

**French Roll:  
Misadventures in Love, Life, and Roller-  
Skating Across the French Riviera**

by

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# Chapter 1

## On the Edge

*Do not look for approval, except for the consciousness of doing your best.—Andrew Carnegie*

The rucksack of dynamite pulled on my shoulders with each step through the Alpen tunnel. Chilling panic shot up my neck each time I bumped the bomb against the icy rock wall. My mountain boss led the way, his red jacket barely visible in the dim light of the fitfully working bulbs, goading me to keep his pace. The two of us had trekked high into Tyrolean territory through secret passages inside the Zugspitze, Germany's highest mountain, where we would burrow through snow tubes with the explosives and blast off the top of the mountain.

It sounded like the life of some super-spy or special ops soldier, but I was a long-haired California kid still sporting surf trunks under my layers of ice climbing gear, far from the surf and sand I called home. I had always assumed I'd be a smart, sensible man by the time I turned nineteen. Instead, I was volunteering for avalanche duty, another goal in a series of unhinged, self-validating missions, apparently nowhere near to giving up my conviction that I could do anything, needed no one, could take on the world on my own two feet. The ski season clock was ticking a countdown to summer—I'd already hit that snooze button of growing up several times.

It was time for an awakening.

We climbed for an hour, beginning at the padlocked doors of the Schneefernerhaus, the enigmatic hotel clinging to the limestone cliffs of the Zugspitze. The desolate hideout overlooked a glacier high above the tree line, an ideal supervillain lair for some literary love child of Ian Fleming and Agatha Christie. For that one cloistered winter of 1980 (because surely I never planned to return once the ice released me from its clutches), I was calling it home.

My foot slipped on an icy stair in the tunnel, and I dropped a knee hard to concrete, ripping my pants. I struggled to my feet under the weight of the loaded backpack, changing my gait to favor the nonthrobbing knee. An icy draft rushed into the tear in my pants and froze a smear of blood on the outside.

I should have stayed in bed.

I could have been cozy under piles of down comforters, waiting to watch another sunrise over the Alps through the dorm window, peeking at me from beyond the well-greased machinery of cable car number three. But the magnificence of the five snowcapped countries outside my window begged adventure, and I wasn't one to ignore their demands. I often climbed out the window onto the cable car catwalks to a secret balcony, where I'd dangle my legs and play my

harmonica to the Alpen peaks in the distance. Most nights began with two beers and the twelve-bar blues, and ended with six or more letters written by a flickering candle in a wax-covered Chianti bottle.

The letters of my routine days read like cliffhanger adventures for the folks in California. I penned intrepid episodes of a world they could only imagine, a life even I could barely believe I was experiencing. My frank stories surely freaked them out. I scribed loquacious letters to Carla, the stylish San Francisco correspondent I met in Munich. I declined important invitations such as job offers and being Guy's best man back in California. And I desperately tried to express my helpless sorrow to my sister Julie with a baby boy in her belly and a softball-sized tumor in her head.

But most of my letters were to my darling Carrie. I gushed over how I missed roller-skating the beaches with her. I rambled on about how wonderful our life together would be once I returned, and I dropped hints about making her mine till death do us part.

Even my readers recognized I didn't belong where I was. My mountaineering adventures were a fix, an episodic high for a teenage adrenaline junkie desperately avoiding his greatest fear. I ruminated on these assessments while keeping pace with Der Spiegel's red coat in the tunnel darkness, following the collage of award patches across his broad shoulders.

After my enthusiastic *ja* to volunteering, Der Spiegel sat me down with a couple of forty-year veteran Tyrolean mountain men in a dimly lighted booth at the back of the employee lounge of the Schneesfernerhaus.

Trapped in the café booth by these burly figures and feeling rather puny alongside them, I puffed up my chest, drank a warm morning beer, and choked on the secondhand smoke belching from their prized fourth-generation Meerschaum pipes. A round of breakfast Jägermeister arrived

at the table, making me wonder if there might ever be an inappropriate time for shots in this mountain life.

