad: her dark bobbed hair, together with the sunglasses, was worthy of Coco Chanel. Even down to her neat waist she looked rather *gamine*, she thought. But there was no disguising her unfashionably round hips and lamentably un-coltish legs. God's Gift to Women had made a pass at her after the first lesson. But then he probably made a pass at anyone under the age of 50 who didn't actually have to shave in the morning.

She looked up. A figure had appeared out of the trees at the top of the nursery slope. Normally this slope was her domain, where she was either persuading nervous newcomers to point their skis downhill and slide a little way – just a little way – or else discouraging over-confident speed-seekers from zooming straight down and right through the glass doors of the Café des Sports.

Was it Monsieur Siebert, at last? But no, this was an expert skier, zigzagging casually, followed by two knock-kneed shapes descending very slowly. Her stomach did a somersault. It was Jean-Luc. But she was going to stay calm.

Instead of setting off, she waited until Jean-Luc glided to a halt in front of her. 'Not working this morning Marie-Laure?' he said. His sarcastic grin attracted and repelled her, as ever.

'Shouldn't you be helping them?' she asked, indicating his two charges, one of whom was now flailing around on the ground while the other tried to help him up with a ski pole.

Jean-Luc threw them a glance. 'They learn more when they make their own mistakes,' he said. 'Couldn't Harald find you a pupil this morning? You can't be a ski instructor without pupils Marie-Laure.'

'Actually I have a pupil. Monsieur Siebert.'

'The pushy poseur with the big moustache?'

'That's him. He booked an early lesson but hasn't turned up. Apparently he went out for a warm-up run.'

'Yes – we saw him,' Jean-Luc said.

She sighed. Everybody had seen him except her, his instructor. 'Where exactly did you see him?'

'At the top of the road.'

'Was he alright?' she asked.

‘His technique was rubbish but I didn’t stop to criticise. I assumed he was going to do what we did and ski back down the track. We had quite a few, er, rests, so I expected him to overtake us, but he didn’t.’

Marie-Laure sighed again. ‘I think he’s getting stuck into the pear brandies.’ She put on her gloves.

‘Let me dump these two and I’ll come with you.’ Behind him she could see his two clients struggling to unbuckle their skis.

‘No thanks,’ Marie-Laure said crisply. ‘You really ought to go over a few basics with them.’

Shouldering her skis, she set off along the track, which in summer was a dirt road leading up to Old Pascal’s farm, the P’tit Alpe. She liked walking. Her leather boots, though heavy, gripped the snow well and her Norwegian ash skis – they had to be ash, Harald insisted – were light to carry.

She didn’t want Jean-Luc around; she didn’t need him. What there had been between them was over and that was how she wanted it to stay. And really there had been nothing between them. She didn’t care about Jean-Luc one way or the other. She repeated this to herself a few times.

Amongst the trees, she inhaled the scent of pine, the perfumed breath of the mountain, and felt the rush it always gave her. Her feet crunched in fresh snow. Shafts of sunlight filtered through the trees, dappling the ground with shadows. It was a glorious day.

She still felt surprised that this was a Wednesday, in February, and she was out in the forest instead of in the classroom at Sainte Thérèse, teaching English grammar to Junior Four. A background feeling that she should be at work nagged her. But she was at work – she was a ski instructor now. The convent school was behind her. She had a wonderful new job.

But would it stay wonderful if she made a mess of this? If she discovered God’s Gift sitting over a bottle of *poire* at the P’tit Alpe and he told her to get lost. What the hell made her think he was going to pay a woman to teach him when he could ski perfectly well, as everyone could see...

Well, Harald would back her up. Nobody argued with Harald. Tall, lean, his dark hair grey now, his fierce brows and hooked nose giving him the air of a brooding eagle, he barked orders in his

Norwegian-accented French and his pupils obeyed without question. Nobody argued with Harald's three international gold medals in ski jumping and two in long distance ski racing.

As she walked up the road, she could see tracks, but only of one skier. Jean-Luc and his pair of pupils had turned off onto the slope, rather than follow the road all the way down to the village. Had Monsieur Siebert simply given up and gone back to his hotel, without bothering to call into the café? Was he so disappointed with his lesson, or with her?

