

Allie Reynolds

SHIVER



For my mum and dad. Mountain people.

PROLOGUE

It's that time of year again. The time the glacier gives up bodies.

The immense mass of ice up there is a frozen river that flows too slowly for the eye to see. Recent victims brush shoulders with older ones in its glassy depths. Some emerge at the top, others at the snout, and there's no way of knowing who will come out next.

It can take years for them to reappear. Decades even. A glacier in neighbouring Italy made the news recently when it produced the mummified corpses of First World War soldiers, complete with helmets and rifles.

Still, what goes in must eventually come out, so I've been checking the local news every morning.

There's one particular body that I'm waiting for.

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‘Hello?’ My shout echoes around the concrete cavern.

The familiar red-and-white cable car sits in the bay, but there’s nobody in the operator booth. The sun has disappeared behind the Alps, the sky is pink, yet there isn’t a single light on in the building. Where is everyone?

An icy wind blasts my cheeks. I huddle deeper into my jacket. It’s the off season and the resort doesn’t open for another month so I didn’t expect the other ski lifts to be running, but I thought this one would be. How else are we going to get up to the glacier? Have I got the wrong day?

I dump my snowboard bag on the platform and pull out my phone to check the email again. *Know it’s been a while but are you up for a reunion weekend? Panorama building, glacier du Diable, Le Rocher. Meet at the cable car, 5 p.m. Friday 7th November. C. x*

C for Curtis. If anyone else had invited me here, I’d have deleted it without replying.

‘Yo, Milla!’

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And here's Brent loping up the steps towards me. Two years younger than me, he must be thirty-one now and he still has his boyish charm – the floppy dark hair, the dimples – though he looks worn and tired.

He lifts me off the ground in a bear hug. I hug him tightly back. All those cold nights I spent in his bed. I feel bad for not getting in contact with him. But after what happened . . . Anyway, he didn't contact me either.

Over his shoulder, sharp peaks loom, in shadow against the darkening sky. Do I really want to do this? It's not too late. I could make excuses, jump back in my car and drive home to Sheffield.

A throat clears behind us. We pull apart to see Curtis's tall, blond form.

Somehow I expected Curtis to look the same as the last time I saw him. Collapsed with grief. A broken man. But of course he doesn't. He's had ten years to get over it. Or tuck it all away inside him.

Curtis's hug is brief. 'Good to see you, Milla.'

'You too.' I always struggled to look him in the eye because he was so damned good-looking – still is – but I find it even harder now.

Curtis and Brent grip hands, Curtis's skin pale against Brent's. They've brought their snowboards; no surprises there. We could hardly go up the mountain without them. Like me, they wear jeans, but I'm amused to see shirt collars underneath their snowboard jackets.

'Hope I wasn't expected to dress up,' I say.

Curtis looks me up and down. 'You'll do.'

I swallow. His eyes are as blue as ever, but they remind me of someone I don't want to think of. There's none of

the warmth I used to feel from him either. For him I dragged myself back to the place I swore I'd never return to. I'm already regretting it.

'Who else is coming?' Brent says.

Why's he looking at me?

'No idea,' I say.

Curtis laughs. 'Don't you know?'

Footsteps. Here comes Heather. And who's that? *Dale*? No way – are they still together?

Dale's previously wild hair is stylishly cut, his piercings removed. His trendy skate shoes don't even look skated in. I guess he's been Heathered. At least she let him bring his snowboard.

Heather's wearing a dress – a sparkly black one – with tights and knee-high boots. Must be bloody freezing, even with the Puffa jacket over it. A whiff of hairspray from her long dark locks as she hugs me.

'Great to see you, Milla.' She must have had a few drinks before she got here because she almost sounds like she means it. Her boots have a three-inch heel, bringing her to an inch taller than me, which is probably why she's wearing them.

She flashes a ring.

'You guys got married?' I say. 'Congratulations.'

'Three years now.' Her Geordie accent is thicker than ever.

Brent and Curtis slap Dale's back.

'Took your time askin', hey bro?' Brent says. His London accent seems stronger too.

'Actually, I asked him,' Heather snaps.

The door of the cable car grinds open. A lift attendant

shuffles up behind us, black resort cap pulled low. He checks off our names on a clipboard and gestures for us to enter.

The others file past.

'Is that everyone?' I say, playing for time.

The liftie seems to think so. There's something familiar about him.

