# Downhill To Death

**Kate Miller**

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**For Emma**

**Murder on Mont Blanc**
**The first in the Marie-Laure mysteries series**

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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 is 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. Downhill to Death is the second of the Marie-Laure mysteries, following on from Murder on Mont Blanc, with more in the series to come.

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# PROLOGUE

The night was pitch black. Jack Flynn crept towards the dim shapes ahead of him. He couldn't hear anyone but he knew there were guards patrolling the area. Luckily his eyes, keen as a cat, were able to pick out the outline of the sinister hut which was the enemy's headquarters.

Could he get there without being spotted?

A dead branch cracked under his foot and he froze: but a minute passed and he heard no-one. Hardly daring to breathe, he crept stealthily forward.

Once out of the undergrowth, there were 20 yards of open ground between him and the hut. He could cross it in a few seconds.

Voices! Jack melted back into the shadows. As he had suspected, there were guards – two of them. They were some way off but he could see them clearly enough. They were examining something on the ground. Then they lifted it between them. It seemed heavy and Jack shuddered. 'Looks just like a rum jar,' he thought, recalling the light-hearted name that the Tommies in the trenches had given those deadly German shells, packed with death-dealing shrapnel.

The guards moved away, carrying their load.

'It's now or never, old chap,' he told himself, and ran swift as a hare for the hut.

The crude wooden door was secured with a large padlock. Jack took a piece of bent wire from his pocket and in a matter of seconds had picked the lock. With great care he pulled open the door.

Inside, the windowless hut was dark as a coal-hole. There was nothing for it but to take the risk of using his electric torch. Its slim beam picked out a large table covered with paper. His keen eyes quickly took in what they were – maps! The coast of eastern England was clearly recognisable on one of them, with red crosses marked at certain points.

The threat was worse than he'd thought – this showed plans for an invasion!

Suddenly, he heard a shout and the thud of feet running. Had

his light been seen?

Jack's fingers closed round his trusty revolver. The enemy had shown themselves to be ruthless operators and Jack was prepared for a fight.

To the death, if necessary. The future of the nation was at stake.

*From: 'Jack Flynn and the Romulus Rescue' by V. Lloyd-Parks (London, 1928)*

# CHAPTER
# One

**Sunday 4th March 1931**
**The mountains above Chamoix-sur-Arve, Haute Savoie, France**

She was seeing things, vague spots appearing before her eyes. Her brain was playing tricks.

But no – it was snow. Of course it was.

*Damn it.* This would make things a lot harder.

Marie-Laure pulled the hood of her jacket up over her hat. It restricted her vision but she could barely see anything anyway: the snow was now swirling in her face as if it were deliberately trying to mislead her. Shapes danced in front of her eyes like writhing genies released from a bottle.

*Concentrate*, she told herself.

She took off her goggles. That made things worse. She put them back on again and lowered her head, focusing on the few metres ahead of her. She had skied this way only yesterday, she reminded herself, and the path had been clear. It was a broad track here, not steep. She knew where she was; she was not lost.

But the missing woman could be, and she needed to find her.

The snow was thickening and she breathed hard to quell a rising panic. *Keep going.* She only had to keep going, find Ottavia and bring her back and everything would be fine. Everyone would be pleased.

It had all been so different the day before, with Claude and Claude's new ice hockey friends, Ottavia and Veronica. They'd had a lovely Saturday afternoon and it had been a pleasure for Marie-Laure, who usually spent her days as a ski instructor coaxing beginners up and down the same short slopes, to be out skiing freely, four women together enjoying themselves. They had taken the Brévent cable car up to the slopes and admired the magnificent views of Mont Blanc facing them across the Chamoix valley.

'My mountains,' Claude had said.

'*My* mountains too,' Ottavia had countered. 'Your Mont Blanc,

but my Monte Bianco!' They had all laughed and gazed in admiration at the white bulk of the mountain, which defied any human attempt to name and claim it.