The road wound uphill and she began to feel warm, even though by now she was completely in the shade of the trees and could barely see the sun. The ground was treacherous: every now and then she slipped on a patch of ice. Tracks showed that various skiers had come down, this morning or the day before.

*Damn Monsieur Siebert!* She should never have gone near the arrogant boor. But he was ready to pay good money and he was her first real client, as she saw it. Rather than just being a pupil handed to her by Harald or one of the other instructors, Monsieur Siebert had driven up to the ski school in his sports car, asking for her – the lady ski instructor. Jean-Luc and the others had sniggered but she knew they were envious. Up till then they had tolerated her as useful for taking the kind of pupils they didn't want to teach. 'Nervous types,' Jean-Luc had said. 'Little kids, spinsters.' The sort who wouldn't tip. The sort who were not seeking Harald's rugged glamour or Jean-Luc's practised charm or Raymond and Pierrot's.... What exactly *did* Raymond and Pierrot have to offer, she wondered? They were local lads, 'strong boys who know these mountains,' Harald said approvingly. When she had landed God's Gift, with his swagger and ready cash, they had been seething.

It had not taken her long to realise that Joseph Siebert had only requested her because he didn't want the male instructors to see that he wasn't as good a skier as he claimed. Marie-Laure was used to men with a high opinion of themselves. Didn't she have three older brothers after all? Her brothers' teasing, mockery and put-downs had always provoked a reaction in the pit of her stomach, a fiery ball of determination not to be beaten. Monsieur Siebert, Jean-Luc and his fellow instructors all provoked the same feeling and a silent vow in her head: *This job is my way out and I'm not going to let you*

*stop me.*

Boys always had to be told they were the best, she knew, otherwise they had a tendency to sulk. Each one of her brothers was somehow their mother's favourite. 'There's nothing better than my boys,' Mam had always said. 'I know they'll look after me.' She had carried on saying that, even when it was painfully untrue. Still, one of the brothers was still at home, looking after Mam and Da, which was more than she was doing herself. The daily guilt about leaving Dublin twanged in her mind.

It was unfortunate that the previous day's lesson with God's Gift had not gone well. He'd refused to admit to his inexperience and wouldn't listen to her teaching; in fact, he had trouble acknowledging that he was the pupil and she the tutor. She had feared he might call a halt to the classes and she would lose the 200 francs, so she had reined in her advice, to bolster his pride and keep him sweet. *Just like any silly girl*, she told herself. She had given him the illusion that he was a better skier than he was, and now he had headed off alone. She knew that he would have seen himself emerging triumphantly onto the nursery slope, executing a few expert turns, before swooshing to a stop in front of her.

But if that was his plan, he should have been basking in her admiration an hour ago.

Climbing the next hairpin bend, she could see something lying across the road at the corner ahead. Something straight: a ski. Cold fear suddenly made her feel nauseous. There was bound to be trouble now. The fool had got stinking drunk and had probably crashed into a tree: just the thing to happen on this icy path.

She began to run. 'I'm coming,' she called. No reply. Either he'd knocked himself out or was weak with pain from a broken leg.

She could see him now, lying on his back, among the pines at the side of the road. As she got closer, she thought how awkwardly he was lying – how uncomfortable he looked. Before she reached him, she knew. She had seen a dead person before.

Marie-Laure put her skis down and looked at him. A Hail Mary ran automatically through her mind.

The bastard. What kind of idiot skis into a tree and breaks his neck on a sunny morning?

He was lying with his legs half on the road, one ski still on, his

body under the trees. She clambered through the deep snow to his head. And stopped.

It was not a broken neck that had killed him. He lay in a halo of blood, puddles of red staining the white all around him. Even the fallen pine cones were red. One of his ski poles had been driven through his throat.

## CHAPTER

### *Two*

She found herself leaning against a tree trunk. A broken twig was sticking into the back of her neck. The man was dead. Her mother's voice wailed in her head: 'This is all your fault, all your fault! Why did you let him do it Mary Dolores? Why didn't you stop him girl?'

She took a deep breath and focussed her brain so she could think rationally. How could this have happened? He must have failed to take the bend. Drunk maybe? Maybe not? Perhaps just going too fast? He must have put out a hand to protect himself, the pole hit a tree and was forced into his neck, piercing an artery...