Everyone else is aboard now. Reluctantly I join them.

'Who else would there be anyway?' Curtis says.

'True,' I say. There were a few others who came and went, but of our original gang, we're the only five left.

Or rather, the only ones still standing.

A flood of guilt hits me. *She will never walk again.*

The liftie shuts the door. I strain to see his face but before I can get a better look, he heads off along the platform and disappears to his booth.

The cable car lurches into motion. Like me, the others stare through the plexiglass spellbound as we fly over the tops of fir trees, chasing the fading light up the mountain. It's weird to see dirt and grass below. It was always snow. I look for marmots but they're probably hibernating. We pass over a cliff and the tiny village of Le Rocher disappears from view.

Suspended in the air like this, with the scenery slipping past the window, I get the strangest feeling. Instead of rising up the mountain, it's like we're travelling back in time. And I don't know if I'm ready to face the past.

Too late. The cable car is swinging into the mid-station already. We step out, dragging our bags. It's colder here and it'll be colder still where we're going. A French flag flaps in the breeze. The plateau is deserted. Halfway up, the browns and greens turn to white: the snowline.

'I thought the snow would be right down to the valley by now,' Brent says.

Curtis nods. 'That's climate change for you.'

This is the heart of the ski area in winter, with chairlifts and tows going off in all directions, but the bubble lift is the only one running today.

The halfpipe used to be right there next to that little shack. The long, U-shaped channel is just a muddy ditch right now but in my mind's eye I can see the pristine white walls. Best halfpipe in Europe at the time and it's what brought us all here that winter.

God, the memories. I've got goosebumps. I can picture our younger selves jostling and laughing. The five of us.

Plus the two who are missing.

A freezing gust swirls my hair around my face. I zip my snowboard jacket up to my chin and hurry after the others.

The bubble lift will take us to nearly 3,500 metres. The Diable glacier is one of the highest ski areas in France. The glossy orange cabins hang from the cable like Christmas baubles. Curtis enters the nearest open cabin.

Heather tugs on Dale's hand. 'Let's get our own.'

'No, come on,' Dale says. 'We'll all fit.'

Curtis gestures. 'Loads of room.'

Heather looks dubious and I see her point. These little cabins fit six in theory but with all our bags it'll be a squeeze. It doesn't help that she's brought a bloody suitcase.

Brent folds his tall frame to enter. 'You can sit on my knee, Mills. Give us your snowboard bag.'

'Dale can sit on your knee,' I say. 'I'm sitting here.'

Heather ends up on Dale's knee, beside Curtis, with me and Brent opposite, bags jammed in around us. Dale looks so strange without his dreads. With his Nordic colouring, he used to remind me of a Viking. Now he looks more like a game-show host.

We speed across the plateau. Such emptiness below. I forgot how huge this area is. Walkers hike here in summer and trails zigzag up. It must be beautiful – a mass of alpine flowers – but all there is to see today is straggly brown grass and rocky scree. No sign of life, not even a bird. The land looks barren.

Dead.

No. Sleeping. Waiting.

Like something else up there. I swallow and force the thought aside.

Curtis's knee bumps mine as we rattle past a pylon. He seems unusually quiet but I can understand that. If this is hard for me, it must be a hundred times worse for him.

The invitation made no mention of it but it's obvious why we're here. In the news the day before his email arrived:

British snowboarder missing ten years declared dead in absentia after legal battle.

The others can't have been any keener to come than I was, but how could we refuse? It's natural that he'd want to commemorate it.

There's snow beneath us now, glowing lilac in the twilight. Far above are the towering cliffs that give Le Rocher its name. The Panorama building perches on top, a squat dark shape hunkered down against the elements.

'So how did you manage this, Mills?' Brent says.

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‘Manage what?’ I say.

‘VIP access to the glacier. Private cable car ride and all that. Pretty swish.’

I stare at him. ‘What do you mean?’

‘This is the shut-down period. Can’t be cheap.’

‘Why do you think *I* organised it? Curtis did.’

Curtis gives me a funny look. ‘Sorry?’

What are they playing at? We pull out our phones. The last time I brought my phone up here, I smashed the screen on my first run, leaving a nasty phone-shaped bruise on my hip. After that, I didn’t bother taking it up with me.

I show them the email I received and Brent shows me his. His invitation is the same as mine, except it’s from M and there’s a PS: *Lost my phone. Email me.*

‘Here you go.’ Curtis flashes his – identical to Brent’s.

