



Millie propped the door of the chalet open with the doormat and waited for the motorised sled carrying the new guests' luggage to pull up outside. Her breath made big puffy clouds in front of her face in the freezing, still night air but she didn't feel cold as the air was so dry. Her months of experience at the resort told her that it was likely to snow tonight. Good, the pistes were getting a bit patchy and a top-up would be brilliant.

Jack, another 'Surf and Snow' rep, drove the sled up to the door, killed the engine and climbed off it.

'Give us a hand, Millie,' he said as he began to unclip the securing cables. 'The mob is hard on my heels, and I've got another luggage delivery to make before I'm finished for tonight.'

'What are this lot like?' she asked as she lugged a couple of big cases into the chalet.

'The usual. Some look as if they think they're auditioning for a part in a film about Scott of the Antarctic and some seem to want roles in *Baywatch*; all teeth, tits and high heels. The rest are all right.'

Millie returned for more bags. 'And what are the girls like?'

'Ha ha. You may mock but you'll see. The fact they've got

to walk to the chalet from the road isn't going down a storm.'

They had just finished getting the last of the luggage stacked in the spacious hall of the chalet when voices, laughter and some yelps of despair rang through the clear alpine air. Millie cocked an ear to listen. She detected the distinctive shrieks of young females picking their way through the snowdrifts and slippery stretches of road. It would be a couple of minutes before they rounded the last two hairpins of the steep road that led up to the chalet. Jack gave her a cheery wave and sped off to the next chalet to drop off yet more cases. Millie kicked the doormat free and shut the door to keep the heat in.

She nipped into the kitchen and lit the gas under the mulled wine to bring it back up to blood heat and gave the leek and potato soup a quick stir; then she flicked open the grill, saw the croutons were done to a crisp and switched it off. She didn't, however, then go and stand by the door ready to throw it open as soon as the party of holidaymakers arrived, as if their arrival was the most important thing in her life. Yes, it was her job to look after them all, yes, she liked cooking, and yes she wanted her guests to have a fun, enjoyable holiday, but she'd learned that it was essential for her own sanity to make sure the guests knew where they stood with her and what her house rules were from the start. None of her rules was unreasonable and most of them were just about being considerate, which helped her out and ensured a pleasant stay for everyone. Also it made sure that everyone got off on the right footing from the start; some of the people who came skiing got terribly embarrassed about asking her to do the least thing – like provide more loo roll – and some would have treated her like dirt given half a chance and expected her to pick up after them morning,

noon and night. Now, after the best part of four months in this game, Millie had being a chalet host sussed out.

The knock came and Millie sauntered to the door and opened it, plastering a big, I'm-your-friendly-chalet-host smile across her face as per company regulations.

'Come in, come in,' she entreated, as per yet more company regulations. 'I'm Millie. And can I ask you to take your snowy shoes off. Sorry,' she smiled, not feeling the least bit apologetic, 'but it's company regulations.' That last bit wasn't quite true, but as she was the one who would have to mop up dirty, snowy water, she felt perfectly entitled to make up whatever regulations she liked to make life easier for herself.

Millie clocked most of them as they sorted out shoes and hand luggage and hauled off coats. There was a mousy couple who looked completely wet, a short, stout older man with a tall lanky female partner who seemed to be entwined round him for support like some sort of vine, two giggly blondes with improbable busts and unsuitable clothing (had to be first-timers), an athletic bloke with *all* the right clothing (which probably meant this was his first time too), a man in a blindingly bright orange ski jacket with his hood up and his back to her, and then there was the couple who obviously felt they were the group organisers and who were already trying to get the other guests to take their cases out of the hall.

So, thought Millie, a complete mixed bag.

For the past months most of the groups who had booked this chalet had consisted of just one or two families or groups of friends; either they had all known each other from the outset or it had been easy to get them to gel. But this lot were totally different. It must be the special 'end-of-season'

two-week offer that had resulted in such a random selection of separate couples pitching up. Millie mentally steeled herself. It was going to take extra work from her to make sure they all had a good time and no one felt left out. But it was what she was employed to do and besides, she would feel she'd failed if people who had paid good money for a holiday didn't have the best time possible.