Marie-Laure stopped. There were voices ahead of her. Someone was shouting.

*That's Ottavia calling for help.*

She skied faster but tried to calm her panic. Perhaps it was nothing. To someone as sporty as Ottavia, born in the mountains, this snow was probably just a bit of weather. She was enjoying herself, unaware that her team-mates were anxious that she hadn't turned up for practice. Ottavia was an experienced skier, a champion in fact; while she hadn't boasted about it, she'd won medals as a ski racer in Italy, though now she was here in Chamoix as part of the Italian ice hockey team. Marie-Laure had warmed to this pretty, confident woman, chic and exuberant with her bouncy dark curls and beautifully-tailored red wool jacket they had all admired.

'Ottavia!' Marie-Laure called out. But her voice was muffled by the falling snow and no-one replied.

She had to press on. Claude's worries might be justified and Ottavia might be lost, or hurt.

Claude had telephoned Harald Sigurssen's ski school first thing, as Marie-Laure was polishing her skis and waiting to see if she had a pupil that day. Too many people were hanging round at the ice rink and not learning to ski.

'I'm at the rink clubhouse. Ottavia hasn't turned up for training,' Claude said, in an urgent whisper as if she didn't want to be overheard.

'Is she having a lie-in? Perhaps we wore her out yesterday,' Marie-Laure said.

'Her team-mates seem to think I should know where she is,' Claude said. 'She told them last night she was going out for a ski before training on 'Claude's route.' Presumably she means where we went yesterday.'

'Well, that's where she is then.'

'But she should have been back an hour ago.'

'Maybe she lost track of time. Maybe the Brévent cable car has got stuck. It does sometimes.'

'Can you go and look for her, Marie-Laure? I can't go and neither can Veronica of course but you know where we all went.'

'I'm supposed to be teaching today.'

'Have you got a pupil?'

Annoyed, Marie-Laure was reluctant to admit that she hadn't got a pupil booked. She was supposed to be a ski instructor, not just someone who could be ordered to go chasing after a distracted hockey player at the drop of a hat.

'Please ....' Claude's voice had an edge of desperation.

'Mmm.' She wanted to help her friend but she still felt resentful.

'Thing is, Ottavia's a sensible person,' Claude whispered. 'If she hasn't turned up, I'm worried it's because something has gone wrong.'

'Alright. I'll go.'

As she'd travelled up on the cable car, the morning was fine, if clouding over, and Marie-Laure had felt a little surge of excitement. Ottavia probably had got into some trouble and she would be the one to find her. Even though she was no champion skier, she was the one Claude had entrusted with this mission. She would rescue the Italian woman; she wouldn't fail.

Now, struggling along the path, she reflected bitterly how easy it was to feel heroic when she was warm and dry. In the worsening weather, she had nothing to help her but the refusal to give up. She would stay out here, searching, until it was dark if necessary.

The feelings of noble martyrdom wavered when she thought how hungry she would get.

*Why didn't I bring some chocolate? Idiot.*

This could all be a waste of time anyway. There was no knowing if Ottavia really had come this way, or if she had happily gone somewhere else this morning and was even now back with her hockey team and getting ready for practice.

'No! NO!' The cry carried through the falling snow. A high-pitched, Italian '*No*!' Then there was another voice, lower, angry. The words were indistinct but that was a man shouting, Marie-Laure was certain. Ottavia was not alone.

Marie-Laure's skis clattered on a patch of ice and she skidded, nearly falling over. Ahead of her was a small grove of pine trees and

she realised that she had somehow gone too low. Surely yesterday they had passed above the trees? There was nothing for it but to climb back up and find the original route.

Sidestepping up was a long and exhausting process and she was sweating by the time she reached a recognisable path. It seemed familiar. She was sure now they had gone this way, past the trees, before stopping for a snack.