I never could read Curtis. Is this his idea of a joke?

The cabin rattles as we pass another pylon and my ears pop. This is where it starts to get steep. We’ve begun the long, long climb up to the glacier.

I turn to Dale and Heather. ‘What did your invite say?’

Dale hesitates.

‘Yeah, same as yours,’ Heather says.

‘From M or C?’ Brent says.

‘Um, M.’ Heather glances at me.

Why do I get the feeling she’s lying? ‘Can I see it?’

‘Sorry,’ Heather says. ‘I deleted it. But it was just like theirs.’

I don't know what I expect at the top. Music? Candles? Waiters with trays of champagne?

There's none of that. The platform is dimly lit and deserted, the operator booth empty. We drag our bags out. A siren wails and the bubble lift cranks to a halt. They must be operating it from the bottom, saving staff costs, having seen our arrival on the overhead security camera. But after the confusion over who invited us, it's a bit freaky, and from Heather's furrowed brow, she clearly thinks so too.

Brent looks my way. 'Leave our stuff here for now?'

'Don't ask me,' I say.

He sets his bags down. I hesitate and dump mine too. It's not as though there's anyone here to steal them.

The steps are gridded metal to accommodate snow-covered boots. By the time I reach the top, I'm panting. The air's thin up here. I push through the double doors into the Panorama building. And breathe in stale

woodsmoke. For a moment I have to close my eyes. Because that, more than anything, was the smell of my winters.

Curtis hits a switch and the wooden-panelled corridor lights up. A constant procession of skiers and snowboarders clump through here normally, past the ski lockers and out the main entrance on to the glacier, but it's eerily silent tonight.

Curtis cups his hands around his mouth. 'Anyone there?'

Brent's looking at me again; Dale too. My thoughts turn back to the invitations. Could one of them have organised this? No, I can't see it. As Brent pointed out, this is the shut-down period. A weekend up here must cost thousands at this time of year. Thanks to my online stalking, I know Curtis is doing well for himself. It has to be him. But why the mystery? And are the others in on it or has he somehow made them believe I invited them?

'There's got to be someone here,' Curtis says. 'Let's look around.'

We all rush off in different directions, kids let loose in a theme park. It's a maze, this place. The only building for miles around, the multi-purpose sprawling structure houses the Mountain Rescue, control room and everything else visitors and staff might need up here. I know the restaurant and toilets, but that's it. Oh yeah, and I once stayed the night in one of its tiny dorm rooms – France's highest youth hostel.

I race down corridors, pressing light switches as I go. There are lots of closed doors. Some open; others don't. This one opens. God, this could be the very dorm I slept

in. The damp and musty smell triggers a memory. Brent beneath me on the mattress, his large hands gripping my hips. I stare at the narrow single bunk. Then step out, shutting the door firmly behind me.

The next door down is a laundry cupboard – rough white towels and well-worn sheets stacked on pine shelves, the reek of cheap detergent. Further along I smell food and sure enough, here's the kitchen. Two pans sit on an immense stove. I lift the lids. Meaty casserole in one; mash in the other. Still warm. Could be our dinner, but where are the catering staff?

I spot a toilet and push the door cautiously, but it's empty and dark. Just beyond is the equally dark restaurant, where the stench of woodsmoke is strong enough to make me cough even though the fire isn't lit. I spent hours in here warming my fingers around mugs of coffee and sitting out snowstorms, but the tables are bare, so I turn down another corridor. The others must be on the floor above because I can't hear them any more.

More storage rooms; more locked doors. The light switches are on short timers and occasionally turn off before I've pressed the next one, leaving me in total darkness, having to grope my way along the wall. The silence is creepy. If someone popped out from behind one of these doors I would just about have a heart attack.

At last a familiar sight: the main entrance on to the glacier. I hurry towards it. Nobody will be out there at this time of night and the door will probably be locked, but if it isn't, I want to taste that ice-tinged air. It's been so long.

It opens. Wind rushes through the gap in a high-pitched, relentless scream. The sound is strangely human.

I yank the door shut and stand there breathing hard. I knew this would be the problem if I came back here. Too many doors I'd be better off not opening.

Get a grip, Milla.

Okay. I can do this. Once I get a couple of drinks in me, I'll be fine.

Upstairs, they have a function room where they host weddings and stuff. A useful money-maker for tiny resorts like this one, especially during the off season. I've only ever seen it in pictures, but that must be where everyone is because I've checked everywhere down here.