'Blimey, this is cosy,' said one of the blondes. She gazed about her, her big blue eyes wide as she took in the kitsch décor of the chalet.

'Isn't it?' agreed Millie, who actually thought the whole place was like something out of a chocolate box factory – all gingham curtains and heart shapes cut out of the backs of the chairs and the cupboard doors and forming twee little peepholes in the shutters. 'Let me show you to your rooms – and, yes please,' she added, pre-empting the bossy woman who had her mouth open ready to speak, 'bring your luggage with you.'

She led the way upstairs and showed the couples to their rooms, explained about limitations to the hot water if everyone showered at once and suggested they all met back in the main room in ten minutes for vin chaud and introductions.

A few minutes later the new bunch began to straggle downstairs in dribs and drabs. Millie busied herself in the kitchen while the guests snooped around, checked out the view from the balcony and the windows to the side, flicked through the books on the bookshelf and generally familiarised themselves with their new surroundings.

When Millie judged the majority were present she began to ladle the warm wine into glasses. She carefully filled a tray with the brimming tumblers and turned back to the

group ready to hand them out. And nearly dropped the whole lot.

Hello. There, in front of her, was the most gorgeous man she had ever clapped eyes on. He was simply knock-out. Her stomach did a backflip and she felt her heart pound in her chest. He was so sensationally, devastatingly good-looking that Millie felt quite faint. What a hunk, what an *incredible* hunk.

OK, she'd had a couple of good-looking and single men stay in her chalet a month or so earlier but she and Helen (another chalet girl she shared a room with) had spent most of the season moaning about the lack of fit guys for them to ogle. However, even the two reasonably nice-looking blokes hadn't held a candle to this guy; not even close. Wow! Well, this would be something to tell Helen about. Or maybe not. Did she really want Helen muscling in? Hmmm.

The incredible hunk leaned forward and stopped her tray from tipping any more perilously.

'Steady,' he said in a voice as dark brown as his hair and eyes. He smiled at her and Millie felt her legs tremble. She tried to take a deep breath to steady herself but embarrassingly her lungs didn't seem to be functioning properly.

Despite the helping hand, the glasses slid further down the tray and clinked in warning as they neared the edge. Millie came out of her near swoon and paid attention again to what she was doing.

'Oh, God, yes. Sorry. Thanks. I've got it. Really. I'm fine. Honest.' She realised she was burbling, but she felt relieved that at least she hadn't made a complete idiot of herself and dropped all the drinks. She hauled her mental state and the tray back onto an even keel and handed out the wine. Then she grabbed a glass for herself. She hoped no one else noticed that her hand was trembling.

‘Right, well, this is a good time for us all to get to know each other,’ she said with a smile which she hoped would make everyone feel welcome and included. ‘Now, in case you didn’t catch it earlier, my name is Millie.’ She smiled again. The hunk smiled lazily back at her. Their eyes connected and she felt a bolt of electricity shock her body. Goosebumps erupted all over. She swallowed and tore her eyes off him. She knew what company policy was on the subject of any hint of liaison between chalet hosts and their guests and there was no way she was going to jeopardise her job or her season’s bonus. Anyway, she definitely did *not* want to get involved with a man. The last time had taught her a lesson she was never going to forget; it had almost ruined her life. She wasn’t going to make that sort of mistake a second time, she told herself firmly. ‘Er, what are your names?’ This was more for the benefit of the guests. It was important to get people introduced to each other early on the first day, it helped break the ice and get the holiday going.

The group introduced themselves. The mousy couple turned out to be called Cuthbert and Deirdre Millington, ‘but my friends call me Deedee’, Deirdre simpered. Cuthbert simpered too. ‘We’ve never done anything as exciting as skiing before. Normally we like to go on walking and rambling holidays, don’t we, Cuthbert?’ Deedee smiled adoringly at Cuthbert.