Except that it was the sharp end, not the handle, in his throat. Maybe it happened as he fell? She stepped round his body and looked at the snow. There were no signs of a tumble; he seemed to have simply skidded. His other ski pole was hanging from his wrist, attached by the strap, as she had shown him.

Anxious to understand, she followed his traces a little way up the hill. They were not easy to see as the snow cover on the road was thin. There appeared to be the tracks of several skiers. Of course, Jean-Luc and his pupils had passed this way before Monsieur Siebert. However, she could see Siebert's tracks, just as they veered off at the bend. Beside them was a patch of trampled snow, as if someone had been waiting there. As if, she thought, someone had been in his path, forcing him to swerve to avoid them.

Or were they her own footprints? She checked – no. But perhaps someone else had been there and seen the body. If so, why had they not raised the alarm? Or perhaps they had. Perhaps a lone skier had come by, seen the disaster, realised there was nothing they could do and had carried on down to the Café des Sports, arriving after she had left.

'Marie-Laure!' She turned: two people were coming up the road. It was Jean-Luc and Harald.

She tried to shout but no sound came out. They broke into a run. 'Don't worry,' called Harald. 'Jean-Luc thought you might need

help with the guy...'

Then they reached her and saw what she was looking at.

'Shit,' said Jean-Luc. He struggled knee-deep into the snow to reach Siebert. 'Shit,' he said again, when he saw the blood.

Harald put his hand on her shoulder. For him, it was a big gesture of kindness and it was the worst thing he could have done. An urge to burst into tears swelled inside her.

'Come on,' he said. 'Put your skis on.'

\* \* \*

Marie-Laure sat on a hard wooden chair and stared at the snow outside the café. She could see Harald and Jean-Luc setting off up the road with the big sledge, normally used for hauling deliveries.

Nathalie had placed a brandy on the table in front of her.

When she'd got back to the café, the one person Marie-Laure most wanted to see was already there – Nathalie, her friend. Friend and landlady. She had been a lodger at Nathalie Lazare's apartment for the past 18 months; only the previous evening they had been laughing about God's Gift to Women and his pompous airs. Nathalie came in on weekday mornings, to prepare the lunches, and her cooking was gaining the Café des Sports a good reputation.

Nathalie grimaced. 'Well, so much for the show-off. It looks like speed was the death of him. Someone will have to find his family.'

'He's not here with family. He's here for work.'

'Really? What did he do?'

'He said he was in 'security'. For a rich businessman.'

'Perhaps he was a bodyguard?' Nathalie suggested.

'Maybe. He is – was – certainly big. You'd think he'd be better at looking after himself.'

'Is his boss here in Chamoix then?'

'So he said. Staying at the Splendide. He's a Monsieur Andlau.'

'Sounds a bit German.'

'They're from Strasbourg. That's France isn't it?'

'It's been France since the end of the war,' Nathalie said firmly.

'Siebert might have been German, I don't know,' Marie-Laure said. 'He told me he was moving on to a better job soon. Going to work for a 'true German', not a 'half-breed' he said.'

'Did he mean his boss? 'Half-breed'? That's not very nice.'

‘He was not nice.’

At that moment they heard the roar of a powerful car engine, which quietened to a low purr, before stopping. The front door opened and a man came into the bar. He was dark haired, trim, wearing a full-length camel coat which looked wonderfully warm and soft. And expensive.

The man raised his hat. ‘Good day. I’m looking for the lady skiing instructor. I was told I’d find her here.’

Marie-Laure stood up. ‘Monsieur Andlau?’ He nodded. She took a deep breath but even so the words came out strangely: ‘I have to tell you some bad news...’

He broke in: ‘Mademoiselle, you have a pupil, a Monsieur Siebert. I need to speak with him. It’s urgent.’

‘The bad news concerns Monsieur Siebert...’ Her mind was whirling but she had a responsibility to tell him. ‘He’s had an accident.’

‘I must talk to him.’

‘A really bad... I mean he’s dead.’

Monsieur Andlau closed his eyes. He looked like someone who had received the news he’d been dreading.

‘Have a seat,’ said Nathalie. ‘Would you like a brandy?’

The man didn’t seem to hear her. He opened his eyes and gazed so intently at Marie-Laure that her face began to flush.