Here are the stairs. At the top is a heavy fire door and the air on the other side of it seems even colder. A faint smell. Familiar. What is it? Heather's perfume, maybe.

Voices from the door on the right.

Stop! reads a sign. *The game is on. Phones must be left in the basket.*

I let out my breath. A game. Some kind of quiz maybe, about snowboarding or what we remember about each other. Something to get us talking about old times. And it's exactly Curtis's style, telling us what to do like this, not wanting any outside distractions from whatever he has planned. I lower my phone into the basket. Except . . .

The sign snags my attention again. *The game is on.* I once said those words to— No. It's a common enough phrase. It doesn't mean anything. I dump my phone on top of the four already there and go inside.

The function room juts out over the mountain, the carpet thick white pile to mirror the snow outside, the furniture white and silver and no doubt stupidly expensive. Upholstered satin chairs; tables of glass and chrome.

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The opulence is in stark contrast to the rustic furnishings below. It even smells different. Gone is the fug of woodsmoke, replaced by the scent of fresh paint.

The entire back wall is windows, white velvet curtains tied back with a sash. The view must be spectacular in the daytime, but for now it's total blackness. Not a light in sight. Eerie in our current situation, but otherwise a beautiful venue for a wedding.

If you can overlook how many lives this glacier has claimed.

And how many bodies it still holds.

Don't think of that.

It's so cold in here that I can see my breath. Damp, too. The room probably hasn't been used for months. The others all have drinks. A lone beer sits on a nearby silver tray – Kronenbourg 1664. The glass is icy against my palm. I used to love these little bottles of French beer, sweet and fizzy. Haven't drunk it since the last time I was here.

It's just the five of us still. The staff must be along the corridor. Curtis keeps looking at the door. What does he have planned?

Heather's French-manicured nails curl over my lower arm. 'Did you see the game?'

'What game?'

She tows me across the carpet to a tall wooden box sitting on a low table. Beside it are pens, good quality cream envelopes and cards. And a printed, laminated sheet. *Icebreaker*. The script is ornate, the sort you see on the order of service at funerals.

And weddings, I remind myself quickly.

Write a secret, something about yourself that none of

the others will know. Post it in the box. Draw the envelopes out, one by one, and guess who wrote what.

I glance at Curtis again, amused he's gone to so much effort when we'd have been happy to just drink ourselves stupid. He strides past me to the window, rubs condensation from the glass and peers out. The fluidity of his movements always reminded me of a male gymnast and that hasn't changed. He still has the same powerful grace.

I need more alcohol in me before I approach him so I head over to Brent instead. I'm surprised by the beer bottle in his hand. He never used to drink.

'Been snowboarding lately?' I say.

'Once a year,' he says. 'All I can afford. I still do a load of skateboarding.'

'I can tell that from the state of your shoes.'

His DCs are so worn on one toe that I can see his sock. DC used to sponsor him but presumably he had to buy his current pair. I'm touched he stayed loyal to the brand, but that's Brent all over.

He was only twenty-one that winter, with the lean frame and all the energy of a teenager. He's filled out a bit now. Hard to say beneath his baggy clothing, but he still looks in pretty good shape. Still wears his jeans halfway down his arse as well.

His dark good looks, courtesy of his Indian father, brought him brief success as a model before his snowboard career took off. I check him out online now and then, but his Instagram doesn't reveal much. I want to ask if he's seeing anyone – if he has children even – but he might get the wrong idea. I need to know that he's happy.

'So you really didn't invite me here?' Brent asks.

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‘No,’ I say. ‘I told you.’

Curtis meets my eye across the room, looking . . . troubled? Wondering where the staff are, probably.

‘You still riding?’ Brent says, clearly making an effort to steer the conversation to safer territory.

‘Not since I left here,’ I tell him.

‘Seriously? Not once?’

‘Busy with work.’ I can see his surprise. Back then snowboarding was all I could think about and I always imagined I’d be doing it well into my old age.

The truth is I’m terrified of it. Terrified of who it makes me become and what other lives I might destroy. The moment I fasten into my bindings, nothing else matters.

Brent doesn’t know what I did, not all of it. None of them do.

And I intend to keep it that way.

Heather claps her hands for attention. ‘Icebreaker time.’

‘Aw, I’m starving,’ Brent says.