A vague shape coalesced in front of her, some metres away. A rock. Yes! They had climbed on top of this rock to sit and have their picnic. Claude had pointed out the names of the mountains in the panorama before them. The Aiguille du Midi, the Dents, the…

Ottavia must have wanted to bring someone to this vantage point to show them the view. But why hadn't they turned back once the falling snow had ruined visibility?

Marie-Laure's legs felt like lead. On this flat path, rapidly piling up with clumps of snow, she was doing more walking than skiing and it was hard work.

Again, there was muffled shouting. It sounded like an argument. Ottavia and her companion couldn't be far away and Marie-Laure thought she could make out a figure on the path, some distance away. Was it a person, or a tree, another rock?

There was a swirl of snow and for a few seconds the world went completely white. She could see nothing except the path in front of her and she had to follow it.

'Ottavia!' Silence.

A sense of unease grew in her as she moved forward. Something about the light, the space. She felt precarious. She sensed a steep drop down to her right. It was hard to judge but there seemed to be an emptiness. To her left was a craggy grey rockface. A sudden movement and noise startled her: a flock of black choughs lifted off from the rocks and circled round above her head, making their chacking sound. Normally she would have been cheered by the sight of them but her unease increased.

Her eyes followed the birds as they floated off down the mountain and then she saw something. A splash of red.

It was directly below her, to her right. Taking off her skis, Marie-Laure immediately sank to her knees in loose snow. She floundered through the drift, unable to find any hard ground to give

her purchase. When she reached the edge of the track she realised that it was a sheer drop, strewn with rocks.

And there was Ottavia, below

Could she reach her? Ottavia was at least three metres down, and if she was injured, it would be difficult to get her back up the cliff. But that man couldn't be far off, could he?

'Help…!' she shouted, but her voice disappeared into the blizzard. 'Help, monsieur… Someone has fallen…'

No reply. Why had he left? Had he really been there, or had she imagined the voices?

She looked down. Ottavia lay at the foot of the cliff, not moving, her red jacket being softly obliterated by the relentless white flakes…

'Ottavia! Can you hear me? Can you move?'

No reply. She must have been knocked unconscious in her fall. *Don't assume the worst*, Marie-Laure told herself, but at the very least, the woman was at severe risk of hypothermia.

She took off her skis, sat on the edge of the track and tried to lower herself down. Immediately, she realised this was a mistake. The drop was so sheer that she would never be able to get back up and that would be two of them stuck.

No, her priority had to be to get help. Scrambling back up to the path on her hands and knees, snow in her eyes, mouth, inside her jacket and gloves, she was filled with panic, knowing Ottavia was freezing to death below. She buckled on her skis, fumbling with numb fingers, and set off.

The snow had stopped falling but the light was grey and the terrain a blank expanse in front of her, with no contours or clues as to where the path was. Suddenly, the ground dipped and her skis ran away with her; she tried to brake, frantically, out of control like a raw beginner and she fell heavily.

She picked herself up, her left shoulder aching badly, and threw herself forward again. Where was she? Was that the grove of pine trees? Could she see the lift station? If she could just get there she could alert the pisteurs and send them to Ottavia.

There was a shape against the white and a sound, perhaps voices? She only had to…

Without knowing what had happened she was falling. She

could see something above her. A badly-buckled ski had flown off and was coming right down on top of her, it was going to hit her but she could do nothing as she rolled down the slope, tumbling rolling tumbling unable to breathe unable to…

Stop…

* * *

'Are you alright?'

Who was that? She opened her eyes. A man was looking down at her with a very anxious expression.

'Are you alright, mademoiselle?'

'Yes,' she said, and he let out a sigh of relief.

He had thought she was dead, and she wasn't. Nothing was broken, not even her ski bindings. But Ottavia had fallen too…

The man helped her to her feet. 'I do need help…' Her mouth was having difficulty forming words. 'There's been an accident… my friend…'

The man took her over to where a cluster of people were staring at her and she explained they needed to fetch help, no not for her, for another woman...