‘Where is he?’ he asked.

‘I found him on the road down from the P’tit Alpe. They’ve gone to fetch the... fetch him.’

‘Mademoiselle – you found him?’ Monsieur Andlau now appeared shocked.

‘Yes. I went to look for him when he was late for his lesson.’

‘But, how terrible for you.’ Suddenly he seemed more concerned about her than his employee.

Nathalie put a glass of brandy on the table. He didn’t touch it but sat down and Marie-Laure sat too. He leaned in towards her, so close she could smell his eau de cologne. ‘How did he die?’

‘He had some sort of collision and... got stabbed in the neck by his ski pole...’

‘Was it an accident?’ When she hesitated he asked, ‘In your opinion mademoiselle? Tell me, I know nothing about skiing.’

Please. Could someone else have been involved?

‘There were marks in the snow – footprints. I think someone...’ She realised what she was about to say and fell silent.

He nodded, as if this were confirmation.

She looked down at her hands. ‘I’m sorry. I should not have let him go out alone. He was inexperienced.’

‘Siebert had more than enough experience,’ Monsieur Andlau said curtly. ‘Have the police been called?’

Marie-Laure realised she didn’t know. She called across to Nathalie behind the bar. ‘Did anyone telephone the gendarmes?’

‘Yes, as soon as we heard.’ She looked towards the doors. ‘I would’ve thought they’d be here by now.’

Monsieur Andlau murmured, ‘Have you told anyone you don’t think it was an accident?’

‘I’m not saying it was not an accident,’ Marie-Laure replied carefully.

‘Indeed. Please, mademoiselle, I cannot tell you what to say, but I should be very grateful if you would not mention to the gendarmes or anyone the... possibility that it might not have been an accident.’

‘It doesn’t really matter what I think. They will ask Monsieur Sigurssen the questions. He’s the boss. He knows what an accident looks like.’

‘Of course. I am grateful to you mademoiselle.’ Monsieur Andlau reached inside his coat and drew out a wallet. ‘What is your fee for a lesson?’

‘Two hundred francs.’

He counted out 12 one-hundred franc notes. ‘I will pay you for six lessons for Monsieur Siebert.’

Marie-Laure was appalled. ‘Of course not. I should have...’

‘I beg you, you are not at fault here. Siebert was an adult, but he could also be a fool. He should have been able to look after himself.’ He paused. ‘Can you look after yourself mademoiselle?’

‘Yes,’ she said. What an odd question that was. He sighed and she thought there was fear in his face. His eyes were red-rimmed through lack of sleep. ‘Are you alright monsieur?’ she asked.

‘It is not myself I worry about,’ he replied, almost inaudibly.

There were shouts outside. Jean-Luc and Harald were bringing

down the sledge, with its burden. At the same time, they heard the bell of the ambulance.

Monsieur Andlau buttoned up his coat. 'I must deal with poor Joseph and the gendarmes,' he said. 'Don't worry mademoiselle. I will ensure they don't make life difficult for you.'

Marie-Laure shook her head. 'I think they will.'

'I am a rich man. You'd be surprised at what I can do.'

Marie-Laure watched as he walked out on to the snow, slipping in his highly-polished shoes with their smooth, leather soles.

Nathalie came out from behind the bar as soon as he had gone. 'He didn't seem very upset.'

'Monsieur Siebert was an employee I suppose, not a member of his family.'

Outside there was the sound of another motor: the gendarmes had arrived. People were moving around. Nathalie went to take a look. The men in tweed came into the café and hurried out again; Raymond and Pierrot must have returned with their morning's class.

No-one spoke to her. She suddenly felt very tired.

She could not believe that everything had gone so badly wrong. A few days ago she had been jubilant. She was a ski instructor, embarking on the life of adventure she had always dreamed of. Best yet, she'd finally said goodbye to the years of school teaching.