‘Me too,’ I say. ‘I found casserole in the kitchen.’

Heather pouts. ‘It’ll be fun. We can eat after.’

Was she always this annoying or has being married made her bossier? She tips back the rest of her wine. Maybe she’s just drunk.

Brent grumbles, but Heather hands out cards, pens and envelopes. I look at Curtis again but he sweeps past me out of the room.

‘What are we supposed to write?’ Brent asks.

‘Something juicy that no one else knows,’ Heather says.

My throat goes dry. I drain my beer but it’s the kind of dryness that no amount of alcohol will wash away. I know because I tried it when I left here ten years ago.

I chew the end of the pen, straining to think of something funny to reveal. And hear Curtis’s voice in the

corridor. He has his phone to his ear. Typical Curtis – makes us give our phones up, then uses his. Is he talking to his girlfriend? He sees me watching and shuts the door.

I look down at my card, but I'm too cold and hungry to think straight. In the end I just write: *I have a cat called Stalefish.*

Brent has disappeared. I slip my secret into an envelope and post it in the slot at the top of the box. Where did Curtis get this thing? Apart from being white, it's completely out of keeping with the rest of the room. The flimsy plywood sides have been badly glued together and given a dodgy paint job, and it looks like something my grandad would make.

I need the toilet. The Ladies is the first door down the corridor. The water comes out the tap so cold you'd think the pipes would freeze.

Back in the function room, Brent has produced a large bag of crisps. I take a handful.

I nod at Brent's snowboard jacket. 'Does Burton still give you stuff or did you have to buy that?'

He crunches crisps. 'I get a discount.'

'All right for some. I had to buy myself a whole new kit for this trip.' I lick salt from my fingers. I gave all my snowboard gear away ten years ago to a French kid who lived across the street. She deserved it more than me.

Curtis has returned from his call and resumed his post at the window, back turned. What's he looking at? There's nothing to see.

Dale comes in with another handful of beers. Brent and I swipe a bottle each.

'Ready to play?' Heather says.

‘Just a sec,’ Curtis says and ducks out once more.

Heather looks like she’s about to combust. I hide my smile. It’s almost like Curtis did it just to piss her off.

‘See any staff?’ I ask Dale.

‘No,’ he says. ‘I reckon we’re on our own up here.’

‘Looks that way,’ Brent agrees.

‘But there was hot food in the kitchen,’ I remind them.

‘Yeah, I saw,’ Dale says. ‘I guess they figured we could help ourselves. Send someone up the lift in the morning to make us breakfast, maybe.’

‘A bunch of guests left unchaperoned? I’m amazed they would allow it,’ I say.

‘Saves on costs,’ Dale points out.

Brent nods. ‘Must be hard for a tiny resort like this up against mega resorts like the Trois Vallées.’

‘What about the game?’ I ask. ‘Did they set that up too?’

They can’t answer. And from the way they’re looking at me, they still think I have something to do with it.

‘Shall I do the honours?’ Heather says the moment Curtis returns. Without waiting for an answer, she opens the flap at the bottom of the box, wrestles out the top-most envelope and rips into it.

The rest of us pull up chairs. What’s she so excited about anyway? What does she think the cards are going to say?

‘I’ll read them all out, then we’ll guess who wrote what, all right?’

She’s so twitchy, she’s not just drunk. I think she’s on something. Then again, Curtis seems equally on edge. He sits stiffly upright, keeping a constant watch on the room.

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I can't feel my fingers. I stuff them under my thighs, but my satin chair seat is as cold as everything else in the room.

Heather reads the card and her cheeks colour. '*I slept with Brent.*'

She darts an anxious look at her husband as though fearing he'll think it an admission, but he's looking at me, as are Brent and Curtis.

'I didn't write that,' Curtis says.

We all laugh.

Everyone except Heather. 'We said we'd read them all out before we guess.'

She's trying to boss Curtis. Good luck with that.

'I didn't write it either,' I say.

The guys laugh some more. Heather glares at me.

Dale puts his hands up. 'Don't look at me.'

More laughter.

One of the guys must have written it for a joke. Curtis probably.

Heather's opening the next envelope already. Her haste makes me wonder. Was there ever anything between her and Brent? Even if there was, surely she wouldn't advertise it. She and Dale got together pretty early on that winter.

She clears her throat. '*I slept with Brent.*' Her voice is overbright.

More laughter, louder this time, from me, Brent and Curtis. Dale isn't smiling.