That figures, thought Millie. Their names! And rambling?! Still, *chacun à son goût*, as the French would say. If it made them happy . . .

The giggly blondes announced they were called Chelsea and Venice and turned out to be cousins, which explained their similarity to each other. Their dads were business

partners – they made tents. Their mums worked for the company too, as did the two girls. Millie couldn't think of two more unlikely girls to be associated with the camping industry than these two. What with the hair and nails, to say nothing of their skimpy outfits and astounding figures, she couldn't think of any pair less likely to have anything to do with it. Deedee and Cuthbert, yes, but these two?

'So is there a significance to your names?' she asked innocently. She had to suck her cheeks in when it turned out that they were named after their respective mums' favourite places.

'Venice was named second,' explained Chelsea. 'Her mum pinched the idea off of my mum but went for somewhere more glam.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Millie kindly. 'Chelsea is terribly smart. If you were Italian you'd probably think Chelsea was the more glam name.'

Chelsea brightened up at that. 'I've never thought of it like that.' She giggled. 'Just as well her favourite place wasn't Kilburn or Plaistow. Can you imagine?' She nudged Venice who giggled too. Millie liked them both. Giggly, girly and high-maintenance but also nice. *Nice*, in Millie's book, was an all too rare quality amongst chalet guests.

The short older guy with his much younger and taller partner were named Mike and Bella and seemed completely wrapped up in each other – or, more accurately, wrapped round each other, thought Millie, wondering if Mike was Bella's sugar daddy. Not that it was any of her business but she couldn't help being curious. Mike was pretty old compared to Bella and no great shakes in the looks department while Bella was quite pretty so surely his attraction had to lie elsewhere. All Millie could think of was

money. They stood rather apart from the rest of the group and didn't seem to want to be drawn in. Well, thought Millie, if they didn't want to join in she couldn't make them but it was probably their loss.

She turned her attention to the two guys. The one with all the right gear was called Archie Green and had a wicked twinkle in his eye. He looked like a lot of fun. The sex god, she discovered, was Luke Hastings.

Luke, she said to herself with a sigh. What an absolutely fabulous name. So romantic.

Finally she turned to the bossy, middle-aged couple. 'John and Pat Barkham-Lumley,' bellowed the woman as if they were on parade. Millie jumped and almost saluted. Pat's silent partner, John, looked tired and resigned as if he'd given up trying to exert any influence himself, or get a word in edgeways, and had decided that letting his appalling wife have her own way was the only route to a quiet life. Millie felt sorry for him and wondered what she might be able to do to cheer him up.

'Right, now we all know who we all are, I propose a toast for a happy holiday.'

The blondes giggled and nudged each other as they raised their glasses. Pat Barkham-Lumley looked at the two girls disapprovingly. Millie thought she would be the sort to disapprove of almost anything – including being called by her first name until she had given permission for that level of familiarity. It looked like keeping her happy was going to be hard work, not just for Millie but for the group as a whole.

Millie went round the room, checking she could remember all the names, which she easily could. After several months of this lark she'd got the knack of it – she got the

details off the manifest the morning of changeover day and learnt them as she stripped the beds. Then it was just a question of matching people up with them. Invariably the guests thought it terribly impressive.

‘And I’m here to make sure you all have a good time,’ Millie said, wondering if she’d set herself an impossible task with Mrs B-L and trying not to look at Luke and failing. God, she’d like to give *him* a good time. No, it didn’t bear thinking about, not after what had happened with her last disastrous relationship. Oh bugger, she felt her colour rise in her face and knew one of her phenomenal blushes was in progress. One could always be guaranteed to let her down hideously, especially if it was really inappropriate. Maybe the guests wouldn’t realise the reason and think that her high colour was the result of her physical exertions in the kitchen. She took a slurp of mulled wine to cover up her discomfiture.

The introductions had done the trick and all the group were now chatting, laughing and discussing such issues as the quality of the snow so late in the season and the merits of various other resorts. Millie patted herself on the back. Job well done.

Before she returned to making the supper, she couldn’t help herself from sliding another look at Luke. He and Archie were talking and joking with the blondes.