The transformation in her life had all happened within a few weeks and it was thanks to Claudine Lemaire. Six feet tall, slim, blonde and athletic, she was always known as Claude. 'Claudine is the ghastly girl in Colette's novels,' she told Marie-Laure. 'What was my mother thinking of?' When Marie-Laure had arrived at the Sainte Thérèse Academy three years before, Claude had taken her under her wing. They were the same age and Marie-Laure was in awe of everything about Claude: her elegance, her rebellious humour, her sporting prowess. Claude was nothing like the games teachers Marie-Laure had known from her schooldays. Grim-faced women bent on their mysterious purpose of increasing their pupils' suffering on this earth. Claude was joyous and enthusiastic and taught the schoolgirls to have fun. She had medals in swimming, athletics and – best of all – skiing.

Marie-Laure remembered the date – the fifteenth of

November 1927, a Thursday she would never forget – when she had woken up to the first heavy snowfall she had ever seen in her life. She had watched entranced as Claude went out to a steep field behind the kitchens and skied down. It looked so wonderful: she begged Claude to teach her. That first winter, she was a worse pupil than the youngest children but Claude was patient and gradually she could complete a slope without falling. A morning of fresh snow became her dream.

She had tried to describe the experience in letters to her mother. *It was a struggle to begin with but now it's the best fun I've ever had*, she'd written. Yet *fun* didn't really capture the exhilarating sense of freedom she felt on the slopes.

*I don't like the sound of it at all*, Mam had replied. *You're bound to catch your death of cold.*

Then, at the beginning of this season, back in December, Claude had taken lessons with Harald Sigurssen. 'He's the best skier in Chamoix,' Claude had said. 'He's got no end of medals.'

Marie-Laure thought Claude was the best skier in Chamoix. 'You've got medals,' she pointed out.

'Only for the women's events. They're rubbish. We're only allowed to race over three kilometres.'

'Three kilometres would be enough for me.'

Everything seemed to have worked out so well for them all. Under Harald's tuition, Claude won more races. She reported that the cook was leaving the Café des Sports and it was just the work Nathalie was looking for. Then Claude's Christmas present to Marie-Laure was a lesson with the legendary Harald.

Initially Marie-Laure had been terrified of him. But he was a marvellous teacher and surprisingly encouraging. 'Claude has taught you well so far,' he said. 'But then you English women are keen learners.'

'I'm not English,' Marie-Laure said.

'French women should forget about their fashions and get on skis. It would do them the world of good,' he went on. 'In Norway all the women ski. It's healthy.'

At the end of the lesson he set up a slalom course on the slope behind the café and watched as she came down it. 'You can turn without falling. It's good, but turns are not important. Don't be

taken in by this new craze for downhill skiing. That's for the kind of brainless young men who like the thrill of speed. Going up a slope again and again and throwing yourself down it faster and faster is not skiing. Where is the joy of being in the mountains? The pleasure of feeling your skis carve fresh tracks through the trees...'

He went misty-eyed and she knew the lesson was over.

The next day she had been out on the nursery slope, practising by herself, when Harald came out with a young woman. Despite her pretty face and chic, fur-trimmed outfit, it was obvious that the woman wasn't happy. She crouched stiffly, crossing her ski tips and falling frequently. Harald did not shout at her and he helped her up every time she fell, but it was clear from his curt instructions and the bored tone in his voice that he thought his pupil was incapable of learning to ski.

At the end of the lesson, Harald had gone immediately into the bar to have a glass of beer. The woman had plonked herself down in a chair on the terrace, too exhausted to take her skis off, her furs wet and bedraggled. Marie-Laure approached her.

'Finding it hard?'

'Impossible,' muttered the woman. Tears were running down her cheeks. 'My husband's right. I've no co-ordination. I'm a hopeless case.'

'No-one's hopeless,' Marie-Laure said firmly.

'I am. I've never been sporty.'

'Me neither. Let me get you a cup of chocolate and then why don't you have a little practice with me?'

So she had spent half an hour with the woman – Geneviève – trying to show her what Claude had taught her and trying to remember how she, always a 'poor athlete' on her school report, had learned. After an hour, Geneviève was making her way down the slope, slowly but upright and without whimpering, even making a few careful turns.

Marie-Laure joined her at the bottom where Geneviève, flushed and triumphant, was talking excitedly to a sleek young man who was presumably the husband. Harald stood beside him. The husband peeled off a generous number of hundred-franc notes from a large billfold and gave them to Harald.

'You and your assistant have done wonders with my wife. She's

such a little ninny,' he said. 'Same time tomorrow?'

