

Maddy's Wings

By; Jan Porter

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This is a work of fiction. Any names or characters, businesses, places, events, or incidents, are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Dedication

~ This novel is dedicated with love and honour to my mother, Gloria Porter and my father, Robert Porter.

Hey Dad, do you remember that day in the diner when you innocently asked, what my next book was going to be about? I did not know until you asked, so of course, your anecdotal life stories contributed to make this story come alive.

~ I thank with profound gratitude and give honour to our Ancestors who served in war time conflict and to those who kept the home fires burning. To all unsung heroes and heroines who sacrifice dreams and personal comforts to make the world a better place for others, I thank. Kudos to all strong and wild natured women everywhere, both past, present and those yet to be. All of you continue to inspire others.

~ Thank you, Richard Mousseau, your insightful editing first brought me to my knees then obviously allowed me to polish this story – you rock!

~ Thank you to my amazing niece, Sharon and grandniece, Cassie for the amazing young female pilot photograph that is featured on the front cover and conclusion quote header of this book.

“Never grow up so much
that you lose your child-like wonder.”

Chapter One ~ The beginning of the end

“I killed Pastor Jacob.”

“What?”

Gordon, aging with visible wrinkles that lined his furrowed face, grabbed Maddy’s arm, insistent, “Damn it woman, listen to me! I’ve got to get a confession off my chest, before I croak. I said, it was me that killed Pastor Jacob!”

Through the many years, the two had been together, she had never heard him blither such a foolish statement. Nursing staff of the home care facility, busied themselves with gossip of the day, mostly complaining about the elderly in their care. They huddled just down the hall within ear listening. They would think of Gordon as demented, mad or worse; send for the police to investigate his demented confession of guilt.

“What? Don’t be ridiculous! You couldn’t possibly have.” Maddy guffawed, “You were just a boy. We were all just kids.” Worried hands wrung thinning skin, creating multiple folds of yellowish flesh. At one time these hands were soft and taut, the beauty of youth.

Maddy’s memory flashed images of little sister, Rosie, returning home; defiled; sexually assaulted by Pastor Jacob. She saw herself as a child, helping Mom stir botulin mold spores into a homemade jar of strawberry jam. Her mind was not on the preserve making, rather intent on committing a crime; hoping to incite a stroke in the pedophile Pastor Jacob and render him; useless.

Whispering, she countered Gordon’s statement, “No. Me and Mom. We did it.”

“Nonsense”, countered the frail voice of Gordon, straining to be forceful in his conviction. Waving a hand, the ridiculous notion from his wife’s mouth was discarded. Yet, she was almost always right, about every facet of their lives. The potential of claim was irksome. Without solid proof, otherwise, somehow, he felt that she was right about this incident. The man acquiesced and grumbled, “I sure wanted to. I really tried to, honest-to-god.”

“Oh, for goodness sake, you only knew half of what happened, and what other exaggerated truths others told you. That wolf in sheep’s clothing diddled half the children in the community, a lot of angry parents wanted to have their go at him.”

“No, I know I had a hand in it. I left crushed lead of fishing line sinkers in the meat of fish. I gave the cleaned fish to him that way.”

“Oh Gordon, everybody wanted to off Pastor Jacob in one way or another. What makes you think your little contribution finished him off? Besides, he ran off, or the church elders moved him away. Maybe he got sick and left for a hospital somewhere else and just never came back. No one ever knew where he was or found him.”

“No, no, no! I am sure of it.” Gordon’s face expressed determination and conviction for what he believed he played a part in the demise of the hateful minister.

“How would you know? You never said anything about this before?” Maddy showed respect for the substance of the man, yet held doubts to the feasibility of the person to carry out such a deed.

“Just because we’ve been married for fifty-five years, doesn’t mean you know every single aspect of my life. I have private thoughts, and, I do have secrets that I haven’t shared with anyone,

not even you my love. It's not something you needed to know. For the need of your protection, for you and little Rosie, is why I've kept this secret all these years."

Maddy's hand waved flappingly, dismissing this dangerous conversation within ear hearing of nosey staff. She was rushing him to be ready for the outdoors, where they could chat privately. Her anxious hands and aching arms slid the man's sweater over Gordon's head. Leaving him to pull the heavy wool down, she tied his shoes. Painfully remembering the details of that terrible day so long ago in the past; today, the vision was fresh, as though happening in real time.

"Fine, just clearing the air with my participation. Jesus and Mother Mary will be waiting for me in heaven to pass judgment upon me. Then I'll know for sure, if he ate my lead laced trout." Gordon grimaced. A painful stroke in the shoulder resisting her hurried manner. "I do know one thing for sure. I do know who finished him off."

"What? What are you talking about? How could you know that?" Hiding guilt, Maddy slushed off the statement and played coy.

"I saw the Pastor, in the thorns of death. I was pretending to fish, wading the stream with my fly-fishing tackle. I saw him stumble while walking a dog along the shoreline, like a drunkard. I figured he was sick with the lead poisoning from the sinkers I left in the trout I gave him the night before."

"Shhhh," Maddy hushed, worrying the nurse's aide would be alarmed by Gordon's raised voice. She stood back while an aide entered the room to assist swiveling the man into a wheel chair, then leave to have them alone again. She tenderly finger-brushed his grey wavy hair and patted pink speckled cheek of age.

He grabbed her hand with frustrated force, his facial grin serious, "Think me a fool, but I know what I know."

Alarmed and concerned, Maddy was now very curious to know previously unknown details. "Know what, Love?" Keeping her voice soft and non-accusing, she had urged the man for further details.

"From a safe distance, I saw the Pastor stumble and fall. Downed, he wildly waved his arms around, mad as hell, as though he was being beaten. I saw his dog and scamper off from fright. The whole incident scared the bejesus out of me. I ran like hell to the house. That's when I found out that your cousin Jack was badly hurt, beaten to a pulp by those bad characters, up on the mountain and left for dead. Remember? I got all side tracked with the Jack business and forgot about Pastor Jacob, left down at the river. Your Dad had already rounded up Old Orville and Orville Junior, and some other men. We all went straight up the mountain to take care of those bad fellows who defiled and roughed up Jack. You and your Mom were busy nursing both Jack and little Rosie, waiting for the doctor. Remember? I had forgotten about Pastor Jacob, so I went down to the river the next morning and couldn't find him."

"How can I forget? It was a terrible day, all around." Maddy stopped protesting, for her Mother was sure; their botulin spore laced jam, the nature spirits and wildlife had done Pastor Jacob in. With the Pastor's body never found, most folks assumed that the pastor had just skipped town. She knew enough that beyond the river, wilderness lay. A vast rocky ridge where legends of spooky nature spirits and wild animals ruled. Fishermen and hunters reported strange unexplainable events that occasionally occurred in the wilderness. Gordon's involvement sounded plausible if he had been older. Being a boy at the time, the story seemed ridiculous nonsense.

It was Gordon who had not fared well in the gang fight over Jack's aggressors; one of them had sucker punched him so hard in the nose, it remained crooked throughout the rest of his life.

"It was; a terrible day at that, Love. Thank you for wanting to protect me and my family." She tenderly tweaked his crooked nose with loving hands. Shaking their heads, both remembering that fateful day and life before the war.

He whispered, "It was a terrible day and terrible deeds that happened to our little Rosie and Jack."

Aging Maddy wheeled his chair down through the hall-way and whispered into his ear, "I suppose we had to travel half-way around the world to find each other."

Gordon grinned. He had always been in love with her, since being young kids, though she only had eyes for cousin Jack, until the war.

Outside of the nursing home, Maddy wheeled Gordon along the sidewalk then into the garden. "How did we end up here? How in-the-hell did we get so damned old, so fast?"

"I don't know Love. Life has passed in the blink of an eye. A cruel trick of nature is to be young and time-turtle slows by. Then all flashes by in a thought, in a blink of an eye."

At the garden bench, both glanced to the sky to watch a small airplane floating leisurely by.

Maddy stepped on the wheelchair brake. "Life is funny; don't you think? We grew up, first as neighbours then in the same house. Then we had to go far away from home to find each other again. I'm ever so glad we have."

"Do you think if we had stayed here in Cedar Groove and not gone to war, we would have ended up together anyway?" Questioned a forlorn man of lasting yearning.

"Oh, I think so, Love." Maddy said, knowing the truth about Jack's natural attraction to masculine gender.

"I'll miss holding hands with you and stealing kisses."

Maddy smiled with warm memories of his closeness, his loving touch, refusing to accept the inevitable. Lighthearted she quipped, "I won't miss picking up your underwear off the floor and having to lean over and put the damned toilet seat down. Why is it, that men can never seem to find the laundry basket or put the toilet seat down?"

Gordon smirked, "I knew how, I just liked getting a rise out of you."

Gently slugging his arm, she tisked, "You, old beggar!"

Unable to lean toward her, he kissed the air, gesturing a make-up kiss. "You're still the prettiest gal around. I thank God for you. Good thing you weren't much of a cook or dancer; I might've have lost you to another man," A shaking hand wiped a tear away.

Maddy smiled and relaxed to enjoy the view. She had spent her first twenty something years, crazy in love with the crop dusting, dare devil, and charismatic handsome cousin Jack. It had only been in trying to impress Jack, that she first strove to learn to fly and then fly with precision better than any man.

During WWII and after, Gordon's boring conservative nature brought welcome stability, which tamed the ravages of post-traumatic stress from a plane crash. His post war navy stress had always been profoundly deeper. Recovering and focusing on building a new life together, she was not sure who saved who. A marriage and baby brought welcome distractions that fulfilled their souls for a time. Only once had they openly talked of personal war-time horror stories. Once shared, they made a pact to never speak of the atrocities experienced, to each other or to others. While veterans often gathered at the Legion halls, drinking away stressors through the telling of tales and honouring comrades, Maddy and Gordon preferred to keep to themselves and avoid any discussions, news, post-war social events and certainly all military correspondence. It was far better for them, it seemed, to treat the ordeal as though having night terror dreams that would vanish when waking, as if not real. A new day would clean out the mind.

Real, was assuming Maddy's family homestead as their own. Here, they were happy, and grateful to resume a life in the tiny hamlet of Cedar Groove. The tiny rural community sat upon an earth meridian line, or so Maddy's mother had claimed. A mysterious line divided the northern wilderness sitting upon the great pre-Cambrian shield, flourishing with hundreds of hectares of cedar and spruce. To the south lay rolling hills, a patch work of farm fields. At the crux of the mysterious line, the mountain area had been recently endowed as a provincial park. Forest growth long hid cousin Jack's old moonshine distillery hut, now a rest stop for hikers and cross-country ski yuppies. At the base, stood a rusty red old tin water tower, threatening to pop a rivet and create a waterfall spill onto the county road below.

"I wonder, when-in-the-hell, they'll ever fix that damn thing or at least give it a coat of paint?" Demanded Maddy, her mind drifting through the years of history.

Gordon followed her eyes to the old rusty tin water tower. Memories brought a grin to his face. Toward home, Eagle River ran through the county, via the back end of their property. A thousand hours and more held childhood family picnics, romping and seasonal adventures. Mother and little sister Rosie communed with wildlife and nature spirits, while father, Jack and Gordon fly fished in the calm waters of the slow-moving river.

Like mother, old timers said that because the town sat on a meridian line, a cross point, where Highway Eight crossed over County Road Eight, every eighty years, all hell would break loose, for one day. It was a strange legend. Truth is often stranger than fiction. As though listening in on her train of thoughts, Gordon nodded in agreement. Living a long life, affords thousands of mutual memories and as a couple, thousands of unspoken conversations.

Deeply appreciating his constant stable companionship over the years, now more than ever, she said in a flirty school girl voice, "You're the handsomest man I ever laid eyes on."

"Your eyes are getting foggy and you can't see shite," Gordon countered, disliking the intent upon a current reality.

"I can still see the river and sunshine in your old coot eyes. I vision you standing arse deep in the river, with morning sunshine dancing on the river's sparkling water surface while you are casting a fly-fishing rod. It's when you are the happiest. Content, and at peace with life."

Gordon nodded. "Remember when we snuck into Old Orville's new pig pen, before a new lot of pigs arrived? We were making love in there, when old man Orville accidentally locked the gate?"

Maddy giggled, "I thought we'd never get out of there. The mosquitoes were ravenous. Back then there was always flies hanging around, even when we'd go out on dinner dates."

"God-damned flies! I guess, every place was too close to Old Orville's pig operation."

Maddy sighed deeply with gratitude. "We've been lucky."

"We've been very blessed."

She tucked a blanket in around Gordon's thin legs, "How are you, Love?"

"Today, I feel fit as a fiddle. Maybe the doctor is wrong."

Maddy winced, knowing he was wrong and confused in the moment of past thoughts and reality. What if he was right? This is his best appearance and mood she had seen in years. Catching herself, and knowing better, she added, "Maybe".

"Ah, I know Love. I'm just feeling good today. I do miss our Irene and Robert though. I could swear that our little Irene and your cousin Jack were sitting on the edge of my bed last night. As real as anything, as though possessing life, and chatting and laughing. Strange, I must say. I was damn glad to see them though. I don't remember anything we talked about; I wish I could." Tearful eyes looked away, "Boy, you sure don't know how much you miss someone, until you see them again after a long time away."

Maddy recognized the process, she had witnessed it all before; with grandparents, friends, and parents. Refusing to display emotion to Gordon, she knew the obvious, they had come to prepare his transition from this world to the spiritual. "Lost loved ones are with us in spirit, just different from being here in the physical."

"Do you think; our Irene might have lived given the modern technology and treatments of today? A glint of hope expanded the irises of Gordon's eyes.

"Who's to know?" Maddy's eyes held no expression of hope.

Their daughter Irene died during childbirth at home amidst a winter blizzard. An aneurism claimed a life too early during the onset of a premature birth. Unable to push, the breeched baby girl lay trapped within Irene's womb, strangled in the umbilical cord. Irene and child died as one. A painful and fateful day. Maddy had battled guilt, deeply regretful. Worse; holding herself personally responsible and negligent for not getting Irene to a hospital before the onset of the blizzard. Negligent for not being able to at least turn and right the baby in time for safe passage.

The term 'negligent' had fallen upon Maddy's soul many times in life, each adding weight upon the next. No, there was no other summation, she had been negligent in taking proper steps to save her own daughter and grand baby. Irene's new young husband, Robert had been beside himself, pacing, wildly anxious. Gordon was frantic because of downed phone lines and tried in vain to shovel a drivable pathway in the driveway. Heavy snowfall prevented a doctor, or a midwife from transportation through the storm in time.

It had been too much for either parent to overcome. Their son-in-law Robert, so distraught, left for the city after the funeral and stayed away. They suspected his grief to be so deep that he was unable to face them. There was no blame. It was right that he felt that he had to leave and make a fresh start, away from memories of their daughter Irene's past life. Just as they had turned away from the atrocities of World War II, forward existing was a matter of surviving atrocities. Disassociation from hurt and making a clean break.

While their grief had left a dark cloud over their lives for years after having already been through so much during World War II, both instinctively knew they had to find a way to go on, without loved ones.

Gordon had not been a church and God praying man, yet hanging on by emotional finger nails, he often went to church seeking direct answers to why events occur. He spent most of his spare time down river fly-fishing, alone. He openly muttered in his own expressed words, praying for his wife Maddy, himself, their daughter, unborn granddaughter, and son-in-law. He prayed for the men that he had pulled out of the ocean, and who died later. He prayed to be released of ghastly war images always flashing in his mind at random moments.

Maddy spent her grief periods at the river's edge and tending to Gordon's domestic needs.

"I'll never forget the lullaby that you used to sing to Irene when she was a wee lass. What was that song, Love? I don't think I've ever heard it anywhere else?"

"I made it up."

"Oh? I never knew that. Got anymore?"

"No."

He peered into her eyes. "I always thought Irene was a precious gift, our miracle child, for having survived the war. Don't you think?"

"I think she came to us, to remind us of all that is still good in the world. It would have been too easy to slide into despair in post war time. But, I think she was too much like my Mom and my sister Rosie, too fragile, too sensitive and too kind, to cope with the harshness of life. Oh, that sounds trite, but, you know what I mean, don't you?"

"Yes, Irene was a delicate soul. You would know that all too well, Love. Thank you for putting up with me all these years. Thank you for never giving up on me."

"Oh, I did give it up with you, many times. I choose to wait because I didn't have anywhere else to go, and I couldn't just send you away to fend for yourself. I handed over your life to the spirit world, because I didn't know what to do about your night terrors. I sure am glad that you found your way though."

"It was you, the river and our daughter. Like most of us, we tried to shove those God-awful war experiences onto a shelf. We had to get on with the good life. Couldn't just slide into the madness and constantly relive it all through bad dreams."

"Yes, exactly."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Love, that I wasn't there for you, to help you through your demons."

"You were. Building a life with you, gave me something to focus on, kept me busy and gave me good moments to look forward to."

Gordon yawned, wiping away nose drool with a tissue. He had a facial contemplative look about him that Maddy had come to recognize over the years, he was working his way to a point. She waited. Settling, he started, "Are you at peace with your bird crashing yet, Love?"

An inquisitive head turned, having not thought about the plane incident in years and dismissed a painful guilt pang of self-assumed negligence. It was fruitless to pretend otherwise for he knew her too well. She was hurt and annoyed that he would bring it up now, after all these years. They had once vowed to never discuss it again in the future. Sensing his heartfelt insistence, she acquiesced.

“No. Not yet, my Love. Perhaps when I join the spirit world, where all things are known.” Uncomfortable and disassociating away from the Pandora’s box containing plane crash guilt, she swiveled the wheel chair into direct sun exposure and cozily adjusted his lap blanket. “How about you Love, have you found peace with your time on the ships?”

“Gordon’s lips quivered, a strand of drool spilling freely from parted lips. He shakily reached inside a shirt pocket for a tissue, wiped his mouth, and blew a watery nose. Current cancer and mini-strokes had been cruel, pounding both body and mind, having taken its toll. Yet, his spirit was calm and he was now more content since before the war. Moments of lucidity had been fading, yet in a current upswing, consciousness was rallying. This moment was indeed, the best she had noticed in many years.

“You know; I do believe I have.” He straightened, readying to engage in a meaningful conversation. I’ve been having dreams of past ship mates, almost every night. It occurred to me that the spirits of all those men we plucked out of the ocean, their souls have been long freed from whatever enemy fire or explosions had caused their deaths. At night, I no longer see their wretched bodies, now I see their freed spirits; giddy almost, happily living spirit lives with their families, friends, and mates. I am happy, surprised now to find that most, hold no regrets nor ill-will toward an enemy.”

Gordon looked deep into her eyes, waiting for a cue to continue. He could never be swayed away from a couple’s problem for long. It was his way of saying; ‘You must sort it out. I’m listening and perhaps in the talking of it, it will sort itself out.’

“What is the part Love, that still has you snagged?”

Sizing up Gordon’s current attention span and energy levels, she ventured to give an explanation. “I still can’t, for the life of me, figure out for sure, if it was pilot negligence, or a simple error. And I still can’t fathom why Gertie Angelo was out of her seat that day. She was best of the best, of the air support crew. I don’t remember setting the flare off. I don’t know how or why I survived.”

The plane crash had fabricated images a thousand times over the years in Maddy’s mind, leaving thoughts searching for that one clue that would explain the last few moments, the cause leading to the crash. She must have missed a detail in a startup safety check, negligent in the care of a loaded B-26 bomber and two air crew mates. If only Gertie had stayed in her seat, as was the emergency protocol, perhaps both Gertie and co-pilot Alice would have survived. Why had she survived, and they had not? It was not fair that she was expected to carry on while they could not.

“I can’t remember where I put the damn house keys yesterday or what year it is now, but I can recall that crash as though it has just happened.” She giggled uncomfortably, hoping to change the subject. “What a lovely garden they’ve put in here. Such a lovely gesture to have done.”

Gordon reached for Maddy’s hand, and as she accepted, both quietly enjoyed the familiar and comforting touch. Gordon could be stubborn and held his ground waiting; it was too important. Closer to entering the spirit world these past few years than Maddy, he had been concerned about putting personal affairs in order. Having had their will revised, insurance and household operations sorted, he turned his attention to her emotional wellbeing. Oddly, he was more concerned about her than processing his forthcoming passing. They had grown up together and their marriage had survived phenomenal changes. His post traumatic nightmares had subsided over time, and somehow, they had made it to old age, bonded by years of sticking it out, regardless of whatever occurred.

Being depression children of the nineteen thirties, they had scavenged for food and resources as a team, with her cousin Jack and Maddy's little sister Rosie in tow. All grew up together, wandering the river and fly fishing, hunting for frogs and re-usable treasures. Hours were spent sitting on the airstrip's wooden fence, while Jack identified every plane. At times, they sifted through the dump, finding discarded yet still useful treasures, or raiding fruits and vegetables from gardens. Maddy's father and cousin Jack's father had survived the first world war and in brotherly bond, the two aging men were adept hunters and trappers who had passed on their skills to young Jack and Gordon; a valuable commodity during the depression. The boys were seven years older than she and had been best friends since babies. All four children were inseparable. In Maddy's seventh year, both boy's parents had passed during a wintry influenza outbreak, and despite the shortage of food and means, her own parents took them in without hesitation.

Jack was a 'take on life by the tail' kind of soul. Handsome, charismatic, air minded and thrilled when hanging out at the airstrip. Brilliantly knowledgeable and resourceful on any topic of intrigue, was always keen for adventure. In early years, the harshness of life, simply seemed to roll off his back.

Gordon was the quiet thinker, preferring solace at the river, fishing. He constantly had to be in the water or gravitating to it. Honourable and old soul stoic, he rarely shared personal bothersome emotions. He sorted conflicts out slowly through casting tactics of fly-fishing.

Rosie was a different sort, always tagging along behind; deeply sensitive and vulnerable to all harshness of life; always nursing a wounded bird, dog, or cat and constantly reaching for the security of a big sister's hand.

In her younger days, Maddy first leaned toward Jack's love of adventure and the thrill of hanging out at the airstrip, though always mindful of Rosie's wellbeing. Yet, after the war, her nature aligned with the calm stableness of Gordon's personality.

The children's knowledge pertaining to the spirit world and life skill's philosophy came from Maddy's mother; an earthy woman who often lounged with the children down river, teaching the Tao of spirit world, wildlife and nature spirits. "They are all extensions of us and if you are kind to them, they will make themselves visible and assist you through times of trouble." Mother, with a sketch paper in hand, had catalogued a variety of the river's inhabitants over the years.

As a toddler, when Rosie was ballooning in Mother's stomach, Mom had carefully placed a purple winged dragonfly in Maddy's hands. Its luminescent wings sparkled in sunlight like a prism. Mother cooed, "Life is precious, daughter. Life and people will often seem harshly unfair. No matter what comes, always respect the life you've been given. Only harvest what you need from nature, never take more than what you need to thrive. My people believed in the nature spirits and that our loved ones in spirit watch over us. Respect all of life and don't ever piss off the wildlife or nature spirits." Mother motioned fly away wings with her hands and Maddy raised her hands to watch the dragonfly flutter away. Giggling and running after the dragonfly along the bramble shoreline, mother chased after then scooped her up in arms. Terse and serious, Mother scolded, "Whoa daughter! Be careful when playing bare-foot down here at the river. There is an explosion, a multitude of baby porcupines. Don't step on them, the quills will go right through a foot, a hand, a cheek, and then poison will set in and you could die!"

Gordon nudged Maddy's leg, startling her out of childhood memories, and peered into foggy eyes, waiting. Walking through so many lifelines together, all squished into this one single life and having intimately known each for so long, Maddy knew that Gordon would not let the question go. 'Sort it out', his expression insisted.

Annoyed, she bent over to refresh the bow lacing on her shoes. "Stop pushing me." Maddy ran fingers through dry old-woman hair. This was not how she wanted to spend Gordon's lucid time. Avoiding the direct question, she quipped, "Shut up about it or I'll load you up with Navy Rum!"

Gordon grimaced, recalling the gut-wrenching swill; years of it, every day, on the naval ships. It had been the drink of survival. Having the mere thought of it; his stomach and bowels revolted.

“God awful stuff! Thank God there was Canadian beer to come home to.” Understanding that she almost managed to change the topic, he raised an eyebrow and zeroed in. “Get to it woman!”

Maddy shrugged, knowing he would not let it go.

“The storm, my error or enemy fire; I don’t know which did the plane in,” she blurted. “Or I missed crucial details. I don’t know!!!”

Gordon was growing irritated. Glancing toward arching sun passing was another cue for her to get on with it, because time was running out.

“God Gordon! I don’t know! I’ve been through it thousand times in my mind! Jack was the risk taker, I always strived for precision. I didn’t learn to fly by instrumentations; I flew by the feel of the bird; by the sounds and smells was how I was taught. I did learn the instruments as best I could, well enough I thought. I knew procedures and followed them to a ‘T’; exterior check, engine check, startup procedure and emergency counter applications. Gertie was an intelligent engineer and a stickler for procedure, smart as a whip. When we hit that electrical storm, the plane was already shaking and shuddering from enemy bombardment, then we were caught in a magnetic storm. Everything not bolted down flew around, bouncing off the ceiling, walls, and floor. The instrument panel and radio were out. Alice had already called in an emergency landing request and we were on standby, waiting for clearance. We were well into pre-emergency procedure. I was focused on steering and concentrating on leveling out the massive heavy bird; keep it out of dive spin, and contemplating our next move. Attempting the first nose dip, I tried to free the bird out of the wind and electrical current. Gertie was still buckled in. Seconds later, she wasn’t. The left engine was on fire and stalling out. It was just a bloody battle to keep levelled off for a descent.”

Maddy paused, “You know, I’ve never told another living soul the truth about what really happened that day.”

“Why not?” Gordon was incredulous. “I know we promised not to, just surprised that you haven’t.”

“Well, when the Briefing Officer came to see me afterward, in the hospital, I didn’t tell the Office Gertie was out of her seat. I had just woken up and hadn’t had time to think through previous events. I suppose I didn’t want her family or anyone else thinking that she had made a grave mistake causing the death of herself and our co-pilot. Up to that point, in my books, that woman was a hero. None other like her. Had she stayed in her seat, she and Alice might have survived. I don’t know. It was an afterthought four days later, that I thought I should come clean, fess up and tell the truth. In doing so, I figured I might find out if they might have figured details out to what caused the crash and why she was out of her seat. I was ready to surrender, if it had turned out that I was at fault. I was advised by a kindly officer that the file had already gone to headquarters under official seal, having no access, ever.”

“What do you think now? Was it a mechanical problem, enemy fire or what?”

“I don’t know! I just don’t know!” Maddy paused, catching building frustration, then rallied. “I’ve thought about those possibilities too. For some strange reason, I’ve just blocked them out. There was just something about that moment that scared the daylights out of me. I didn’t have time to deal with it. Alice and Gertie had been slammed dead and I had to get that bird safely down. The cargo was ammunition and bombs. When the left engine sparked fire, I knew I had to get it away from the airstrip. A crashed explosion would have lit up the entire place and taken an entire grounds crew out.”

Gordon yawned because of a lack of strength and not from boredom.

“Oh, okay Love. You’re tired. Let me take you in now.” Maddy rose, moving around to the back of the wheel chair.

He turned, clasping a hand on hers, “No. Not just yet. I want to stay awhile longer. It’s been so long since we’ve chatted and been alone together. I want to stay awhile; do you mind Love?”

“Oh, all right then.” Reluctantly, Maddy sat back on the bench.

Thoughtfully, he turned slightly to watch a chickadee land on a bird bath, fluttering wings splashed, and a dipping beak sipped into murky stagnant water. Smiling at the delightful scene, he turned back to his wife.

As she studied him, the many years of hardships faded in a vision of a dance on a first date on the English shoreline near the Hamble air base. Their song; 'Maddy, Remember When' echoed in her mind and she began to hum the tune. Gordon joined in and reached for her wrinkled hand to relive the magic moment. Gordon had always sung the song to her in romantic moments.

Slurring, he sang,
"Maddy, I strolled down by the river,
to watch the blue water flow.
Maddy, I fished by thee old sand bar,
where we use to dream long ago.
Maddy, gone is the green valley,
where we would walk there among,
the daisies of summer's endless days,
when we were so young.
Maddy, old father time says we've aged,
though wishing for the youth of way back when.
Our smiles will tell a written story of life,
scribed by nature's pen.
Maddy, we cannot out-live our time,
or repeat those songs of old we've sung.
Maddy, forever fair you will be,
when we were then so young.
Maddy, our earthly time shall be,
no longer to repeat songs we've sung.
Dear Maddy, forever fair you will be,
when we were then so young.
Maddy gone is the green valley,
where we would walk there among,
the daisies of summer's endless days,
when we were then so young.
When we were then so young."

For the first time since the tender age of twenty-four, Maddy realized just how much more Gordon was to her. So much more than a childhood friend, he was a true, life companion.

Gordon yawned knowing that, they did not have much time left to finish what had to be conveyed. "You know, you may never know what really happened with the plane crash. I understand your integrity, honour and sense of responsibility to your mates. You've always been that way, especially with Rosie and Irene. It has taken me a long time, to sort mine out my part in the war. I'm just wondering, now that enough time has passed since all that war business, if it might be time to allow facts to be said and make the missing pieces known. Don't be afraid, it can't hurt you anymore."

Maddy pulled her hand out of his grasp and slumped with fear.

"Love, you know what I'm saying is right. Life is too damn short and fragile to be carrying false guilt inside. Let it all out to face the light of day. Please! Do it for me. Free your mind. I want you to relish and enjoy what time you have left. You know I'm right about this, don't you?"

Maddy remained by his side through nearly fifty-five years of his post war inner torment. At times, his wild mood swings bordered on violence and madness of having seen too much atrocity. It was the years spent at the river that slowly calmed his spirit and yet now, seeing the complete

shift within his soul, he had sincerely come to a place of peace. Gone were the hardships of war and life.