It was there they gave me the Avalanche Talk—in German. Though I had become fluent after five years of studying German, the thick accents of the Bavarian and Tyrolean mountaineers left me reading body language for clues. The Avalanche Talk was like planning a bank heist or a *coup d'état*. A storm had hit unseasonably late, and we would be avalanching from an awkward location. Awkward meant dangerous.

Still, the boss was going, and I was comfortable putting my life in his hands. To say the Alps were his home was an understatement. Through my California eyes, he *was* the Alps.

The men methodically explained the coming tasks in throaty, five-syllable words beyond my fourth-year German vocabulary. There was an audible tension in their gruff voices and rare and genuine concern on their ruddy catcher's-mitt faces. I took notes, from which I would later translate unfamiliar phrases from a pocket dictionary: “hazardous duty,” “blow up the mountain,” “extra pay.” I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being set up for something the career alpinists wanted no part of. But I agreed. Der Spiegel gave me his customary heavy slap on the back, and so it was done.

We met before sunrise in the employee lounge. The 1930s hotel was deathly quiet in the predawn dark. Its zoetic gallery of German history, frozen in time with handcrafted furnishings and gilded Nazi-era artifacts, hinted at adventures and dangers, isolation and secrecy. The Schneefernerhaus is the fantasy of every James Bond film location scout, but that morning it was just a place where a grumpy teenager was told to be at five o'clock sharp.

Der Spiegel tucked a flashlight into his armpit, preparing to fill two heavy canvas rucksacks for the hike. I reached for the heavier of the two bags, respectfully offering to carry the load.

“No, this rucksack is for you,” he told me in German.

Why would I carry an empty backpack?

Armed with antique keys on a rusted steel ring, he opened the padlocked doors to the far reaches of the Schneefernerhaus, places I had failed to access despite months of late-night snooping. Exposed to the elements, the formerly grand dining room hadn't hosted a party since 1965, when the Great Avalanche had swept an entire section of the hotel, along with ten of its guests, right off the face of the cliff.

The west wing surrounded us in biting cold. I bumped something at every corner, but Der Spiegel slipped through the darkness like a cat. Dim morning light refracted through snow-frosted tables and chairs, haphazardly stacked and perfectly preserved in these hypoxic altitudes. This was long-term storage, an open-air tomb of tragic memory where outdated equipment was left to rest for eternity.

Beside the stacks of furniture lay disaster rescue gear: shovels, locating poles, stretchers, cables, and come-alongs. A wooden casket was propped against the rock wall, a sobering reminder of how fragile life in this numbing climate could be. Snow dusted the casket's cracked black paint, and the way it stood at attention—ready for something to jump out—sent a chill through me that could have frozen a candle in midflicker. A shriek like a ghostly warning filled my head: the last people to enjoy this space, on May 15, 1965, had died a horrible death.

Der Spiegel paused. His sigh was heavy even from across the room. I stood in silence as he gazed down the slope.

“I was your age when it happened,” he began. “We were frantic, harpooning the snow with only the most cynical hopes of finding survivors buried deep. There was just so, so much snow.

Everywhere snow. White, and nothing else. We used these harpoons. The rescuers yelled at me to lunge deeper into the snow. ‘Lunge with all your might!’”

He shook his head. Between deep breaths, he continued. “And I wanted so badly to find a survivor, to save a life. But I was so scared. So much snow. The harpoon, it would go right through a survivor if I hit one. Maybe I would kill them instead of saving them? My father was the boss back then—the job I have now. ‘Lunge harder, lunge deeper!’ he yelled at me. I still have nightmares of throwing a javelin into a dark crowd from a stage, but to find a survivor, you had to hang onto the javelin, your hand unaware if you would find or kill a survivor.”

An awful taste hit the back of my tongue, but I managed to keep it inside.