Harald smiled. 'Why not.'

Back in the bar, Harald had given Marie-Laure some of the francs which the man had paid.

'If you want to take the lesson, same time tomorrow, you can have the whole payment.'

So Marie-Laure's career as a ski instructor had begun.

Two days before the new school term started in January, she went to see Reverend Mother at the Academy of Sainte Thérèse de la Petite Fleur, took her life in her hands and gave in her notice as English and German teacher, with apologies but with immediate effect.

She had never thought it would be easy. She wouldn't earn as much and there was no guarantee that there would be a steady stream of pupils. Now that the railway line from Paris was bringing in visitors keen to try to fashionable winter sports, ski schools were springing up all over the area. On the other hand, few were run by anyone with Harald's reputation and with his backing she felt she could make a go of it, even if she used up all her savings.

But she'd never imagined such a disaster as the death of a client. She longed to talk to Harald and be steadied by his fierce common sense.

Outside, cars drove off, one after another. Then there was silence for a while before a blast of cold air rushed into the café as the door opened. Harald entered, followed by Raymond, Jean-Luc and Pierrot.

Marie-Laure was aware that they were all looking at her. Harald was grim-faced; Jean-Luc had a curiously shifty look; Raymond and Pierrot were smirking. Raymond went to the bar and poured himself a drink.

'You should go home Marie-Laure,' said Harald.

'Yes. I will.' She put on her coat and hat. At the door Harald came up to her. 'You don't need to come in tomorrow,' he said, awkwardness in his voice.

'I'll be alright.'

He cleared his throat. 'I mean you don't need to come in again. I think you'll agree... It was my mistake, to employ someone lacking in experience...'

Marie-Laure went cold. ‘You’re sacking me?’ she asked.

She wanted to protest but hated the idea that it would sound like begging. What could she say? That it wasn’t her fault? She could not bring herself to speak the words.

‘This... accident will be the ruin of my school unless I take action...’ Harald mumbled.

‘But...’

‘Be reasonable Marie-Laure...’

‘Have the police threatened...?’ she began. Perhaps rich Monsieur Andlau had not managed to fix things.

‘Not the police, it’s the Alpine Mountaineering Association!’ Harald said. ‘You know they’ve never approved of me and they will seize any excuse to have me closed down. I can’t afford to tolerate negligence.’

‘I see,’ she said.

‘We have professional standards to maintain. It’s important if skiing is to develop as a sport with international credibility.’

‘Quite right,’ said Raymond at the bar. Pierrot nodded in self-righteous agreement.

She looked for Jean-Luc. Had he spoken up for her? But he was gazing fixedly out of the window, refusing to meet her eye. Maybe he was glad to be rid of her.

Raymond raised a glass. ‘Goodbye Marie-Laure’, he called. ‘Delighted to have met you. Now fuck off back to your girls’ school.’

## CHAPTER

### *Three*

‘Would it be so bad, going back to teaching?’ Nathalie had returned to the apartment a little after Marie-Laure, and they sat opposite each other at the kitchen table.

Marie-Laure slumped in despair. ‘The last thing I want is to crawl to Reverend Mother and ask for my job back.’

‘True, it would be a bit embarrassing. But she didn’t want you to leave in the first place,’ said Nathalie, giving the sensible advice Marie-Laure was seeking, and at the same time resenting.

‘I don’t care about being embarrassed. But I’ve spent twenty years of my life in one convent school or another. How did that happen? I’ve never wanted to be a nun. Not even when I was nine and all the other little girls fell in love with Jesus for a few months and vowed to take the veil.’

‘No-one’s saying you have to be a nun. You can walk out of Sainte Thérèse and come back here at the end of the day and drink a whole bottle of wine if you want.’

‘You’re right but... teaching skiing was so much more fun than teaching English and I really thought I’d be able to earn some decent money.’

‘Only in the winter.’ Nathalie shrugged. ‘And anyway this craze for skiing might be finished by next year.’

Marie-Laure couldn’t explain why she had felt driven to leave Sainte Thérèse, in pursuit of a life of freedom and adventure. What did that mean anyway? It seemed callous to talk about freedom when Nathalie, a widow at 33 with five small children, had little chance of finding any freedom herself.