Gordon yawned, blinking red watery eyes filled with fatigue.

"I know Love. I'll do what I can. Now, I am taking you in before you start snoring right here."

"Maddy, no, wait."

"Yes, Love?"

"Call Robert. Make plans for him to take over the house, if he wants it. It's the least we can do."

"Yes, Love. It'd be nice to have him take the house when we're gone. I'll see what I can do."

Gordon relaxed as she wheeled the chair around and back onto the path. Late afternoon spring song birds chirped and fluttered. It was becoming a lovely sunset. They had spent every evening possible down at the river, watching the sunset, together. Irene had been conceived on one such gorgeous evening.

Gordon piped, "Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. I saw my Mom last night, sitting right on the edge of my bed. Gees, I haven't seen her for so long, I'd forgotten what she looks like and how beautiful she is. I thought she was an angel at first. Maybe she was, but Dad was standing right beside her. It was like looking into a mirror. I didn't know we resembled each other. Gees, I haven't seen them since I was a boy. I gotta tell you, it sure was good to see them. I didn't realize how much I missed them, until last night. Gave me such a boost. I wanted to reach out, to go with them, but, something held me back. She touched my face, as real as you are, right now. The damnedest thing; Irene and her baby showed up and they were just fine. My room became awful crowded. I saw kids from school even. Jack, your Mom and Dad, Rosie; they were all there, grinning. It was nice, the best loving feeling I've felt in a long time."

Maddy hesitated, loved ones in spirit coming to visit was a sure sign that she was slowly losing him.

"Look here Love, why don't you give Robert a call? I'd like him to have my motor bike."

"Seriously? That piece of junk." Maddy declared.

"What? Why would you say that? It's vintage; a collector's treasure. Maybe he can clean it up, get it running and take it for a spin. Might do him good to come and visit you."

"Gordon! That damned thing was always falling apart on you. Every time you turned left the stupid horn would blow! Scared the livin' bejesus out of everyone at intersections."

"Oh, it wasn't that bad." He grinned and turned away, lost in thought. "I packed my bag this morning, not sure why. Just felt like I was going somewhere. Funny that."

He paused, "Maybe I felt good enough to go home with you." Dismissing the homesickness of life without Maddy, he grinned, "Want to stay the night? I just need a quick nap and then I'm good to go!"

"Oh you, old horn dog, you!" Maddy giggled. Wheeling the wheelchair around, she smooch-snuggled him. "You smell like an old man and pills. Maybe put some cologne on first. I miss how you used to smell, like river water and aromatic cedar, from your years when working at the lumber mill."

Gordon nodded and yawned, fading into a wanting sleep.

When tucking him in, he seemed to almost have slid away from her. His eyes glazed as though asleep, yet eyes were slightly open. He murmured while grabbing at the air, anxiously fighting and motioning to get up out of bed.

Choking brave tears, she held his hand until he calmed and closed aged eyes.

She stroked white soft hair and whispered, "I love you, always will. You are the breeze that fills the sails of my joy. If you want, you can go now, to the light, to your folks and your girls." She lied.

As Gordon panted then lay still, Maddy leaned warmly against him.

It was impossible that this lucid day had just been the best he had been in years.

“Gordon? She whimpered a wanting, “NO! Don’t leave me!”

“Walk on alone with as much happiness as you can muster and trust that there is a higher plan that is greater than the grief you have left behind.”

Chapter Two ~ Twenty years later

Twenty years of existence had passed in the blink of an eye, and Maddy was finally stabilizing without everyone that she had loved. Maddy found herself nervously waiting for the neurologist to spill the medical findings. Breaking the serious tension, she glibly blurted, “Do you want to know what the best thing is about being ninety-two?”

The young woman in the white doctor’s coat looked up from the file and earnestly smiled, “No, what?”

Maddy leaned toward the desk, resting thin elbows on top, grinning, “There’s no one else left of my generation, so I can be as kooky and senile as I want, and they can’t make fun of me.”

The Doctor slid off frameless glasses, chuckling. Serious professional ice was clearly broken, “Oh Madeline, for a pint-sized gal of your age, you are a hoot. Thank you for adding spice to my hectic life.” Still chuckling, hands remained on a closed folder.

Maddy slid back into the hard chair. Sitting upright as straight as possible, she strained to be at eye level with the Doctor. The chair must have been chosen intentionally to lay lower than the Doctor’s; sub-conscious instilling submission within patients to the higher authority of the medical profession. There had been many times when she had brought a cushion into plane cockpits and sat on a parachute. Airplane seats were designed for the average man. At five-foot five inches, she had often strived to be taller, to level the playing field. She refused to shrink small for anyone and would not submit now.

The Doctor shifted and became serious as Maddy braced for a death sentence.

“Well Madeline, you are getting old, I think much of what is happening just comes with the aging process. I’m sure that there’s been some forgetful incidents that you’ve not told me about. Since you are relatively fit, astute and in good health, we’ll let those unknown incidents go for now. I’ll not pry and probe for details. Since you are still living independently and able to attend to your personal affairs, we’ll not make any interventions, just yet. I see that your husband passed away twenty years ago, and yes, you live on your own and take care of your business. But, Madeline, there’s soon going to come a time when you’ll have to consider making other living arrangements.”

‘Old?’ Maddy’s alarmed mouth hung gaping, quizzically waiting for the doctor to get to the point.

“At some point, soon, we’ll have to discuss arrangement options for long-term care.”

Maddy squirmed and shifted, irritated with alarm. “Oh, I’m forgetful sometimes, but hardly think I’m anywhere near that point. Unless you have a specific reason for saying this, in which case, consider me an intelligent self-educated woman. I want to hear the whole deal of what’s up and not a dummy’s version. I want to hear all facts, and make time to discuss it fully, please?”

“All right then, just give me a moment.” The doctor pushed a desk phone button. “Hi Deb, please hold all calls for about twenty minutes or so. Yes, Madeline is the last appointment for today, so if you need to leave, go ahead.”

Maddy patiently waited until the doctor released the intercom button. “Give it to me straight.”

Sliding glasses back, the doctor sighed, “Madeline, you have early indications of Alzheimer’s disease. It could be a slow progression.”

The doctor paused, sensing the old woman’s mental capacity and ability to navigate through facts and process. “It is irreversible, a progressive brain disorder that will slowly destroy your memory and cognitive skills; eventually rendering you, incapable of simple self-care tasks.

“Most people begin experiencing symptoms in their sixties and it is a prevalent disease. We found abnormal clumps called amyloid plaques which are essentially tangled bundles of fibers or neurofibrillary tangles. What happens is; a loss of connection between your neurons. Over time, the neurons lose an ability to transmit messages to different parts of the brain, including muscles and organs.”

Maddy sighed, after processing and grabbing onto the facts. “Oh, I see. Please go on.”

“Well, we believe that the process actually began ten years or more prior to any palpable symptoms manifesting on a regular basis, so, you likely have had this for a long time. Over time, memory problems emerge, manifesting gradual cognitive impairment. Occasionally, with therapy, some individuals regain limited function. In your case and at your age, I am not sure that it is possible. We will track your condition and do what we can to curtail further deterioration.”

Pausing, the Doctor surveyed the old woman, mindful of not overloading her mind with worry.

“Early detection is good, as in your case. However, there is still a great deal that we do not know about this disease. It varies depending on the individual. You may find that you have difficulty finding a word, or with reasoning and judgement capabilities. You may find yourself wandering at times or have difficulty handling money, or your distinct personality changes. This is typically when referrals are made to me. In acute stages, people dramatically lose language, reasoning, and cognitive processing capabilities. This means, you will likely become unable to attend to your self-care, cope in new situations, unable to recognize familiar faces, or hallucinate and experience paranoia. As the brain and tissue shrinks further, the body begins to shut down and you will likely require full time care.”

“Good lord! So, this is what I must look forward to? My goodness. What can I do about this? This is not how I want to spend my remaining existence.”

“Well, Alzheimer researchers are still studying biomarkers and genetics. We have ruled out blood sugar and blood pressure concerns for you at the moment. I do know that for many of my patients, who seem to have coped well, they eat nutritiously and actively exercise on a regular basis, continue with engaging interests, and stay socially involved. We could do further assessments; gather more information about your overall health, consider other past medical issues, continue with cognitive testing, and incremental brain scans. Some conditions and symptoms are treatable. There are some pharmaceutical drugs available for more severe symptoms with varying degrees of reported effectiveness, but, they are not for everyone. We will schedule a follow up appointment toward the end of summer. I think you have had enough for one day. Do you agree?”

“Yes. Yes, providing I don’t have to worry about becoming an invalid tomorrow. I’d rather just keep on keeping on, for now. Is there anything else that I should know right now?”

The doctor flipped through papers in a file then looked to the old woman. “There is hardly anything here in your family physician’s file, about your medical history.”

“I rarely see him, except for the odd cold that I can’t shake. Why? Is there a problem?”

“Well, it’s odd. I can’t understand why you are not on specific medications, for other conditions.”

“Why is that odd?”

“Well, most senior patients over fifty arrive with a list of medications and conditions. I need to know exactly what medications you are taking and what other conditions you have.”

“There aren’t any.”

“What? Why? How can this be? Surely you must be seeing a doctor regularly?”

“No, no, I don’t.” Maddy proud boasted.

“Why not?” Aghast, the confused doctor searched the old woman’s eyes for truth.

Maddy fidgeted uncomfortable, “Because the last time I had a thorough check up, the doctor said menopause meant I was getting old and there was no cure. There was no point continuing to see a doctor. Old age and tests were a waste of time and the tax payers hard earned money, for what is a natural woman’s cycle of change. That was forty years ago. The doctor said the same thing when Gordon became ill twenty-five years ago, putting him in the old age home to wither away was the solution.

“I am fit as a fiddle, so I don’t go. I don’t need anything and don’t want to be a burden. The only reason I went to see the doctor, was because I was getting a strange little elastic snap sensation in my head. It alarmed me, so I went, and here I am.

“I just wanted to know what it was, and how to deal with it. I don’t want expensive tests, treatments or otherwise. I know you people get paid, get to bill the government for extras, but don’t want to waste it on me. So, I’m letting you know, right here and know, I get it and I don’t want anything else from you people.”

“All right. I think I see how you perceive the medical profession. I also gather that you are saying that you don’t want extensive interventions. I am right?”

“Yes. Exactly right.” Maddy straightened her spine, asserting a right to self-determination. “I’ve lived a long life and everyone I’ve ever loved, is long gone.”

“Yes, Madeline. I understand your assumptions. We don’t know what the long-term prognosis of Alzheimer’s disease is, so I strongly suggest that you set financial and legal affairs in order. Address any potential independent living safety issues. Consider alternative residential living options and talk with support people. It is imperative that you start communicating with support people now and discuss long term care options. If you like, I can refer you to a support group, and I will refer you to the new community care consultant now. However, it is my opinion that you are still in good condition for your age and I’m confident that the next steps of long-term care strategy can be discussed at our next appointment. I am going away for a summer vacation, so how about we schedule a follow up as soon as I get back?”

The Doctor glanced at the lapsing of time on her watch, waiting for the old woman to agree.

Relieved, Maddy sighed, grasping the cue that this appointment had come to end. “I see.” Standing and gathering her purse, aged eyes peered into the doctor’s eyes, the portal to the soul. “I want to thank you for taking the time to talk to me, to explain things. I do appreciate your concern. If you don’t mind, give me a couple of days to think on this and I’ll call in to make that follow up appointment?”

“Absolutely. If a health concern crops up before then, call your family doctor, or go directly to emergency. Oh, Madeline, one more thing, who shall I indicate as your next of kin, a first contact and primary person?”

“Hmm, it might be my son-in-law, Robert. I’ll have to get back to you on that. You see, my only child Irene died many years ago, and he’s remarried. So, you understand, that I’ll want to chat with him and the new wife first?”

“Of course, call in when you know for sure, and reception will add it to your file. Oh, Madeline, one more thing. At some point, you can expect a call from the new community care consultant. She will be in contact and will arrange a time to do an in-home assessment to see if there are any accommodations and resources available to you. It is a free service and you are eligible for all sorts of grants and support services.”

“Accommodations? I have a house.”

“No. Yes, I understand. By accommodations, I mean, in the way of ergonomics or minor renovations, computer support applications, an alarm system; that sort of thing. To make life safer and easier, since you live alone.”

“Oh. I don’t need anything. Thank you anyway.”

“Well, I’ll make the referral anyway. When the new case worker consultant calls, please ask about any concerns or needs, she might be able to assist in a way that you might not think of.”

Maddy boarded the bus and headed home to Cedar Groove’s rural neighbourhood. Grateful for home, where three generations had been born and passed; home was a comfort through each major defining change in life. A young woman in nursing scrubs led an old hobbling woman to a bus seat in front of Maddy. The young girl plugged an ear cone into an ear and adjusted a cell phone then gently rocked in rhythm to secret music. The old woman turned to the girl, “HOUSE?”

“No Lydia. Your house is gone. We’re going to a new home now, to a nursing home.”

“P, p, p, p, p, p, PIE? P, p, p, p, p, PIG TREATS?”

“No Lydia. The five and dimes’ been closed for years and your pig is in foster care, remember?”

The ancient woman was clearly mournful while the young girl rhythmized and mouthed words to the secret music. Maddy was riled, unaccustomed to feeling angry in a safe predictable world, and saw the old gal depicting her own possible future. Maddy hoped that someone would be there for her, in friendship and support. She boldly leaned forward and nudge-poked the young woman.

Turning around and pulling out the ear plug, she said, “Can I help you, ma’am?”

Assertively polite, Maddy asked, “Do you have to be somewhere, right away?”

“Oh no. Yes, I have a date in an hour, after work. Why?” annoyed to be interrupted.

“I’ll take Lydia then, for pie. Just give me her home address and I’ll make sure she gets home safely.”

“Oh, I can’t do that. The nursing home has strict rules; I’ll get fired. I must check her in myself. She has stage one Alzheimer’s.”

Undaunted Maddy continued, “The Cedar Groove Seniors Residence?”

“Yes, that’s the one.”

“I’ve spent most days there over the last thirty years, first looking after my husband, friends and then as a volunteer. I know it very well, and I know the staff wouldn’t mind a slight detour. So, call your date and tell him you’ll be a little late. We’re going for pie. The diner is right on the corner of the next stop and they do make fabulous homemade pies and ice cream. My treat.”

Maddy knew she had trapped the young woman between emotion and duty.

Squirming with annoyance, the nurse struggled to be polite. “I know you mean well ma’am, I just don’t think it prudent.”

Maddy nudged her shoulder playfully, “Come on, when was the last time you had homemade pie and ice cream? Come on, we’re almost there. What’s an hour; a half hour, when you’ve got the rest of your life to flirt with a beau? Who knows how long Lydia and I have. You wouldn’t want that on your conscience after we croak. It’s just three gals having a little time-out party; yummy pie and ice cream.”

Lydia grinned, her eye’s giddy and bemused, shouted, “BEES KNEES!”

Waffling, the young woman mulled, then stared at Maddy as the old woman pulled the bus stop string, alerting the driver, “Come on now, let’s go. This will be fun.” Maddy giggled with excitement.

Lydia stood, intent on following Maddy, turned back to the young woman nurse and blurted, “SLACKER!”

Not waiting for a response, Maddy reached for Lydia’s hand then gingerly and carefully guided her down the aisle and out of the bus.

For a moment, she worried the young girl was not coming, then noticed she was outside pacing and arguing with someone on her phone. Lydia ambled directly inside the diner to a cushioned booth, beaming, waiting. “BEES KNEES!”

The waitress approached with menus under an arm. Her demeanor warm and caring, an aura of motherhood under sore feet and weary soul. "Well, hello ladies. We have dinner specials on today. Shall I give you the list or would you rather look at a menu?"

"Neither", blurted Maddy, winking at Lydia. "We'll have a platter of pieces of each kind of pie you have for dinner, a big bowl of all kinds of ice cream, all that you have. Oh, and whip cream and sprinkles. We're having a party. Celebrating."

"Oh, my goodness", the woman hesitated, waiting for validation, "Are you sure you want all of that dessert for dinner?"

Lydia giggled and nodded.

"Of course, we're sure. And we'll have three big bowls and spoons, we're waiting for another guest."

"Well, all right then. What'll you have for drinks? Coffee or tea?"

Lydia unsure, looked to Maddy for direction.

"Do you folks still make ice cream floats?"

"Of course, although I haven't made one in about a year, but I can make some."

"Dandy! Just dandy. Lydia? Have I forgotten anything? Is there anything else you might like?"

Lydia motioned a 'no' and wiggle grinned.

"Oh, and if you wouldn't mind, change the music and put on a station from the nine-teen forties or fifties. Maddy asked of the waitress.

"Oh sure, we have internet music stations." The motherly waitress scribbled on an order pad. "So, what are you ladies celebrating?"

Maddy looked at Lydia and winked, "Life."

As the young nurse girl slid into the booth beside Lydia, the platters arrived.

"Good God! Oh, my God, no!" Muttered the bewildered nurse.

Maddy smirked, annoyed by the nurse's tone, "What's the matter? Not your kind of party?"

"God no! Do you have any idea how much sugar, chemicals, carbs, and calories are in all this stuff? Artificial chemicals?" She reached into a large purse to retrieve a water bottle.

Irritated, Maddy handed Lydia a bowl and large spoon, motioning her to dig in. "My name is Madeline, just call me Maddy, and don't call me ma'am anymore." She handed the young woman a bowl and large scooping spoon.

"You know, young lady, Lydia and I have lived through the great depression, two world wars, watched the world change through all sorts of natural disasters, social changes and lost everyone we've ever loved."

Maddy caught the nurse's eye rolling as a hand slid an ear phone plug into an ear. Continuing a rhythmic sway, the nurse was tuning the boring old women out. Lydia, astute, lowered eyes and shoulders shrugged, as though to say, 'see what I have to cope with!', then blurted, "SLACKER!!!"

The young girl closed eyes, while impatiently waiting for this boring distraction to be done with. Maddy arched her back, refusing to feel bad, to have her spirit belittled, to acquiesce in the face of a temporary nemesis; after all, she had been through too much of life's quandaries.

Lydia daintily dug in, with manners clearly demonstrating that she was cultured and well educated. A good soul, a good woman with a speech impediment, who had likely given a great deal of time and effort into doing her part in making the world a better place for the likes of this young girl. It occurred, that the young girl might likely be caring for Maddy in the future. A relationship with boundaries, and caring education would have to be established now. She carefully reached across the table and gingerly pulled out the girl's ear plug wire. The girl, guffawed.

"I don't mean to bother you, I'd just like to know who I'm dining with, Love. What's your name? What school do you go to?" Assuming, that the young girl with Lydia was a new volunteer at the nursing home and not yet in high school.

Squirming impatiently then gauging the old woman's sincerity, she tucked the phone into her purse. Groaning and feigning politeness, and in a raised voice, she slowly articulated as though Maddy was both deaf and a boring old fart, "I'm Mary." She reached and gathered a tiny piece of pie into a bowl and taking a tiny bite, reeled at the horrific sugar, artificial chemical compounds, noting the calories she was attempting to swallow and ingest. Setting the spoon aside, she wiped a pursed mouth and set the napkin to cover the bowl, a signal to the waitress that she had finished. "I graduated university; a major in nursing, last month. I just started at the home yesterday." Patronizingly, she nudged Lydia, "We both started there yesterday. I'm interning in Geriatric Care, but I really want to work in a hospital emergency. I want to be in the shit, pardon my language. I like the action. I'm on a waiting list."

Maddy cynically mused, "Oh, I wouldn't have thought you were that old. I don't mean any disrespect, you're so gorgeous, one of those young women who'll always be so pretty that it's hard to put a finger on how old they are."

Mary had already dived into her purse and was swiping on a cell phone. Maddy, undaunted reached over and gingerly slid a hand on top, blocking Mary's view. "I was a pilot and crashed a B26 bomber in WW2. Two of my crew; both women, died in that crash. I couldn't save them. My sister Rosie, was sexually assaulted by a Pastor and went on to be a nurse in that war; she was gang raped by Canadian service men and discharged. My husband Gordon was in the navy during the war and pulled dead bodies out of the water. The mangled and dead men so traumatized him, that he nearly went mad. I held my daughter when she died during childbirth; her baby dead in her womb."

Maddy glanced at Lydia, checking to see if she was accepting of the path of conversation. Lydia grinned, rose a fist, then turned her hand and made the post war victory 'V' salute, "SOCK DOLLAGER!!!" Pointing to Maddy, Lydia blurted, "BRICKY!"

Maddy grinned, remembering the old slang term sock dollager from the nineteen-thirties and agreeing with the sentiment of expression. Bricky meant brave, Maddy shook her head 'no'.

Mary's mouth hung open, cheeks burning red with embarrassment, she scorned Lydia, "You should not swear, decent women should not swear." Mary did not understand the meaning of the words.

Maddy grinned and translated, "Sock dollager, is a slang term from the nineteen-thirties that refers to; a remarkable outcome. Lydia made the war victory V sign for the allied forces winning WW2 and bricky means brave." Then without skipping a beat, Maddy nailed her point, "You want to talk about life in the shite?"

Mary nodded.

"I'll come by the nursing home on Saturday, if I can. We can chat then if you like. But right now, Lydia and I are celebrating life. It is rude to ruin someone else's good mood and cheer. So, if you don't mind, we would like to enjoy our little party. If you don't feel festive and really don't want to have fun with us, you can go to your date and I will be happy to take Lydia home. We would rather have you join in and have fun with us."

Having the tables turned, Mary slunk, pouting in bewilderment. Maddy slid an ice cream float in front of Mary and said, "Please Mary Love? Join us?"

The diner's speakers blared Elvis Presley's; 'You ain't nothin' but a hound dog'. Maddy and Lydia simultaneously began to make jive dance moves in their seats, arms and shoulders slumping up and down in unison, both grinning.

Mary acquiesced, grinned and reached for the ice cream float. "Oh, my God! What have I gotten myself into?"

Maddy watched Lydia, engrossed in the joy of watching the woman eating pie and ice cream. "There is something familiar about you, my friend. You are a Giggle Mug; you have a wonderfully infectious smile. Did you by any chance, go to public school here in the community?"

Lydia smiled and nodded, "Mo, mo, MOVED. Ba, ba, BAD MINISTER."

“What? Are you talking about Pastor Jacob?”

Lydia’s eyes turned dark and she strained to blurt out, “BALDERDASH!!! SIDE WINDER!!! GAL SNEAKER!!!”

“What?”

“FOUR FLUSHER! DOUBLE CROSSER! SIDEWINDER!” She sadly nodded, a yes.

Maddy, sat back, “Well, I’ll be damned!” She paused, her mind putting pieces of the puzzle together. “I do remember you! You always wore your hair in braids, with yellow ribbons. You sat in the front row, the younger kid’s row.” Maddy paused, lost in thought, recalling the one room school house, accommodating all grades. “Well, isn’t that something. Imagine that. I thought you seemed familiar. I had wondered as a kid, what happened to you and where you moved to.”

Lydia was obviously not one for using a lot of words. Maddy sympathized, “It’s difficult for you to speak, I won’t push you.”

Mary chimed in, “All right, given the situation that Lydia went through, I get double crosser, gal sneaker and side winder, but what in the hell is a four flusher?”

“Oh,” said Maddy, “That’s a slang term from the thirties, what we used to call someone or who mooches off others. In this case, Pastor Jacob was one helluva moocher. Among other nasty deeds, he was always taking food and resources from community members during the depression, a time of scarcity. He took more than families could spare.”

Lydia nodded in agreement and took a deep breath to softly add, “DAD, MAD-AS-HOPS!!! M, m, m, MARIE.” Lydia worked hard to form words, softly trying to articulate, and explain. “sa sa sa, SAINT MARIE.” Taking a rest and pausing, she then added with effort; added, “Ba, ba, ba, BLACK, fa, fa, fa, FLIES.”

“Oh, I see; you had a lot of Black Flies in Sault Sainte Marie.” Maddy paused, pieces of Lydia’s family life falling into place.

Lydia reddened with effort, “fa, fa, fa, FAMILY h, h, h, HOME is HERE. Sa, sa, sa, STILL HERE. Ba, ba, BAD NURSE, SOLD IT. DOUBLE CROSSER! SIDE WINDER!”

Confused and not understanding, though not wanting to strain Lydia’s emotions further, Maddy said, “Oh, I see.”

The waitress approached with a bill and Maddy tugged at the woman’s apron, “Could you please add some left over in a bag please? It’s a treat for a pet pig. Pigs eat anything.”

The waitress, grinned with curiosity and said, “Oh sure,” said.

Lydia smiled and clapped her hands.”

Walking home and experiencing a sugar high and having had time to acclimatize, Maddy’s mind contemplated the essential fact; there were end of life preparations to be made. Clicking in to old military service duty of self-discipline, she adjusted a work ethic of ‘get on with it’. The most crucial step on the agenda was to get out of the house more and have some fun.

A new sense of random fun had already been established with Lydia and the pie party, and now, she just might consider calling Robert. He was, in her mind, still a son-in-law after the death of her daughter, perhaps still as lovable. If something medically unforeseen might arise due to the memory loss to come, there would be decisions to be navigated. She did not want a no-body making life decisions on her behalf. She would need someone of trustworthy importance in her corner. Fifty years had passed without a word between them, yet, intuitively, and emotionally, she felt as though a bond may still be intact between them. She hoped.

On a whim, that evening, she took a chance and called Robert.

Robert elated to hear a warm and familiar voice from the past said, “Oh, Old Gal! I’m so happy to hear from you! Is everything alright with you?”

“Hello Love, yes. I’m just wondering if you and your wife are up for a visit sometime soon?”

“Absolutely! I’ve been meaning to call you for ages, and yes, wanting to visit for quite some time. I wasn’t sure that you’d want to talk to me after all these years. It’s so good to hear your voice,” he cooed. Robert had been feeling retirement blues and her call came at a perfect time.

Relieved and happy to receive a warm reception, Maddy stammered, “It’s good to hear your voice too, Love.”

“Oh, we have been divorced for years now. It’d be just me. I’d love to come and visit with you. If that’s all right?”

“Oh, I’m sorry about your split-up.”

“Oh, no worries, time has passed. When were, you thinking?” Robert asked, hurrying to change the subject.

Elated, yet not wanting to pressure, she suggested, “Well, that’s up to you. You’re the one with a job, unless you’ve retired already. I’m flexible. Although, spring is on my doorstep, it would be lovely to spend some time chatting on the patio. The afternoons are lovely warm.”

“Oh no, I got laid off from the newspaper two years ago; everything has gone digital online; on the internet. I’m actually in-between freelance contracts now, so your timing couldn’t be better.”

“Fabulous. How about right now?”

Robert chuckled, “How about Sunday afternoon? I’ve got a few things to wrap up here over the next day or so.”

“Fine and dandy with me. I’m feeling festive. If I pick up a bottle of wine, would you share a glass or two with me?”

“Old Gal! I didn’t know that you drank fine spirits! Come to think of it, I never saw you drink alcohol. What’s up?” Robert’s mind flashed to past years when being a close family member.

She chuckled feisty, “Oh nothing is up, just made a pact with myself to stop living life so familiar and safe. I’m going to liven up my life a bit, while I still can. I’m not getting any younger, physiologically that is.” Maddy was cramming in information as if time was being cut short on sharing.

“Well then, we have a date. Sunday afternoon and a bottle of wine it is.”

“Well then, I might as well get a case of it, I feel like getting absolutely giddy snockered.”

Robert chuckled a heavy snort of humour in response to Maddy’s lust for life, “Oh Old Gal, it’s so good to hear your voice. I can’t wait to get snockered with you.”

“I’ll check on the guest cottage and set it up for you. You shouldn’t be driving after our chat. Unless you want to taxi into town and get a motel room?”

“Oh, I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

“Never mind, Love. We’ll see what happens. If you want to stay down at the river in the little guest cottage, then it’ll be ready. If not, we can call a taxi. I won’t be offended.”

In the morning, Maddy dragged an oversized children’s red wagon, straight to Orville Junior’s Farm and Feed store for a fifty-pound bag of apples and a ten-pound variety bag of nuts. Normally, smaller amounts meant an easier tow, but lean winters and tugging a toboggan load meant more winter trips. Old friend, Orville Junior himself was still behind the counter, he always kept her order aside. “Thanks Orville. All these years, same order and you’ve never let me down.” Maddy said to the massive grizzly bear sized man.

He slid eye glasses down on his nose and peered; his breath heavy under a massive weight, “Maddy, your family has been placing the same god damned order since I was old enough to stand at this counter with my father. God only knows why you people need so many apples and nuts. I suppose you can tell me now, after all these years.”

“Orville Junior, you tried pinning me down in public school, and like I told you then, it’s for the wildlife down at the river.”

“Madeline! You ought to be ashamed of yourself for lying like that!” He chuckled, bouncing his massive jelly belly. “You making strange liquor? I remember your cousin Jack, making nasty

corn brew up on the mountain. That was mighty fine stuff. I might be interested in buying some," he whispered, secretively.

Maddy was quizzical, in remembering the legends and tragedy of Jack's mountain moonshine scheme.

Orville, regretting upsetting her, added, "Sorry to bring up old memories. I'm just saying, that if that's what you're doing, I'd love to have some. Medicinal purposes only, of course."

Maddy huffed, "No! For heaven's sake. It's not that at all. Like I told you, it's for the wildlife."

She waved a hand, "I don't know what you're talking about, old fart." Maddy feigned offense.

"Well fine, have it your way, old woman."

Maddy grinned, relieved to have the topic closed, once again, "Thank you. I will."

"Orville, old man?" she slid a large legal sized envelope across the counter to him.

"What ya got there?"

"I want to transfer all of my pork futures and other stocks over, put them in Robert's name and don't tell him right away. I want it to be a surprise."