Curtis slaps Brent's shoulder. 'No wonder you never made the Olympics. You didn't get enough sleep.'

It's good to see Curtis looking happier. His icebreaker

is having the desired effect. Warming us up – whether from amusement or embarrassment – despite the frigid air temperature. I'm enjoying seeing Heather squirm. From the expression on Dale's face, if there was ever something between Brent and his wife, it's news to him.

A look passes between Brent and Heather. A wrinkling of Brent's brow that says: *what are you playing at?* Brent thinks Heather wrote it! Heather answers with a slight shake of her head. What does that mean? *Not now?* Or that she didn't write it?

My brain is boggling. If Brent thinks Heather wrote one of them, does that mean he actually slept with her?

I crane my neck to see the handwriting, not that I would recognise it – we didn't do a lot of writing that winter – but the card Heather holds is written in neat capitals, the way you write when you don't want someone to recognise your penmanship. It's a joke, it must be. A prearranged joke between Curtis and Brent to stir things up. Curtis and Dale always had a problem with each other. Yet Brent's surprise seemed genuine.

I could speak up, insisting I didn't write either of them, but I think I'll wait and see what the next one says.

Heather opens the third envelope. She looks at the card and sucks in her breath. *'I slept with Saskia.'*

Nobody laughs this time. A line has just been crossed.

Despite our differences, I can't imagine why anyone here would write that. As far as I know, only one person present has slept with Saskia, and I didn't think it was common knowledge. I'm careful not to look in Brent's direction – or Curtis's.

Heather eyes her husband, clearly wondering if he

wrote it. If I stick to my assumption that Curtis and Brent wrote the first two, Dale must have written this one. But why the hell would he do that?

Heather opens the next one. Must be thinking it can't get any worse.

But apparently it is because she blinks and looks up in shock. *'I know where Saskia is.'*

Curtis snatches the card from her hand and studies it, stony-faced. 'Is this some sort of joke?'

Nobody answers.

'Did anyone actually write any of these?'

Eyes slide around the room. Heads shake.

Unease creeps through me. A glance at the window, at the total and utter blackness out there, reminds me how alone we are. It's just the five of us. Nobody else for miles and miles. I need to know if Curtis invited us here. Because if he didn't . . .

I look at the door, thinking of all the long, dark corridors beyond. Is someone out there?

Brent breaks the silence. 'Let's hear the last one.'

Heather opens it and turns pale. The card flutters from her fingers to the floor.

I pick it up. *'I killed Saskia.'*

TEN YEARS AGO

A girl flies high above the halfpipe, white-blond hair streaming out from below her helmet. She's good. On her last hit, she spins one and a half rotations – five hundred and forty degrees – and brakes to a stop in front of me, spraying me with snow.

I know who that is. Saskia Sparks. She beat me in the British Snowboarding Championships last year, placing third to my fourth.

And this year I'm going to beat her.

My long blonde hair, a few shades darker than hers, is pretty distinctive, and if I recognise her, she probably recognises me, yet if she does, she doesn't reveal it. She simply unfastens her back foot from her bindings and skates across to the tow lift.

I dump my backpack and hurry after her. I've heard stuff about her. The Ice Maiden, they call her.

My lift pass is in my pocket. I tilt my hip to the scanner, wait for it to beep, then push through the turnstile.

The lift is pretty basic, weather-beaten plastic T-bars that dangle from a tatty-looking moving cable. I seize the nearest T-bar, slide it between my thighs and watch the action as it drags me up the slope.

With its naturally forbidding terrain of rugged cliffs, narrow couloirs, and slopes too steep for the average package holidaymaker, Le Rocher holds cult status amongst expert skiers and snowboarders.

The resort has another big drawcard, and here it is: the Le Rocher halfpipe. The snowboarder's equivalent of a skateboard ramp, the long white channel stretches up the slope. Built to Olympic specification – a hundred and fifty metres long with walls of snow six metres high on either side – it looks in pretty good shape.

Riders are criss-crossing back and forth, launching out of the sheer ice walls and doing all kinds of crazy shit. It's hard to tell who's who under the hats or helmets and goggles, but there are clearly some big names gearing up for the Le Rocher Open tomorrow.

I wish I'd got here earlier. The season started two weeks ago, on the fifth of December, but I was still working. Had to make sure I'd saved up enough to last the whole winter; that way I can focus on my training. I'll never make the top three if I'm up all night working some crappy bar job. Anyway. Catch-up time.