Two of the skiers headed off quickly to the Brévent lift station to alert the pisteurs. The others helped her along and by the time they all reached the station, a rescue team equipped with a stretcher were poised to depart. She gave them instructions as best she could on how to find Ottavia.

'Look for her red jacket,' she said. 'Should I come with you?'

'No.' And they were gone.

She could have waited in the café for the rescue team to return. But she didn't want to. She didn't want to face Ottavia when she regained consciousness or be thanked for anything because she knew how ridiculous she'd been. Racing back heroically only to crash in a heap.

So she waited, cold and aching, for the cable car. The clouds had lifted, the sun was appearing and people were only now just starting their skiing day. Quite a few were coming up to enjoy the fresh snow.

They were not going to be cheered when they got out, to be greeted by the sight of a woman on a stretcher.

The journey down seemed interminable. To her surprise, as

she left the bottom lift station, Gendarme Rondeau was waiting for her, his round, friendly face looking troubled.

'Are you all right, mademoiselle?' he asked. His kindly tone almost made her cry.

'Yes… why? What…?'

'It was you who found the body…'

The body. Then she really did start to cry.

# CHAPTER
# *Two*

'What the hell did you think you were doing?'

'Trying to help…'

'The woman's dead. So much for your help.'

'I tried…' Marie-Laure repeated miserably but she couldn't put up much of a defence. Harald was right.

'And you nearly killed yourself,' he continued.

'I'm fine,' she mumbled.

'Are you? Well you're lucky. You could have seriously injured yourself and it would have served you right. You'd have been out of a job then and I'd be without one of my instructors, just at a busy time. I don't want to be turning clients away and losing money just because of your stupid heroics. Going out in a snowstorm alone. What were you thinking?'

'It wasn't a snowstorm when I set out…'

'If you'd asked me, I could have told you snow was on its way. You haven't got the experience Marie-Laure. Being able to teach a few kids is no substitute for a lifetime in the mountains.'

She hung her head. It was true.

'Next time you hear of someone in trouble, leave it to the experts,' he said. 'No-one's asking you to go round rescuing people. You're too quick to get yourself involved. Look what happened last time.'

'But last time…' She was ready to protest but Harald turned away.

That was unfair. It was not as if she had deliberately involved herself in trouble last time, when her pupil Joseph Siebert had got himself killed. In fact, murdered. She had been accused then of negligence for failing to look out for him, though there was nothing she could have done to prevent his death.

This time she had tried to protect someone and she was getting the blame all over again.

* * *

*What am I going to tell Claude?* As she'd walked with Rondeau to the Gendarmerie, this was all she could think of. She had known Ottavia only a brief while but Ottavia was Claude's friend and Claude was Marie-Laure's best friend. Though she still wondered sometimes why Claude, tall, blonde, ski champion, games teacher Claude, had befriended her (a short, dark-haired, unathletic, languages teacher) at the Sainte Thérèse de la Petite Fleur Academy for Young Ladies, more than three years ago now. Had she simply felt sorry for a woman who found herself alone in a foreign country, eight hundred miles from Dublin?

Don't be silly, she told herself. You're friends because – well, you just are. You laugh at the same things. You can be yourself with her.

But of course Claude made other friends too and she seemed to have hit it off with two women who had arrived in Chamoix for the international ice hockey tournament. Marie-Laure had been a little surprised, and flattered, the day before, to find herself out skiing and sharing bread and reblochon cheese with stars of women's ice hockey. Well, Claude was a star and no doubt Ottavia was the pride of her Italian team as well.

Veronica was just – unnerving.

'She's English,' Claude had said when they all arrived at the Café des Sports in Les Souches, the village a couple of kilometres outside Chamoix where Harald based his ski school. Claude seemed to think that meant Veronica and Marie-Laure would have lots to talk about, but one look at this hearty young woman, with her boyishly short hair, ruddy cheeks, and no doubt thorough knowledge of dogs and horses, turned Marie-Laure completely speechless. It didn't matter; someone like Veronica would not hear anything she said anyway.