Orville opened the envelope. "Oh, I see. Yes, I can handle details. But, they're not pork investments anymore, haven't been for a coons age. About six years after the war, the big corporations took over my Dad's pork markets, what little he had left, went to the states. A lot of these investments, we had talked to Gordon about and they were re-invested, transferred. I see you've only ever cashed one of these in, we'll have to see what they are worth now. I'll have our accountant look at them later this afternoon. You know, I always look out for you and to tell the truth, it's given me comfort as I am sure it gave Gordon comfort, to know that you had these. Otherwise, I can't imagine how you would've managed to look after yourself and that house all these years." Orville adjusted the reading glasses, "I have no idea, at first glance, how much this pile is worth. I'll have to have a look."

"Well, whatever it is, I thank you and your father. Gordon and I started with the one you and your father gave us on our wedding day. I added a hundred dollars from my pay, from the R.A.F., after the war. I wasn't working, didn't have any kind of military pension and wasn't sure if Gordon was going to be able to hold a job at the lumber mill. He was pretty messed up when he came home. I only cashed one in when Gordon got sick, so I'd have access to emergency funds when needed. The interest every month, has been fine. I honestly don't know what the rest are about, and haven't tended to them. I suppose, I should have had a visit with the bank manager, but Robert can deal with all of that now. I don't want the bother."

Orville anxiously peered over his glasses, "Yes, yes, Gordon was quite messed after WW2." Returning eyes to the paperwork, he said, "Shite, I haven't seen this one stock in over forty years and this one is some sort of fancy internet gizmo called goggles, or gurgle, or gargle, or googly, or google, or some damn thing like that. Some internet contraction, whatever in the hell that it is. The other one is Tesla, some sort of electronic gizmo invention thing. Oh, I don't know, my grandson looks after all this stuff now, has been for a long time. I don't know if he's making any money, it's a hobby I guess. This one, pig stock, my father expanded to include goats, so that people in third world countries and the Middle East could have meat, milk and use of the hide and so on." He glanced back to Maddy, "My great grandson is just about finished university and will be taking most of the business over this summer. He said something about ensuring a philanthropic trust, so that any profit, always gets rolled back into more projects, to keep the business investments sustainable and growing."

"Oh, that's lovely. I suppose that is one of the reasons why I invested eagerly, with your father. I remember how scarce food was here before the war. Almost all the food, meat and goods went overseas to the war effort, meant for the fighting men. I was there, and I saw it, first hand. With the Royal Air Force, I always had access to good hot meals. Home rations were not nearly enough; women, children, and the old folks, had to scavenge for food scraps. You and I know what that was like, growing up during the depression. I always admired your father for having forward

thinking and to sell livestock to the military, and to use much of the profit to set up community mini farms so that civilians overseas could eat; brilliant. Truly the mark of a good soul. It wouldn't have mattered to me if I never saw a dime from my investment. I was honoured to be able to keep helping, in my small way. So maybe your accountant and grandson can just give Robert a call after I've talked to him about it first, then the three of you can take it from there."

"Well Old Gal, I'm glad that it worked out for you all these years, don't know what I would have done without mine. My Dad could be a crusty old beggar, he sure did know business, but a lot has changed since then. I can't guarantee if these are worth much, but I will consider it."

"Thanks, old coot, I am ever so grateful."

Orville tucked the smudged reading glasses into a shirt pocket. "Leave it with me. You should probably let your lawyer know so she can ensure that he is a rightful heir. Give her a call when you get home, so at least she has it on file and has time to draft up proper documents."

Having a weight lifted, Maddy waved and jig-danced out of the store.

With an over-loaded wagon of apples, nuts, groceries, wine, and treats, Maddy carefully headed home.

Maddy had spent an evening re-organizing important papers, in case Robert was the right one to assume the role of medical and legal first-person contact. It distinctly seemed as though another chapter in life was ending and she was now growing ready to join Gordon and Irene in the afterlife. Instinctively, she knew that one day soon she would leave the old homestead and needed to be ready for whatever the outcome of mind and body would be.

Surveying the small cottage home, images of a lifetime flashed before tearing eyes. Her great grandparents had homesteaded here in this rustic space. Her parents gradually built a newer roof and added windows, then she and Gordon added indoor plumbing and electricity over time. Both Maddy, Rosie and then Irene were born in the master bedroom. Rosie had assumed primary care of their mother and father in their palliative time. So many loved ones had passed into spirit world in that same room. Jack had contracted a serious lung disease from crop dusting and passed in sleep before either of the girls could return home on leave from overseas.

Immediately after the war, upon Gordon's return, Maddy and Gordon had married at the town hall clerk's office and held a small reception party in this very living room with Orville Junior and his boisterous new wife. Gordon had returned a changed man; solemn and at times livid, reliving war traumas. One cold morning, he promptly announced, "There will be no children born of my loins! The world is an atrocious place to bring a child into! I won't have it!"

It had been their first impassable disagreement. Years later, surrendering to Maddy's longing and biological clock, he announced unexpectedly, "Oh damn it all to hell! If we're going to procreate, we best get to it before we're too damned old. Let's have a go and see what happens." Nine months later, she had given birth to their only child, Irene in the same master bedroom.

So much life, so many memories. Maddy sighed, hoping to not have to sell the old place, but to leave it to Robert. There were no other family or relations, she was the last. Marriage to Irene, Robert was the closest by default.

She headed to the tiny guest cottage down at the river with a broom and fresh linens in hand. If they did indeed drink heavily and matters unfolded well between them, she might convince Robert to stay overnight. It took four hours to clean the space free of cob webs, mice poop and dusty windows. Edging on the river, the little cabin had grown first out of Dad's want for a handy fly fishing storage area. Promptly it was assumed by Mother's want of an artistic space. Out of the corner of an eye, Maddy saw Mom sitting in the rocker with a sketch pad, with a studious Rosie standing aside; discussing the day's nature sightings.

Maddy sighed and smiled, warmed by the precious memory moment.

The next morning, the sound of a roaring truck rattled her awake. Peeking through the curtains, to gaze past the garden and through the tree line, she saw a moving truck backing into the neighbour's driveway. Following behind, a fancy car arrived and a fifty-something shy woman, with a young nerdy girl and a well-dressed gregarious thirty something man spilled out. Having a need to pee overrode curiosity, she knee-knock ambled to the bathroom. That house next door had been empty for years. For forty years, the couple who had lived in it, had kept to themselves and rarely passed a word or side-glance to anyone in Cedar Groove. She had not seen the pair leave the place, only noticing its' emptiness weeks later. Maddy rushed back to the bedroom window to see the young business suited man bark orders to the movers, wave goodbye to the woman and peel off.

Maddy pulled a chair close to the window, watching as the woman and girl disappeared inside. The truck promptly emptied and drove away. Growing hungry and bored with the lack of action outside of the house, and still in her night gown, she headed to the kitchen. The past eighteen hours had already been the most exciting day in twenty years and there was oh so much more to unfold. "Eat breakfast first, then get dressed."

Sweeping the patio in preparation for Robert's visit, Maddy watched the new woman next door sneaking around the house and light a cigarette, eyes darting back and forth, not wanting to be seen. Maddy made her way through the garden to the tree line and ducking through low tree branches, deliberately walked toward the woman on an angle, so she could not scurry back into house.

"Hi there!" Maddy, smiled sincerely, "I'm Maddy, the old bag from next door. Welcome to the neighbourhood."

The woman quickly slid the cigarette out of sight, pinching it out and side blowing away smoke. "Oh hi. I'm Gloria." Shy and uncomfortable, she anxiously prattled explanations. Glancing toward the front door, "That's my granddaughter, inside; Lizzy. My husband died years ago. I'm on my own with the girl. Her parents died in a car accident. My nephew, on my dead-husband's side of the family, helped us move out here. Lizzy needed a better neighborhood than where we were living in the suburbs, I thought. Getting her ready for high school, I didn't like the looks of those city schools. A lot of miserable looking teenagers. Always hanging around in groups, trying to look and act like hoods; gangster wanabes. Lizzy's starting to blossom, and I want a better life for her. I'm hoping for a quieter country life and maybe she'll make some new friends here; good ones." Finding herself expressing insecurity, she waited for judgement, or acceptance.

"Well, my goodness! Sounds like you've both been through a lot. I'm rather glad that you are here. It'll be nice to know that someone so nice, is close by. I'm a widow and my son-in-law, Robert is coming here for a visit. I want you to know that if you or Lizzy ever need anything, I'm right next door."

Gloria smiled shyly. "Oh, that's very kind of you. Thank you. I'm not used to having friendly neighbors, but I am relieved, to meet you."

"Well, I need to get on with my day, so I'll get out of your hair." Maddy turned to leave then hesitated. "Gloria?"

"Yes?"

"Can an old gal give you some advice?"

"Oh sure."

"Don't hide your cigarettes, for anyone. If they give you comfort, balls to anyone else. Do what you need to do to get through the shite of life. Be who you feel like being. Smoke in my house if you want to visit and need a smoke. I just want you to know that you can be yourself around me. I've been through too much in my life to tolerate people who pretend otherwise. I rather like people who've been through some tough times, survived and are kind. What do you think, Love?"

Warmed and relaxing, "Oh, thank God. Yes, I agree. Thank you Maddy." Gloria sighed and smiled.

“Good! See you later.” Maddy waved and made her way back through the bushes.

On Sunday evening, Maddy opened the front door to greet her aging bearded son-in-law. “Good-God, Robert, how did you get so damned old?” she snickered, reaching for a hug.

“Old?” he bear-hugged, lifting the little woman off the front step. “Old? Why I take great pride in maintaining this twenty-four-year-old body,” He chuckled. “And it’s not grey hair, it’s ash blonde.”

“Like hell!” she laughed, egging him on. The years of abyss disappearing, a new admiration bond quickly ensuing.

He set her down gently and stood back. “Well damn, you look fantastic for an old gal!”

“I am fantastic! Thanks for noticing. Come in, come in. Are you hungry, or shall we get right to the patio and drink some wine?”

“Oh, thanks I’m not hungry at the moment, let’s go to the patio and crack a bottle.”

Christmas tree lights twinkled, lining the surrounding porch lattice work. An antique oil lantern hummed, casting a soft orange glow over the wine bottle.

“Cheers! To life!” she clinked his glass, “Bottoms up, let’s slug the first glass down and get right to it, shall we?”

“Cheers! To life!”

Maddy back handed a wine dripping mouth. “Whooooaaaaa. It feels like fire rushing through my veins. Whooooaaaa.” she refilled their glasses. “So how are you, Love?”

Robert sat back, swiveling the wine glass, “Hmm . . . , ever have one of those days when you feel off kilter all day?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, it seems I’ve been having a few years of those days. Not sure if it’s because I’ve lost my passion for my work, or if I’m just getting too damn old to do it anymore. I’ll tell you one thing, I’m too old to be hanging out in an Afghanistan desert.”

“You’re burnt out, maybe?”

Robert sat back and ran fingers through a greying beard. “I lost interest for covering the stories they want me to cover. I got sidetracked a few months ago and stayed with an old Afghani veteran in the hills, a cave. I felt like I was in a desert Shangri-La; beautiful people, beautiful souls, mystical and wise. My editor-in-chief was pretty pissed off for my writing about veterans on both sides of the conflict. You, know, it’s better to perpetuate terrorism. Now they want the young hot-shots to go overseas and say only what they want them to say. Everything is critiqued by military advisors.”

Maddy nodded in agreement, “Some things don’t change. So, do you want to talk about what you saw over there? What made you turn?”

“No.” He turned away, eyes watering. “I still get nightmares. Atrocities to human beings, and innocents caught in cross-fire.”

A flash of past images of destruction formed behind Maddy’s eyes. She winced and batted eye lashes. “So, you can understand why I’ve never wanted to talk about the war. Unfathomable atrocities.”

“We bear witness, before God. But, God only knows why we must bear these burdens. Burdens of mad men. Madness.”

“I had a friend during the war, a pilot, Roy. He helped me cope, more than he’d ever have known. I gather this old Afghani man, helped you somehow?”

Robert’s eyes lit. “Oh God yes. Just the tip of the ice berg though. He was a Sufi, you know, Muslim philosopher, but much more. He was calm, wise and spoke of ancient knowledge, mysticism really. I did chores for him while he chatted. So much knowledge to be absorbed. He spoke of his people from ancient times, yet the basic principles and teachings were of the highest morality. Like the Persians, Turks, and Urdu. Yet, North Americans are still ignorant of these ancient faiths. Mind blowing, really.

“Anyway, I felt like I was onto the story of the century, a real game changer for the world, but they called me home. Management was pissed off. I’d like to share the old veteran’s stories, how war changed their personal philosophies; from both sides. You know, not perpetuate racism and ignorant war mongering. For the Vets, there has never been an acceptable post service program in place that addresses their needs.” Running fingers through his hair, and winching back tears, he said, “My God, how in the hell are they supposed to have normal lives when they’ve seen such atrocities? Some of the terrorist groups use innocent children to approach our soldiers and us, carrying bombs that are remotely detonated. They tell the kids that the soldiers have candy and treats for them. Our men and women come back all messed up and must fight for pensions and disability payments. Many are sick, sick from the nasty chemicals they been exposed to; shite like Rainbow herbicides, like agent orange, white and purple. Radiation from abandoned Soviet munitions.

“They don’t get the post-traumatic stress-help they need. So many of them are now homeless or taking their own lives. The Veteran’s Ombudsman is overloaded and halted at every turn. I think I’d better stop there, I’m getting too worked up.” Heavy sweat formed above furrowed eye brows. Lines of heavy emotional aggravation creased his forehead.

“I don’t know Love; I think you have to finish the article and get it off your soul. If it upsets you, you must find a way to create balance. You must follow other passions, those things that create some happiness. I think it’s time for you to walk away from freelance reporting perhaps?”

“I don’t know if anyone is really interested in the untold facts of truth.”

“I am.”

Robert eyed her, sensing her sincerity. “Maybe. I’ll think about it.”

“It was like that for us when we were overseas too, more so for the boys on the front lines; in the shite of it. I was well protected, such as it was; at the air base. We noticed quickly what was transpiring, and we didn’t want to tell people we cared about how awful war was. We had to focus on the positives, instill hope and morale. You know, people might not have handled the truth of just how bad events were. I know I wouldn’t have, if being a civilian. Worse, none of us knew how truly bad it was and we were there. The truth should come out as evidence, eventually. People must know. That’s how things change, for the better. Oh, Love, say what your soul wants to say and then go do something nice for someone who can never repay you.”

Acknowledging her wisdom, yet uncomfortable with the burden of carrying the sword of truth, he quickly changed the subject. “So how in the hell are you, Old Gal? Aside from looking fantastic, how are you?”

Maddy nodded, appreciating his gesture. “Well, I’ll get right to the point. I was planning to wait and feel out our mutual situation but, I think I’ll get right to the point. First, bottoms up!” They downed another glass and Robert quickly refilled with liquid courage.

“Apparently, I’ve got early onset of Alzheimer’s. Can’t honestly say that I’ve experienced any of the symptoms they talk about. Except, oddly, house keys go missing, or I forget why I went into another room, and must back track to remember,” she chuckled. “No more than any other person over fifty. Normal silly things, I figure.”

Robert, snit-snorted a chuckle. “Oh, that is so true. So, what is the doctor telling you? Medications? What are you to expect?”

Appreciating his lack of denial and instant comfortable acceptance, she responded, “Thanks Love, for taking this in stride. Not much for now. I’ve been living on my own since Gordon passed, and don’t have any other burning medical problems. This could be a long slow journey, or something might happen quickly at some point, and so, the doctor wants the name of a support contact person; in case someone has to make some dicey choices on my behalf.”

Instantly surmising the gravity of her situation and what would be required from such a person, he said, “Well, I am honoured, and I’m honestly happy to assume that position, if that’s where you’re going with this?”

“Thanks Robert for saying that. Thanks for not giving me an insincere hassle about it. I don’t have time to dally around. I’ve got to get on with it. Make some plans. I’d rather think that I’m not being a burden; it’s just business. Do you understand Love?”

“I do. I certainly do. I’ve seen way too much shite go down, especially with the war veterans I’ve worked with. You have my word. No insincere trite bullshite. Straight up business. Whatever you need.”

“Thanks Robert. You have no idea how much I appreciate this and your visit. It’s already done me a world of good.”

“As have you, to me. This is the first time I’ve felt alive since being with Irene in those early years.”

The moment turned quiet, each within their own thoughts. Maddy pointed upward. “Bet you don’t see stars like this in the city.”

Robert tilted a light-headed head up. “Nope sure don’t. Isn’t that something. When I was out in the desert, it was like this, except here, it seems almost as though if I stand on tip toes, I can touch them.”

Maddy flashed a memory, “I remember standing on the English shoreline during lights out, near the air base in Hamble, during the war. Holding hands with Gordon for the first time, I had thought the same. It was a beautiful moment, forgetting for a little while, where we were.”

“Old Gal?”

“Ya?”

“I’d like to write a book about your time during the war and your experiences. Consider it a way to keep your memories alive and maybe inspire a few others.”

An inebriation wave rushed through her body. Slurring words, she chuckled, “Funny man, you.”

He turned with a serious grin. “No, I mean it.”

“I don’t want to go on about the war or the plane crash, Robert. If I do happen to blither about it, and you hear, then use it in one of your stories, on condition.”

“Sure. What condition might that be?”

“Give a first read copy to the new woman next door, Gloria and her granddaughter, Lizzy. At least one of the first copies. It’d be a woman to woman kind of gift.”

Curious and surprised, “Sure. Why?”

“Because, Robert, you should pay attention to people who cross your path. There is always a reason. An opportunity. It’d just be a small gift that says to them, that someone that they hardly knew; cares. You never know, your work and life experiences could also inspire and change a condition for those veterans who can’t speak for themselves, advocacy. There was that fighter pilot, Roy, during the war, that I crossed paths with a couple of times. He taught me a lot. Isn’t that why you’re a journalist, to pass on what you have learned, so others will better themselves?”

“I suppose.”

“Robert?” She slugged down another glass.

“Ya?”

“I’m drunk already.”

“Light weight!” he grinned, downing his wine.

Snort-snickering, and backhand wiping a strand of wine drool, Maddy cursed, “Jesus! I’ve got to wander off to pee and go to bed,” she wobbled. “Pay no attention. Just carry on without me. Oh, and don’t go off anywhere, just stay in the guest cottage. It’s all set up for you. If you’re hungry, just go inside and rummage around in the fridge and cupboards. Make yourself at home. And for God’s sake, don’t be wandering down by the river drunk. I don’t want to have to wake up worrying if you’re all right.”

Robert laughed, enjoying the antics of the moment. “Actually, I am drawn to the river. I think I might go sit and watch the fireflies. Haven’t done that in a very long time.”

“There are not just fireflies and rocks to watch out for.”

Quizzical, he eyed her, recalling Irene’s stories of strange wildlife and nature spirit legends of her childhood, passed down from her grandmother. “Oh ya! I remember. Ha! Don’t piss off the wildlife and nature spirits.” he chuckled.

Maddy winked in agreement. “Just be careful where you walk down there.”

Robert respectfully waved. “I remember.”

“Oh Jesus, Robert. I’m completely tanked already. I do apologize for cutting this short, but I think I’d better go pee before I pee my pants and get into bed while I still can. We can chat more, tomorrow?”

Robert raised his glass, “Good night Old Gal, sleep well. Yes, I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Welcome home, Love.”

“Cheers, mother-in-law, Old Gal, it’s good to be here.”

Fighting a throbbing head, Maddy rolled over, away from blinding sunshine streaming through the window and penetrating through closed eye lids. A pounding sound resonated, some idiot was pounding on the front door. Knock pounding continued as she grudgingly slid on a housecoat and slightly opened the front door. Partially hiding a near exposed body and bed-head-hair, she waited for the officious short middle-aged woman to get to the point of this intrusion.

The woman handed over a business card. Maddy reached out and held it at arm’s length; print too small and illegible, the words not registering in a hangover fogged mind. She looked quizzically at the woman, waiting. “Eh?”

“I’m Gretchen. I’m your new elder care worker. I’ve been assigned your case.” She stated with the voice of bland authority. “I’m here to complete a home assessment, to determine your independent living situation.”

The woman reeked of Lily of the Valley perfume; flowers for the dead.

Maddy ignored her terse and forceful manner. “Oh, good grief! I already told the neurologist that I don’t need any help. Thank you anyway.”

Old hands motioned to close the door, dismissing the woman. Gretchen moved forward blocking the door open with a large hand.

“Oh, I think you misunderstand.” The hostile tone, alarming, “It’s mandatory!”

Back straightening, “Oh, I don’t think so!” Maddy retorted. “It is my understanding from the doctor that someone would call first, to see if I needed anything, and, I don’t. Why didn’t you call me first? Why are you showing up on my doorstep so early in the morning, without calling first?”

Knowing she had the old woman engaged, Gretchen smirked, “I prefer to meet people in their natural home environment, unprepared. I gather a lot more information that way.”

“I’ll bet you do!” Maddy grew nervous, angry and somewhat scared.

Robert approached from within and stood in the open door, unfazed by exposure of body in boxer shorts. Running a hand through bed-mangled hair, the smell of alcohol wafting on his breath. “What’s going on Old Gal? Who is this?”

The woman guffawed, a tyrant predator hot on the heels of harassing an old woman, smirked. Gretchen arched a stiff back and cocked an arrogant head to eye Robert’s boxer shorts, as though Maddy was exposing a sordidly inappropriate relationship with a younger man. She huffed, straightened and pursed indignant lips. “Who are you?!”

Robert, a seasoned professional, having worked in hostile war zones, quipped, “I asked you first. Who in the hell are you and why are you bothering my mother-in-law so early in the morning?”

Unrelenting the power of her position, she stated, “I’m Gretchen, Madeline’s new Elder Community Care Consultant. I’ve been assigned to Madeline’s case. I’m here to do an in-home assessment of her living situation. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m coming in.” She moved closer to the open door.

Robert stepped forward, stop-sign-hand blocking any entry." Oh, no you don't! Stop right there. As the woman backed up, he turned. "Maddy Old Gal, do you have an appointment with this woman? Did you invite this woman into your house?"

"No!"

Robert grinned. "As I thought." He crossed limp arms, smirking, standing in front of Maddy in protection. "Goodbye Gretchen, and don't bother coming back. You're not welcome here, ever." He glanced to Maddy for confirmation, she nodded cautiously, in consensual agreement.

"You can't do that! This is a mandatory assessment!"

"No! Whether its mandatory or not, you're not coming into this house and you're certainly not welcome here. Do *you* understand?!"

The woman huffed, unaccustomed to being challenged, pursed lips, and opened a pursed mouth to challenge as Robert turned to Maddy, gesturing her back inside, "Come on Old Gal, let's see to a cup of coffee, shall we?" He motioned to close the door on a blocking foot.

Aghast with Gretchen's audacity, he puffed up a hairless chest. Alpha dogging her, she stepped back. He slammed the door, locking it and blurted after her, "Feck Off!"

Rattled and stricken with the fear by the woman's authority, Maddy hesitated and looked to Robert. "Oh Love, you were so angry! I had no idea my illness would come to this, so soon. What if she gets my doctor's support? A court order? Maybe you shouldn't have slammed the door and swore."

Robert motioned Maddy into the kitchen. "No. Give the bitch an inch and she'll take a mile. No! Got to set a proper take-no-shite precedence right off the top. Don't worry about it, if she gives you any more grief, she'll have to deal with me. So, come on, sit. I'll make us a coffee and breakfast."

Maddy slumped; it had been a long time since she so felt utterly rattled and powerless; insignificant. Not since having an argument with Rosie, after the war. It was a similar dark hostile feeling that had occupied Gordon for a time, an anger; livid rage that drove knives into the core of her being.

Robert set the kettle to boil then sat beside her. "Look, I've seen this kind of shite before, with the war veteran's. It's an old warrior's tactic, using intimidation to unnerve the target, in this case; you. You see this shite more in business and war. Can't say that I've seen a woman pull that act off with such hostility though. In Marshal arts; you intimidate someone so much with fierce energy that the opponent bows under the alpha-dog power and often just self-destruct. She can't do shite. Not while I'm around. She has no legal authority over you if we don't allow it. You've not been deemed incompetent, have you?"

"NO!"

"Fine. If she makes a stink about it, I'll go to your doctor and request another worker. This whole matter is bullshite. There is no legal reason for her to assess you without an appointment and having someone with you, for advocacy and support. She has no legal right to intrude or intervene, not currently. You are healthy, astute, and still fully capable of determining your own choice of lifestyle. I'll back you up one-hundred percent. If anything does happen to go funky, well, I'm a journalist and I can expose her as a tyrant bully. It'll make her a target of great interest to the altruists out there. We could sue her arse off," he calmly chuckled and ran fingers through an itching beard, thinking. "I don't trust that woman. There's something wrong with her personality. No-way she has your best interest at heart."

Processing and contemplating the narrow escape, Maddy moaned, "Good grief, Love. She just scared the living bejesus out of me. Can she really do that sort of thing? She sure seems like she has the power."

"Look, people like her are just bullies; control freaks."

"Yes, some I know." Her mind drifted to Pastor Jacob and the Nazi atrocities.

"Old Gal, don't let her get to you."

“Oh, normally I wouldn’t. But, I suppose it’s just that with my diagnosis, I almost feel as though she is way ahead of me, as though the diagnosis instantly gave my rights away. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yes, I do. It’s a play that has obviously been working for her. Makes me think that she does this with other vulnerable people.”

“You might be right. Jesus, Robert, that really shook me. Coffee? My head is pounding.”

“Coming right up.” He poured coffee and slid into a chair.

“Jesus, Robert.” She looked him hard in the eye. “Thank God you were here. I mean that. To think that I almost didn’t call you. I didn’t want to bother you, with my situation. I didn’t know for sure I could talk to you after all this time. Thank God, I called, and you came. Your timing is perfect. I can’t thank you enough.”

“No thanks required. I’m glad to be here. You’re all I have left in this world. No wait, it’s more than that. I’ve always thought of you as my Mom. My mother was so young when she died, I can barely remember her. Then my Dad died. You, Gordon and Irene got me through it. I was young then too. We were so young. I just couldn’t bear losing Irene and the baby too. I couldn’t bear it. I’m sorry I left the way I did. I’m sorry I stayed away. I suppose I was ashamed of myself for not dealing with grief better. So, I got lost in my job. In the Middle East and other war zones, at night, I conjured up thoughts of them, of you and Gordon.” Robert sighed, running a hand through matted greying hair while sipping coffee. “I know why my ex-wife left me; I was a haunted man and she couldn’t compete with my ghosts.” Robert back handed a tear. “I’m so sorry Old Gal.”

Feeling safe again, Maddy gingerly laid a hand on his, smiling, a love bond renewed, “Wanna get drunk again tonight? Maybe light some sparklers around a bon fire, blast some Elvis and shake this place up? Maybe invite the new neighbours over? Roast some wieners and marshmallows and vomit it all up?”

Robert threw a laughing head backward, snorting, “Game on! Ah, it’s so good to be here. I wish I didn’t have to go back to work so soon.”

“Don’t.”

“Eh?”

“Don’t go back. Stay. If you don’t feel comfortable staying in here with me later, we can renovate the place or the guest cottage. Maybe you should write something other than war and terrorism news pieces.”

“I hadn’t thought about writing anything of substance in a long time.”

“Don’t think too much. Just do it. Surely you could write about other topics, things you’d rather write about? Why would you want to go back to a lonely apartment? Why would you want to go back to those horrible war zones? Isn’t it time you retired and leave war correspondence to some young whipper who is ready to take the world on?”

“Oh. Yes, like I said last night, I’ve lost the heart for the job a long time ago. I’ve had a couple of book ideas floating around in my head for years. What I’d really love to do is take time out and write your story. I really mean that, I’d really love to write about your experience, as a war support pilot.”

“You mean my plane crash, don’t you?”

“Yes, and no. I mean, I’ve thought about asking you about the plane crash over the years and have always thought it might make an interesting story. Now that I’m here, yes! I really want to know more about your crash experience; what makes you tick, and how you got through it.”

“Well, timing is everything, isn’t it?” Maddy reasoned on how events of life become connected.

“What do you mean?”

“I wouldn’t have said yes before now. I’ve intentionally avoided anything and everything about that ordeal. I promised Gordon, before he passed, that I’d consider it. Maybe if I chat about

it to someone I trust, I'll get to the bottom of the cause and aftermath. What exactly do you want to know?"

"Some mysteries don't reveal insight in this lifetime, so no pressure. I just want to lounge and listen. Whatever you want to chat about, is fine with me."

"I honestly don't think you'll hear anything worth writing about. Maybe at some point, we'll be able to chat about our Irene, that would be nice. If you want to hang out, rent free and be my body guard while listening to an old fart ramble, you're welcome to it."

She reached a hand over the table, offering a hand-shake deal. "Now let's get on with it. We'll need something other than wine for tonight. Sparklers, wieners, marshmallows and whatever else you want. Get some special goodies for the girl. We're having a campfire party down at the river tonight. The Peeper frog chorus will be wonderful tonight. Mosquitos and black flies won't be out yet. The nights are still too cool."

"Sounds good. Do you want to start talking about anything else relevant in your life first? Anything that might be connected to the crash?"

"No, Robert. Now if you don't mind, I've just woken. I need to dress and have some breakfast. Please, go introduce yourself and talk to the woman next door; Gloria. Invite her and the child over. Don't take no for an answer. Gloria's a bit shy, so she likely won't agree straight away. She'll come around. Seems like a good woman and I think she's been through some tough times."

Robert rose, to head for the fridge. "Will do. Eggs and bacon first?"

"Wonderful! You're hired!"

"Old Gal?"

"Yes?"

"Will you be comfortable chatting in front of the neighbour and her girl?"

"I suppose, I just wouldn't want young Lizzy hearing violent details that a young girl isn't mature enough to hear."

Relaxing, Robert nodded in agreement.

"Fine. Get on with breakfast. I'm starving, and I need to go to the bathroom. I'll be right back, dressed. How about you get dressed too?"