Saskia is back at the top already. Is she here for the season or just the Le Rocher Open? She drops in and pulls another huge five-forty spin. Really nails those landings.

The first time I saw a halfpipe, the steepness of the near-vertical walls terrified me. It's an illusion. The vert is your friend. Land on it correctly and it's so smooth you

don't feel it. But the ice is hard as concrete, so if you screw up, you're in trouble.

Fear tingles through me as I fasten my boots into my bindings. Inside my leather pipe gloves, my palms are clammy. I'm more nervous than usual because my snowboard is new – a Magic Pipemaster 157 from my first ever board sponsor.

Normally I go easy on my first run, to get a feel for the pipe, but Saskia's the girl I need to beat so I'm going to try a five-forty on my last hit. I ride down the side until I have enough speed, then plunge in. Down the wall, across the pipe floor, then up the opposite wall and into the air.

My front hand finds the heel edge of my board and grips it tight. Backside Air. I soar above the ice, mind pure and empty, seeing nothing, hearing nothing. Only feeling. These precious moments of weightlessness at the top of the arc, suspended by gravity. This is why I juggle three jobs for half the year and cane myself in the gym.

Sinking back to earth, I touch down, all fired up and ready for more. Back and forth from wall to wall like a pendulum. On my final hit, I spin hard and make the five-forty – just. My fingers shake as I unfasten my bindings. I love this board. I'm going to keep it forever – put it up on my wall so I can show my grandkids.

Saskia's walking up now, because there's a queue for the lift, so I trudge after her. The glare off the snow is dazzling, the whiteness of an Alpine winter so different to the grey of an urban one. My eyes are still adjusting.

On her next run she does big back-to-back five-forties on her last two hits. Fear swirls in my stomach. I always

imagined that once I found sponsors, I could sit back and enjoy myself. How wrong I was. The pressure is tenfold now I have an image to uphold. I can't let my sponsors down.

I picture the spins in my head as I strap in. I need to go big on the first one to get enough air time to make the second. Here goes.

Crap. I just face-planted in front of all the people eating their lunch at the bottom. Spitting snow, I wipe my goggles and hurry back up. My knee throbs and I don't even want to know if Saskia saw that.

I have to do this. A top three ranking is the difference between semi-pro and fully pro, and fully pro means you can train year round. Unlike Saskia, I don't come from a wealthy family, but I want this more than I've ever wanted anything in my life.

I try again. Another wipe-out. My right hand takes the impact and pain zings up my arm. I think I see Saskia smirking as I pick myself up. It takes me four more tries, then, somehow, I manage. And dammit if Saskia doesn't pull a seven-twenty. Two complete rotations high above the ice.

The sun blazes down on the halfpipe. Every time I nail something, Saskia raises the bar. I'm pushing it as hard as I dare. If I break something before the Le Rocher Open tomorrow, I'm screwed.

By mid-afternoon, my water bottle is empty again. I've already trekked to the mid-station once to refill it. I leave my board at the bottom of the pipe like last time, amongst the colourful array of others, and jog across the plateau.

On my way back, I pass a family of skiers – Mum, Dad and small child – in agitated debate on the cliff edge. When I peer over, I see why. A tiny blue glove lies on the snow below.

My gaze returns to the family. Strapped to the man's chest is a baby, all bundled up against the elements. Only his little pink cheeks are exposed. And one small bare hand. He must have dropped the glove from the rickety chairlift that rattles overhead. Le Rocher isn't a family-friendly resort and it's the first family I've seen here. They must be locals.

I check either way along the cliff. I've jumped higher ones plenty of times. *If it's not over twenty foot, it's not even a cliff*, according to *White lines* magazine. But it will eat into my training time. I look over my shoulder at the pipe, where Saskia will be increasing her lead. Then back at the baby and his poor bare hand. Before I know what I'm doing, I've stuck my water bottle into my sports bra and I'm running to the edge. The woman's hand flies to her mouth as I leap.

Mid-air, a realisation hits me. I've only ever jumped cliffs with my snowboard on. This is going to hurt . . .

I plummet through the air. Powder and rocks loom below. As my boots touch down, I tuck my shoulder in and roll, coming to a stop plastered with snow. I raise my goggles and see the family's shocked faces peering over the cliff at me. Now where's that glove?