The events of the day had only confirmed Nathalie’s belief that skiing was a foolish pastime, bound to end in disaster. Marie-Laure recognised that Nathalie had been very restrained on hearing that her lodger was going to give up a steady job and throw herself down a mountain instead. And she was grateful that her promise to pay the rent without fail had been accepted without a murmur.

For Marie-Laure, the apartment on the rue des Cavaliers, in the centre of Chamoix, was a haven, albeit a noisy one. Nathalie's husband Emile had died three years before, leaving her with no money and no easy means of earning any, other than what dressmaking work she could find. The lunchtime job at the Café des Sports was a welcome supplement, but she was having to pay one of the neighbours to mind the youngest, four-year-old Charlot, when he was not at the *école maternelle*. She charged Marie-Laure a small rent for a generously sized room and good meals, and in return Marie-Laure helped with the children and the housework, and stood particularly still while Nathalie held up dress patterns against her.

Marie-Laure had been at Nathalie's more than a year now. She had first come to Sainte Thérèse in the summer of 1927, equipped with nothing more than her school French, which had been praised in Ireland but which immediately proved inadequate in France. Plus she had a letter of recommendation from the convent's sister-school, Saint Theresa's Academy in Blackrock, where she had taught English for four years. To begin with, the obvious arrangement was for her to lodge with the nuns. But that had been an uncomfortable time. She felt as if she were just another boarding school pupil, forever under the eye of the headmistress. Yet it also gave her the stability and peace she needed. Reverend Mother seemed to know that and asked her little about her background. But then again, perhaps Mother Anthony at Blackrock had already told her about Marie-Laure's stricken family. Nuns knew everything.

Then one morning she'd dreamt that when she arose, instead of her own clothes on the chair beside her bed, there was a nun's grey shift, black gown and veil. Time to move out.

Claude, via her mother – who also knew everything – had heard that Nathalie was looking for a lodger. Marie-Laure was charmed by Nathalie's home, on the second floor of a big 19<sup>th</sup> century building beside the river Arve. The faded pink shutters and wrought iron railings on the balconies seemed to her the epitome of Frenchness. 'I've always wanted to have a room with a balcony,' she told a bemused Nathalie.

Living in the town meant an early morning bus ride up to the school, which was perched at La Platière, two kilometres along a

winding road rising out of Chamoix. But the extra effort was worth it. Marie-Laure hit it off with Nathalie straight away; the large family reminded her of her own childhood in Churchtown, and she felt she was rejoining the real world. In fact it was a better world than the one she had left behind in Ireland, she told herself.

But, right now, sitting in the kitchen, Marie-Laure wasn't sure if she wanted to cry or rage. When she had left the Café des Sports that morning, jobless, she had walked the five kilometres back to Chamoix in a daze. The idea that the death was no accident niggled in her mind; something was not right and she hadn't been allowed to say so. But she couldn't hold any thought before it was swamped by a surge of anger and bitterness. She wanted to go to the top of Mont Blanc and yell 'It's not fair!' until her protest echoed in the ravines and made the glaciers growl.

By the time she'd reached the town centre, she was intensely tired, so bought some sugar-topped brioche buns at the pâtisserie to cheer herself up. She looked at them now on the table. They seemed rather small and not up to the task. She left the brioches to Charlot, went to her room and lay on the bed, her mind still bubbling with resentment.

When she woke it was already dark. From outside came the noise of a powerful motor. For a horrible second, she thought it was Monsieur Andlau again, come to accuse her. But no, pulling up in front of the building was a familiar automobile – a low, sporty, bright red Alfa Romeo, driven by the equally flamboyant Claude Lemaire. Marie-Laure went down to let her in.

Claude's earrings flashed under her short blonde hair as she zoomed into the kitchen.

Nathalie admired her outfit. 'A trouser suit looks so good on you. I wouldn't dare to wear one, but you...'

Claude grinned. 'Trousers are so liberating, Nathalie. All your clients will be wanting them soon.' She picked up the last brioche bun. 'Get changed Marie-Laure! We're going to a party.'

'I'm really not in the mood for a party.'

'Oh don't be such a misery!' Claude said briskly.

'My pupil's dead and I've lost my job.'

Claude stopped, mid bite.

'It's true,' said Nathalie.