Robert smirked and chuckled, somewhat embarrassed when glancing at his attire, "Sorry Old Gal, I forgot. I don't usually walk around like this. I bolted awake and jumped out of bed, just had this slamming urge to come to the rescue. I'm glad I did."

A Guardian Angel had arrived in Maddy's life. "I don't need any help other than breakfast. Thank you. So, get on with it and stop blithering."

He held a spatula, sword-fencing a motion toward her. "I'll blither as I feel. Got that?"

Maddy grinned, saluted and headed to the bathroom.

Robert, Maddy, Gloria and Lizzy settled comfortably around the campfire. An air of shy awkwardness exuding between Robert and Gloria, an underlying shy yet flirtatious attraction. Young Lizzy, oblivious to the adults, slumped and slipped cell phone ear plugs in, cranking up the volume in attempt to tune out boring adults.

Maddy tenderly reached over and pulled one out. The girl recoiled with distaste, waiting for intrusive silly words from the old woman.

"Hi Love, what are you listening to? Could we all listen to the music, just one song? Then I would like you to listen to one of my stories. After that, I'll need help to take the apples and nuts upriver a bit, for the wildlife. Then you can put your ear plugs back in. Is that okay?"

The girl smiled, "Sure." It was the most exciting thing that had happened all day.

"So, what are you listening to?" Maddy's interest was genuine and she relaxed on an equal plain with the girl.

"I don't know if you've ever heard of her, it's Billy Holiday. Nineteen-fifty's, kick ass, jazzy blues. A Woman before her time and a tough life made her a powerful singer."

"Are you kidding me?" Maddy's eyes widened with excitement.

"No. why?"

"Of course, I know who she is. I just expected you'd be listening to some awful rap or metallic screeching."

"Oh sure, stereotype me." Lizzy smirked with a typical modern expression, "I don't think the volume on my phone will go loud enough for everyone to hear it."

"Oh, that's quite all right, I didn't really want to listen; I was just politely intruding, trying to find a way to include you."

"Ya, I gathered that."

"Hmm . . . , Billy Holiday. How on earth did you get interested in her?"

Lizzy glanced to Gloria and smiled, "My Nana; I like a woman of strong substance, and who sings with attitude."

"Well you've come to the right place and you're my kind of gal!" Maddy chuckled. "What kind of books do you like?"

Lizzy grinned, "I'm not telling you. You'll think fantasy stupid."

"Try me."

"You know, ancient nature legends and women with attitude."

"Why do people think nature legends are fantasy?"

"I know! Right?!"

"Come on, let's go feed the wildlife now before it gets too dark and I get too tired. Grab the basket of apples and bag of nuts and follow me, I'll tell a story later."

Maddy stood to face panic on Robert and Gloria's faces. "Oh, for heaven's sake, we'll only be a few minutes. Surely the two of you can get past your shyness and chat a little."

Both crimsoned with shy embarrassment avoiding eyes looking to their feet.

Robert scratched his beard and flattened his shirt down over a middle-aged pot belly. Gloria tucked loose hair behind an ear and searched a cell phone for something unimportant.

Placing bewildered hands on hips, Maddy blurted, "Put that phone away! For heaven's sake, if you can't figure out a starting point, then talk about me. That should be fodder for a good laugh."

She turned to lead Lizzy, "Follow me kid. I've got an important job for you. As long as I am alive, I will pay you to feed the wildlife."

Intrigued, Maddy knew instantly that the girl was hooked. She might be the one who would inherent the care of the river's wildlife.

At river's edge, a full moon illuminated an opening, sending dancing sparkles over the water's gurgling surface calmer spots.

"Come, on, we have to go upriver, just a few steps."

"Wow, it's beautiful down here, Maddy!"

"I know, but you must not come down here alone until I know for sure that you know your water and nature safety skills. Can you agree to that?"

"I took outdoor skills in school. I know what I'm doing."

"I understand woman child. But there are other wild things down here that you need to know about and understand their ways, their culture."

Maddy hesitated, sensing that she was suddenly talking to herself and turned around. The girl was bent over giggling and looking at her hand; a fire fly glowed. Maddy hesitated and watched. A smiling Lizzy beamed as the tiny glowing insect fluttered and tickled the girls nose.

Maddy smile nodded a hello to the wee delicate creature and turned to the young girl, "What do you think?"

"So, beautiful. I've never seen a fire fly up close before."

“Yes. Yes, it is beautiful. My mother and little sister Rosie believed in the old ways of nature spirits. Stewardship and food offerings to the wildlife, ran in my family. Three generations. Their care of this river is why there’s never been a polluting factory or sewage or other intrusion of any kind along here. We must protect the wildlife, the water and land. Do you understand?”

“Yes. I do. I’m sure that my Nana would be cool about it too. She’s smart in different ways than most people and she’s got a good heart. I know, she’ll love this river.”

“Thank you, Love.”

“Hey Maddy, I feel amazing right now, like this river is why we moved here. Taking care of this river is what I came here to do.”

“Oh, my goodness, girl. I think you’re an old soul.”

Lizzy focused on the tiny glowing creature before her, “You seem to know a lot about this place.”

Maddy glanced along the water’s surface and shoreline, “Yes, but my mother knew more than I’ll ever know. I’ve just always felt safe and happy here. We all did.”

“Tell me more about your family, the war and plane crash.”

“That’s enough for now. Leave the apples and nuts in the basket behind that big old cedar tree, there. I’m getting chilly. Come on, let’s go and see if there’s a romance brewing back at the campfire.”

Lizzy smirked and chuckled. “That would be cool if Nana fell for Robert. She’s lonely but, will never admit it.”

“Well, Robert has been alone for a long time too. A long time since there’s been a woman of substance in his life. We’ll have to allow nature to take its course and try not to meddle, too much.”

“Right. Sure,” Lizzy giggled.

Sensing Robert and Gloria’s defenses lowered and shyness dispelling, Maddy slid into a lounge chair, feet resting to warm on top of the fireplace stone, eyes watching flames dance and crackle. “Okay Robert, I’ve got about an hour before I’ll need to toddle off to bed. And I don’t have much time over all, so let’s get to the story telling business, shall we?”

Robert smiled, grateful for the change of topic and in a journalistic motion, turned on the audio recorder on a cell phone.

“I don’t know where to start.” Muddled Maddy.

“Wherever you want to. It doesn’t matter.”

“Should I follow a theme or talk about specific parts?”

“I don’t think so. I think you should just go with the flow, let your mind select a memory. I won’t interrupt unless I have a provocative question.”

“Do you want to take notes or something?”

“No notes. Remember, I have a recording app on my phone, if that’s all right with you?”

Maddy nodded, “Oh yes, silly me. I just saw you turn it on.” She slid a camp blanket around thin legs. Thoughts quietly reflected, she relaxed enjoying the river’s gurgling as a loon headed out to the lake, calling out to its mate. She sipped on a brandy, “I suppose you want to know how I got involved in flying, so I’ll start there but I can’t guarantee where I’ll end up. What’s an app?” Maddy’s mind wandered.

Robert’s face squinted, confused by Maddy’s question, “What?”

“You said you have a recording app on your phone.”

“Oh. An app is an application, a feature of sorts. This one is an audio recorder, like an old tape recorder.”

“Oh!”

Robert smiled, sliding back into the lounge chair, aware of moon and stars above and nature’s ambiance. Like a curious child, he waited for Maddy’s story.

“It was Grandpa’s fault. He sat with us watching the eagles and hawks swoop the cliffside, dive, and dip, searching for prey. That Saturday, he took my cousin Jack, Gordon, my little sister Rosie, and I, to a kite flying competition over in the next county. The old man had two passions; fly fishing and like cousin Jack, they were air minded, intrigued by anything that flew.

“We had to research, design and build our own kites. After a studious inspection while puffing on a pipe, Grandpa deemed them worthy of a test flight. From then on, Jack, Gordon and Rosie and I hung out at the airstrip whenever we could, usually Saturday afternoons. Just because we were little kids, we didn’t negate our responsibilities of helping at home. It was the Depression, you see. We kids, scavenged while the men hunted, while Mom kept house and preserved anything edible that we scrounged.

“We didn’t know we were poor. We considered ourselves better off than most because we knew how to find food and hunt.

“It was during the nineteen-twenty-eight wheat crop crash that came before the global depression. We were mostly rural, bush and farm people. It was normal to be out of work. There was a relief program for families but not for single people, and a lot of poorer folks were sent off to work camps in British Columbia. Some work camps were just for men, or for families. Mostly city people went to those camps. Some of us rural dwellers reverted to scavenge living off the land. The Dirty Thirties affected everyone. Mining and lumbering were also included in the economic crash. Everyone was constantly looking for work, taking any part time and temporary job just to put food on the table.

“I remember my Dad telling Mom that he had cornered our Mayor in town, ‘The lumber mill has been shut down for a time and I have applied for every position imaginable Sir. I eat one meal a day, everything else goes to the family and by a meal, I mean toast and a cup of week-old tea.’

“I remember that day, it had been a particularly hot and dry summer, a downright drought. The grasshoppers had overtaken our neighbour’s crop fields. Tent caterpillars had taken over the apple orchards. Crops dried and were destroyed. Despite my parents’ knowledge, passed onto to them from their pioneering parents, it was a difficult existence. Edible food and work were hard to find. One farmer hung himself in the barn. He was a kindly proud man and refused to succumb to hunger or a relief program.

“My Dad and Uncle would hunt and trap every week. Deer, rabbit, and wild turkey were mainstays. We were so lucky to have meat. One man was so desperate after an empty hunt that he shot into a murder of Crows and cooked them. Even us little kids would go to work for the farmers, cleaning stalls, picking vegetables and fruit; not for money but, for leftovers. Jack and Gordon were older than Rosie and I and were growing into strong young men. Once they managed to get some work helping to build houses. They worked all week for a quarter; twenty-five cents.

“Rosie, Mom, and I had managed to grow a bumper crop of sugar pumpkins one year. We spent the first two autumn months of school walking with a full wagon load, trading some for other goods and many we gave away. A farmer came to Mom looking for her leftover rotten pumpkins. He boiled them down then mixed the syrupy mess with straw and fed it to his pig. It was a trick to fatten it up.”

“I was offered a job as a clerk through Jack and Gordon’s construction boss, but it was at a site far away and I would have had to stay in a tent all winter. My Mom and Dad would not allow it. I would be a young girl alone with a bunch of men, you see. I was disappointed, wanting to help in a bigger way, but they were right.

“People got married in the town hall or churches, but no one had fancy wedding receptions, no one could afford it. I went to junior high school, and spent all my spare time watching Jack at the airstrip, or fishing with Gordon and Rosie down at the river.

“You know, it’s funny, but you’d think we’d have all been depressed as hell, it was the depression years, but we weren’t. My parents still made wonderful family time down at the river. A

picnic, swimming, fly fishing, and frog catching. Even in leisure, there was still food being gathered. Quite brilliant.

“My Dad finagled a Model T flatbed truck once. I don’t know how he did it. It was in rough shape. He got it running, and with all our help, our scavenging and re-sale ventures paid off by covering more distance than we ever could have walking. Jack’s Dad had an idea to gather dry fallen cedar trees. Borrowing a friend’s horse, they managed the higher trails on the mountain in winter, thus bringing down more fire wood to use and barter with others. Then they had the idea to take toboggans and follow the river out to the lake and cut ice in the winter for use as refrigeration during the warm summer months. They stored ice blocks in saw dust and straw in a cold cellar underground. Most of the ice was bartered away at Old Orville’s store.

“We were always thankful for everything that we had. We had to learn how to fix things ourselves or it wouldn’t get fixed.” Maddy’s thoughts trailed off then catching herself, apologized. “Oh, I’m sorry Robert. You wanted to hear about flying?”

“No worries, Old Gal.” Robert stood, stretched, tossed another log onto the fire and refilled wine and brandy glasses. Handing Lizzy a soft drink, he asked, “So what do you think of Maddy’s story so far?”

Lizzy grinned, with a hidden pride, “I think she is an old woman with attitude. My kind of old gal.”

Chuckling, Maddy sipped. “I suppose, a bit of background story provides a better understanding of how things were back then. It’s a person’s experiences and the people around them that shapes who they are and how they get to the now. Do you understand?”

All three nodded.

“Well then, where in the hell was I? Oh yes, leading up to work at the air-strip.

“I didn’t have a clue on how to make coffee. You see, I was hired on as a clerk after school and weekends at the air-strip office. There really was not much clerking to be done, my job was to clean the office, run errands, make coffee and sandwiches for the staff, hangar crew and pilots. In short time, I was hauling supplies to and from planes. Mostly crop dusters and bush planes, in those days. I didn’t care, I was just happy to be around my cousin Jack. Pitching in some money to help at home was just a bonus for the family.

“I had such a crush on Jack, ever since I can remember. I always thought it was a done deal; we’d get married someday. Though, it just wasn’t meant to be.

“It was Jack’s passion for flying that inspired me, got me hooked on flight, as a little girl. I remember him lying on his back, watching birds circle and dive. After a year, I nagged and begged my boss to allow me to join the pilot training program. I needed to earn flight hours towards earning a future wage to help my family. My boss finally gave in and allowed me to do one trip a week with Jack in a crop duster. I was in heaven; with Jack, in the air.”

Maddy stood, stretched, and warmed herself closer to the fire.

With arms outstretched, she resumed, “I remember, as a little girl, Jack made me a pair of wooden wings, I’d lie on top of a little wagon and he’d pull me around, to get the feel of flying by using my arms as wings. Once, we bravely climbed half way up the mountain. And yes, the first quarter mile coming down was fun, but we hadn’t thought of how to stop. It was an exciting ride and a rush of adrenalin. Once, we climbed up to the top of the old water tower, and stood with arm wings stretched out, feeling the wind as we looked out over the horizon. Silly beggars that we were.

“Gordon was handy mechanically and woodworking inclined, even he could not repair the broken wings. It was about the same time that I had grown out of the child’s play of wagon and arm wings anyway and was ready to really fly.

“It’s funny. Jack always made sure that I wore pilot and crop dust protection gear; a scarf over my mouth and nose against the crop dusting chemicals. He never did so himself. It might have saved his life. I don’t know. Those chemicals were a nasty business. Revolutionary agriculture; so, we were all led to believe.

“Oh, my goodness, I remember one thanksgiving, everyone pitching in, we bought our own chickens and a year’s supply of beans for baking. Mom always made great homemade bread and jams, so that’s pretty much what we ate. Supplemented of course, with wild game and fish.

“Sometimes farmers would barter for Gordon’s handy man work, then we had oats, flour, and other goodies. The boys all worked extra, seasonal lumbering of cedar and spruce on the mountain ridge to the north. So, we had a good supply of firewood for the cook stove.

“In between off times, Gordon and Dad fished. Jack was not one to stand still fly fishing for more than four minutes.

“Yes, we all worked hard, but all together; six dollars was a lot of money. At times, Rosie and I would have to help stack wood too. A cord is four feet wide, four feet high and eight feet long. It’s funny the details that you remember from a long time ago, but now, half the time I don’t know what day of the week it is!

“One summer, we kids took a job with a farmer. God awful arduous work, it was. We did everything from chopping corn, hauling it into a silo, packing it in tight to cure like tobacco. That old fart’s name was Orville, Orville Senior. Old Orville also had a lot of pigs and a few cows and we’d have to tend to them. We all decided to take no pay, in exchange for a pig or half a cow at season’s end. Old Orville’s father made a small fortune supplying pigs to the service men in WW1. Of course, Old Orville and Orville Junior did the same in WW2, except, expanded to supply the Canadian military and to help U.K. citizens to have their own little community pig pens and piglets, so that they had a supply of protein.

“Anyway, with our pig, Rosie fell head over heels in love with that pig and kept trying to name it. My Mom and Dad were concerned, watching it follow her around like a puppy dog. One evening at the dinner table, Rosie was prattling on about what name she might call it when Dad pounded a fist on the table, startling us all. We’d seen him concerned before, but never like that. Having our attention, he bellowed at Rosie, “Don’t go naming our food, young lady!”

“It was all he said on the matter. We knew his concern for Rosie’s loving compassionate nature and the danger of bonding with a creature that could not be spared to be a pet. Food was precious, and attachment could be traumatic when it came time to slaughter. It was a hard lesson for those who lived so intertwined with nature. I’m not sure that Rosie understood the distinction, ever. It was her compassionate sensitive nature, like our Mom, that would always be her downfall.”

Maddy’s mind silently trailed off, quietly thinking of Rosie. Gloria took the opportunity to toss another log on the fire. The rising sparks startled Maddy out of a reverie.

“Oh, anyway, back to flying. That is what you want to hear, isn’t it?” She glanced at a waiting audience, each quietly gazing in the fire, captured by the unfolding story.

Gloria calmly responded, “Oh Maddy, I can’t remember when I’ve had such a lovely evening. I find your story refreshing. You’re such a breath of fresh air. I am soothed and lulled, ever so relaxed, please go on.”

“I’m sorry if I wander and prattle on. I suppose it’s Old Fart Syndrome. You know, once we get going, we don’t stop until we fall asleep.” She giggled, pleased by the attention and sipped a brandy. Sitting, she gathered thoughts and an access point.

“Old Orville Senior was a tough employer. We worked hard for an end reward. Don’t get me wrong, we were grateful for the work and the food. Another farmer we knew, beat child labourers with a cane. That crusty old man was notorious for paying far less than the agreed upon wage, likely because they were just kids and thought he could get away with it. He’d rant, bellow and complain about shoddy and poor work, then toss a penny instead of a quarter and expect the kids to suck up the payment.

“Those kids would pretend to complain, so the unsuspecting farmer wouldn’t notice that they were stealing a few potatoes, eggs, and apples from him, to make up the difference in pay. We all stole from him, just bits here and there to make sure that no one went home empty handed or hungry. They rarely got caught. It was a tough moral dilemma, the weights and measures of a fair

pay for a respectable job well done. Which one of them was the criminal, farmer or work hands? The workers couldn't go without pay or food, families were near starving, it was that simple. The swindle seemed to work; the old man got farm chores done and those kids took food home.

"It's funny how times change, most adults didn't hesitate to use a strap or cane to discipline a misbehaving youngster. I was lucky to have parents who had another opinion. They never raised a hand to us; they always tried to give a rational explanation and offer choices; so much easier and so much more effective. They were unusual in their parenting, in hindsight, I can see now."

Maddy stood and turned to warm her bottom closer to the fire, "Shakespeare was right, it was the best of times and the worst of times. But we never know how blessed we are or appreciate the good in life until years later, in retrospect."

Bending over, she yawned and rummaged through a grocery bag, "I've blithered on long enough for tonight. I'm getting tired of flapping my lips, and I'm starving. Robert? Can you please get some hot dogs cooking? Oh, and how about some sparklers to celebrate life?"

Watching Robert skillfully remove the wieners from its package and prepare the cooking sticks, Maddy commented, "Oh how things change. We almost never had store bought food. When we absolutely had to, Gordon would do odd jobs for the butcher and Mom bartered his work for cheaper cuts of meat; liver, tongue, and hearts. Blood for blood pudding and sausages. While unappealing to those who could afford better items, Mom was adamant that all the nutrients were concentrated in the cuts she chose. 'Those who had the means were foolish in throwing away the best nutrition', Mom would say.

"Gordon often came home from the butcher with bread rolls stuffed in pockets and under a baggy shirt. The stale bread would have been fed to livestock, so, was he actually stealing it? Home, my Mom would make the most delicious bread puddings. One day, the butcher caught Gordon red handed and laid the boots to him. Gordon managed to break loose, but the man grabbed his shirt and took back some of the rolls. That night, the butcher came to our door with a horse whip, fully expecting Dad to support a beating of Gordon in retribution and discipline.

"Dad blocked the door, already having heard the story and barked back, "It's already been done. He's been disciplined by my own hand. It'll not happen again. Gordon whimpered from inside of the house, adding a little dramatic affect. The man grumbled and retreated with disappointment. We had bread pudding again that night. Especially delicious in the knowing that we had each other's back. Without discussion, Dad had a honour bond to protect the boy who was not of his own blood.

"Jack was stealth at pilfering. In between crop dusting, he taxied supplies to rich investors who explored mining business opportunities in the northern bush and skimmed off supplies. He became adept at the game of poker or simply used his charm to acquire gifts. He'd always come home with real coffee, sugar and other precious goodies."

Eating campfire hotdogs and savouring the moment, Gloria spoke, "My grandfather talked about those days, when I was little. He said that almost everyone had outhouses, and no one wasted money on toilet paper. They used Sears paper catalogs; the size and texture were just right." She grinned, enjoying the memory and moment. "Never the glossy in store catalog."

"Oh, my goodness, yes. We did too. I'm surprised he told you that. It was a common-unspoken truth."

"My Grandpa also stole cow licks, the salt cow licks from farmer's fields, only the white ones."

"Oh, my goodness yes, I recall some kids doing the same." Maddy's face smiled at the criminality of the era and survival comforts.

"Grandpa used to talk about how important shoes were."

"Yes. Yes. Shoes and boots were always hand-me-downs, and when they wore out, we patched them up as best we could. Shoes were how the county was divided; the haves and have nots. Those who wore proper fitting, in-good-condition shoes were the 'haves'. Those of us who went bare foot all summer and wore too big worn out boots in the winter, were the 'have nots'."

Gloria beamed with delighted pride. "My grandmother was handy with sewing, everything was hand made from other items; old blankets became pajamas or nightgowns. She could make a pattern, just by looking at a shirt or take a part a dress and tailor it to fit a different size and shape. She often bartered for eggs and sugar or remedies in exchange for altered clothing."

"Yes, my Mom was also handy that way. Old clothes were cut into shapes to become quilts. Corn husks and feathers became mattress and pillow fillers, with cedar chips added to keep the bugs away. Flour sacks became dish towels and underwear. Everything was used and served a re-purpose. She was our, in house barber, cook, nurse and doctor. My grandmother was the local midwife and knew of medicinal tinctures and herbs. I often thought that my sister Rosie would continue that tradition, had she lived. She did go overseas, as a nurse. That is a story for another time.

"Yes, growing up in the depression, our motto was, 'use it up, wear it out, make do or do without'."

Robert had been quiet, having turned off the phone audio recording app, in synchronistic timing. Maddy finished the last of a hot dog and was now, very full, and sleepy.

Standing, she passed wind, "Oh excuse me folks. Old fart lady is done for the night. I've talked too much and stayed up too late. Carry on without me, enjoy. Oh Lizzy, come and see me when you're ready to do some chores; you, young-woman-child with attitude."

Grinning, Lizzy stretched, openly farted and burped, "You got it Old-Gal-with-attitude. Sweet dreams."

Exhausted, Maddy slipped into an easy chair to take off shoes and drifted off to sleep. In dreams, she recalled Gordon's parents. In attempt to relieve the burden of providing for mouths to feed, left their home to ride the rails, and heading west in search of work that did not exist. Years later they returned, having survived by the gracious adoption of seasoned Hobos who took them in and shared the wit and skills of their trade.

There is a clear distinction, Hobos were a separate breed unto themselves. All were dislocated, unemployed and moral folks who wandered alone or in small groups, seeking work with no place to call home. Gordon's family had ridden in box cars amidst hundreds of men, through Toronto, Sault Saint Marie, Thunder Bay, Kamloops, Moose Jaw even Vancouver.

Grueling tales of slave work camps far in northern British Columbia, horrified a young Maddy. Intended to house and employ thousands of wandering homeless, all wore government issued prison surplus clothing, ate stolen WW1 rations, and lived in tar paper shacks.

Gordon's mother and father eventually earned food and clothing by inspirational guest speaking in churches, unions and labour councils, addressing social problems, teaching philosophy and advocating for those less fortunate. His family values akin to her own family, they quickly became close friends. Values are genetic it seems. While Gordon was a quiet man by nature, he rarely rose to a fight. Yet when an occasion arose, all quieted to hear his stabilizing and wise perspective. People listened.

Jack was descended from a bush pilot who fell in love with an indigenous woman. Roughing it in the bush came naturally for Jack, as well as the call to fly.

Dad and Grandpa rarely spoke of WW1, having assumed it was the last great war, they chose to set the atrocities aside, as though experiencing a bad dream. All were intent on building new lives with families. Perhaps if they had spoken more of it, Maddy's generation may have been more prepared for the atrocities of WW2.

Maddy waking, waved a hand to dismiss the trail of dream thoughts. A young girl's mind could not have fathomed war and combat strategy. A youth centered around Jack and learning to fly, merely to impress, only him.

Innocence is bittersweet, and in a child's mind is a better mind space to linger. Maddy toddled through the hallway, slumped into bed, and drifted into a deep dreamless sleep.

“Knowing and doing what must be done,
dissipates fear.”

Chapter Three ~ Family and Foe

Ladies, dressed casual dress, settled into chairs at the Nursing Home Garden Birthday Party. Lizzy whispered a little too loud to Gloria, “God, they all smell like pills and pee. Gross!”

Gloria blurted, “Shhh . . ., don’t be so rude!”

Maddy snickered, “She’s right, but you do get used to it after a while.”

“How come you don’t smell like that?” Lizzy nudged Maddy affectionately.

“I’m glad to hear that I don’t. Cedar; does the job.”

“Eh?”

“Cedar chips in the house, closets and drawers. I even keep some in cheese cloth, stuffed in my clothes closet.”

“Oh, that’s cool.”

Young Mary wheeled a cart into the centre of the residents and new guests. She seemed to be comfortable and settled into the domestic job.

Sliding a cake onto the patio table, a cranky old woman loudly blurted, “God-damn, how’d I get so old? I’ve had my right breast removed, my eyes balls and moles lasered, a hip and two knees replaced and yet, I still feel like I’m twenty-four on the inside of my brain.”

An old man in a wheelchair woke from snoring and eyed the cake. “Whose birthday is it?” He asked.

Mary raised her voice to accommodate the hard of hearing, “Lydia’s.”

Another woman, chuckled, “By the time I get ready for the day, I’m ready for a nap. You know how it is; I have a coffee, have a bowel movement, wrangle myself into a bra and pants then I still have to hustle my fat arse to the dining room in time for breakfast.”

A well-dressed man with dark sunglasses entered the group and searched for an empty seat with a hand. “I can’t see worth a damn, but I can hear people snore from down the hall,” He smirked, vacant eyes turning to mumbling voices.

Lydia impatiently waiting, focused on the cake, licked lips and lifted a ready fork. “BUTTER UPON BACON; BIG PARTY! BEES KNEES!”

Mary chimed in, “Hold on Lydia, let me serve everyone and then we’ll sing Happy Birthday to you, first. I’ll only be a minute.”

Dejected and impatient, she replied, “BALDERDASH!” Her excited body slumped.

Life as an old fart and light-hearted competition continued, as each strove harder to entertain and make Gloria and Lizzy laugh.

“Shite, I take forty different pills every day, and the nurse complains that I don’t eat all of my supper. How in the hell am I supposed to eat when my stomach is already full of pills?”

“Well, it pisses me right off when the doctors ask me stupid questions, like; who is the Prime Minister of Canada, or what year is it? I told him that he shouldn’t be practicing medicine if he doesn’t know those answers; to go back to school or apply for special needs help,” snapped a woman, her eye lids continuously blinking.

A woman continually wiping a drooling nose grinned and chimed in, "I always ask my granddaughter what day it is, where I live and how old I am; I keep losing track of time. Thank God I still have my car and driver's license though."

The man with the sunglasses adjusted his cane on the back of a chair then elbow nudged the woman beside him, "I've been having a helluva time trying to change my will. I wanna be cremated and have my ashes sprinkled over my wife's cemetery plot, just to irritate her. She always had to get the last word in till the day she died. This way, I'll finally have the last word."

"Whose birthday is it?"

"Lydia's!!!", the group's raised response answered, echoing through the old fart's ears.

The woman with the nose drool piped, "I don't feel this old until I look in the mirror and then all I see is; saggy eye lids, warts, wiry chin hairs and wrinkly skin. But, I'm thinking if I keep over eating, the wrinkles'll just stretch smooth; flatten out."

The blinking woman grinned and winked at the woman beside her, "I'd like to not fart every time I stand up. I think I scared the shite out of my grandson's new girlfriend last Sunday."

"Whose birthday is it?"

"LYDIA'S!!!!!!!!!"

Startled Lydia popped to life, and blurted her own preoccupied thoughts, "SOCK DOLLAGER! I, I, I don't kn, kn, kn, know . . . m, m, m, MAPLE."

A snoring man roused and cupped an ear as though to hear better, "What?"

"M, m, MAPLE." Lydia repeated.

"What?"

Chuckling impatient with the curiosity game, Lizzy rose her voice, "MAPLE!"

"What?"

"MAPLE!!" Lizzy repeated.

"What?"

Mary had been standing, eyes darting back and forth as though watching a tennis match. Impatiently she groaned then with a stop sign hand held up, intervened, "Oh for God's sake everyone. Lydia has a house broken pig, perfectly lovely. A companion. She bought it a few years ago, from Orville Junior, just to get her granddaughter's attention. As it turns out, Maple didn't annoy the granddaughter at all, but has proved to be a wonderfully loving companion. She's unable to care for it here at the nursing home, and her granddaughter lives in the city, a professional working gal, has no time for it. Anyway, its in a foster home. She still must find a new home for it. She'd prefer that the pig not end up back in one of Orville's pens, might end up in slaughter."

Maddy piped, "How big is your pig Lydia?"

Lydia glanced at Mary, who answered for her, "A small dog, a pug; smarter and doesn't bark."

Maddy grinned, "I know a young gal who needs a companion." All eyes turned to the girls as Maddy nudged and pulled out one of Lizzy's head phone ear plugs.

"Wanna pet pig?"

Lizzy scanned the old faces then turned back to Maddy, "Seriously?"

"Seriously!"

Lizzy smiled, then cynically cocked her head, wincing, "How much?"

"I'll take care of the boarding fees and vet checkup. Consider it a birthday gift, since I didn't get you anything for whenever the hell is your birthday. You'll have work to pay for it's food and vet bills from then on. What do you think?"

