

The Last Ride

By Máire Rock

The wind whistled in Dan's ears as he dropped down. His ski's hit the fresh snow, and everything disappeared. It was just him and the powder. Everything but the sound of his skis was gone. He was on his home trail, and his muscle memory just took over. He whipped past the trees and the plants, snow flying out behind him. Flying down the hills, Dan felt a sense of peace. He gripped his poles and leaned farther down, picking up speed. Rushing through the snow, Dan had never felt more alive. He crested hill after hill, floating over them. He relished the feeling of weightlessness as his skis flew over nothing but air. The early morning sun glinted off the crystalline snow. It was his favorite kind of snow to ski in, the freshly fallen powder fine like sand. His skis moved through it like butter, throwing it up in the air around him. The tiny crystals pricked at all the skin it could reach: the small sliver of skin between his glove and his coat, his cheekbones that poked out between his goggles and neck garter.

All too soon, he glided over the crest of the final hill and at the last moment, slid himself to a stop. He pulled his goggles up and his neck garter down, his breath billowing into the cool morning air. The helicopter that had dropped him off was flying in the distance. The soft morning light illuminated the town below. The town he was raised in. The town he raised his children in. His grandchildren. This was the mountain he taught them to ski on. He had taken Jake up on his first helicopter ski when he had

turned sixteen. Most kids wanted to take their drivers test on their sixteenth birthdays. Jake wanted to go helicopter skiing, just like his Pop. He had only waited so long because his mother hadn't given him permission till that very morning. Jake hadn't asked for anything else. All he wanted was to go helicopter skiing with his Pop.

Dan felt his breath catch, and a lone tear slipped down his cheek. He was going to miss it. But he knew that he also needed to be there for his family. In his heart of hearts, he knew that not skiing anymore was going to be the right thing to do. But it was going to hurt, not being up here most mornings. Not to go sweeping down the mountain with his heart in his throat, missing trees by a fraction of an inch, all the while being in complete control of his actions. Not to feel the complete satisfaction of completing a run where he had to use every ounce of his skill to finish the run. Not skiing in the dawn light with his only grandson.

Dan snapped his goggles back on. It was time to close the chapter in his life. He knew it was better to do it on his terms than his doctors. Or Cassandras. He knew she wouldn't stand for it much longer. For the last time, he pushed off the crest of the hill.

As he flew down the hill for the last time, he forced himself to slow down. To enjoy the journey to the bottom, not just think about the destination. All too soon, he could see the bottom. But the bottom of the trail wasn't empty. They were there. They had come. His family. All piled at the bottom of the hill. The tears came back to Dan's eyes, but the wind whisked them away as fast as they came. And then, for the last time, Dan pulled himself to a stop. He lifted his goggles and pulled down

his neck garter. Walking towards him was Jake. He pulled him into a tight hug. They both knew that words wouldn't suffice for what they both wanted to express.

Jake clapped him on the back, and they walked over to the family. "Not bad for seventy-five years old Pop, not bad at all," Jake said, walking to the group with his arm around Dan. Dan smiled softly, walking with his back to the snow peaked mountain, towards his family.