There’s a surprise, she thought morosely. Two single blokes and two single blondes and all of them attractive. That was the trouble with being the hired help; you were invisible unless they wanted something. Sadly, she didn’t seem to be the something Luke wanted. Millie sighed and went to check on the food at the kitchen end of the big open-plan room.

Of course, being invisible was exactly what she had craved when she'd first got the job as a chalet girl. The guests would arrive and ask her name and after that would take no further interest in her. All the guests cared about was that they had a good time, the food was plentiful and tasty and that the chalet was clean and tidy. The last thing on the guests' minds was anything about her background, which had suited her very well and she'd been almost grateful to be virtually ignored.

Wistfully she looked at Venice and Chelsea and wondered what it would be like to be so attractive to the opposite sex. She'd love to experience the full-on attention of a couple of great men like Luke and Archie. Well, it wasn't going to happen, she told herself sternly, so there was no point in dreaming.

She filled a big jug with more mulled wine and passed it to Mrs Barkham-Lumley as she was nearest, before checking on the lasagne bubbling away in the oven.

'Now don't have too much of this vin chaud,' said Pat to the assembled company in stentorian tones. 'We don't want anyone tipsy.'

Millie turned back just in time to see faces around the room fall at the prospect of the mulled wine being rationed. Millie wasn't having this. Just because Mrs B-L didn't want to enjoy herself with a drink or two didn't mean the others couldn't loosen up in the evenings.

'Oh, don't worry about that,' said Millie breezily, abandoning the lasagne and sloshing wine into a second jug. She returned to the group and began pouring it into any tumbler near to hand. 'There's a whole vat of it in the kitchen and it doesn't keep, so drink up. I'd hate to have to ditch it. Such a waste.' She glanced at Pat who didn't look

overly impressed. She dragged poor John out of reach of the jug before he had a chance to refill his glass. Millie smiled at him and saw his rather rueful shrug. Poor man! She vowed to make sure he got the carafe of wine right by him at dinner.

She left the jug with Archie, telling him to ‘come back for more when it’s empty’, and got going with making a salad while keeping half an ear out for the conversation in the sitting room.

It transpired that Chelsea and Venice had never skied before but ‘thought it would be a bit of a laugh’, and Cuthbert and Deedee had always wanted to learn and felt they must take this opportunity before Deedee started ‘making babies’. *Making babies*. Millie couldn’t believe it. She nearly choked and then clutched the edge of the worktop to stop her shoulders shaking with silent laughter. She pulled herself together, regained a modicum of self-control and returned to making the salad as the conversation behind her continued. Pat and John had skied all their lives, ‘it was part of John’s army training’, so no surprise there, and Mike and Bella had ‘done a bit’.

Millie took the bowl of salad from the kitchen to the table in time to hear Pat Bossyboots pontificate on the subject of skiing.

‘Oh, those of you who haven’t done any shouldn’t worry. The trick is to take proper lessons. No point in getting into bad habits. And if you’ve done a bit you’ll find that it will all come back to you. Just like riding a bike.’

‘There’s nothing like riding a bike,’ mused Luke to himself, staring at Chelsea and Venice.

Millie giggled and noticed that the joke went over the heads of the rest of the group.

‘We fancy having lessons, don’t we, Chel?’

‘I’ll say,’ said Chelsea. ‘We’ve heard all about those hunky French ski instructors. We want to check out how much is true.’ They both giggled. They giggled at everything, thought Millie.

Pat looked pained. ‘You can’t expect to learn properly if you don’t take it seriously. John and I had years of lessons to perfect our technique.’

‘Oh,’ said Deedee, sounding worried. ‘Years? Is it terribly difficult? I know I won’t be any good if it’s too hard.’

‘You’ll be fine,’ said Luke. ‘Honestly, anyone can learn. It really isn’t so very difficult.’ Millie spotted him shoot a look at Pat as if daring her to contradict him and knock Deedee’s limited confidence. ‘Did you ever roller skate as a kid?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Deedee, perking up a little.