Lizzy turned to her Nana, Gloria, for approval.

Rolling indecisive eyes, Gloria braced, "I'm actually quite all right with that Honey. I trust that you will live up to the terms. It will take getting used to though; having the responsibility of another life. Are you sure you're up for that?"

Lizzy beamed with delighted eyes.

Lydia, smiled, nodded and pointed approvingly to Lizzy, "CHUCKABOO! BEES KNEES!"

Maddy, added, "I'm sorry Gloria, I should have asked you first."

"Oh, that's all right." Gloria waved a hand.

"We'll go and see Orville Junior at the Farm and Feed store so that you learn about what is needed to take care of Maple."

The girls arrived home to find Robert, legs up on the patio table, laptop open with important paper files spread around. He was reading a familiar old and tattered book.

"Hi Ladies. Look what I found! Maddy, I assume this is your Mother's wildlife art journal. I hope you don't mind that I looked at without asking you first."

Maddy and Lizzy slid into chairs beside him, "No, of course I don't mind. I haven't seen that since before the war. I always figured that Rosie had taken it with her when she moved away."

"Look at how detailed these firefly, dragonfly, porcupine family and bear are."

Smiling, Maddy reached for the book and gingerly ran a hand over the pages as Lizzy looked over her shoulder. "My Mom kept track of all the wildlife down at the river. She really was quite gifted," she said flipping pages. Beautiful sketches and notes of a porcupine family, snakes, deer, a moose, trees, plants, herbs, birds and near the end, sketches of baby Maddy and Rosie.

June 21, 1928: Our River

What we ought to know:

~ We humans are not alone.

~ Life is all around us yet, few humans have the eyes to see the nature life, the ears to hear. If you happen to have the active aspect of the mind that allows this perception, then nature knows who you are and can be companions to you.

~ Our rational mind cannot perceive this realm, with a bit of persistence and practice, the mind hemispheres can be activated to see, hear, and interact with them. (includes but not limited to: water, fish, animals, plants, rock.

~ They have much wisdom, healing, food and knowledge to share

~ They are here to inspire, illuminate and cooperate.

My notes:

~ My research thus far finds that wildlife family clusters tend to stay along river shoreline and forest area.

~ My research indicates a wide variety of species; I have catalogued over forty different animal and plant families or clans.

~ I have thus far, only encountered one wildlife family with a nasty disposition; the porcupines. While appearing delicate, porcupines are quite powerful, of high intellect and possess un-pleasant dispositions.

~ All others make the most amiable of companions.

~ Hence, it is my intent to compile my own river research data for future use, to encourage future generations to reconnect and maintain natural habitation. This is natural law and prophecy of my ancestors.

Maddy paused to reflect, "Well there you go Lizzy, what do you think of that?"

Lizzy looked at Maddy with wide eyes, "Wow! It's beautiful and interesting. May I borrow it? I promise to take super good care of it?"

"No, you can't borrow it."

"Oh, I understand." Lizzy slumped, and disappointed eyes turned away.

"You can't borrow it because it's yours. I have no use for it anymore and no one else to leave it to. I know how much you love the river. It belongs to you. You are now the rightful heir."

"Ohhhh, thanks Maddy Old Gal! This has been the best day ever."

"You are most welcome." Maddy felt a weight lift knowing that Lizzy would indeed appreciate and honour mother's precious work.

Gloria stood, "All right then, if you are finished spoiling my granddaughter," she winked, "May I offer you lovely people dinner?"

Robert grinned, "No thanks, I have roast beef and salads already made. Please join us."

Gloria returned with a pitcher of Long Island Iced Tea in hand, Lizzy with a new notebook under one arm.

"What's the notebook for, kid?" Robert asked.

"Oh, I've just decided to start taking notes of everything happening around here with Maddy. My own art journal book, like Maddy's mother." She turned to Maddy, "Who was your hero?"

"Oh my, well first there was my family, but, I'd have to say Jack. And Jack worshipped Billy Bishop, though I've always admired Amelia Earhart."

"Who is Earhart?" Lizzy pushed for an answer.

"Well, Lady Lindy as she was known, was the first female pilot to fly across the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific. In the late nineteen thirties. Amelia inspired me partly because she didn't follow the status quo, broke many aviation records, and wrote about her flying adventures. She was respected as an aviation expert."

"Whatever happened to her?"

"Well, I think it was in nineteen thirty-seven; story has it that she kept having mechanical problems with the plane through out an attempted around the world flight. No one knows for sure, whether it was mechanical, pilot or crew error. The Pacific Ocean portion of the flight must have been grueling; South America, Africa, Indian Ocean, New Guinea and stops because of terrible diarrhea, dysentery and repairs. Choosing to make space for more fuel, she took out the parachutes to lighten the load. After twenty thousand miles, with another seven thousand miles to go, she headed to Hawaii from Australia, using the stars to assist with navigation. They had maps, sun position and compasses with some access to the Coast Guard. Over desolate water, the plane would have some buoyancy in the event of a crash and a rubber dingy. Some experts believe that Amelia was off course and scrambling to a target tiny island pit stop. Fuel was nearly empty, and they could not find an air strip. Search and Rescuers assumed they crashed into the ocean and then about twenty years ago, they found plane parts; speculating that she had crash landed on a desolate island."

"Wow!" Lizzy gasped, "Sounds like my kind of woman."

"Yes. Yes, she was. Of course, she was a master aviator. I, on the other hand, was just a glorified air taxi driver."

Lizzy scribbled down notes, as Gloria poured coffee. Robert took mental notes and asked pertinent questions, "You must have picked up unique skills somewhere?"

"I suppose I owe most of it to Jack. You see, in those early days with new chemicals flooding the agricultural market place, claiming to rid crops from the destruction of insects and weeds; miracle-grow products, Jack was in his glory. During the end of the Great Depression, his work flourished. A regular pay cheque and doing what he most loved to do, he became quite a famous guy. He was so handsome and charming that people treated him like a movie star, everywhere he went. He could have chosen any one of the girls in the county, yet, unknown to anyone other than our family, he naturally leaned toward the male gender. This was a taboo subject, and no one openly talked about it. Jack tried to appear heterosexual because it was certainly safer. He always had pretty gals chasing after him, not just me, even married women. So, he had charisma but, more.

"While we were in the air, Jack always ensured that I wore gloves and covered my face with a handkerchief, yet he never took similar precaution. It was only later in years, as I was growing older, that I understood that underneath the charm and charismatic smile, lay the hidden secret

pain of homosexuality, in an era where like persons could have been imprisoned or murdered. He was accosted and badly beaten once. I didn't know any better. Later, I came to realise that his dare deviling was, a death wish.

"Jack could fly low, dusting apple orchards; always unprotected, spraying potent and poisonous arsenates. That's just one of the nasty chemicals they used to kill the moths and tent caterpillars that destroyed crops. So skilled, he could nearly touch the crop tops, and a master at chemical drifting; the ability to drift sideways into the wind so that chemicals land on crops. I remember when another crop duster in the next county, snagged a power line with the plane's tail hook and cut off power to the entire community. Anyway, after the first world war, there was a surplus of planes and pilots, so the big farm companies hired men like Jack.

"Many of the WW1 pilots that didn't crop dust, became daredevil flying acts and every country fair had plane rides. It was socially stylish and vogue to join a flying club or go for a ride in one, for those who had money."

Maddy's thoughts silently drifted.

The sun began to set, and Robert plugged in the evening patio lights then wrapped a blanket around her legs. "So, how is it that you joined the war effort and went overseas, Old Gal?"

"Oh well, I think it was the news; another world war was about to explode, but most people were still reeling after WWI and the depression. Europe and several other countries were already heated with threat of war. Work, good food, and resources were still scarce. Here in Canada, everyone's grandfather, uncles, brothers, cousins, and friends were still attempting to adjust to a normal life at home; many retaining post-traumatic stress, and many more were physically disabled. Times were tough, without having to think of participating in someone else's war overseas.

"I suppose it made perfect sense to me at the time, that since I spent time with Jack in the crop duster and had acquired my own accumulated air time and a pilot's license, that I could go. Jack couldn't go because of his bad lungs. Because I adored him, I offered myself, in his place. Besides, I was a young woman, and finding an employer here at home interested in hiring a female pilot, was virtually impossible. The best job I could acquire was a part-time airport office clerk; almost no paperwork, just cleaning, making coffee and sandwiches for the male staff.

"You see, we did not have electricity and only wealthy people went to the moving picture shows where they ran news reels first, before a movie. It was newspapers photographs and articles that kept the rest of us up to date on the growing war situation overseas. Gordon, Rosie and I gradually made the choice. Jack desperately wanted to enlist, but the effects of the crop dust chemicals had already taken a toll on him. He often spit blood during coughing fits, and regularly had to be hospitalized. Of course, he couldn't pass a medical physical. He could barely function in the air.

"Gordon was the first to enlist. One day without word, announced over dinner that he was heading to the East Coast for Navy training. We were all shocked. A month later, a news photograph showed bomber pilots taking out a German tank and freeing a civilian village from occupation. I was intrigued, young and naïve. I wanted to make Jack proud of me, to impress him. Oh, I remember the arguments in our house, 'There is no getting around it Maddy, the Canadian Military doesn't want women flyers. It will never happen. You'd only be packing parachutes, filing paperwork or cooking. It's not safe and no place for you; a young woman without military experience. That is it!' my father was adamant.

"Rosie, the indomitable care giver, fantasied herself as a Florence Nightingale nurse. So many wounded soldiers; all of them heroes; she was needed, overseas. She had been assisting Mom with all things pertaining to health and medical since being a tiny tot, though not a qualified professional. I always worried, we all worried about her. We all thought, if anyone could go and survive, it'd be Gordon. He could take care of himself for the most part, but Rosie had already been through a terrible assault ordeal at the hands of Pastor Jacob that she hadn't recovered from. Not

wanting to be left out or left behind, I saw myself in the sky, protecting Rosie's medical unit on land and Gordon's ship at sea. In the naiveté of youth, I thought I could change the rules and do it.

"I was unrelenting; there had to be a way. After Rosie left with assurances of promising to write every day, I was even more determined. Aside from Jack, who was in the capable hands of a nurse gal pal, the two people that I loved the most were already heading overseas and further away from home.

"Glued to newspapers, I prayed for an answer. It was in January when Jack and I heard that the British Air Force had been conducting a female pilots experiment. They were expanding the program and hiring women from the commonwealth. This was an answer to my prayers, and I thought I had to go.

"Be careful what is wished for, for I was so naïve." Maddy sighed, "So there you have it, I had wished for a way and it appeared. I remember the big burly recruiting officer laughing and telling me that I was a 'fanciful ridiculous thing, a five-foot something girl who couldn't possibly handle a plane. Go home, little girl', he said. I was so angry, I said, 'Oh Ya? Well then, just try me!'

Robert snickered, "Yes, I can see that, you, the little spit fire!"

"I confess, it was hard. Very hard. Flying just was not a role that anyone expected a woman to take on. For me, I liked the peaceful feeling of floating among the clouds; a divine heaven. It also gave me opportunities to show off to Jack.

"If you recall world history, it was on December seventh in nineteen-forty-one when Japan attacked the US, at Pearl Harbour. It seemed the entire world was at war again. We were all anxious because there was Hitler; a power hungry mad man who seemed ruthless.

"During the R.A.F.; British Royal Air Force, Air Auxiliary basic training, I flew a variety of old beat-up planes from air bases to air strips where the men pilots would then take the planes into war zones.

We went through the same flight training as men, except faster because we weren't official military personnel and not expected to fly into action. Single engine planes with open cockpits at first. There was a requirement of at least thirty-five hours of airtime, know the gist of the mechanics of the aircraft and of course, the lingo. With my hand on the stick and my feet on foil metal controls, I was comfortable flying. There were many skilled women, and I thought I wasn't going to make the cut, until the Instructor said, 'Well, son of a gun, you passed the test!'

"Truthfully? I was nervous taking my first solo flight. It was in a plane that I was not familiar with, worse, another gal had just died in a plane crash. I was shaken and got a bit dizzy; once I was up in the clouds alone and enjoying the smooth purring silence, life was okay.

"We had to carry our own parachute, damn things were bloody heavy. I detested the thought of ever having to use one because the harness was a one-size-fits-all and for an average man. I was worried that I'd just slide right through the damn thing.

"I was, at the time, proud that out of thousands of women that had applied, I was one of only a thousand applicants, to make the cut. You must understand that there was no glory whatsoever. We were never employed or classified as military personnel per-say, always civilians; just civil service employees, unranked taxi drivers.

"We had to have thick skin and a sense of humour. We were labeled inferior to men. That's just the way it was back then. Some of the girls were not treated well because someone had spread rumours that we were military prostitutes, all venereal diseased and one angry townswoman, spit in my friend's face.

"Most pilots had flight experience, though none of us had military experience other than a few weeks of basic training. There were a lot of old patched up junk planes still in use, and a lot of pilots died when the planes failed. One girl lost a roommate and was assigned to deliver the girls body back overseas to grieving parents.

"It really was rather cosmopolitan though, many cultures and skin colours, certainly there was no class distinction, that mattered amongst us fly-girls.

"I often worked as a janitor in the air hangar, because most senior male veterans were given first dibs on flights. We were given our first run each morning and filled in the rest of the day at each destination, as we went. I flew Finches, Cubs, Tiger Moths, and a Harvard once. Some of us flew loaded bombers."

Maddy fell silent, thoughts disassociating away from the inevitable trail toward the crash.

"We were doing a job. It was just a taxi job, no glory and no accountable reward."

"Above the clouds, we often had to rely on instrument flying and that was a challenge, when requiring radio silence. At times, I couldn't see a thing through fog. At the air base in Hamble, the south of England, there were always so many in bound planes that we'd often have to keep circling until we saw an opening. Down, we'd have to wait for a taxi jeep and then follow him into a parking spot."

"It's funny what I remember; we had to dress like a lady always when going to our base, or leaving. Some of us wore our lady modesty gloves and dress hats. In fact, most of us gals showed up to our first day of training dressed to the tee; wearing dresses, nylons, heels and make up."

"It was hard when we went on leave, or when permanently sent home, we had to find and pay our own way."

"After the war, the military boys had free transportation home and to reassume reserved jobs. Some stayed on in the military by re-enlisting. Early in the war, Gordon had considered staying in the forces, thinking he might want to become a Frog Man; a diver. I'm ever so glad that he returned home instead."

"Anyway, unlike me, many of the air girls around the world assumed a role of fighting for equal rights, pay equity, a veteran's status and acknowledgment."

Lizzy wrote furiously, keeping stride with the old woman's words.

"You know Robert, I've never really spoken about my time flying, because it was no big deal. Only when looking back now that I see that maybe I was a little different. There were so many others, stronger in spirit than me. One gal became a lawyer, she was a maverick then and now."

"I should admit; I still don't care to think of my little stint in the war."

"Anyway, I was just damned grateful to be home and on solid ground. My inner compass always directed me to that feeling of family and sitting by the river."

"I never flew again, after the crash, never inclined to. I never had a mind to and I didn't keep up with the flying vocation or military service. I suppose I didn't want to re-live war events and emotions of the accident, or the true cause of it. I didn't have the stomach for the substance of the war afterwards. It had been such a short part of my life once, a powerful time, yet, a brief amount of time. Usually, it seems to be a foggy dream, not real in my life now, dreams that I once had. At times, I felt bad for not remaining more involved in the women's flying movement. Today, I'm glad that I left history making to the women mavericks who have made changes, and advances."

"Looking over my past, I see the difference is, not to care what other people think, it's following what makes your heart soar. Maturing, brings the knowledge that you can do just about anything, if you follow through. Sometimes, when achieving a goal or dream, you can change your mind and that's okay too."

"I was homesick a second after arriving and would rather have, well, wish I had been home for Mom and Dad, been there for Jack and Rosie. I used to get so annoyed when I was growing up, if Mom asked me to do something extra. One day, I was in a rush to get to the airstrip and she pleaded with me to collect rose hips with her. She was fully capable of doing this herself and could have asked Rosie. I was so annoyed that I huffed off. I didn't see it at the time, but she just wanted to spend some quality time with me. I wish I could take that back, I would give anything to spend lost time for a single afternoon with her, now."

Annoyed with the guilty memory and longing for loved ones, Maddy abruptly stood, "I'm thirsty, and I have to pee."

Concerned, for Maddy's strength, Robert quipped, "Wait, are you too tired? Has all of this worn you out?"

"No Love. Make us some fresh energy coffee and I'll be right back."

Maddy returned and sat down comfortably in a seat. A little disorientated, she stared at the young girl. "Hey kid, what are you writing about?"

Lizzy seemed confused by the blunt tone, "I told you earlier, I want to make my own notes of all the stories floating around here."

"Oh. Oh yes, I remember."

Changing the subject and respectfully shifting the focus away from the woman's momentary memory loss, Robert chimed in, "So, how exactly was it that you were able to keep your spirit intact with being away from home and the crash memories? How did you spare yourself the terrible after effects of the war?"

Chuckling and relieved, "You'll laugh at my antics."

"Go on, tell me. I really want to know what it is that makes you the indomitable Maddy."

"Magic."

"What?" Robert was taken by surprise.

"Well, each morning when I wake, usually grumpy and groggy, I sit on the side of my bed, first, trying to hold my pee, because I have to wait for my mind bearings to kick in, so I don't pass out. I look for my good mood, call it in and spread it through my day. I wave my arms around as though I am powerfully clearing my mind of all the bad in the world, and then fill it up with only good thoughts."

"Seriously?", Robert shrugged quizzically.

"Young man, I've never told another living soul this. I am absolutely, one hundred percent, serious. I am honour bound to do this every day. I owe my life and blessings to the many others who have died before me and so, cannot squander my life."

"Wow! I've never heard that one before." Lizzy scratched her head.

"No, I get it! I do something similar," Gloria supported, then took in a deep breath and slumped comfortably.

"For most of my life, supposedly I choose to emulate Jack; go with the flow and avoid being caught in a nose dive and die. Stay focussed and aim for updrafts and high winds. Maybe I picked it up from my Mom, she wasn't a church goer, but she did commune with the nature of life.

"Truthfully, it was after Gordon died, and I was left alone to endure my own miserable company. I had to do something to shake myself out of misery. The house and my days were so damned empty and depressing as hell. Survival just kind of came to me one morning and the sensation felt marvelous. Some mornings waking up needing to pee so bad, and forget to do my little magic, then find myself in a poopy mood all day, catch myself and I remember to commune. Works damn near every time. Of course, when I do it, life feels wonderful, like flying solo above the clouds, free and in sync with the all that is."

"Wow, Maddy Old Gal, you're really something," Lizzy boasted.

Maintaining a serious expression, Maddy countered, "No, I'm not. There is not a dam single thing that is special about me, above anyone else." Her tone resonated hard.

Robert's hands rose to present a stop sign. "Okay, okay, we hear you. Don't get your old gal knickers in a twist." With a voice light and humourous, he altered a mood change in Maddy.

Maddy shifted, watching Gloria light a smoke, admiring the woman's natural beauty, before continuing, "Exposure was irksome, we always had media people hanging around and snapping pictures of the pretty ones, writing war propaganda by using us. We were constantly told by the higher ups, to look like a pretty lady at all times and smile." She grimaced a dramatic fake smile.

"War is an unfathomable horror and no amount of putting a pretty face on or hero'ing people makes it anything less than a tragic war. Do you get that?"

“Yes ma’am,” Robert blurted. “We do. While we’re on a roll, tell me about the crash.”

“No. I’m going to enjoy a cup of coffee.”

All eyes seemed disappointed.

“Well, what else is there that stands out about that time, other than the crash. Hmm . . . Well, I think it’s important to remember how daily activities were for us. At the movies, thoughts occurred to me one day, that Hitler had spent the first twenty years of my life, raging revenge upon all who he considered responsible for the devastated German economy and a WW1 war-ravaged country. He was madder than a hornet and hell fury intent on amassing a world dominant military force, like the world had never seen before, or would in the future. We never knew how bad it was over there until years after the war. His madness manifested in the mass genocide of four million lives, mostly Jews, who he blamed for monopolizing the German economy. He had a ferocious appetite for power and conquering, furiously destroying and assimilating resources and assets. Insatiable, he openly voiced a personal hatred in media clips, of a distaste of Jews and pacifists. Movie clips demonstrated his military strategy with sense of dirt pits filled with the dead and using submarines to sink any ship including civilian passenger ships. Audiences were gasping and reeling in their seats from the horrific images implanted into our psyches. German propaganda hinted that Canada and America would be next.

“Jack had repeated over the years, ‘There’s lots of crazy rabid people in the world Maddy. Don’t give them too much attention and don’t be afraid; respectful but not afraid. If you find yourself cornered by one of them, do what-ever you must do to get yourself out of it. It’s not a time to surrender, rabid dog fight if you must. You can’t spend time thinking about consideration or worrying about them. Don’t ever allow fear of what others are saying crawl into your soul. You gotta know what doesn’t belong to you. You can’t fix crazy and if you spend too much time trying to figure them out, or try to outsmart them, you become their kind of crazy and it’s damn near impossible to get the hate out of you, once it’s crawled inside of a person’s darkness.’

“Gordon didn’t know, none of us knew just how bad the European situation was, until years after the war.”

Maddy strained to steer away from detailing atrocities, of the millions of prisoners gassed. To separate herself from the fear and horror, she strove to give plain facts, and what her role in the war effort was. Noticing that everyone was quiet, and that Lizzy’s eyes were horrified, Maddy felt suddenly embarrassed. “Oh, I’m sorry. I’ve said too much.”

Gloria cut the tension, “Yes, I think we’ve all had enough for one day. Maddy, you don’t need apologize. It was, what it was; and the truth must be told.”

Shaking the gruesome madness of war off, Maddy added, “Let’s promise, no more evening endings this way. Tomorrow and forward, let’s lighten up and have more fun.”

Maddy stood then hesitated, turned around and poignantly added, “You’re asking how we got through the wars and depression, or how I got through so much, I think this little parable sums it.

“Once upon a time, a long time ago, there were two monks walking one day through a thick fog. They both stumbled and fell off a cliff. One monk wildly screamed, kicked, and flailed arms around, fighting the inevitable, wildly and madly. The other monk noticed a plant growing out of an outcropping, and calmly and delightfully said to his mate; ‘Oh, look there’s a strawberry! How lovely’.”

The first battle is waged inside –
knowing what must be done,
is my conscience.”

Chapter Four ~ The Call of Duty

The next morning, with Robert away, Maddy, Gloria and Lizzy headed for the air strip outside of town. The original viewing tower and hanger had long been replaced with a newer plaza style one, low and modern.

Spreading out a picnic blanket, in view of the sprawling air field, Maddy’s memories slam landed on injustice that fateful day years ago.

“Pastor Jacob assaulted Rosie when she was only twelve years old. I was with Jack that day. Usually, Rosie followed me around like a shadow, especially if Mom was busy. Since she wasn’t hanging off my dress hem that morning, I assumed she was with Mom. Gordon and Dad were working at the lumber mill.

“I had such a crush on Jack. I had noticed that the girls in town were circling in on him, vying for his hand in marriage. Everyone loved Jack. I woke up early and decided on this morning that I was going to head the other girls off at the pass. I figured that since I was the closest gal to him, that I’d get a promise out of him first. I thought, I was the rightful heir to be his wife. So, I headed out to the airstrip in a pretty Sunday dress with a ribbon in my hair and some of Mom’s rose water dabbed on wrists and behind clean ears. I felt grown up, womanly gorgeous, and irresistible. I was a young woman, hell-bent on a mission. No one had seen Jack yet that day. It was odd. One of the hangar crew said he thought he saw Jack’s bicycle on the trail behind the lumber yard.

“The trail led half way up to the mountain where I knew that Jack and some other boys had been building a still, intent on getting rich making corn-whiskey.

“I shouldn’t have gone there, knowing my parents would have a fit, if they knew. A lot of rough characters from the next county had heard about the still and were beginning to hang around, trying to get a piece of the action. It wasn’t like me to not take the time to let Mom or Dad know where I was or know for sure where Rosie was. But, I was dressed pretty and, on a mission, thinking it wouldn’t matter, just this one time. Isn’t that always the way?

“Well, I found Jack’s bike and hiked for nearly an hour toward the still hut. I hid behind cedar brush, checking to make sure none of the rough men were there. I remember hearing a terrible sound, like a groaning bear cub, so I stayed hidden for a while, kind of scared. I heard voices in the distance, so I crept further along the trail and saw six rough unruly looking young men, sitting around a campfire pit, drunk, drinking moonshine out of one of Jacks jugs. I waited until one tried to stand and zig zag behind a tree to pee. He slumped and passed out, still peeing, on himself. The rest of the characters hooted and hollered. A few more, stretched out on their backs, half snoring in a drunken slumber.

“I couldn’t see any sign of Jack, so I slowly backed away and headed for the still hut. I heard that moaning sound again as I got closer to hide behind some brush. This time I knew that the moaning was a person, maybe sick or hurt. I knew it was Jack as soon as I heard his whisper. Seeing no one nearby or hiding, I slid into the hut to find Jack curled on the floor. He was badly beaten, blood was caked on his forehead and his pants were undone.

"I've never told another living soul this, but Jack had mistaken a stranger's intention as possible attraction. You see, he was homosexual, and in those days having the wrong person know what your natural preferences are, could be deadly. He couldn't walk. He had a few broken ribs from being kicked. I found out later, worse, one of the attackers had shoved a shovel handle up his rectum; torn tendon tissue and mangled his gonads. I didn't want to risk leaving him there like that. I had to get my Dad and Gordon, in case whoever had done it returned to finish the assault.

"I helped him slide into a wheel barrow and covered him with a canvas tarp. It took me two hours to slowly push the barrow down the trail to the lumber mill. I hid Jack behind brush at the bottom of the trail before finding Dad and Gordon. Luckily Dad had a truck and sent Gordon off to fetch a doctor. I knew that Jack might still be in danger and I worried. So, I told Dad about the rough characters and what had happened. Dad didn't say a word, just clenched his jaw shut, absorbing the facts and visual results. I knew he was angry, not with Jack, but against those that had done this dirty deed.

"Once home and having settled Jack into a bed, we waited for the doctor to arrive. When Mom bolted through the door with Rosie wrapped in a blanket in protective arms, we noticed her eyes wild with tears.

"Rosie's face was red, and tear stained, silently sobbing.

"Pastor Jacob had lured Rosie down to the river to rescue a new puppy. He had said that the puppy had gotten trapped in fishing line and was in big trouble. Normally, Rosie would never wander off, certainly not without family. Compassion can sometimes be a trap, as it was on this day. He had pleaded, that it was an emergency and needed her help to rescue the pup, and only a compassionate child could help.

"The doctor arrived and advised that both had been sexually defiled and needed restrained understanding and much rest. Rosie and Jack, never spoke of what had happened to them ever from that day forward.

"Mom was beside herself, I took Rosie to bathe and comforted her through sleep that night. I wasn't going to let her out of my sight again.

"Mom and Dad sat at the kitchen table long into the night. I heard Dad fire up the truck after midnight. After that, no one ever spoke directly of the incidents.

"A day later, Dad confided that he had conscripted young Gordon, Orville Junior, and a few trusted neighbourhood friends to accompany him up the mountain. In the dark of night, void of detection they circled and roughed up the characters at the campsite, using canes and two by twos in hands. They rendered their gonads and knees into submission, incapable of further function. They would not be able to have the nerve to attack anyone again. Once finished with the assault, Dad and friends destroyed the still.

"Now Pastor Jacob, needed a different strategy, being a so-called holy man under church protection.

"Over the next morning's breakfast coffee, many of the community folks had stealthily showed up in our kitchen. I hid in the stairway, listening to the whispering hushed voices debate various concerns about Jacob, and strategies on how to deal with him. The one thing that they all agreed on was that no one would ever reveal that they knew anything about the incident with Rosie or of their own children. Pastor Jacob had a fake smile, and was always inserting himself inside of everyone's business. He had powerful church connections and their backing support, which meant that he would have legal resources that none of us had. He would deny it all in the name of serving the church and would be protected. After all, for those who didn't know what we knew about him, who would not believe a man of God? While calling the police and his superiors seemed the most moral and proper thing to do, there was still the question of what children would be targeted next. It was pointed out, that he carried and projected the confidence of one immune to accountability by the law and the church. In fact, his altercations with community children had been escalating with violence, hiding behind a philosophy of children ought to remain silent with strict discipline.

“Throughout the next morning, ambling through town as though nothing was amiss, Pastor Jacob set about a morning ritual; taking food and households goods from each household and the stores. His confidence in taking whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted it, was boldly growing. Carrying a bible under an arm, he expounded unwanted and unwarranted advice upon families, under the guise of hell fire and damnation. Families who were dirt poor hungry were not spared his wrath. People were afraid, which only served to empower himself. We all saw glimpses of pure evil in his eyes. There was no compassion, nor giving of goods to the poor. There was no respect for community elders nor the vulnerable.

“It was expected of community members to give the local clergy free food and supplies. This was not new nor discouraged by other clergy who came and went over time. Tithing was normal, but shared and all usually benefitted.

“Thus, it was that a unanimous decision whispered through the community and was supported even by the elders, so the pastor wouldn’t have cause to be suspicious. Old Orville and the butcher had laced his bacon and meat with Salt Peter. If you know anything about it, it’s potassium nitrate, used as tree stump removal, fertilizer, gun powder, rocket propellant and fireworks. In the middle ages, it was used as a food preserver. In WW1, the military put it in the soldiers’ tea and coffee, to reduce randiness, you know; diminish sexual prowess. The Germans fed it to their soldiers, when used as a table salt, it turned eggs green. Corrections fed it to prison inmates, institution patients and teenaged boys, for the same reason.