Instead, Marie-Laure had talked to Ottavia and found her warm and friendly. Ottavia's lively elegance had also caught the eyes of Marie-Laure's fellow ski-instructors, Jean-Luc, Raymond and Raymond's sidekick Pierrot.

'*Ciao bella*,' said Pierrot, as he served her a coffee. He smirked, pleased with himself, though Marie-Laure was sure these were the only two words of Italian he knew.

'*Che bel ragazzo*,' said Ottavia and Pierrot smirked some more,

unaware that she had given him the equivalent of a pat on the head. Ottavia giggled and so did Marie-Laure. They got chatting, while Claude and Veronica planned the skiing route, with Raymond giving them the benefit of his wisdom – 'Born and bred in these mountains' he reminded them (as if Claude were not).

Marie-Laure had found she had no pupil that afternoon, so she was quick to agree when Claude suggested she come skiing with them.

'But haven't you got hockey training?' she asked.

Claude shrugged. 'Tomorrow, yeh.'

Marie-Laure thought she was taking it very casually, when being on the French ice hockey team was surely a big responsibility. The town of Chamoix-sur-Arve was making a great fuss about hosting the international championships. Though in fact the actual tournament wouldn't start for another ten days, and the women's matches were not part of it. The four countries which had put forward a ladies' team – France, Italy, Austria and Germany – were being graciously allowed to stage their own contest on the ice rink over the next week before the men began the official tournament, with eight nations competing.

Unofficial it might be, but the women's tournament was a serious matter and would be hard fought.

'Are you a skier as well as a skater?' Marie-Laure had asked Ottavia.

'Italy has Alps too, you know!' laughed Ottavia. 'I live in Turin now but I grew up in Courmayeur, the other side of Monte Bianco.'

'And you play ice hockey too.'

'Ice hockey, grass hockey, tennis, you name it. Though I spend most of my days shouting at children – I'm a sports teacher like Claude. Playing in a real grown-up competition makes a wonderful change. And on an Olympic ice rink too!'

'The rink is not that grand,' Marie-Laure warned her.

'I don't know, Chamoix seems very grand to me, compared to Courmayeur. The size of the hotels! There's a lot of money here, isn't there?'

'More pouring in every year. The Parisians have discovered winter sports in a big way.'

'Not just the Parisians – the English upper classes too,'

murmured Ottavia, with a sideways glance at Veronica. 'Did you know the English invented skiing? She was telling me on the way here. Remarkable.'

'Quite an achievement for a country with no mountains,' Marie-Laure agreed. 'But you have to remember the English invented everything. Including probably the wheel.'

Ottavia nodded. 'Everything except *amore*,' she said. 'And coffee.'

Although Pierrot was annoying, and to call him a ski instructor was a stretch because he was not a good skier and mostly served behind the bar, he did make a good pot of coffee and now he was filling a vacuum flask for them to take.

'This is very exciting,' Veronica announced. 'I'm really going to be shown the mountains by an expert.' To Marie-Laure's surprise, she spoke French confidently, though with a plonking English accent. 'It's going to be such fun to have a day out, before we get down to work at the tournament.'

'Are you competing? I didn't know England had an ice hockey team,' said Marie-Laure, a little cautiously.

Veronica gave a hoot of laughter. 'No! No such thing as English ice hockey – yet. But give me a couple of years and I'll be back here with a workable side. No, I'm a referee you see, impartial. So when the Italian girls play the French, I'll be right in the middle. Firm but fair, that's me.' She laughed again, sure of herself and her authority, and they all went out to take the bus to Chamoix.

* * *

'I'm sorry to do this,' Lieutenant Deschamps said, 'but it seemed best to find out straight away what happened.'