‘Well, if you have the coordination to do that I expect you’ll be fine on skis.’

‘Really?’ Deedee sounded more hopeful. ‘I was quite good on skates – and on ice skates too. I could even skate backwards and do a couple of simple jumps.’

‘There you are,’ said Luke. ‘I’m sure you’ll crack the basics of skiing in no time.’

How nice of him, thought Millie.

‘I’m sure you’ll be fine, sweetie,’ said Cuthbert, not to be outdone by Luke’s charm. ‘And we can help each other between lessons, can’t we?’

Deedee looked adoringly at him. ‘Yes, that would be lovely.’

‘What about you boys?’ asked Bella, surprising Millie by joining in for the first time. She’d hardly spoken a word till now, all her attentions being reserved for Mike.

‘Oh, Archie and I ski a bit, don’t we?’

Archie swallowed a slurp of his mulled wine and said, ‘I’ll say.’

‘Will you be taking lessons?’ asked Pat.

‘Probably not,’ said Luke flatly.

‘Then you can ski with John and me.’

Millie looked up from slicing a tomato just in time to see Luke’s eyebrows twitch fractionally. ‘Oh, er, that’d be nice. So you and John snowboard too?’

‘Oh no.’ Pat was horrified. ‘Not boarding. We do *proper* skiing.’

‘I prefer improper skiing. Sorry.’ Luke’s eyes seemed to glitter a little as he leant across Archie and refilled his tumbler. He caught Millie’s eye and winked. She turned away because she thought she was going to burst out laughing and carried on slicing tomatoes assiduously, not daring to look up again. Delicious to look at, charming and funny; practically perfect, Millie thought. Perhaps these two weeks were going to be OK after all.

Millie finished the tomato salad. Apart from whipping the cream for the trifle, dinner was ready. She filled a couple of carafes with red wine which she placed on the table and then took a couple more from the cupboard and made her way through the room.

‘Forgive me,’ she apologised, ‘but I keep the white wine on the balcony so it’s nice and chilled. I’ll be as quick as I can.’ She opened the window and a blast of freezing air whistled into the room. Millie pulled the door shut behind her, noting that the threatened snow had arrived and tiny flakes, almost grains, were swirling earthwards. She filled the jugs as fast as she could from the industrial-sized wine boxes that they bought from the wholesaler for the guests.

Despite only being outside for a couple of minutes she was perished by the time she got back indoors.

‘You should have got one of us to do that for you,’ said Luke. ‘You’ve been rushing round ever since we got in, doing things for everyone. Do you always work this hard?’

‘Yes,’ she stammered, surprised by the comment. God, that sounded as if she wanted a sympathy vote. ‘But it’s my job,’ she added quickly and wishing she didn’t sound such a moron. Having longed for a bit of attention from Luke, she was bowled over now she’d got it. Feeling hugely self-conscious she sped past and put the two jugs on the table. She didn’t want him to see he had succeeded in making her blush again.

She served the soup into bowls in the kitchen, taking her time and hoping it would give her colour a chance to subside. With no mirror handy to check it she had to trust to luck when she carried the tray to the table. Swiftly and efficiently she doled out the bowls and then returned with a couple of plates piled high with crispy garlic croutons. The guests tucked in with gusto; even Pat Barkham-Lumley seemed happy with the food on offer. The conversation died as the ten guests concentrated on their first course.

‘That was fab,’ said Bella, scraping her bowl.

‘Simply delicious,’ said Mike. ‘Bella, you must get the recipe.’

Judging by Bella’s expression, she wasn’t so enamoured by the soup as to consider cooking it for herself.

‘More?’ offered Millie.

‘Best not. My salopettes are already a bit tight.’

‘Can’t have you putting on weight,’ said Mike.

Ooh, like you can talk, thought Millie, eyeing his pot belly. For the second time in the space of a few minutes

Millie wondered what made Mike so attractive to Bella.

Bella ignored the personal comment. 'Anyway, I can smell something else delicious and I want to save some space.'

