

## Hidden Away

It was one of those perfect days that can only happen in the Alps. It had snowed heavily the night before and now the whole landscape was dazzling white under a cobalt blue sky. The bright sunlight made the puffs of snow twinkle as she allowed the drag lift take her to the top of the piste. Claudine closed her eyes briefly as she soaked up the sun and then she was at the top. She disengaged from the lift and slid in her skis to the top of the ski run.

Then she was away, carving her way through the virgin snow, weaving through the trees until she reached the bottom. Exhilarated, she stepped out of her skis and propped them against the rail outside the mountain café. She had really needed that, really needed to get out of the old wooden chalet that was her parental home, just for half an hour.

She could see the chalet in the distance, nestled on the slopes of the mountain. It had been there for two hundred years in this region of France, close to the Swiss border. The village itself was a farming community that had been occupied by the Italian army in World War II and a few of the local men had joined the resistance, risking their lives helping Jewish families to escape into Switzerland. Now, the village was being absorbed into the nearby ski resort of Morzine and the old way of life was disappearing

The day before yesterday Claudine's mother had died, refusing stubbornly to go to hospital. She had died aged ninety two and had never been further than the Haute Savoie region in which she had been born. She had lived a simple life in the mountains, bringing up her family and enjoying tending to her livestock. She had coped well on her own since her husband Georges had died fifteen years earlier, but the last few months had been hard.

Claudine's mother's death had hit her like a physical blow, even though she thought that she had prepared herself for it. Her need to be outside in the mountain air was overwhelming.

Claudine's older brother, Jean Marc, had given up farming as soon as he could, leaving home at nineteen. He had been a successful businessman, living and working in Geneva. He was retired now, but he and Claudine only met up a couple of times a year and that was enough for both of them. Now, he was here. He had arrived yesterday evening with his city dwelling, trophy wife Françoise. They had taken over as she had known they would. Claudine had escaped as soon as it was polite to do so and now she was going to indulge in a hot chocolate in her favourite alpine café, before returning to her mother's chalet to help sort out her affairs.

Chocolate over, she collected her skis and made her way back. Jean Marc and Michelle were sitting at the gnarled pine kitchen table, surrounded by paperwork. They looked out of place in the old kitchen and Jean Marc couldn't hide his irritation at her absence. Claudine fetched a bottle of wine and three glasses and joined them at the table, determined not to get angry. She didn't really want to tackle her mother's belongings yet, but her brother wanted to get everything sorted and escape back to Geneva.

"This is all such a mess, why on earth did she keep all this stuff, it will take weeks to sort out" he grumbled. "As for the attic, here's another pile that we found. It was disgusting up there." He pulled an old leather briefcase towards him, opened it and tipped the contents onto the table. There were several black and white photos of their parents and then there were later, coloured photos of the family. The case also contained their birth certificates, their parent's marriage certificate and their father's death certificate. Lastly there were two small black boxes. The siblings looked at each other. "We'll open one each" suggested Jean Marc.

Each box contained a square medal attached to a green ribbon. The medals were inscribed with the words 'Compagnon de la Liberation' awarded 1944. Claudine and Jean Marc were stunned, they both knew the significance of these awards and they both knew that they were only given to a small number of people, very few of them women.

Claudine spoke first. "Oh my God, you know what this means, they were both in the resistance – I don't believe it." The thought of her parents leading such dangerous lives was astonishing.

Jean Marc shook his head in disbelief "I can believe it of dad just about, but mum, no"

"Don't forget this envelope" remarked Françoise, "it's addressed to both of you"

"You read it" indicated Jean Marc.

Claudine unfolded the letter and started to read. It was written by her mother and was dated earlier that year.

"To my beloved children, I haven't got long and I need you to understand about the war and about our little family. Your father and I both fought for the liberation of our country. We were in the resistance. Your father spent a lot of his time in the mountains helping people find a route into Switzerland. I stayed at home with Jean Marc, passing on information whenever I could. We had a transmitter hidden in the loft. There were Italians occupying our village – they were everywhere. We were very scared of them. One night I was in the loft sending messages when I heard soldiers at the door. Two of them forced their way in and searched the house. They found the transmitter and smashed it. They tried to get me to talk but I refused. One of them said that they would keep quiet about me if I would have sex with them. I refused of course, but they raped me, both of them. They left after that, but one of them came back again the next night, wanting me to give him names. I couldn't betray your father, but I betrayed him with my body that night and other nights. This is the story of your birth my dearest Claudine, please, please forgive me. I had no choice. Georges loved you like his own, you must believe me. He was a wonderful father to you, as you know. So now you know all there is to know. Please don't judge us, we did our best. All my love, my dearest children"