A twinge of pain from my knee as I scramble up. Old injury; it does that sometimes, and today's wipe-outs didn't help. I hold up the glove and the parents clap. As hard as I can, I hurl it upwards. The man snatches it,

shouts out his thanks and the family disappears from view. Now I need to figure out how to get back up.

After a long sideways hike through deep powder, I'm finally back at the pipe, sweaty and breathless. And all that for a bloody baby glove.

My thermal top is sticking to my armpits and I've drunk half my water already, but at least my snowboard is where I left it. Saskia sits nearby, tilting her face to the sun. She still hasn't acknowledged me, but the moment I pick my board up, she grabs hers and races ahead to the tow lift. I hurry after her, trying to regain my focus.

As we ascend, a figure in a mint jacket busts a huge spin. Shit – that's a girl! You can usually tell female riders from the way they ride – less power, more cautiousness – but this one rides like a guy, fully committed to her moves. How can I compete with that? Hopefully she's not a Brit.

I pull myself together. For now, all I have to worry about is Saskia. She drops in as I fasten my bindings. Damn. She just did back-to-back seven-twenties. I don't think I can do that.

Come on! Your sponsors would drop you if they knew what a chicken you are!

I take a deep breath and plunge in, but my board is sluggish and unresponsive and I'm all over the place. The best I can manage on my last hit is one full rotation. A shaky three-sixty.

Out of control, I speed on down, catch the toe edge of my board and fall into some poor guy's lap, knocking him backwards to the snow.

Brilliant. I've just mown down Curtis Sparks, three-time

British halfpipe champion and Saskia's older brother. 'I'm so sorry!'

He helps me up. 'No problem. You all right?'

'Yeah, are you? I hit you pretty hard.'

He seems amused. 'I'll live.'

I've had a big-time crush on this guy for years. He's not just gorgeous and mega-talented. When asked why he hadn't qualified for the last Winter Olympics, he looked the interviewer in the eye and said: 'Because I'm not good enough.' He didn't mention having major surgery shortly before the qualifiers. No excuses. His own harshest critic. I loved him for that.

I lift my goggles to see what's up with my board.

'Hey, I saw you in the Brits last year.'

'Yeah, I saw you too,' I tell him.

Flustered by the way he's looking at me, I examine my snowboard. 'My binding came loose again. Have you got a screwdriver?'

'Let's have a look.' Curtis crouches over my board and grasps my binding with large hands. His hair is darker blond than his sister's and really short, his skin golden, pale around his eyes from his goggles.

'Hey, Sass!' he shouts.

And there she is, watching us.

'What did you do with my screwdriver?' he calls.

She comes over with a large screwdriver with a purple plastic handle.

I take it. 'Thanks.'

She raises her neon-pink goggles to her helmet but doesn't say anything. She has the most amazing eyes. I've

seen them in photos but they're bluer in real life – even more so than her brother's.

I tighten my binding, putting all my strength into it because I don't want it to come loose again. I had to borrow a screwdriver from some guy at the top earlier.

'Want me to tighten that for you?' Curtis says.

'Do I look like I have a problem with my arms?' It comes out before I can help it. Rude, I know, but would I seriously be up here if I can't tighten my own bloody bindings?

Fighting a smile, he looks me up and down. 'I don't see any problems at all.'

My cheeks burn. I hand the screwdriver back. And notice a rip in his lower leg. 'Oh God, I tore your trousers.'

His smile widens. 'Hey, don't worry about it. I don't pay for them. You can fall on me any time.'

Is this guy a complete flirt or what? In front of his sister, as well!

'It's weird,' I say. 'Because that's the second time my bindings came loose today.' He's making me babble.

His smile fades. 'Really?' He turns to his sister.

Why's he looking at her like that?

Saskia smooths her hair over her shoulders. 'Must be the warmer weather. The holes in her base have expanded or something.'

'You're giving my sister a run for her money today,' Curtis tells me, still looking at her. 'She's pulling stuff I didn't know she could do.'

Saskia's face darkens. Maybe I'm not as far behind her as I think.

She shoves out her hand. 'Hi. I'm Saskia.'

SHIVER

‘I’m Milla.’

She breaks into a grin. ‘I know. Are you coming out tonight? The Glow Bar’s running a pre-comp party.’

I hesitate. ‘I don’t normally go out before a comp.’

Saskia tilts her head. ‘Why? Are you scared?’

I curse inwardly. ‘No. I’ll be there.’