“It would be days before we found them. Fifteen bodies, no survivors. Their faces were poked with holes, their backs gashed by picks and shovels, arms and legs frozen solid, broken and twisted like mannequins thrown into a box. I was just a boy the day that it happened.” He paused, looking me straight in the eye. “But not the next day.”

Another sigh, shorter this time. “Some say I dynamite for avalanches too much, but I can’t let this happen again. Not after what it did to all those people. Not after that effect on Dad. And not after a storm like last night’s.”

He straightened. “Okay, Herr Jarvis, this way. The tunnel is in the back.”

Heavy steel buttressed a thick wooden gateway to what I could only imagine was some bloody-toothed, wooly monster’s cave. Der Spiegel used a ridiculously oversized skeleton key for the padlock and heaved the door open on squeaking hinges; my anticipation of a sinister screech was richly rewarded with a sound right out of an old horror movie. Behind the door lay blackness. He threw the lever for the electricals, a knife switch like in *Frankenstein* movies,

illuminating bare bulbs and exposing wiring along the low ceiling tunnel. Cold, stale air wafted from the passage.

My apprehension transformed into huffing, puffing, and a little high-altitude vertigo in the tunnel's twists and turns. After a while, Der Spiegel turned around and stood still as the tunnel air. He pointed at a white line painted across the floor and held up his hand; I was not to cross. Arrows and words were painted on either side of the line: *Deutschland* and *Österreich*. The international border of Germany and Austria apparently ran directly through the center of the mountain.

“We now enter Austria. Did you bring your passport, Herr Jarvis?”

My expression told him I hadn't.

Had I missed something during the Avalanche Talk? Was I breaking international law? Was I ruining the mission? Would they toss me in the clink if I crossed the border without my papers?

Watching the mild panic rise on my face, his expression morphed from deadpan to a huge smile. “Ha ha, Spiegel. Oh, that was a good one. What's next? The Von Trapp Family Singers come out in their drapery costumes?”

But no, not the Von Trapps. He had something even better. The next steel door required the largest of his ridiculously oversized skeleton keys. Acrid funk filled the tunnel, and our flashlights revealed a room full of dynamite.

Only then did I understand why I carried the empty rucksack.

## Chapter 2

### Say When

*Believe you can and you're halfway there.*—Theodore Roosevelt

Der Spiegel packed my pack so full of TNT we could barely close the flap, delicately pulling the leather to catch the last strap hole for the buckle. I got under the deadweight and pressed upward like a powerlifter struggling to take a step. I was the bomb, literally. I was Little Boy, the atomic device dropped on Hiroshima, wobbling on the legs of a newborn foal.

He gave me a fatherly grin, but his squint silently asked if I was okay. I replied with a tough-and-ready grin. At least I avoided the slap on the back.

I could do this. I'd make him proud.

Onward and upward, each step more deliberate than the previous: *kaboom, kaboom, kaboom*—a marching cadence, as I visualized slipping and turning the Zugspitze into an active volcano. I imagined a body at the front of a fireball blasting down the tunnel to the door below like a rocket launchpad, blasting remains over the glacier and scattering the ashes across the Alps. Moment of death to an ash-scattering Alpen memorial in two seconds—German efficiency at its finest.

Only soldiers, suicide bombers, and a select few nutjobs have ever been strapped to one hundred pounds of dynamite. How many lived to tell about it? Surely not the ones who carelessly slipped on the icy floor or bumped a tunnel wall too hard.

I wiped a different type of sweat from my brow as Der Spiegel stopped at yet another door. This door opened into a tiny cabin of old wood and concrete, deathly quiet yet comfortable as dry socks. He fiddled with an old metal box on the wall. The ancient fixtures flickered, then illuminated the room with electric light.

We dropped our packs—delicately—and flopped on the floor, breath clouds chugging like locomotives in front of our faces. Der Spiegel crossed the room to the door to the outside. I expected crisp, thin air to breathe and an Alpen morning vista; instead, I faced a solid wall of white. It was as if we were sealed inside with concrete. It was snow; everything white was snow.