Rondeau had taken her to the gendarmerie barracks, a grim, comfortless place, which made you feel accused of something as soon as you walked through the door. Now she was sitting in Deschamps' office. Was he accusing her? They were friends, surely? Only weeks before, they'd faced down murderers together. She had every reason to trust him. *Never trust a policeman* came her brother's voice.

'How did you know to find me?' she asked, through chattering teeth. Somehow she couldn't stop shivering.

Deschamps sent Rondeau to fetch her some coffee. 'And some

of those biscuits if there are any left…'

He explained. The pisteurs had been quick to locate Ottavia and bring her back. 'So they telephoned the gendarmerie and one of them said he thought it was the English teacher who had raised the alarm.'

Rondeau handed her a steaming mug and three-quarters of a petit-beurre biscuit. 'Sorry,' he said. She wasn't sure whether he was apologising for the biscuit or for the bad gendarmerie coffee.

'Well, this has been dreadful for you,' Deschamps said. 'You went out skiing this morning and came across this woman…'

'Ottavia. I don't know her surname.'

He was startled. 'You know her? My God, she's your friend? You were skiing together?'

'No no, we weren't skiing together. But I had gone to find her. She's – she was – a friend of Claude.'

'Ottavia. Italian?'

'She's a member of the Italian women's ice hockey team.'

'Oh...' He glanced at Rondeau and frowned. 'This is going to be trouble.' Rondeau nodded grimly.

Marie-Laure explained that she had met Ottavia only the day before. 'Then first thing this morning, Claude was in a flap because Ottavia hadn't turned up for practice and her teammates said she'd gone out for a pre-training ski, on the same route we took yesterday…'

'Gone out alone?' he interrupted.

'As far as anyone knew…' Marie-Laure paused. Most people didn't ski alone, but then Ottavia was an experienced athlete and for her it was probably like going out for a morning walk. 'Claude worried she'd got lost,' she continued, 'and I didn't have a lesson this morning so I said I'd go and find her.'

'Alone? You too?'

'Well, yes…'

'That was stupid, wasn't it?' Deschamps' voice was sharp. 'There was practically a blizzard.'

'Not when I set out…'

'It could have been you up there frozen to death Marie-Laure! What were you thinking?'

'I was trying to help.'

'A lone woman was missing on the mountain. You should have just called the rescue team.'

'I didn't think she was missing, I thought I'd find her easily. But then it did start to snow.'

'And why didn't you turn back at that point and get help at the Brévent station?'

He was right of course. He was asking the sensible questions. She tried to explain: 'I didn't want to…'

'You didn't want someone else to rescue the woman,' he said.

That was unfair. 'No. But I didn't want to give up.'

Deschamps sighed, like an exasperated teacher faced with a pupil who has yet again failed to grasp the lesson. 'Marie-Laure, seeking help is not giving up. These mountains are deadly. They don't care about your feelings. The mountains don't admire you for being brave and determined.'

She felt crushed by her failure. And by knowing Deschamps thought her stupid.

'If mademoiselle hadn't carried on in the snow she wouldn't have found the woman,' Rondeau pointed out.

'No but the pisteurs would probably have found her quicker,' Deschamps said.

'And she might still be alive,' Marie-Laure muttered.

'So,' Deschamps said in a matter of fact voice. 'She appeared to have crashed off the path.'

'Yes. At a point where there is a steep drop.'

'But you didn't think she was dead?'

'I couldn't tell. But I didn't think she was. I suppose I didn't think that someone like that could be killed in an accident.'

'Someone like what?'

'Like young and fit and an ice hockey player. She was a mountain girl after all, from the Alps on the Italian side.'

'She was unlucky,' Rondeau said. 'The pisteurs think she hit her head on the rocks as she fell.'

Marie-Laure took that in. An unlucky fall. It could happen to anyone.

'Did you try to reach her?' Deschamps asked.

'No. It was impossible. And there was no-one around to help…' Marie-Laure paused. 'Well, to be honest, I thought there

was someone. But I might have been mistaken, or else they were too far away to hear me when I called.'