Millie gathered the plates and staggered back with an enormous dish of bubbling lasagne. She plonked it down in front of Bella.

'Will you serve it?' she asked. Pat, who was sitting at the head of the table, looked deeply affronted. Millie smiled inwardly. She returned with a big serving spoon and ten plates then took it upon herself to refill wine glasses. She got to John's first so as to give him a racing chance of getting another drink before Pat saw what was going on. With a feeling of triumph she achieved her aim a second before Pat cottoned on.

'No, John. Is that wise? We want clear heads in the morning, don't we?'

Millie didn't think a few glasses of wine were going to render John incapable of hitting the slopes twelve hours later and, judging by the look of pure gratitude John shot her, neither did he.

'Pat?' Millie proffered the carafe in her direction.

'Not for me, I think. Enough is enough.'

Prissy old killjoy, thought Millie as she carried on round the table. None of the others had any such inhibitions and lapped up the booze as if they had just spent a year in Saudi and had not just stepped off a charter flight with a perfectly well-stocked bar.

'You're the last guests here this year and we're sloshing in wine. What doesn't get drunk will only end up going down the drain.'

'That sounds like a challenge,' said Luke. 'Does that

mean if I don't get drunk I'll end up down the drain too? Usually I only wind up in the drain if I *am* drunk.'

Millie smiled and filled up his glass again. 'Possibly.' She wrenched her eyes away from him. She really must stop staring at him quite so much. At least she seemed to have stopped burbling whenever he spoke to her. That was something to be grateful for.

While the guests ate, Millie helped herself to a plate of food, ate it in record time and then cracked on with the washing up. While she was doing that she answered questions about the chalet, the resort, the skiing conditions, the projected weather forecast and good bars for après ski. It was the usual stuff that all the previous holidaymakers had asked and Millie tried not to sound as if she was on autopilot.

The first few times she'd done this sort of briefing she'd had to really struggle to name the various brasseries in the village and remember how to describe the route up the mountains which involved the shortest lift queues. Now, at the end of the season, she didn't even have to think. It didn't matter what the punters were after, noisy clubs, quiet bars, the best hot chocolate or tastiest lunchtime snacks, Millie had all the information at her fingertips. It surprised her to think how familiar she was with the place. She knew it even better than her home town. Not that that was difficult, when she considered how sheltered her life had been before she'd escaped to France. She'd almost never gone out, and if she had, the rule was that she was home by eleven, hardly a drop of alcohol had passed her lips and pop music was something she listened to surreptitiously when her father wasn't around. And now? Well, she was hardly ever in bed before midnight, was on first-name terms with most of the

bar owners in the resort and was completely familiar with the music scene.

‘So where do you go to wind down at the end of the day?’ Archie was asking.

Millie returned her attention to her guests. ‘Depends what mood I’m in really. Tomorrow night, if you’re up for it, Jack will take you on a bar crawl.’ Chelsea and Venice looked at each other and whispered and giggled. The idea appealed to them at least. ‘That way,’ continued Millie, ‘you can find out what this place has to offer for yourselves.’

And with any luck, she thought, you’ll not find the Husky for a while. The Husky was where she escaped from the guests. It was her refuge and her lifeline and it was where she was able to indulge in her passion for music. So she told the guests about the other bars and clubs in the resort, where to go for various forms of entertainment, but she kept quiet about the place she hung out on most evenings.

Tonight, however, for the first time in the entire season, it crossed her mind that if she wanted to see more of Luke then maybe she ought to tell them about the place. Perhaps if he saw her off duty he might pay her some attention instead of being mesmerised by Chelsea and Venice. She glanced towards him and saw he was still, apparently, riveted by the cousins. The sight made her feel quite deflated. Sod him, thought Millie, sadly. If that was the type he went for, she had no chance. And as types went, these girls were stunningly pretty – masses of blonde hair, very blue eyes and Hollywood smiles. Millie knew that red hair like hers wasn’t to everyone’s taste and her grey eyes were definitely run-of-the-mill. As far as the cousins were concerned, she was simply no competition at all.