I shifted uneasily. All that snow would need to be tunneled before we could get outside to do our job. It would be hard work. But that didn't upset the boss—not even a little. He handed me a shovel and sat back down to rest.

I picked and scooped and quickly covered the cabin floor with wall-to-wall firn. I dug inward, then upward, tunneling and climbing with mitts, clawing like a drowning swimmer to reach the surface until I broke into the foggy predawn with a fist. I breached the surface with a

false sense of safety, my head just above the surface, gasping for thin air. Cold, cloudy nothingness lay in every direction. I shoveled a path across the cabin's flat roof, digging down and eventually hitting the top of a safety rail. If I fell off the roof, I'd run out of breath screaming before hitting something at the bottom of the cliff.

The irrefutable smell of danger caught my attention: dynamite. Der Spiegel began passing up the sticks he'd taped and fused together. Taking each bundle was unnerving. In the rucksack, it had been cargo, but in my bare hands, the red paper felt like holding the boundaries of a galaxy. At the opposite end of the roof, a huge reel and crank would let us shuttle the dynamite out on a thin cable beyond the clouds. I stacked the sticks at the base of the crank.

This was the antithesis of the sheltered Southern California beach bubble I came from. This was the edge, where life happened. This was the adventure I'd been looking for. I shivered with cold and something else.

Each bundle was a double-handful of dynamite, maybe eight to ten sticks per bundle, tightly wrapped with black tape. A long red fuse connected each bundle to the next. Working methodically, accurately, Der Spiegel hung the TNT bundles from the cable, and I cranked them somewhere into the clouds.

Relief trickled down my neck the moment they were out of sight. I understood most of his German words about dynamite by then, but none of it sounded safe, especially in five-syllable German words like *streichholzschächtelchen* (little box of wooden matches).

“The bundles are connected by the fast red fuse. The red fuse burns at one hundred meters per second, so they all explode at once. But the black fuse is zee slow fuse. It gives us time to get away.”

“So how fast does that black fuse burn?” I hoped the answer would be measured in hours. Or kilometers.

“Slow enough to give us time.” He winked at me with the grin of a mad scientist.

What the hell did “enough time” mean? Was I not entitled to some intel on how fast to run for my life?

Striking the flare match, he checked his watch as a matter of professional blaster’s protocol before lighting the black fuse.

“Herr Jarvis, you can start cranking now,” he stated in calm, polite tones—also protocol.

Cranking so much weight uphill required all the muscle I had. I cranked and hoped with every turn the signal would come—a shout of “enough!”—so I could flee from the string of bombs.

Der Spiegel had moved back to the ice tube, prepared to evacuate. “Did you reel to the stop point on the cable?”

“The stop point?”

Uh-oh.

“Ja, there’s a red tape on the cable. That’s when you stop cranking.”

“I didn’t see—I wasn’t looking... I didn’t understand.”

Oh dear god, I’d killed us all.

Der Spiegel held his sleeve back, still calmly checking his wristwatch. “Keep cranking.”

I cranked furiously, focused on red tape and envisioning imminent death if I stopped cranking. My only explosives experience came from close calls with holiday firecrackers, but when it came to dynamite, it didn’t take an expert to hypothesize that farther away was better.

“Okay, Herr Jarvis.”

I turned for visual confirmation, but a black hat slipping below the surface was the only sight. I'd expected something more along the lines of "RUN—SHE'S GONNA BLOW!" But Der Spiegel's sensible protocols helped me mirror his calm. I moved across the roof and sat calmly before scrambling down the snow chute.

I landed flat on my back on the cabin floor, Der Spiegel looming over me. "Did you secure the reel with the pin?"

"Oh, *fudge*."

In hindsight, I should have said that chocolaty F-word. My word of choice was regrettably the mother of all four-letter words, spewed into the boss's face.