“One woman baked a cake with crushed moldy nuts, the mold would cause liver failure or cancer. Mom baked a cake laced with cyanide and tucked it into a basket with a jar of jam. The jam had mold, so she stirred in the slimy black mold, to hide it. The botulin spores were sure to incite a massive stroke, rendering him useless. Gordon told me once that he laced trout with lead.

“No one ever saw the pastor again after a week. Dad and Gordon took turns watching the pastor’s house and keeping an eye out. It must have taken great restraint for them to not give the pastor a beating, or worse.

“Over time though, more people slowly came forward to Mom and Dad, confiding incidences within their own families and thus confessed to administering a wide variety of toxins and chemicals into his dinner. Blankets used by children with chicken pox and red measles were gifted into his home. Several women came forward sharing another woman’s concerns, who caught him acting overly familiar with her own daughter, then assaulted her, in their own wood shed. She had spoken to her husband about it and then hearing of Rosie’s plight, he snuck into Pastor Jacobs house and stuffed his cooking stove pipe with a mixture of flammable chemicals. A fire bomb waiting to happen. The house eventually did burn to the ground.

“The whole situation had been discussed behind closed doors in everyone’s house. Mom calmly stating one evening at dinner, that those who took it upon themselves to help stop him were those families who had either been defiled or were aghast at the possibly of him continuing. Their deeds for retribution were exempt from God’s holy wrath. Those who spoke against Rosie’s honour, surely were prevented or perhaps, guilty of doing similar deeds behind closed doors. God herself would be watching.

“Mom believed that God was a woman, the earth mother and would not tolerate, anything less than the utmost respect. It was a stupid man who thought no one knew of Pastor Jacobs dirty deeds; the earth mother sees all and knows all. Eventually, all must face the wrath of the earth mother and repent for their dirty deeds.

“A few months later, when Rosie was ready to return to school, a bully boy teased and taunted her at recess. Jack, Gordon, Old Orville Senior, and Orville Junior set the bully straight by the end of the day. Since the principal was standing neutral on the subject, he too was given a terse lecture from Old Orville. In time, without signs of Pastor Jacobs presence and the murmuring puttered to a stop, other community dramas took over.

“Wars overseas were heating, and another world war was brewing.”

Maddy finished a sandwich and laid stretched out on a blanket to cloud gaze.

"I'm talking too much, and that Pastor Jacob business gets me all fired up inside, as though it was yesterday. I've wrestled with the guilt of leaving Rosie alone that day, throughout my life."

Lizzy stretched out on the blanket beside the old woman as Gloria spoke, "Yes, I understand how you feel. I could not prevent my husband's illness nor stop the car accident any more than you could have been in two places simultaneously that day. Perhaps Rosie may have been spared Jacob's dirty doings that day, but maybe, he would have found another day. Besides, no one would have been there to save your cousin Jack, he may well have been killed. Bad things happen to good people, there is no rationale that can make it right. It doesn't make it any easier though, does it?"

Maddy squinted, eyeing the woman, "You're a damn fine woman Gloria. I am ever so glad you moved here."

"Me too," she smiled.

Maddy grinned, "Jack was quite the charming character. By the time, Jack turned fifteen, he could easily pass for a twenty-year-old seasoned expert crop dust flyer. We were regulars at the airstrip over the years and I worked part time there; cleaning, doing clerk jobs, making coffee, and paying my way through flight instruction, air time and licensing. While Jack never outwardly indicated that the assault had ever happened, in hindsight, I can see how the incident damaged his sanctity. Despite heavy drinking, he took pride in mentoring me, for a while. My first job was to spin the propeller. Instructions included the risky aspect of how to fly under telegraph wires, under bridges, chase cars and once, how he tried to land atop a moving train.

"Farms and orchards needed pesticides and fertilizers sprayed thirteen to fourteen times a year, once every five days. Jack was often headachy, fevered and straining against blurred vision. He needed the whiskey in a chest flask, he said it was medicinal. I had thought at the time, the stress was from the humiliating incident, it had not occurred to anyone of us that he was slowly being poisoned by the harsh chemicals.

"Jack's flying hero Billy Bishop and a copilot, stumble landed onto our town's air strip one afternoon, having missed the runway on landing. He was never good at landing at the best of times, or anywhere. All four of us kids had been sitting on a fence watching and quickly ran and heaved the plane, righting it onto the runway. Famed as a World War one flying ace and Air Marshall, the shy man stood before us, sun casting a light shadow around him, presenting an aura of bigger than life presentation. Jack was awestruck and stumbled for words. I just grinned and reached out a hand to shake. He removed a glove, shook and chatted, smiling at my aspirations. The moment had far greater impact on me than Jack. With simple respect, Billy Bishop neither patronized me nor my dreams.

"At the beginning of the WW2, only a few of the trades had opened for women; office clerk, phone operator, driver, seamstress, hairdresser, hospital assistant, instrument mechanic, parachute rigger, photographer, air photo interpreter, intelligence officer, instructor, weather observer, pharmacist, wireless operator, and service police. Of course, I wasn't interested in any of those positions. When the Royal Air Force advertised a shortage of flyers, I signed on as a civilian, joining the Air Auxiliary.

"With a crop dusting license in hand, just as regulations were lifted to allow women flyers into military flight instruction, I was called to the East coast. Since Rosie was an innate caregiver, she trained as a nursing assistant the Canadian Army Medical Corp and was sent overseas to work in a French military hospital.

"For general recruitment, women had to be between twenty-one and forty-one years old, pass medical tests, be at least five feet tall, be of normal weight, have been accepted to high school,

pass a trade aptitude test, be of good character, unmarried without children under her care and not hold a permanent civil service appointment.

“The training barracks held eight hundred air service women. There were dance and movie nights. Basic training included drill, deportment, discipline, service customs, etiquette, and regulations. During the frigid winter, many slept in uniform to keep warm, I padded my mattresses with newspapers while others stayed warm playing baseball and skating. Instruction in proper hygiene, how to wear long hair, shine shoes and boots, maintain uniforms and of course, behavior and decorum. We were to look like a professional woman, act like one; especially with senior officers and the public. Two hours each day, were devoted to physical fitness, as well as drills and saluting superiors. We were assigned tarmac and hangar duties; cleaning, counting nuts and bolts and painting. In-class instruction included, meteorology, map navigation, aircraft mechanics and aerodynamics.

“I remember anxiously waiting to go overseas, lingering in the air base hangar, absorbing facts and preparing myself for a new job abroad. An impromptu gathering formed one afternoon, as a seasoned burly Sergeant assumed centre. A natural hush of respect spilled over the crowd as he spoke.”

‘There are two thousand miles of ocean ahead to cross gents! Memorize the smell of your machine’s oil, gas, and hydraulic fluid, which will become a habit to do prior and during all flights. You can tell a lot about what plane is and its condition by the odours. And, you will learn to fly solely on the sounds your bird makes.’

“The Sergeant surveyed the crowd, inventorying his audience, adjusting his address to each as well as offer an overall picture of the war at hand. His pep talk, aiming to ready the crowd for what they were flying into. The burly man barked rather than talked, for an hour straight.

“The man had obviously seen a great deal of action and this was a personal way of imparting wisdom. Quoting Prime Minister Mackenzie King, as Canucks our role was to be ‘democratic’. Air transporters would be ferrying aircraft, war supplies, personnel, and food. There were seasoned men among the group who had done tours in World War I, returning to duty for WW2, less out of duty and more for the pay cheque after having found no progressive opportunities during the interim. The new young boys with eyes aglow, chattered about seeing the world, free from their pasts and home responsibilities.

“Like Gordon, Rosie, and I, most of the Canucks had no military experience in battle. For a flyer, the challenge would be to find a way to fight smart, against a highly skilled and war minded dark enemy. There were climate and cultural differences to adjust to, and equipment was different from basic training relicts. There was a warning that we would have to adjust fast, finding ourselves in cold wet front line trenches, heat stroked in Sicily or bobbing in the freezing waters of the North Atlantic. We were warned to not write letters back home whining of conditions and morale, lest the letter find its way into enemy hands or upset loved ones back home. We were told to always aim for showing a good front, that alone could be enough to tip the scales of the war in our favour.

“An older pilot sat beside me and cynically snickered then whispered, ‘Once you’re in the thick of it, you won’t want to write home at all; it’s too gruesome and you’ll be too busy. You’ll be spending all your waking thoughts and dreams, dashing in and out of chaos; they shoot at you and we bomb the shit out of them. I know a lot of good solid personnel who’ve lost their hair, just from the stress of being in the thick of it.’

“I strived to distance and separate myself from the fear. Jacks words were a whisper in my ear.

“As though adopting me and assuming to be my mentor, the older pilot’s tone softened, and a hand reached out to shake mine, ‘I’m Roy.’

“Instantly, I had the sense that he was a man of wisdom and insight, I gladly accepted his handshake, ‘I’m Maddy,’ I said.

“There was something about the man that reminded me of Jack. ‘One thing you’ve gotta know, even in the Auxiliary, there’ll be times when you’re caught in a corner. The Germans’ll spit bullets ahead of the plane. You’ve got to navigate through that stream. You’re trapped in that stream, getting hit in the plane’s fuselage, fuel tanks and hydraulics, it’s their strategy. I’ve known a few flyers who’ve found themselves so shell-shocked that they’d fly out and hide out of range, avoiding their assigned targets completely.

“When you find yourself in the sites of the enemy, fly high, hide in the clouds and circle around so that they’re blinded by the sun. Instinct and experience’ll be your saving grace. The Rangers and fighter birds’ll climb, dip and scan for predator aircraft. There’ll always be one of them around, so keep your eyes peeled for them, know where they are at all times. You’ll likely be transporting a lot of old beaten birds, flying coffins. But, we’ve got to fix them as best we can and use them. They still come in handy, especially at night and in black outs.’

“Roy rolled a handmade cigarette then tucked it on top of an ear and under the cap. I waited, hoping for more, hanging on to every word; growing in respectful admiration for the man.

“Strike hard, strike sure. We’re taking out airfields, rail lines, oil refineries and unfortunately, inhabited villages. I’ve flown spitfires, but mostly I do bombers now.’ Roy grinned, ‘The aircraft crew on the ground, get to know them; they’re a dedicated bunch and don’t be offended by some of the bird paint jobs; some rather nude looking girls on them, keeps the morale up. Oh, you’ll learn pretty quick that each of the flyers has their own talisman.’ Roy reached into a pocket, showing a St. Christopher medallion. ‘All of your personal affects, exception of dog tags is filed before you step foot on a plane. Wouldn’t want the enemy knowing anything about who we are or what we’re up to.’

“Roy tucked the medallion away and as I waited for more, I slid a hand in a pocket and rubbed Mom’s dragonfly pendant.

“The blitz is still going, and England is getting hammered by bombs and gas. The Krauts are whaling on Poland and Holland hard, and taking out everything, even churches, schools, theatres, zoos, and palaces. They’re blocking access, people are starving.

“If you find yourself trapped in a burning bird, lean into the flames, and get it over with. I’ve seen a lot of god-awful shit. I can’t think of much worse than to be burnt near death and still being alive to feel that pain. The RAF guys call that kind of stuff; fucked by the five fingers of fate or, screwed blued and tattooed. You’ll hear someone say that and you’ll know what it’s about.

“You always should think ahead. Now we fly in formation, so if you’re in trouble, saddle up to a Halifax or Lancaster and the boys’ll know what you’re doing.

“And you’ve got to know your mates, so you can fly as one, if you catch my drift. After a while, you get to know what each of them can and will do.

“If you’ve gotta do a night flight, stay the hell out of searchlights. If one catches you, you’ve got about four seconds before four more of them tag the target. Within seconds, you’ll be ripped to shreds by a stream of bullets. The only way out is a corkscrew dive, if your bird can handle it.

“After each flight, the men get a coffee with a shot of rum in it, to calm, medicinal. A lot of them are on Bennies, to stay awake and alert. Don’t judge them, everybody’s doing what they can to survive and get through the shit of things. I don’t do the Bennies myself, I want to be at my best, whatever that is and whatever I am capable of. I don’t want to be addicted to anything when I go home.

“Stay warm. Before you fly out, you’ll likely get warm boots, a turtle neck, and gloves. You’ll get your Mae West life jacket, you’ll wear it around your waist and sometimes you’ll be wearing a parachute pack as well. Those things come in a one size fits all, so you’ll be wanting to keep the bird going just to avoid using the parachute. A thin gal like you might slide right through the harness. A few of the smaller fellows have.

“Oh, and, if you’re on a long haul or navigating through a mess, get used to the crew urinating or defecating in a can. It’s better than taking off your helmet and disconnecting your radio

and oxygen lines to try and navigate back to the portable toilet. Then you've got to unhook your parachute, life preserver and undo your coveralls. Then sit there, unprotected. When guys are busy in the mix of a mess, they'll go right in their pants.

"Just a heads up, don't be expecting a warm welcome by the men or by towns people. A woman in uniform gets slammed harsh at times. You'll want to go to town when you can to let loose. A lot of the gals get hassled and harassed, even raped. Never, never go out alone. There's rumours going around that women in uniform are military prostitutes, spilling over with venereal disease and crabs. So, don't be surprised if you get spit on or accosted.'

"I remember telling Roy that I'd already got a taste of that at home. Men didn't much like having a woman messing with their planes, or even for being a clerk in the office. I was more worried for Rosie.

"You've gotta stay strong Maddy. You'll get a standard issue escape kit with a variety of; European currency; maps, matches, razors, food, gum, and a compass. The helmets'll be a bit different from what you're used to; they're still leather but they've got the standard issue goggles and mask attached with radio and oxygen lines. You'll get a thermos of tea or coffee, a sandwich, and a chocolate bar. You're likely going to be doing a lot of eighteen to twenty-four-hour shifts for a week straight at times, so pay attention to the weather, any aircraft problems, and updates on enemy action. One bit of information can save your ass. When you're done for the day, just give your report, eat your full meal, and go straight to bed, in case you get woken up and called out.'

"I thanked him and said that the information was really valuable."

"Indeed, it is,' Roy had chuckled. 'You know I used to study everything I could about Billy Bishop's flying in WW1 and I'm glad that I did. Now it gives me comfort knowing that there's honour in stepping aside after so many fights. I'll be doing Ranger patrol now, like he did.'

"The loudspeaker announced boarding and the crowd dispersed. Roy stood, holding a hand out to shake again, 'Well, Miss Maddy, maybe we'll meet again on land or in the air. God speed.'

"I shook his hand hard, lingering, grateful for the information and humanistic bonding. The man was an earth angel.

"Two thousand miles across the Atlantic Ocean, then a ferry and train ride to the southern end of England delivered me to the coastal Hamble air base, a new home away from home. The women were outstanding, all types, from all over the world. There were seasoned trail blazing aviation women leading the new Air Auxiliary team in training, to new gals who had never flown a bird before.

"I never once thought I was doing anything special. In fact, everyone who wanted to do their bit, naturally slid into positions they were most suited for. None of the women at the time were in this war with the aim of evolving women's rights, we were just wanting to do our part. The team was originally assembled for older seasoned male air staff who had either aged or been handicapped, yet still quite capable.

"In the beginning, my days were spent taxiing small single engine planes to and from various air fields and bases, or cleaning hangars. Each pilot was continually assessed on what kind of plane we were most suited to handle. As the war momentum increased so did the need for more taxi-ing. One of my air mates was a seasoned flyer named Alice, who began flying the bigger and heavier bombers, and once for me. My base in Hamble, was on the English coastal canal, the go-to air base for re-fueling and repairs. The ground mechanical crew could replace a bullet torn plane with aluminum and rivets, and back into place in time for another round of dog fighting before a day's end. Most often, the ferry pool had another plane to fly waiting, or we jumped a ride with another pilot. Sometimes, we had to find our own way back to base, hitch a ride or take a train.

"Hundreds of various kinds of planes came and went, to each the essential point was; know the takeoff speed, stall speed and landing speed for each, and with a map and compass in hand,

are good to go. No radio contact during black out, meant we had to read maps carefully. For one woman, she found herself lost in heavy fog and crashed into a mountain.

"The main bunker on the base was top secret. Nightly German air raids over London, often spilled over and around Hamble. One night, there was no time to run to our bunker and my air mate Gertie pulled my arm. We ran for the surrounding tree line as the haunting sirens screeched. We entered the war office bunker and Gertie slid into the top officer's strategy session. Gertie's engineering opinion was required to consult on inventory shortage issues. I huddled in the observation area. The sky above mumbled with groaning sounds of incoming bombers and the distant sound of whistling bullets littering the air. Earthquake shuddering rumbled from the pounding bombs. Machine guns and cannons lining the circumference of the base, defensively reeled shots skyward at passing swastika clad planes. It was quite unreal, and I remember my heart pounding. The sky lit brightly with the fireworks and lightning of war. As was my way, and by Jack's constant advice, I closed eyes and turned away from imagining terrified Londoners, fear, and details of destruction. I day-dreamed of home, the river, and family.

"I only took one real leave. I had been so busy throughout the year, and one day found myself exhausted. I was long overdue, and having enough leave time, I could go home. Unable to coordinate leave with Gordon and Rosie, I hitched a passenger ship and headed homeward.

"The trip home, by train, ferry and passenger ship then train again and then bus, had left only a short four days to relax. Numerous days were required to travel back to Hamble England.

"Expecting a small welcome home party, I arrived to find that Jack had passed away during my trip. His crop dusting chemical lungs no longer able to cope with phenomenal complications. He had already drawn his last breath. Dad was beside himself, having yet mourned Mom's death years before to flu complications. He just sat hunched at the kitchen table, trying to be stoic and enjoy my company. Both of us rarely drank alcohol, but that first night home, we lit a candle and sat toasting whiskey shots, to all our loved ones and friends.

"It's so empty here now without all of you underfoot,' he confessed.

"I nodded slowly and offered a smile. It was good to be with him.

"I don't know what's harder, losing your mother and Jack, or missing the rest of you overseas in the middle of a war, where I can't help if you get into trouble, or for being too dammed old to join in the cause. I sure do miss having you all under foot.'

"I remember that he wiped teary eyes. I had never seen him express deep emotion like that before. The moment needed no reply, it was how it was. Grief and a changing world, nothing was the same, nor would likely ever be again.

"I changed the topic of his thoughts by asking; 'So, Dad, what've you been doing with yourself?'

"You mean besides trying to keep busy and waiting for word on how all of you are doing?'

"Yes, Dad.' I poured another round of shots, even though I was already feeling light headed and soused.

"The cedar mill shut down for a while. I took a job melting metal to get shipped to the factories for building war supplies; bullets.'

"Oh really?'

"I figured it is my contribution to the war effort. I try not to think about where the bullets will end up, hopefully not in some poor innocent person's body.'

"I chugged another shot and back hand wiped my mouth like a seasoned drinking man 'Best not to let our thoughts go and dwell there, Dad.'

"Right you are. Hard coming home to an empty house. Empty is one thing, it's the long nights of wondering where you lot are and what you're doing. I've taken to reading adventure novels, to keep my mind busy.'

"That's good, Dad. Glad to hear it.'

"Are you going to tell me what's it like for you, over there?'

“Not much to tell.’ I had to consider what Dad could bear and didn’t want him to worry. “It’s just a bigger version of our airstrip, pretty much. Too busy taxiing planes and working in the hangar to do anything else. I like being on the coast though, I watch for Gordon’s ship, not that I’d know which ship he’d be on. I like to stroll along the shoreline. I can see France and the Netherlands across the channel on a clear day. So, I look out across the ocean and envision you here at home.’

“Dad was relieved and relaxing, ‘What kind of planes are you dealing with?’

“Oh, mostly single engines, right now. Though we’ll be ramping up soon, bigger two and four engines coming through. I’m hoping to up-class my certification soon.’

“Dad nodded. ‘Are they treating you all right over there? Are they respectful? Having any problems?’

“No Dad, it’s fine, mostly a bunch of real nice people.’ Not wanting him to dwell, I changed the subject, ‘Although, it sure would be nice to be spared the regular sausage bangers and beans. A cockpit is too small a confined space for what they do to a digestive system. I eat a lot of strawberries, they seem to grow everywhere, all summer. Got to watch those too, too much’ll give you liquid problems that you don’t want to have on a plane, with no freedom to come and go from the toilet, if you know what I mean.’

“Grinning, he turned serious and poured two more shots and looked me straight in the eyes, ‘Is there anything you’re not telling? Anything I ought to know about?’

“I stood, hugged him from behind and whispered in his ear, ‘No Dad. I’m fine. I’m well protected and supported.’

“Leaning back into me, both of us basking in each other’s comfort, he asked, ‘Is there anyone you want to see while you are home? Go to a party, look up some gal pals?’

“No Dad, just you.’

“Well, I’m glad of that. It’s not been often that we’ve spent much time alone, together. I hope at least you get a night out, now and then. Do you get to go out and let your hair down?’

“I don’t go out often. Occasionally, some of the gals and I go over to the Legion for the Saturday night dances. Usually we’re chaperoning each other, sometimes one of gals’ll have a date night, that’s Wednesday’s at the local pub.’

“I see. Do you have a beau of your own? Anyone you’ve taken a shine to?’

“I was embarrassed, because I immediately thought only of Gordon and admitted to it. ‘I think about Gordon a lot.’

“Surprised, Dad nodded, taking it in and with an aged calloused hand began chin rubbing, ‘Well, he’s a good man. He’s solid and he’ll take good care of you. Not that you need a lot of taking care of. He’d be a lucky young man, if it’s mutual.’

“Thanks Dad. Thanks for saying so.”

Maddy yawned and closed heavy eyes to quietly continue the memory, a cue for Gloria and Lizzy that this conversation was over for now. She dozed, snored and promptly awoke to continue the story as though a hick-up in the narrative. Lizzy and Gloria grinned with knowing humour.

“Where was I? Oh yes. The days following Jack’s funeral service, we relaxed at the river, adjusting to Jack’s departure and other life changes. Dad had taken a few days off from work and for the first time in years, enjoyed fly fishing again, wading hip deep in gurgle glistening water. Bittersweet memories, I envisioned Dad and Gordon spending many early mornings together, casting in unison, bragging about a bigger catch. Mom with her sketch pad always in hand, drawing nature images while explaining details of plant properties to Rosie.

“I remember one day, Rosie had been the first to find a dog upriver, hearing its yip cries that no one else could hear. Sensitive and compassionate, her little fingers unthreaded its entangled body in someone’s discarded fishing line while she cooed with a comforting hug. The small gangly and half-starved mixed breed mutt whimpered as Mom assumed unwinding its noosed hind leg. Dad, shifting his sensitive side to stoic, announced, ‘Pitiful creature, it’s been here for days, damn

near starved to death and trapped. It'll have to be put down. Mom intervened, 'No Love, let's wait and see what we can do.'

"Free, the dog instantly limped to Rosie and nuzzled into her neck, it's savior and Guardian Angel. Mom and Dad had spent the remainder of the evening, until Rosie fell asleep, amputating the bad leg, and nursing it through the night. A few days later, once deloused, the dog rallied and became part of the family for a while.

"Oh, I'm getting off track. Where was I? Oh yes, home on leave with Dad. Well there I was, packed and ready for the next morning's early morning bus back to the east coast, bound for overseas, when a letter arrived for Dad. Rosie had been discharged and was on her way home.

"Rosie had inherited most of the deeply sensitive aspects of Mom and Dad; her caring nurturing nature had been both a blessing and a curse. I was relieved, knowing they'd look after each other and I remember that that night I slept the best solid sleep I'd had in over a year and a half.

"As I hesitated at the door, as though it would be the last time, I hugged Dad again. He opened my hand, folding hands over Mom's dragonfly pendant. 'I wondered if you still had it. I'm glad I gave it to you before you signed up.

"Oh, yes Dad, I always have it on me. Thank you again. But shouldn't Rosie, have it?'

"No, it's yours. You're a winged creature. Rosie has your Mom's sketch book. Besides, that old book likely means more to her. You know, I gave this pendant to your mother when we were just dating.' He chuckled and scratched his head, 'I couldn't imagine not marrying her. Dragonflies, she said, help you see through the illusions of the world and focus on what really matters. So hopefully this little fellow'll help keep you safe and bring you home, soon.'

"I love you Dad!"

"Ah, get out of here and hurry so you can do what you have to do and come home.'

"One week later, I got a phone call from Rosie; Dad had passed away in his sleep. There was to be no formal service. Something had changed in Rosie. Her voice sounded distant, far from our childhood sisterly bond, she was serious and succinct. The call was void of our regular comradery and chit chat. Given a day off to mourn, I wandered the shoreline, letting tears for Dad subside, I just worry-wondered more about what had happened to change Rosie.

"Shortly after having received a call from Rosie, a call from Gordon informed me and said that his ship was in the vicinity. He was granted a two-day leave and he headed straight for me. We walked, talked, and shared our private grieving moments. Without bells, whistles, or a Hollywood romance, we held hands. 'I want to marry you Maddy. I try to think of home and not about what I am sometimes pulling out of the water. I can't imagine going home without hearing Jack and your folks voices, but more, I can't imagine life without you. I know you latched onto Jack, and I figured that neither of us thought about each other in this way growing up, but you've grown up into a beautiful woman. More than anything I could imagine, you inspire me. You keep me going. I long to take care of what needs taking care of, as your man. I want to make you happy. Marry me, Madeline.'

"Quiet, I was so surprised and giddy that I didn't know what to say at first. I remember that I did gauge his sincerity. While I sensed that he had been infatuated for over a year and way ahead of me, the surprise was a delight. Taking my hand, he added, 'I'd like to wait though, if we can. I'd rather marry you at home.'

"Of course, I agreed. We couldn't talk about what was really going on around us, so we agreed to send a post card, when we could, simply writing; 'Thinking of you.'

"As the days slid by, another air hangar was built, and a wider variety of bigger and newer planes began to show up. One afternoon Roy arrived on a twelve-hour stop-over for repairs, and we spent the day chatting about life at home. He was heading out in the morning on secret op, picking up a scientist in Norway.

“So how goes the battle from your spot, Maddy?”

“The planes are changing, bringing in newer aircraft and the bigger two and four engine bombers. My class might be upgraded but I’m not sure about handling them in a dicey situation, not quite yet. Taxi’ing from point A to point B is fine, I know I can keep ‘em level. In severe weather, I do follow the rail lines. I’m good at reading the maps and often navigate by locating rail lines and avoiding the barrage balloons.’

“Good to know. The shit is heating up and we’ve got a few hours, let’s take an American B26 for a spin. I’ll show you how to force a landing and how to get out of a spin. Each plane has different capabilities, as you know, and the plane manuals just aren’t good enough to explain the required skills. Only learning from experience, during chaos, do you navigate out of a tight spot.’

“Permission was granted, for a B26 bomber needing delivery to nearby London. We slid into the massive cockpit, Roy assumed controls and I was co-pilot. Eyeing my unclipped helmet, Roy dug in. ‘Some of the fighter pilots aren’t wearing their helmets, mask or gloves and they’re getting burned pretty bad. We all know that they seem to get in the way when we’re in the middle of the shit. But, a little discomfort is far better than spending the rest of life scarred and in excruciating pain. One fellow was so badly charred that he lost fingers and can’t close eye lids. He’s having experimental plastic surgery, but there’s always problems with infection. It’s a bad road, paved in hell.’

“I nodded, embarrassed. ‘I don’t normally, not do it up.’

“Just saying what needs to be reminded. I’m glad they’re modifying the Spitfires; the old ones can’t fire a shot unless aiming right at the swastika. It’ll be interesting to discover what other modifications they come up with. All right then. Oh, pay attention to where the active fighting hot spots are before you head out.’

“For sure, I do.’

“Reason being, avoid it at all costs. There’s no way to zip through. If you’re trapped, turn and face the bastard and shoot with all you’ve got. A few months ago, I was so close that I could see the face of the kid. He was just a kid and looked terrified. I almost hesitated too long. I saw him maneuver a hand slightly, which shook me out of it. He was scared shitless, though wanted to kill me. I had to shoot fast and pull away. The blast of the enemy plane exploding, damn near took me out. Face your enemy and take them out. Don’t hesitate or you’ll be dead.’

“Wrapping myself around what was being said, I had a deeper understanding of what numerous other instructors and pilots went through. I simply, and respectfully, nodded. I remembered being a young child with an adult rifle in arm, aiming directly at a deer. It’s gentle and graceful eyes were calmly staring, peering into my soul. Shaking, wavering, and easing off the trigger, my Dad whispered, ‘Do it Madeline! Don’t hesitate. Do it. It is food, we need the meat.’ I had rapidly fired then slumped to my knees. The boys reeled in delight. ‘Whoot! Perfect shot!’

“I had only fired the shot because Dad had startled me.

“Rosie was devastated and refused to talk with me for months. My childhood dream-space took years to rid the deer’s eyes from my soul. Eventually, Mom’s comforting words settled though, ‘Although a gun is not in the natural order of things Madeline, the food chain is. Sometimes, like your father says, you must just get on with it and do what must be done. Stand up and do what must be done, do not whine, or leave the task to someone else. This is the true mark of character.’

“The fact that Roy was faced with this day in day out and was still sane after all he’s already been through, mystified me.

“Swinging the plane out over the coast line, I remember him saying, ‘All right, we’ve only got half an hour. I’ll stall the plane first, then you take a turn, just follow my lead.’

Maddy yawned and stretched, “I don’t really remember everything that happened later, during the plane crash, but I think the things that Roy taught me that day, might have saved my life.

Although, I don't know why my life was spared that day and my crew mates, . . . perished and then . . ."

Dozing off, Maddy snored herself awake to a full afternoon sun, as a plane's outline crossed the skyline.

"Oh, where was I? Yes, well, never mind. We'd better get home; Robert will be wondering where we are." Giddy as they packed, Maddy refreshed, quipped, "Hey Lizzy, want to know what's great about getting old?"

Lizzy squinted, "Eh?"

"You're going to be an old fart one day, so listen up. One thing for sure is that as you get older, your secrets are safe with your friends. They can't remember them either." Maddy laughed within.