Millie, however, hadn’t noticed that Luke had paid the

girls exactly the same amount of attention as he had everyone else in the room, because he was polite and had the sort of easy charm that meant he could get on with pretty well anyone. Even the dreadful Pat.

As soon as the guests finished eating, Millie, having had months of practice, had the coffee on the table and the dishwasher stacked with the crockery. For the first few weeks she'd taken until nearly ten thirty to get cleared up for the night but not any more. She'd got the whole chalet routine off pat and could get all her chores, both morning and evening, squared away with impressive ergonomic efficiency. And it was in her interests to be quick. Once she had fed everyone and cleared up, she was free to go. She glanced at her watch; just after nine. Great, she had plenty of time to enjoy herself before bed. Millie left Pat sternly pouring coffee and trying to ration the wine and slipped on her coat.

'OK then, everybody,' she said, reappearing in the living room. 'I'm off now. I'll be here to do breakfast in the morning. I stop serving at eight thirty so if you want to eat you have to be up before then. After breakfast we'll get those of you who need stuff to the ski shop to get you sorted out with kit. Jack will bring your lift passes here first thing. He'll also bring a stack of piste maps and tell you about some of the things we've arranged for your evening entertainment if you want to join in.'

'I'll make sure everyone is roused and ready,' said Pat ominously.

Luke, behind her back, rolled his eyes. Millie hid her smile behind her scarf and, mumbling thanks, headed to the door.

She let herself out into the crisp, cold night, flicking the

hood of her red 'Surf and Snow' company issue ski jacket over her head as she shut the door behind her. Snow was still falling gently, fine powder that, if it carried on all night, would provide fabulous conditions tomorrow. The glow from the streetlights looked like big luminous pom-poms as the lamps reflected off the tiny granules of snow suspended in the almost still air. Under her feet the fresh snow was covering the ruts and bumps of footprints and ski tracks and turning the village into a picture-book fairy land. Her breath hung in the air in front of her and her feet crunched on the fine snow. It was like walking on cornflour the way the new powder squeaked under her boots.

Millie pulled her coat tighter round her and adjusted her scarf so that only her eyes were exposed between it and the furry hood. She trudged along the snow-covered road to the path that was the short cut to the village proper. Ahead of her were the bright lights of the pubs, clubs and bars. Strains of music of all varieties drifted across the air to her: the thumping bass of heavy metal; the beat of reggae; the brainless lyrics of some sort of Eurovision song . . . It was all there; whatever your musical fancy, it was catered for. But none of that was Millie's taste. She strolled along the main street, avoiding laughing, smiling couples and parties, waving at the other reps and friends that she'd made in her time in the resort, shouting greetings to bar owners and waiters and feeling thoroughly at home. She would be sad to leave this place in a couple of weeks when the ski season was over. Since she'd left Westhampton she'd adopted this French alpine village as her home and it had, in its turn, adopted her.

She walked briskly along to the very end of the village, away from the bright lights of the bars and window displays,

past the last of the chalets until she reached a narrow flight of wooden steps that ran up a steep slope to a wooden hut. Despite the thin air she was fit enough to run up them two at a time to the door at the top. The smell of wood smoke scented the air as Millie opened it and let herself into the bright warmth inside.

‘Millie,’ roared a tall man with impressive moustaches from behind the bar.

Half the heads in the bar turned and several people waved or mouthed greetings at her. Millie slipped off her coat and walked over to the bar.

‘*Bonsoir*, Georges,’ she said as she kissed the barman on both cheeks.

‘I was hoping you’d come tonight,’ replied Georges. ‘It’s slow. It needs livening up.’

‘But it’s Saturday. It’s always slow on changeover days,’ Millie said in French that had gone from schoolgirl and halting to near perfect.

Georges shrugged and smiled. ‘But now you’re here, the evening will be beautiful.’

Millie smiled shyly. ‘Flatterer.’ She walked behind the bar and picked up the guitar. As she did so, the regulars in the bar – some locals and a gang of other seasonal workers – broke into applause.