He checked his watch, but his casual tone was gone. "Without the pin the weight of the charges will come back down to the cabin if the pin ist nicht secured!"

Calm safety protocol was blown out the window. One of us had to go back up.

"I'll fix it," I said.

He cocked his head and considered. "*Ja, auf gehts*."

I was going, all right. He pushed my feet and launched me up the tube like a submarine missile. I stopped briefly at the top to look for—hell, what was I looking for? My expectations of this moment came from too many movies in which a digital timer counted down the final seconds. But here, there was no timer. There was no telling how much time I had left, no telling if the reel had let the charges slide back down. The bombs could be far away in the clouds or just a few meters away.

I ran across the roof, grabbed the reel, and cranked like hell.

The holes for the locking pin were at the bottom of the reel, but where was the pin? I'd left it right there. An air raid siren screamed in my head: *Yes, Michael, this is the time to panic.*

Still cranking, I found the pin where I had carefully placed it, dusted over by snow.

“I have the pin! I see the red tape! I’ll pin the reel now.”

“Get out of there, *dummkopf*! IT’S ABOUT TO BLOW!”

Now that was more like it, Boss.

I slammed the pin and sprinted across the roof, then dove headfirst at the ice hole like a seal escaping a white bear. I made no effort to slow myself sliding straight down the frozen tube and shot through the door, sliding across the icy floor and smashing into the far cabin wall.

Der Spiegel slammed the outer door behind me, grabbed my jacket collar, and dragged me into the rock tunnel. He slammed the tunnel door just seconds before the mountain rumbled like an angry god trying to get moist salt from a shaker. We locked eyes in a low-blink-rate intermission, our blood and breath racing with adrenaline.

A pitiful smile came over Der Spiegel’s face, shaking his head and mumbling a German word not found in any of my school textbooks. It didn’t need translation; the meaning was clear.

So Good. To Be. Alive. My downhill marching cadence easily allowed me to whisk the empty rucksack past the TNT shack, across the Austrian border, out the tunnel past the casket, and back to the employee lounge. The ski lift crew had just assembled for the workday with warm breakfast beers.

Chef poured two shots of Jägermeister for us.

“It’s the avalancher’s tradition,” Der Spiegel explained, raising his shot glass to a mild cheer from the crowd behind us.

They raised their cups in admiration.

Der Spiegel downed his shot without hesitation, smiled, and gave me a sturdy attaboy on the back in front of everyone. “Good work up there today. That was a brave thing you did.”

I had earned his approval, validated by public display, as if Dad had told me I was his favorite child in front of all the siblings. My value had increased. My self-worth was elevating, congenital stock skyrocketing.

But nothing had really changed. Underneath it all, I was the same guy in a bathing suit under layers of mountain survival gear, missing Carrie and the beach and wondering where I would go once the snow melted.

I stared at my trophy, the shot glass in my fingertips, questioning why his approval, why his validation held more value than my own. Why was my self-worth attached to Der Spiegel's approval? To anybody's approval, for that matter?

This was no way to live. I could just as easily hold on to the attitude. And I had control over my attitude, right? Why not consider myself valuable every day?

I vowed to keep this change, downed my seventy-proof cough syrup, and gave Der Spiegel a heavy slap on his back.

"Great job up there to you too." I shook his hand as if we were balanced, leveling our ultimate positions as mere humans doing a job.

He'd saved my life. But the humility I should have felt was upstaged by testosterone and hubris. I smiled at the crowd like a big shot, knowing deep inside the question remained if I could make it—really make it—out on my own. Would I always need a Spiegel, a Dad, a coach to keep me on the rails? I'd gone to the edge and made it back. But maybe that hadn't been the edge. Maybe there was something further? What would ever be enough, and how would I know?

I was determined to test my limits, to challenge how far teen invincibility could take me and still live to tell about the next harebrained adventure I could dream up. I had little concern about

how I would ultimately find the limit. But with the seasons and my circumstances changing, the limit soon found me.