'Man or woman?'

'Man. I thought I heard Ottavia arguing with a man.'

'Arguing?'

'That's what it sounded like. But I couldn't see them and it was snowing hard at that point. I couldn't hear very well.'

'If someone else was there, why didn't they help?' Rondeau asked.

'Exactly,' the lieutenant said. 'Unless they had already skied on and had no idea what had happened. Where does that track go?'

Marie-Laure tried to picture where they had gone on Saturday afternoon. 'We just dropped down and took a lower run back to the lift station,' she recalled.

Deschamps sighed. 'This is not good. Skiing is just making the job of the police worse.' Marie-Laure wondered if this comment was directed at her who, as a ski instructor, was positively encouraging the dangerous pursuit that Deschamps, born and bred in the mountains, disapproved of.

'Rondeau, you'll have to go over to the ice rink,' he said. 'Break the news to the Italian team. We need next of kin and all that.'

'Do you want to ask me anything else?' Marie-Laure said.

'No. Go home and get some rest.'

But as Rondeau opened the door, a young officer appeared. 'Excuse me lieutenant but is this Mademoiselle Monaghan? Mademoiselle, your boss telephoned. He wants to see you.'

* * *

So, here she was at the Café des Sports. Cold, aching and being told off yet again. Harald seemed to have nothing more to say to her. He had summoned her all the way out to Les Souches just to yell at her.

She went into the kitchen, which was warm and filled with the delicious aroma of *pot au feu*, the day's main dish on the menu. Nathalie, who was responsible for the café's growing reputation for excellent food, and who was also, as it happened, Marie-Laure's landlady and friend, gave her a brief hug and said nothing. Marie-Laure was simply grateful not to be reprimanded.

'Can I do something?' she asked miserably.

'Peel these carrots,' Nathalie said briskly. 'Harald was worried about you.'

'He has a funny way of showing it.'

'No really. One of the clients came in and said he'd heard the English teacher had been in an accident on the Brévent. Harald was beside himself. Telephoned everyone he could think of.'

Suddenly the kitchen door was flung open. 'Marie-Laure! What are you doing in here?' Harald barked.

'Helping…'

'I don't pay you to chop vegetables. What about your pupil?'

'What pupil?'

'Your afternoon pupil. Outside. Go!'

# CHAPTER
# *Three*

Outside, on the terrace, a boy was throwing snowballs at a stack of skis. He ran up, whirling his arm, and with a well-aimed throw, brought a ski clattering down.

'Howzat!' he yelled.

He was English.

'Piers?' she said, as he scooped up another handful of snow. He stopped and looked at her with suspicion. 'I'm here to give you your lesson.'

'About time. Where have you been?' he said sulkily.

Marie-Laure really did not want to answer that question. She was exhausted, her shoulder hurt and she was going to miss lunch. But he was just a kid, 11 or 12 maybe, so this couldn't be all that difficult.

'I'm Piers Lloyd-Parks. And you are…?' His upper-class English drawl conveyed the perfect balance of politeness and contempt.

'Miss Monaghan. I'll be your instructor this week.'

'I hardly need an instructor,' he said loftily. 'I've been skiing since I was old enough to walk. We go to St Moritz or St Anton every year.' He looked around at the snowy sweep of the Les Souches slopes. 'I don't know why we've come to this dump.'

'Monsieur Sigurssen's coaching is world famous and your father thinks you will benefit from it,' Marie-Laure said.

'My father just wants me out of the way while he does important things,' the boy said, with a worldly air. 'You can go if you like. Take the day off. I don't need instruction.'

He gave a sly glance under his sandy-haired fringe to see if she would rise to the bait, but Marie-Laure's years teaching at Sainte Thérèse had equipped her to deal with supercilious rich kids with an overblown sense of their own importance.

'You tell me you're a good skier, but how do I know that's true?' she said. 'We'll start on the intermediate slope and you can