"Funny. I know old fart jokes too." Lizzy grinned. "How about this one; You can't stay young forever. But, you can be immature for an entire life."

Gloria chimed in, "I live in my own little world. But that's okay, they know me here."

Maddy paused, waiting for their attention, "Well, forget the damn health food. I'm at the age where I need all the preservatives I can get."

It was a joke square off. Lizzy arched a stiff back, "Oh ya? Well, eventually you will reach a point when you stop lying about your age and start bragging about it."

Snickering, Maddy quipped, "I would be unstoppable, if I could only get started."

As though making herself taller, boasting, Gloria added, "The older I get, the fewer things seem worth waiting in line for."

Giving the last word and slamming a foot, Lizzy bellowed, "You know you are getting old when everything either dries up or leaks."

In fits of giggles, snits and snorts the three headed for home as Lizzy continued ranting on her own, "I've got a million of them. First you forget names, then you forget faces. Then you forget to pull up your zipper."

Maddy sighed with happy contentment, "Well I don't think that life should just be a grueling journey to the grave. Life should not be lived by always being safe in an attractive, well-groomed, tanned, and well-preserved body. I rather like Lydia's spirit. We bring out the wild old gal in each other it seems. You know, we'd rather skid into death sideways with a yummy dessert in one hand and screaming, Yahooooo!!!"

“Survivor’s guilt screams,
‘I am not worthy of enjoying life;
too many have died.’
yet, I will strive to enjoy my life,
for their sakes.”

Chapter Five ~ Predators

Robert arrived home from wherever he had been venturing off to and prattled on about the aviation history research that he had been doing. “I just heard about a ninety-two-year-old woman, your age, Old Gal, that did something that she hadn’t done since the war; she climbed in behind the controls of a piston-engine-war-bird and took it for a spin.”

Maddy did not take the bait, merely rolled eyes and sighed about being enticed to fly again.

“Per the newspaper article, the woman was part of a publicity stunt to promote a new aviation museum exhibit. The exposition is set up to honour female fliers of World War Two and commemorate their achievements.”

Unimpressed, Maddy rolled eyes, uninterested in hype.

Unabated, Robert continued, “You are a part of many forgotten pioneers of the skies. I think that there is certainly so much to commemorate.”

“Robert, I’m not disputing the intent. More has been done in the states in the U.S. citizens minds with the WASPs; the Women Air Service Pilots who taxied planes. None of the WASP’s ever saw action. Don’t get me wrong, their flights weren’t without risk, because I think nearly forty of those women died in flying accidents. It’s sad though, because none of those WASPs were considered part of the armed forces. We weren’t either. None of the women who flew during the war and killed in the line of duty were given military funerals. Worse, their families had to cover burial expenses themselves. The War Departments even denied their relatives flags to cover the coffins.”

“What a shame, I think.” Robert agreed.

“Yes, the female pilots and crews who assisted the British Royal Air Force and the Air Auxiliary, were credited immediately. We held military rank and the RAF gave us female fliers equal pay to our male counterparts. The American WASPs on the other hand, were paid much less, less than two-thirds the normal salary of a male pilot.

“Now, the Russian Air Force had all-women squadrons during WW2. They were called the Night Witches. One, a woman named Marina, took it upon herself to lobby and pester Stalin himself. She got the female flyers all a pay raise and took over the training program. Now there was a maverick! She was renowned for mentoring the best of their best pilots. She cultivated the night bombers, took old discarded bi-planes, and flew many missions. You see, those old bi-planes could glide and that allowed the pilots to kill the engines. They silently outwitted the Germans, many, many times. Now those daring young women, saw conflict, they were in the thick of battle.”

“Oh yes, I remember hearing about those women.”

Maddy winced and shifted both feet up and on top of the patio table.

“Are you all right, Old Gal?” Robert asked with sincere concern.

“I’m fine. It’s just that, I’ve been talking all day with the gals, about flying during the war, so can we chat about something else?”

“Oh, sure. I understand. How about Gordon? How was it for Gordon and Rosie? How did they manage the duration and post war years?”

“Oh, well, when Gordon finally came home after service, he was not the same man. Daily, his eyes would change in the blink of an eye, from calm to wild. His mood was black, as though he just as soon as pummel someone. In a huff and with tight lips, he’d slam the back door and head for the guest cottage; either building fishing flies or slipping into waders and go fishing until dark.

“I always gave him a wide berth in those moments. I honestly didn’t know what to make of it, or how to rally him out. One thing was for certain, he could not drink rum anymore. I guess he’d had his fill of the awful stuff in the Navy. Alcohol contributed to his dark moods. I suppose with the rum, inhibitions would be lowered, and thoughts couldn’t hold back the terrors seen. One moment he would be calmly reading the newspaper and then his mood would turn dark and nasty the next.

“After months of this, I finally cornered him at the kitchen table one day. I stood there, just holding bacon and eggs hostage until he spoke, to let me into his emotions and thoughts.

“He slumped into a chair and I’d never seen him so humbled and openly vulnerable. He did speak of his nightmare visions. ‘Well, I thought I was signing up for an easy Navy job, loving the water the way I do. It made sense at the time. I thought doing the Derry run, you know, just running supplies back and forth across the ocean would keep me out of the shite.

“‘After that day when I got leave and you and I walked the coast, holding your hand, it got worse; bad, Maddy.’

“‘Tell me about it, maybe it will lighten your burdens.’

“‘I don’t want to laden your soul with it. What’s done, is done. Maybe you should have married Jack anyway, or some other normal guy. Maybe you’d be better off with a man who hasn’t been through the shite of war.’

“‘I’m not giving you breakfast until you talk with me, include me. We’re married now, and we’ll just have to sort problems out and work it through, together. I’m not going anywhere, so you’ll just have to say what you need to say.’

“Gordon, seeing my stance, ran fingers through thick unruly hair. ‘Can I at least have a damned cup of coffee?’

“Pouring, I prayed for strength.

“I still feel like I’m on a ship half of the time. Twenty-four hours a day we sailed those god-damned merchant ships through dangerous waters, often in driving gales and wild waves. Waves as high as the town’s water tower or bigger. Up and down. Up and down. Worse in the winter and because the northern route was shorter, the north Atlantic was perpetual winter. When they built the metal mesh to keep the enemy U-boats out, it was a bitch to navigate our own entry point into Halifax harbour. As you know, we always came and left in convoys of thirty or more merchant ships. After loading and unloading supplies and re-grouping, corvettes wing flanked as escorts with maybe a warship or destroyer or two. You know, a lot of the guys were just young kids, the good ones were sixteen-year-old sons of fisherman. Many of the Officers were yacht club and university brats who knew nothing of hardship. Away from any coast, in heavy seas and in storms, the ship would climb crests of waves only to plunge into troughs. Every roll and pitch would buckle my knees and jar my jaw. We often zig zagged, changing course every fifteen or twenty minutes to avoid enemy U-boats.

“Worse in fog, we were blind. There was thick fog the first time I saw and handled dead bodies, the day a Dutch freighter collided with a corvette. Hit in the hot boiler, a second corvette nearly hit it too. The corvette was rapidly taking on water and many unprepared crew slid into the freezing water as horns blared the collision. A hundred men floated half frozen, too cold to swim or grab onto dangling rescue ropes. Another war ship, blind in the fog, mistook the sinking freighter

for an enemy U-boat and blasted it. After the that, hundreds of Christmas turkeys bobbed in the water with the men.

“You never knew where the damned U-boats were, and suddenly one of the cargo ships would explode and light up the sky. I can still smell the burning debris; littered the air with black snow flakes, you couldn’t breathe. Hundreds died that day. We only managed to save a few. The ones that were still alive had black feet and hands; frostbite, and hypothermia.

“Our equipment and technology were outdated and often broke down, and often narrowly missed an ice-berg.

“Water, water, water, there was no way to get away from it. Even in our bunks, sea water was always seeping through hatches.

“Sea sickness for the first few days of each trip was always worse than death, a torture that none of us were immune to. We’d just crawl into a corner and moan and groan. It was misery without relief.

“Through freezing rain and snow blizzards, watch duty was four-hour shifts of bone chilling torment. We’d put on every piece of clothing we could lay hands on bodies were still half frozen even with a thermos of scalding hot tea.

“They gave us a lot of Grog; Navy issue rum, it wasn’t for light weights, even when it was diluted. It was the highlight of our day. Gathering in groups, we’d drink and make up songs to pass the time and forget about where we were. Songs became vulgar, fast with swearing, some very raunchy and rude lyrics.

“Everywhere on the ships, was an infestation of cockroaches and we’d have to slam the bread to get ‘em all out so we could eat it. But, cockroaches ate bed bugs, so that helped relieve wakeful sleep.

“God, I wish I could erase the nightmares from my mind and eyes. I can still smell charred flesh and burnt hair, and men pulled men out of the water, sometimes covered in oil. It was so eerie. Just the orange glow of a sinking ship at a distance and the smell of sulphur. The worst one was a guy I pulled out; his eyes were wide open, a piece of twisted and torn steel piercing through his neck. The next one, grotesque with twisted limbs.

“I don’t know Love, if I can ever shake these visions off and get on with a normal life. I still find myself trying to stay alert and be aware of U-boats. They behaved like rabid wolf packs out to slaughter.’

“I rubbed his back, ‘Have some breakfast love, it’ll keep you going, and so will I.’

“My mates were always joking, that I was the calm one. I don’t feel very calm.

“One of my mates, was from rural Hamilton. The only water experiences he had was summer swimming in a quarry mud hole. He was a happy fellow, always saying that life was good because we were still alive. It took me a long time to fathom what he was going on about. He had an air about him, as though he were forever young, a teenager and ready for adventure. I found out after being relieved, from the merchant fleet, that he re-enlisted. Assigned to a depth charge crew. Another pal of mine from Montreal, stayed in Londonderry. Said he had nothing to go back to, so got a civilian job and married an Irish gal.

“You know, I don’t blame him a bit. The people in Ireland, were a nice lot. I enjoyed those port stop overs and the Irish pub food. What was nice, being able to walk along the Londonderry shoreline, always reminded me of the river, here at home.

“Back on ship, we’d all go through sea sickness all over again. Then guys would slowly emerge from bunks, ready to drink, sing and play poker. Just so you know, I only did that once a week. I read a lot. In a storm, we floated like a cork, always reaching for something to hold onto and getting bounced around. It was normal to have a wack of new bruises and cuts by the end of a shift.

“On my last trek, I felt old and soured but, I knew I had to finish my time and come home as soon as possible. The new guys needed to take over.

“Ah Love don’t get me wrong, I am happy to be home. It’s just that I think I’ve brought the ship and ravages of war, home with me, buried inside of me.”

“All right love. It’s just going to take some time to adjust. Let’s not talk about the past anymore today. Let’s just go to the river for the day and you can teach me how to fish. I tried it once when I got home, but I didn’t do well. Shall we?”

“No, no fish biting this late in the morning, love. But if you’re willing, we’ll get up at four, tomorrow morning and be down there before sunrise? Geez, how could I forget? It’s the first of May, perfect fly fishing time.”

“Carrying lit lanterns and gear through a dark worn path, Gordon led the way.

“Hush Love! Quit jabbering, and making so much noise, the fish can hear vibrations of sound through the water!”

“Fine!’ I adjusted Jack’s old rubber waders, not nearly as big as Gordon’s outfit but still too many sizes, too big for my body.

“Morning mist hovered over water surface with pole ready and stepping in, he turned to see me fumbling, ‘Now sit still, for heavens sake. The fish can see you sorting your gear and pole.’

“Fine.”, my eyes searched the water.

“A few feet from the shore, thigh deep, water gurgle-swirled around him. ‘See that white foam on top of the water? There’s lots of nutrients and bugs in the soup and the bigger, older fish hide under it, feeding. They’ll dart out though, for a fly. That’s what fly fishing is all about. The younger ones stay upriver, closer to the shore, in calmer shallow water.’

“Oh, okay. I understand now. Got it.’

“See those larger rocks in the middle? They aerate and oxygenate the water. Perfect for the fish to thrive in.’ He tilted his pole backward and with the flip of a wrist, cast way out into the river centre.

“I was, preoccupied with pouring a cup of coffee from a thermos, procrastinating, half watching my rod and not caring to fish. This was the most relaxed and content he had been since being home.

“Oh, I’ve got one already! Ah balls! Lost it! Did you see it? A brown trout, this big.’ Gordon exaggerated with outstretched hands.

“Spring birds awoke, fluttered and chirped. A grumpy porcupine ambled by on the other side of the river’s shoreline and up along a muddy bank. With the breaking of a cedar branch, I swished away black flies and hungry mosquitoes. As the morning sun rose and spread across the water’s surface, dragonflies flutter-danced. Gordon’s reel buzzed as he flicked another cast. Graceful, it was a Zen skill he had mastered from my Dad’s teaching many years ago. A lifetime passed in between.

“It seemed that the grass had turned a bright alive green overnight. Spring had officially arrived bringing forth smells of moist dirt, river water and new growth of tree buds popping open before our eyes.

“Old Orville’s hound dog barked for breakfast in the distance.

“Wading closer to me, Gordon said, ‘The cove has changed since I was last here. See those felled trees in the water over there? During spring thaw, when the river is high, the water erodes the soil underneath, washes away the shoreline cedar’s foothold and the roots give way and they topple over. The fish love it under those trees, but I’d never get ‘em. If I did get lucky enough, the fish would just bite off my fly bait.’

“Gordon had changed. It took along time for him to make peace with memories, and he was never quite the same. I didn’t go through as much as him, and certainly experiences were nothing compared to most others during that war. But, every once in awhile, I still hear the creaking and feel the shuddering of the bird before it crash-landed in the ocean. There was always an unspoken

awareness that the person sitting beside you, might be going home in a body bag after their next fight.

“Rosie saw more of that end than we did. Yet, we all wondered, when would the shite hit the fan next? Can I take it? Everyone had the same facial expression of wide eyes and trying not to think about visions. Rosie was surrounded by death. It wasn’t until she had come home for a visit, with her husband, that I began to understand the gist of what she had been through.

“Rosie said, ‘I had only been at the hospital for two days when I was raped by two men, soldiers from my own unit. The worst part was in being discharged because no one believed me, or they chose to side with the men. Boys will be boys, they stated.’

“The after shock was harder to rationalize; why so many others died or suffered and yet, how could I complain, for I was still able to walk away.

“Oh Maddy, it wasn’t until I got home, and a few weeks had passed when the reality of the event really started to bother me. It could rip my mind apart. I did not feel deserving of some holy protection or blessing. I still carry the shame of Pastor Jacob’s molesting touch. I struggle with my own worthiness of having survived. One of my mates, a gal from Toronto, had said that I had conjured up the whole ordeal of the rape because I was too weak to stay and face my job. I think a part of me agreed with her for awhile, then I was just madder than a hornet for a long time.

“Mad for being lured twice in a lifetime; first by Pastor Jacob, and then by Canadian men having their way with me, mad for being weak and stupid. I continued to do my job for a few days after, but, because I had reported it, I had to meet with a psychiatrist. He was a nice man and told me that I not only had post traumatic stress from the incident, but, that I was in danger of repeating the incident, though unnerved as I was. A new gal was already in transit to be my replacement and he offered me narcotic drugs to calm my nerves.

“Most days I feel as though I’ve grown out of it, then I find myself re-hashing and trying to make sense out of events. I feel everything, ever so intensely. I am unlike you Maddy, I cannot be alone for more than a day. I remain afraid of the night darkness.

“My doctor, at home, advised me that I cannot have children. I had already decided, I would not. I could not bare to bring a vulnerable child into this mad world.

“I can’t even volunteer at our local hospital, to make myself useful. I am haunted by the smells of infection, sepsis and moaning from patients. The worst is the burn patients. There were so many in the unit, so badly burned and deeply in pain that at times, even morphine could not relieve.

“I hope that some will say that I brought them some comfort in their time of need. But, I was just a girl, who went to war already wounded. I suppose I was afraid to face my family and myself, scared to know that I had ultimately failed in overcoming what I should have, to serve. I was less afraid of staying and facing another rape or the daily influx of wounded and dead, but more so, of my own ineptitude. I would always hear fire exchange in the distance and felt relatively safe, yet in the end, I had a job to do and I couldn’t finish it.

“I am not even content to tend house and to my husband. Although, I prefer to stay home, where life is quiet and predictable.’

“I had tried to comfort Rosie and said, ‘For what’s it worth, I can’t shake feeling responsible, guilty about not being able to protect you, both times as well as, the two gals who died in the plane I crashed. When I left Hamble, something inside of me just clicked and I only wanted to come home. I was ready. Now I prefer to walk, feet on ground.” Maddy’s tired mind trailed off into painful memories.

Startled back to the here and now, Maddy noticed that Gloria had joined the evening patio table dinner discussion.

A tender hand on Maddy’s shoulder, Gloria asked, “Oh you must be so tired from this day. I believe that memories haunt because, so many questions go unanswered. The mind and heart yearn to make sense of incidents.”

Maddy yawned, stretched contemplating then responded, "I do have many questions. I suppose that many insights might have come if our service records weren't sealed after the war. Like mine, many incidents and service records were marked secret or classified.

"Because our records were sealed, historians did not include service women in history books. I never had access to my records. I've always been worried that someone would open it and come to arrest me for making a mistake during flight, causing the crash. Anyway, you can imagine how we women felt. This was the final straw. We had flown military aircraft during World War II, and that made us the first women to fly military aircraft. It was as if they had just forgotten about us. So many of the women organized themselves and became a force to be reckoned with."

Gloria served coffee, "Did you ever regret not keeping up with your flying after the war?", she handed a cup to Maddy.

Having already had a similar conversation with Robert and growing weary of the problem, Maddy waved a dismissive hand. "No. Absolutely not. I was done with it and only wanted to be a stay at home wife to Gordon and a mother to Irene."

Straining to have more questions answered, before the conversation would be lost to the old woman's sleep, Gloria pushed, "Did you ever have contact, stay in touch over the years with other pilots?"

Gloria's insistence reminded Maddy that she was running out of time to make peace with the past. Maddy yawned and pressed forward. "No. I never heard from anyone. Mind you, I didn't want to have anything to do with the military after the war, nor hearing anything more about the horrible events that went on."

Lizzy had been quietly scribbling notes into a journal and piped up, "What would you want people to know and remember about you?" she asked of Maddy.

"Hmm, interesting question. I suppose, my values, family values that many of us who grew up during the depression and war carried; honour, integrity, service, faith, and commitment. Thank you for asking."

Maddy became quiet in the moment of confusion and was hesitant, "What are we all doing here?"

Robert and Gloria exchanged glances, Maddy was tired and having a forgetful moment.

Lizzy, growing used to the brief memory lapses, said, "Nothing much Maddy Old Gal. We've just finished dinner and now having a cup of coffee."

"Oh. Well then, if you don't mind, I am thoroughly exhausted and going to plunk in my easy chair, inside." Maddy grimaced against fatigue and creaking old bones.

Lizzy followed the old woman and stealthily crouch-sat beside her.

Leaning back into the old chair, Maddy opened one eye and asked, "What's up kid?"

"Nothing much. Just wondering how you're doing with your memory? Any problems or incidents I can help with?"

"No!" Maddy closed eyes as a cue for the girl to go away then rethinking, opened one eye again. "Maybe?"

"Go on." An eager Lizzy's interest was piqued.

"Well, I did lose my wallet the other day."

"Did you find it, where?"

"In the bread box, of all places. Why? Because I'd shoved it in a shopping bag earlier when coming out of the grocery store. I guess when I got home and unpacked, I had other things on my mind. So, I shoved it in the bread box with the bread. The damn thing is, when I needed my wallet during the day, it was nowhere to be found."

Lizzy's concern relaxed, "That's funny, but it doesn't sound like you were having an Alzheimer's moment."

Relaxing into the girl's caring assurance, Maddy yawned and said, "Maybe, maybe not. I don't really know."

Lizzy positioned her notebook on knees and chewing on a pen tip, eyed the old woman over. "Maddy, are you going to sleep now, or can I ask you more about your family and the river wildlife?"

"I guess I'm awake now. What do you want to know kid?"

"Whatever you want to tell me."

Maddy shifted comfortable and softly began, "My little sister Rosie was much like Mom and all the women on the female side of our family, they were sensitive and instinctively connected to nature and healing. Certainly, much more interested, and knowledgeable than I ever was. Rosie spent more time down at the river after the incident with Pastor Jacob. I always thought that surprising, given that that was where the assault had happened.

"Caring for the plants, wounded animals and sick people, was Rosie's stick. I did not see her for a few years after she enlisted in the Nursing corps and she spoke little of her time during the war overseas. It seemed a fitting transition, caring for wounded; accidents and infectious disease. She had spent a year and a half in training and only four weeks of a tour of duty in France. I know that she often worked nearly twenty-four hours straight. She had originally talked about staying in service, for there would be more training opportunities and prisoners of war to tend to.

"All three of them were so much alike; Mom, Rosie, and my Irene.

"I remember Irene as a little girl, Gordon and I took her to the river one evening, keeping the lantern at a distance so not to attract mosquitoes. Fireflies swarmed us, she threw her hands up and sighed, "It's no use Daddy, those skitters are coming after us with their own lanterns."

"Irene was eighteen and in labour when she died, she had an aneurism before giving birth while we were waiting for the doctor to arrive. She was complaining about a splitting headache one minute and then deterioration happened so damned fast! Oh, how I wished that Rosie had still been alive. Gordon and I knew little about midwifery and childbirth. There was little to alleviate our grief and loss. Gordon and I lost all three loved ones that day; Irene, baby and Robert."

Maddy stretched, yawned and blew a nose then continued. "It's been so long; it almost feels like I dream I once had. If Gordon and I hadn't been so grief stricken, well, I wish we had been better support for Robert."

Robert had entered the room and heard the gist of Maddy's story. Listening, and touched by the tender moment, he counter explained to Lizzy, "I was young and had previously lost both parents. I ran away to college after losing Irene and the baby, and coped by immersing myself in work. If my mind wasn't full of school work, I'd find myself sliding into a dark depression. It was during that time that I gained comfort and courage from knowing that Maddy and Gordon were still around." Robert turned to face Maddy and strongly added, "You were my safety net and I knew if things got too bad, that I could seek you out. It gave me a great deal of comfort in knowing that. The guidance counselor at school, forced me into a support group. Sharing feelings, just wasn't my bag, though it helped to listen to other people's stories. An inspiration.

"After that, I started riding my bicycle more and going for long walks along the river. It took a good four years before I began to feel stable, inside.

Maddy pat-comforted his hand and said, "I understand. I think the river saved Gordon. Gradually he was able to fly fish again and I was content to amble along the shoreline and pick berries."

Maddy's attention shifted to Robert fidgeting with the edges of a large black book. "What's that book you've got there?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, I do believe this belonged to your mother. I found it under a floor board. Look, its another journal and sketch book of nature sketches." Robert carefully handed the book to Maddy.

"Oh, my goodness, I haven't seen that book since I was young." Maddy gingerly flipped through pages, "You know, art was never really my thing. I suppose I took more after my Dad."

"Well there you go. Another romantic family archive, for you."

Lizzy beamed, patiently waiting to have the book in her hands.

“Oh, that reminds me. Look near the back. There is a sketch that looks like something out of Gulliver’s Travels. Looks like some poor guy was impaled by hundreds of quills. Butterflies and dragonflies fluttering above a man and a den of big fat porcupines meandering away from the scene.”

“Oh, I wonder if that’s what Mom thought happened to Pastor Jacob after he abducted my little sister Rosie. Perhaps the sketch was her wishful thinking.”

Quizzical, Robert balked, “Seriously? You don’t believe that nonsense, do you? I might be concerned about you,” he winked and snickered. “That is funny old gal, porcupines killing a man is just folklore.” He laughed.”

Maddy chuckled, “Like I said young man, think what you will, stories can grow larger over time. Just don’t piss off the wildlife.”

“All right funny guy. Why don’t you make yourself useful and go help Lizzy build some new bird houses and garden boxes? The ones around the property are so old that they’re falling apart. She needs involvement and a friend as much as Gloria. Go look around in the garage, there’s all kinds of Gordon’s tools, lumber and paint. Go and make an old woman happy. Tell them to come over for dinner tonight, and Lydia. On the patio. We’ll have a new bird house and garden box launch party. Tell Gloria to dress up, in her fanciest dress. You’ll need to wear a suit. Sunday best. We’ll make it a semi-formal dinner party. Ask Lizzy to bring the pig. Lydia might like a visit with it. Since you people won’t let me rest here in my easy chair, I’m going to bed. I’m done talking and reminiscing for the day. All of this nostalgia is making me home sick of a life from the past.”

Maddy clinked glasses, a toast to the event. Taking a sip, she eyed Robert. “Jesus Robert!”

“What? What’s the matter?” He leaned back, appalled.

“Nothing is the matter, except, I just realised how old I must be after looking at you with greying hair. What the hell is that all about?” Maddy feigned shock.

Crimson faced embarrassed, Robert glanced to Gloria then back to Maddy, “Funny lady!”

She snickered, “You know, I don’t have to drink to feel a glow. I wake up in the morning, slide my feet over the bed and I naturally feel woozy. It’s an old lady thing.”

Gloria had been relaxing politely quiet. “You know Maddy, you’re one in a million. You make me laugh. I can’t remember ever, smiling, and laughing so much, until I arrived here.”

“Ah, cheers to you and Lizzy. It’s been a long, long, long time since I’ve felt loved ones and family around. Cheers!”

Lizzy slid a note book on the table while the pig snooted around under foot. “Would you like to hear some research bits that I’ve found?”

“Sure,” All said at once, eager to be enlightened with a story.

“Well, I’m just getting started and have drawn a younger picture version of you Maddy Old Gal, flying a vintage B26 bomber. But, I have more questions than answers at this point.”

Gloria had been intensively listening, “You know, I remember hearing history stories about a few women when I was a little girl. I think it’s a wonderful hobby, to do research Lizzy. More than a hobby, I didn’t mean to belittle your mission Lizzy.”

“No offense taken, Nana.”

“Well, maybe when you meet some new kids at school this fall, some of them might be interested in helping you.”

Maddy added, “It’s a fine idea.”

Lydia had yet to utter a word, stoned, quietly sipping wine and carefully eating, food smudged around her mouth. She sat back, napkin wiping her mouth and beamed. “BEES KNEES!”

Gloria coaxed Lydia, “Well, doesn’t that top everything. Lydia, that’s the most you’ve said since you’ve been here tonight. Don’t stop now, what else do you want to say?”

Lydia having a belly full, suddenly slumped; her head hung with mouth open and a snoring sound gurgled. Maddy, Robert, Gloria, and Lizzy, looked to each other and laughed with Lydia, and not at her condition.

“Oh, my goodness, I love that woman.” Gloria wiped a smile-tear.

Maddy sat back in silence as the others chit-chatted. Soon Lydia’s condition would be hers, and she hoped to be able to remember this moment.

The following day they were back in Maddy’s doctor’s office. Robert and Gloria jumped to Maddy’s protection, speaking at the same time. Annoyed, Maddy burst through the chatter with an angered response, “I’m fine, for heavens sake. Why do you think me daft for wanting to know what school program is allowing children to wear a doctor’s coat or nurse’s scrubs? For heaven’s sake, they all look like school children and it does not exactly give me confidence.”

The young woman doctor calmly reassured, “I can assure you Madeline, all staff members are of age and have appropriate qualifications.”

Maddy looked to Gloria, Lizzy, and Robert for reassurance. Embarrassed that she had slipped time in front of them all. Maddy lowered eyes and sat back, sulking. Just yesterday, she had gotten lost in the bathroom, unable to find a way out. The world’s parameters were slowly slipping out of control. Shaking off fear, she straightened and regained composure.

Sensing and intuitively gauging Maddy’s competency and wellbeing, the doctor sincerely said, “Well, Madeline, I am happy to see that you have such a good support system.” The doctor seemed sincere.

Robert remembering the reason for the appointment and angry, straightened a limp back with a professional ‘take no nonsense’ demeanor. “We are all here today to discuss Gretchen, the Community Care Consultant assigned to Maddy.”

“Oh?” Alarmed, the doctor slid her glasses down a slim nose to peer over them, from across the medical desk, bracing for a professional debate. “Oh yes, I’ve read your complaint. You must understand that with Alzheimer’s, the human mind is capable of manifesting or forming images and auditory hallucinations, not actually occurring. Sometimes we call this imagination, or creativity in a stable mind. When it comes to mental health, Gretchen needs to determine whether Madeline may potentially self-harm or cause harm to another. In any report, well, we must take any professional opinion seriously. I suspect the incident that you are referring to, is merely a part of Gretchen’s initial assessment of Madeline.”

Robert feeling rebuffed, strained to maintain a calm professional demeanor. “Like hell it is! I was there! Gretchen is a bully, pure and simple. She showed up at Madeline’s doorstep, without an appointment and tried to bully her way inside of the house. The woman was plain and simply rude. We want a different elder case worker, that is, if Madeline needs one.”

Shifting uncomfortable, sliding glasses off and twiddling the frame in hand, the doctor replied. “Well, I wish I could offer you that, but Gretchen is the only case worker we have. You might take your concerns to the new CEO; Bob, over at the senior’s residence. I haven’t met him yet either. Since he is liaison with all elderly in all three counties and palliative care network in the region; he is Gretchen’s direct supervisor.”

Calming, understanding the hierarchy, Robert would not be deterred. “Well, we might do just that. We want to know exactly what, if any authority and power Gretchen has over vulnerable people such as; Madeline and Lydia. And, what might the due process be, in the event we have further disagreement? Do we come back to you or do we seek legal counsel?”

Quickly glancing to Maddy, Gloria and Lizzy to ascertain their level of concern, the doctor then candidly offered, “I can only suggest that if your concerns are serious, that you do both.”

Robert nodded. “I want it on the record, that all three of us are here in support of Madeline. She is fully capable of continuing to live independently and looking after her own affairs. She has

Gloria, Lizzy and I now. If there are any concerns about her wellbeing, by whoever, you'll have to consult with the three of us first. From here on in."

Wanting to deescalate rising tensions, the doctor suggested, "Perhaps, before your concerns grow any further, you can arrange a case meeting; all the parties involved with Madeline's care, for the future."

Robert wanted it clearly understood that he was taking a no-nonsense stand. Undeterred, he concluded, "We may do just that. In the interim, we may seek legal counsel. Thank you for your time Doctor. Come on Old Gal, let's get out of here."

Robert and Gloria sat in the front seat of the idling car, deep in thought about what had transpired. Maddy could see Robert's reflection through the rear-view mirror from the back seat. He ran irritated fingers through a bristled beard. She strained to read and ascertain his current mood and thoughts. Gloria and Lizzy sat gazing back at the medical building, also contemplating what had just transpired and concern for Maddy's wellbeing.

Uncomfortable, confused and scared, Maddy broke the tense silence. "I don't understand what happened in there. Why is there so much tension? What did I do wrong?"

Robert glanced into the rear-view mirror to observe Maddy's facial expression, "You didn't do a damned thing wrong! It seems there is no other case worker than Gretchen available right now."

Gloria turned to Maddy and Lizzy, swinging a casual arm over the back seat. "Sometimes people like Gretchen take trivial incidents out of context and make mountains out of nothing. It's only my opinion, but I have an intuitive suspicion that this Gretchen might be a bit of a narcissist. Something is not right here, I can feel it."

Robert turned to Gloria, "There is just something audacious about Gretchen that I don't trust."

Worried, Maddy wondered if Gretchen could be seeing her downfall before the others could? Should she come clean and confess to the memory lapses? The word 'harm' hung in Maddy's mind, overshadowing all other rational thought and stabbed at old guilt wounds. Nauseous, unable to bear the reality of having let Rosie down and could not save the lives of her air mates, Gertie and Alice. Maddy was unable to get her daughter Irene and in utero granddaughter to a hospital in time to save their lives.

In the moment of survivor guilt darkness, Maddy noted that no one had yet made her accountable for her part in losing people she had cared for. Guilt fear was building and quickly turning into an escalating train ride.

Striving to rise out of the dark mind space, Maddy looked for Robert's reflection in the rear-view mirror. "But, what exactly did I do wrong? I must have done something to give Gretchen concern? I just want to understand what happened. What does she know that we don't?"

Robert and Gloria turned to face Maddy with concern when Lizzy cut them off. The young girl took Maddy's hand, "Nothing, Maddy Old Gal." She smiled. "Haven't you ever known anyone who tried to make their nasty intentions appear as though it's your fault? Like they're doing you a favour. You know by how it feels, that what is going on, is wrong. You know an exchange is off kilter when you're left feeling as though you've been jolted by a stun gun."

"I suppose." Though Maddy could not think of anyone who fit that description other than Rosie or Gordon and their war terror moments. Growing up in a small rural community meant that everyone knew of everyone's business, and accountability came to each who may have fallen off the straight and narrow track. Lies and hurtful behaviours were not tolerated and were quickly dealt with.

Sensing that Maddy was still unconvinced, Gloria calmly comforted, "Even if you are having memory lapses that we don't know about, it still isn't just-cause for Gretchen's intrusive rude behaviour. Do you see? None of us sense that she has your best interests at heart and this is cause

for our concern, someone to keep an eye on. There are just people like that, who have a hidden agenda of their own. Whatever it is, it's not right and she's trying to slide under the guise of the authority of her position. Gees, after everything else you've been through; those characters who beat up your cousin Jack, Pastor Jacob, Rosie, Irene, Gordon and . . . the war, and now this.

"My God!" Gloria's thoughts trailed off into a relatable memory, a painful one. "It took four years for my insurance company to deliver my husband's insurance to me, the claims agent didn't want to dole out the money, plain and simple. The bastard insurance agent insisted that somehow, he committed suicide, despite the coroner's report of findings clearly stating otherwise. You would expect compassion for a grieving widow, but no. Life and shady people don't stop because you are vulnerable. In fact, some will zero in on vulnerability and clean their clock.

"No Maddy, you haven't done a thing wrong. Like old-soul Lizzy said, there are just some people who are out for themselves, no matter what the situation is or cost to another."

Breaking the tension, Lizzy blurted, "What the hell is wrong with that Gretchen woman? Robert said that she reeks of dead people's perfume. Creepy!" She grinned and lovingly nudged Maddy to lighten the tension.

Fidgeting and picking at dry skin on a wrist, Maddy considered the meaning of Gloria and Lizzy's words. More so, it was in Robert and Gloria's manner, a calm professional take on this situation that relieved some tension and worry. Yet, it felt dark as though dead war enemy spirits had snuck onto her plane, and into the core of her well-being. She felt safer with Robert, Gloria and Lizzy, yet, suddenly tired, very tired, and homesick for the safe familiarity of Gordon and loved ones, long passed. Catching the building morose mood, Maddy shook a confused head. No, she would not give in to depression and fear.

"Can we please go home now? I'd like to sit in my easy chair and rest a bit. Later, after, I'd like to treat you all to some take out dinner, that is if you don't mind going out later to pick it up."

“It takes courage to stand and
boldly face your fears.”

Chapter Six ~ The Crash

As late spring rain storm pummeled on the roof, Gloria spread takeout pizza on the living-room coffee table amidst candles and wood stove fire warming away chilly air.

Maddy sensed that her lucid time was running out and rather than feeling remorseful, she felt what Gordon had felt during their last conversation. It was time to bare one’s soul and sort false truths and the truth out.

“If I talk about the crash, before I lose my marbles, completely, at least someone will know that I tried to sort the facts out. Just promise me, if anything crops up, anything that I may have done wrong, that you’ll let me decide if I need to contact the authorities to confess, so that they will have the truth.”

Jumping on the cue, Robert quickly turned his cell phone audio recorder on, and Lizzy rummaged through her back pack for the journal as Gloria couch-curled.

“I honestly, often can’t remember what year it is, where I put the damned house keys or what day of the week it is, but I am able to recall some aspects of that last flight, as though it was yesterday. It’s an odd thing that a person can remember sensations long after a significant event has occurred.

Maddy, paused as lightning and thunder shook the house.

“Jack was a risk taker, I always strived for precision. I didn’t learn to fly by or use instruments in the beginning or during the war. I flew by the feel of the bird, its sounds, and smells. That was how I was taught. I did learn instrumentation as best I could, and well enough I thought. I knew flight procedures and strived to follow them to a ‘T’.

“I clearly remember doing the plane’s outside checks, then reviewing the take off and pre-flight procedures manual. I’ve reviewed it all in my mind, hundreds of times, looking for that missing piece of the puzzle to indicate exactly what had gone wrong. Weather forecast had been fine.

“It was an unusual run. The assigned pilot had already flown twelve hours straight, he was fevered and said that a fellow must know when his good luck has run out and when to walk away. He was done being in the air and wasn’t going to take another chance leading a crew. He simply walked away from the plane to the infirmary. None of the other licensed pilots were available, so I was assigned to transport the loaded twin engine B-26 bomber. While the bird had seen its share of battle, it was still sleek and functioning. It had the moniker of the ‘Widow Maker’.

“Walking towards the plane with Alice and Gertie, I recall ignoring a knot in the pit of my stomach. I should have known better, perhaps it was a pre-insight of trouble brewing ahead. I willed the sensation away. As though sharing the same gut-nagging sensation of something amiss, Gertie, Alice and I exchanged a slight glance between each other. It seemed that there was no turning back. The outside of the plane was inspected, and we climbed inside the cockpit.

“As was a normal pre-flight routine and because of the variety of planes to be shuffled, I took time to read over the planes’ operating manual. There was so much to absorb and remember. Every part of my being was glued to Alice’s B-26 experienced words. I hoped that I would remember Roy’s advice. Alice was experiencing fever and chills and did not want to take the helm. It was up to me to maintain control and leadership to the best of my ability. She had flown this type of plane

before and with her experience, I felt confident that between us, we wouldn't forget a fact, or miss a single step. She had memorized each step and idiosyncratic aspect of the plane. Alice, who was one of the best, had flown a variety of aircraft, she was a true aviator and despite a current fever, had calmly assumed preparation procedures as co-pilot. Following her hand motions for each lever, gauge, and knobs proper settings, I relaxed into acute awareness. Gertie, had attended basic training and flight instruction with me and while she couldn't land a plane properly for the life of her, she was deeply intelligent and competent at everything else. The problem was, Gertie did not have proper depth perception and was transferred to navigation. Graceful and without resentment, she assumed a new role and duties as though born to do it. Gertie was instinctively a perfect co-worker. Cohesively, we continued preparation protocols.

"All in good hands', Alice said, she was easier going and light hearted, half serious and half mocking her old instructor, reported start up procedure, 'Hatch hinges and emergency release handle, safety pins in place, pressure up on hydraulic hand pump, until I can't pump anymore.' She glanced outside, 'Check, propellers have been turned over by hand two or three revolutions with engine off, oil sediment in lower cylinder cleared.'

"I was somewhat familiar with the basic process and glanced outside to ensure for myself and watched three of the air craft ground crew turn the twenty-foot propellers.

"I remember clearly, continuing the startup procedure, 'Starting engines check, throttle 1/8th open, . . . wing flap control up, landing gear control set . . ., carburetor air cold, fuel stable, wing gear . . .nose gear . . . safety pins in place, throttle, wings flaps, fuel booster. . ., hit emergency bell button again . . . signals! Clear! Clear! Engine switch on, . . .'

"The engines roared to a start. As co-pilot, Alice naturally assumed responsibilities of a lengthy list of duties for the duration of the flight. In the back seat, Gertie rifled paperwork, double checking the navigator's list of duties specific with the plane. We moved to the runway and watched another B-26 plane coming in, observing how it landed.

"Don't turn the radio on just yet Alice, wait until we're ready to taxi out, for confirmation and directions.' Alice nodded compliance.

"Stand by for takeoff.'

"Alice reminded us, 'You ladies must remember that we'll be landing a large ship with tricycle landing gear. This is not conventional gear, so stay alert to its unique operating requirements; turning, thrusts and we've got to keep the nose straight on this one.'

"I took the next step, 'Engine and prop check; Alice, this one has different manifold readings. . . RPMs . . . listen to the sound of how the propeller changes . . . both engines should be putting out identically the same power . . ., Gertie, check the generators. Okay, now check; oil temperature and pressure, fuel pressure . . . boosters on . . .instrument panel . . . your hands must be ready and kept on propeller switches and the other to raise the landing gear.'

"Alice then reviewed specific emergency procedures and checked take off procedures while the engine roared.

"We have to get to one hundred and sixty miles per hour before we get to the end of the runway, and we have a narrow window to get the landing gear up and in flight or we'll end up in the ocean. We're carrying a heavy load, let's hope the ground crew packed it properly for balance.'

"The plane's nose slowly rose as we made our way up toward grey clouds. At two hundred and eighty-seven miles per hour at five thousand feet, I balanced out and Alice sat back in the seat to rest.

"Recalling a past flight with Roy, I became a momentary instructor, for Alice and Gertie's benefit, 'Got to make sure the landing gear all come up gradually on this bird and not before eighteen thousand feet, if one wheel is lagging we'll go into a violent bank. If we ever find ourselves in that position, we'll just try lowering all down and then raising them up again. Easy controls huh? Keep an eye on the cylinder heads, heat and oil pressure. I'll try making some shallow dives, climbs and gentle turns and get a better feel of her. She's got a sensitive rudder. Alice, we're skidding.

Let's try it again. We're carrying thirty-seven-thousand pounds, plenty of guns, machine guns and ammunition as well as a bomb. This is a different kind of load we're carrying, and it'll affect a stall. We must know what we're carrying and how it's loaded. My friend Roy told me that just before a stall in this bird, she'll shudder like hell, so let's pay attention to how pronounced it feels and the lack of control. This plane will give us plenty of warning. In a recovery, we must put the nose down and let it pick up speed by itself. We can't be too slow or cautious or we'll end up in a spin, so we always pull out gradually. Let's try a forty-degree bank. All acrobatics are prohibited but we can practice a few dips and banks. She's good for diving, but a high-speed dive will rip off the tail and an improper load imbalance can rip off a wing. Okay now, let's just fly her straight and level. She's got plenty of power though, despite the armor plates and guns, it's rated as low statistic loss."

"Another B-26 came into view flying just below and parallel. I was mindful that I had full assumption of the controls and rose above cloud cover keeping an eye on the other plane.

"Remember that her small wings and heavy load means we'll be coming into a landing at a high speed, between one hundred and twenty and one hundred and thirty-five miles per hour. Watch how the nose drops on the other plane, landing flap position and how they'll glide in at about one hundred and forty miles per hour, until they're almost on the ground. They'll hold the nose real high and let it down easy.'

"A comfortable half hour had passed, and our plane was nearing a northern coastal destination point when cloud cover suddenly turned dark, cold, and rainy.

"I was now flying blind. Instinctively dipping the nose into a high-speed dive to break out of the din, the instrument panel gauges wildly reeled. Gertie shouted, 'We've been hit, we're leaking fuel and the tail section has a bit of rip in the fuselage.' I fought for control while Gertie kept a look out for the other B-26 and any other aircraft. Righting the plane with surreal calm. I noticed a dozen planes circling below, 'Alice, call the control tower and request an emergency landing.'

"Okay, please stand by for instructions, we're loaded down here. Take your bird up another thousand feet if you can, we need at least ten minutes or more to clear a runway.'

"I pulled the nose up. I noticed ice forming on the wings. Gertie quickly tended to a mechanical issue. As Gertie returned to her seat and buckled in, the plane bounced and jerked, we were in the middle of a bizarre wind twister. Everything not latched in the plane, bounced freely and slammed against walls, ceiling, and floor. Lightning flashed all around us sending sparkling blue flames snaking across the sky.

"I had heard of it once, it was St. Elmo's Fire; a weather phenomenon that manifests itself within electrical fields. The blue lightning hit the left engine, forming four blue rings of fire that arched and snaked the window seals, framing a blue fire. I fought for control, trying to keep the plane level, looking for a way out.

'Alice, call the tower!'

"Radio's out!'

"I glanced to my crew, the women were calm and professional, transferring calm to me. In the surreal moment, I knew that trying to land at the air base was out of the question. We were carrying enough ammunition and a bomb, to take out the entire area. Remembering Roy's advice, I instinctively thought; 'I know what to do', so I dipped the nose at forty-five degrees.

"As was my way, I double checked our status and options. We were losing power in the left engine, a trail of smoke flowed from a feathered propeller. The radio tower had already cleared us for a landing, yet we were quickly losing altitude, too quickly. Gertie shouted that one of the landing gears must have dropped, creating drag. We were about eighteen miles from the coast. It was difficult to tell what was lightning, air fire or ground fire. It seemed we were trying to navigate a sky filled with fireworks within the middle of a storm. The plane shuddered, losing altitude in a dive that was too steep and too fast. Concerned that the stalling engine's fire and tail rip may ignite the load of ammunition within, I instinctively banked, aiming offshore to the water below.

"I intended to level the plane a few feet above the water's surface and glide into a smooth landing. Growing up watching Jack do acrobatic crop dusting, I thought I knew how to glide.

"Double checking on my mates, I noticed something wrong with Gertie. The woman presented a terrified expression.

"I didn't have time to check on her, while focusing on trying to keep the plane level. My hands were so strained that I took and held the steering wheel with folded arms. It took my entire strength and will. Then suddenly we were down low, gliding above and on massive wave tips. I strained to adjust to each bounce and bracing for a large wave wall to suddenly stop us. As though tobogganing a giant truck across a snow mogul field, we bronked a wild horse for an eight count.

"Something was wrong. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Gertie free from her seat and reaching for the floor.

"Why had Gertie left her seat? The woman was a stickler for protocols. Why was she unlatched and not braced for impact?

"The plane slowed, and the nose dipped and caught a massive wave, the plane jerked when slamming the rock backward then forward. Gertie, flew forward, crashing into the windshield taking Alice into the instrument panel.

"The plane's wing caught and dipped below the water then slowly floated as water flowed in. Assuming the women dead, I reached for the radio. Finding only static, I tried and tried again to get a signal. Wading through waist deep icy water, I searched for additional preservers, a dingy and emergency packs. A rush of water blasted in from the tail, slamming me backward. Half trudging, half wading, I made my way back to the tail and managed to grab a spare life preserver just as the plane groaned and dropped several more feet. I heaved my body weight against the jammed hatch door clips. Unsuccessful, I turned around toward the windshield. Gertie's impact had cracked the windshield and the cockpit was now filling with foam. I was trapped.

"I remembered the day that Rosie had found a kitten, trapped in the woodwork under a neighbour's porch. It was not our home and while the homeowners were away, Dad hesitated on prying apart the timbers, hoping the critter would find a way out on its own accord. Late that night, badgered by a forceful Rosie, we all gathered with tools in hand on a rescue mission. Upon freeing the kitten, the angry neighbour arrived home to find us all on the dismantled porch. Dad, protecting his family behind him, puffed out his chest and stood up to the livid man, 'We're here only to rescue a trapped starving kitten, we mean you no intrusion and no disrespect. We'll be back in the morning to right the porch.'

"There was no Dad or family back up here and now to help rescue me from a drowning plane.

"Taking a fire extinguisher in hand, I hammered at the cracked windshield. One at a time, I slid the dingy through, then Alice and Gertie, pulling their life preserve strings as they went. 'No one gets left behind', I yelled into the storm above.

"The plane groaned as water rose near ceiling when I slid through. Gashing my right arm, I let go of the spare preserver, just as it expanded open. The rough waves brush slammed me against the plane and knocked the wind out of me. Unable to grasp my own preserver string, I sunk deep into the water below. Struggling with collapsed lungs, I noticed my thin body slip through the preserver harness and helplessly watched it float away. Near fainting from lack of air and a limp arm, I did not have time nor a chance to correct my breath nor gain an inhale, I desperately struggled against gasping. Resisting panic, I looked toward the surface to see a bright light shining down, illuminating a pathway up.

"It was then that Jack appeared, swimming toward me, a hand reaching towards me.

"Comfortably gliding toward surface and seeing the preserver directly above, I held my mouth closed and aimed upward. Breaking the surface and holding tight to the preserver, I kicked off boots and held on.

"Jack was gone.

“Alice and Gertie were nowhere in sight. Thankful that I had the fortitude to pull their preserver strings, I knew that they would float face up, possibly only a wave or two away.

“Bounce-floating, cold and shivering, I remember wondering if Gordon’s ship would happen to be close by. Seeking his comfort, in my thoughts, I was amid our last visit, dancing close to one of our favourite songs: ‘Sentimental Journey.’”

Maddy wiped at forming tears and sighed, “It is strange what we think about when faced with death. What in the hell was I doing there, in that dangerous place?”

“I was, oh so cold and then it occurred to me, to just let go. I heard my Mom whisper, ‘Sometimes, you have to just get on with it and do what needs to be done. Stand up and do what must be done with what’s right in front of you; this is the true mark of character. This is what you are made of Madeline, you’ve already proved that repeatedly. You’ll do it now.’

“Waking in the hospital, shadowed by a uniformed Officer, I struggled to sit upright. I am sure that I was jacked up on morphine and very groggy. The officer nodded, motioning that he would ask questions first; a debriefing necessity. I was unaware of exactly where I was and of all that had happened. I mumbled a short groggy report, intentionally neglecting the part where Gertie had been out of her seat and had slammed into Alice. I didn’t want Gertie’s family to think anything less of the woman.

“‘Is there anything else that you want to add?’ the serious officer asked.

“I glanced away, noticing my dragonfly pendant on the hospital side table. A thoughtful nurse must have placed it there.

“‘No. Not to the report. Where is my crew? Why am I in here? How did I get here? What happened with the plane, did it sink?’

“The ward was very noisy so; the officer slid a chair aside the bed.

“‘Air Tower personnel and a Ranger, both saw the plane go down; no parachutes reported. There was a Rescue Boat nearby and they followed a flare. Two crew mates were retrieved and are being sent home. The plane was detonated to ensure that it wouldn’t fall into enemy hands. It now rests at the bottom of the ocean.’

“I looked away, taking it all in. ‘What flare? I don’t recall setting one off.’

“‘Well, you must have. You did a helluva job landing that aircraft on water. If you were not civil service, you would be commended. That is all I can tell you at this time.’

“‘What flare?’

“‘You must have lit one before you became unconscious.’

“I didn’t say anything more and neither did he. I was dumbfounded, there was no way I could have fired a flare. The flare and Gertie’s actions, I suppose, will stay a mystery.”

Maddy looked away, teary eyed, solemn, and slightly shivering from the recalled excitement. Gloria rose and bundled the old woman. “I think that’s enough for tonight”.

It took Maddy two full days of napping to recover from the plane crash memory. Gloria following up with suggested elder care activities, took Maddy to a yoga class.

A picture-perfect Marilyn Monroe, look-a-like yoga instructor, eyed Maddy from head to toe, forcing a feigned smile of disgusted judgment. “Welcome everyone and apparently, a Senior to my Health Fit Yoga Class. Choose any spot, get comfortable and follow my lead of body movement, as I talk.” The woman stretched her arms high overhead then bent over, placing hands flat on the floor in front of feet.

Rising to a standing position, her eyes fell on Maddy. “You do not have much control over the things that happen in your life, but you do have control over what you eat and how much you

exercise.” Shaking off a ghastly image of aging old-woman-Maddy, the yoga woman straightened her spine and looked to a slim twenty-year-old then smiled.

“It’s never too early,” Yoga woman smile-winked at Lizzy, then tersely looked directly into Gloria’s eyes. “or too late to work hard to be the healthiest you.”

Stretching from side to side then with one leg held in air, yoga woman pontificated, “Detox every day. One liter of water every day. Organic, high fibre vegan diets only. You can purchase a copy of my bestselling vegan cookbook and yoga fit movie following this class.” Yoga woman bent over, arms stretched backward. “True health care begins at home in your own kitchen, consider my cookbook and movie as your first homework. Throw everything into the garbage that is not in my cookbook’s acceptable food list. Optimum health and fitness is like a good marriage, you cannot expect to cheat with unhealthy food and to be fit at the same time.”

Maddy relaxed on a floor mat, uninterested in any further stretching. Cynically she watched the yoga woman pretzel while expelling virtues of ‘heath’. Her mind wandered to a vastly different era of growing up during the depression and WW2. Food had been so scarce that many starved and died of malnutrition. Most who fought on the front lines, on all sides of battles, would have gladly given a piece of their souls for meat scraps. Maddy could not fathom going without meat protein. Salivating at the mere thought of deer meat, river trout, pork and beef, she wiped a drooling mouth corner. The luxury of having a dessert, consisted of a piece of stale bread with a smidge of maple syrup or bacon grease. Post war and now, homemade pie and ice cream is the best. Affording groceries after the war was a luxurious era of abundance and hope. Those who had managed to survive the depression and war, understood the freedom and prosperity with a deeper appreciation. So many had gone without food and died making the world a better and safer place for their families, and fought for the wellbeing of future generations. There remain, so many war-torn and impoverished peoples, and in the moment, Maddy wondered if their spirits were cringing at the yoga woman’s privilege.

Gloria nudged Maddy and whispered, “Hey Maddy, what did you think of the yoga class? Want to come again next week, or do we cross this off our bucket list?”

“I think I’ll give yogi a pass; once is enough.”

Chuckling, Gloria continued to feign yoga bending and stretching, “You don’t like this yoga stuff?”

Maddy sighed, strategizing how on earth she was going to get up off the floor without assistance. She whispered, “Good god no. I don’t need a reminder of how old bones and muscles don’t bend anymore. Geez, all that bending, twisting, jumping, huffing, puffing and sweating. By the time I squeezed into these damned leotard tights, I was already needing a nap!”

The following day, a grumpy Maddy found herself exhausted from the yoga class, personal story telling and attention. Accustomed to being alone and relatively healthy, she had yet to process all the changes transpiring.

“Robert, please stop asking me stupid questions!” Maddy snarked.

“What stupid questions are you referring to?” Robert was surprised by Maddy’s angry address.

“Like what day it is. It pisses me off. I’m getting worried that you’re conspiring with the Doctor to trick me into answering wrong.”

“That’s hilarious!” A slight laugh exited Robert’s parted lips.

“Why is that so funny?” Anger lines formed upon natural aging wrinkles on Maddy’s face.

“It hadn’t crossed my mind. I ask you because, living in your guest cottage at the river and spending my nights writing, well, I’m completely losing track of time. It’s not about you.”

“Oh. I am sorry. That was egocentric of me, wasn’t it?” Humour twisted Maddy’s lips.

“No. I can understand how you might think that.”

“What are you writing about now?” She changed the subject.

“Well, I’m doing an article for a Veteran’s magazine, and will also use the piece in my book about you and your life. How Jack inspired you to fly.”

“It wasn’t just because I had a crush on Jack that inspired me to fly. While the men fished down at the river, Mom and Rosie would research the wildlife and plant medicine, I would watch the birds fly. I remember laying on my back, chewing on a grass stem and in my imagination, I was equally as free. All birds fly a bit differently and depending on where they are, I was always amazed how they could rise or spiral low, adjusting ever so slightly wing-tip feathers. Have you ever seen an owl hunt in the bush? Those creatures can navigate thick bush, a few feet off the ground by zig zagging at a fast clip when perusing a mouse or rabbit. Truly amazing. You can learn a lot about flying techniques, just hanging out and watching nature unfold by the river.”

“Oh, I see. I do believe I know what you mean. I think I’ve changed a great deal already, since I’ve been here. A year ago, I never imagined being so content, so inspired to write. Now, I can’t imagine anything less.”

“The river has no ungodly noises, no thirst, injustice or sorrows. The river may seem like escapism to many, a waste of time. For us, it has always been a source of food and reverence. Fish and frog legs for dinners, roasted over a campfire then we would lazily watch fireflies, and study the stars. Life rarely gets better than that. There is a simple joy to be had, just being down at the river and allowing the water to wash away the troubles and tears of the world.”

Robert nodded in agreement then inspired asked, “Hey Old Gal, may I have your permission to research your military records on your behalf?”

“Yes. I just don’t want to see any of it. In fact, there’s a box of old papers in the attic you can look through. I’ve never opened any military service mail. I didn’t want any reminder of the war or crash. It was hard enough dealing with Gordon’s night terrors, and I needed to stay home for him. Go ahead and poke through it, if you want. I just don’t want to be informed of any details other than what I remember.”

“I understand, and thanks.”

“Gordon and I attended Legion events in the beginning, November eleventh memorials and so on. But when they shot off a canon or rifles, it would take months for Gordon’s nerves to calm. In his mind, another ship was being blown up; Nazi wolves, stalking the fleet. He would dream about pulling bodies out of the water. It was hard enough when we’d have torrential downpours and lightening. For me, it wasn’t so much my time in the war as, afterwards, finding out just how god-awful things were behind the scenes. No one should ever have to live through seeing mangled bodies. I don’t want to remember it; my life is running out of time and I don’t want to see visions of destruction. I want to take care of my exit from life and more importantly, have fun in the now.”

Arriving home from another elder class, Maddy was greeted by Robert at the door. “Hi Old Gal, how was the memory clinic?”

“Oh, hi Robert, come on in. Oh, easier than I expected. Tricks to using visualization and word association, for when words fail me. It’s quite useful information, and they provided coffee, tea and muffins. I am ever so grateful that our Gloria is here and has taken such interest in coming with me to those appointments, and of course, visiting with Lydia. I’d forgotten how nice it is to have gal pal company.”

“Ah that’s good. What is the name of the consultant? I want to add their name to our list.”

Maddy looked to Gloria, “Oh damn. I don’t remember.”

“Don’t let that upset you Maddy. If I hadn’t grabbed one of her business cards, I wouldn’t have remembered either,” confirmed Gloria, retrieving the card.

“So, how are you? Is there anything we should know about?” Robert asked, intent on getting information when fresh.

“I like spending time with Lydia, Gloria and Lizzy, I think that helps.”

“Any other incidences of confusion, tiredness, pain?”

“No, I don’t think so. But this business with Gretchen is confusing and bothersome. It seems complicated. She has us scheduled to go to a support group. The doctor says it’s so that we’ll have support and resources. So, you won’t need to feel guilty, when needing to make some decisions. That’s a lot of pressure that I don’t want you to carry alone. I am a fighter, and I promise I’ll not willingly give into it. I don’t like those kinds of dramatics.”

Gloria stood, “Those appointments won’t be until the autumn, when everyone is back from summer vacation. So, we can just carry on without them for now. You know? I remember when my Dad began his process. He ran a stop sign and in the same day, put the car into reverse rather than forward and clipped a taxi. A few days later, he came stomping into the house, madder than a hornet, ranting on about calling the mechanic and if it they didn’t fix it properly, he was going to sue their arses off.”

“What happened?” Maddy asked.

“I went out to the car and it wouldn’t start because he hadn’t put the key in the ignition to turn it on.” Gloria said, a laugh in her thoughts, humour in hindsight of the incident.

“I’m glad I stopped driving after Gordon died. I didn’t see a need for it anymore. I figured I needed walking exercise and I could hop on a bus if I wanted to go further. Mind you, it is a long walk to the diner, where they make homemade pies. I have such a craving for a pie and ice cream.”

“Oh, I get that. I’m not making a comparison Maddy, you just jogged my memory. After a while, we couldn’t get Dad to eat anything healthy. He would only eat ice cream, donuts, cake, and drink ginger ale. What a sugar bomb he was consuming every day; bloody gross. You would think that he would have gained a pile of weight, but he didn’t, lost forty pounds. Sometimes, he’d wake up in the night and reality would be a Japanese prisoner of war camp. Drove my Mom to distraction, trying to calm him down. She worried about him something awful.” Gloria winced.

“Yes, my Gordon was like that too. I mean having the night terrors. It sounds like your father survived quite an ordeal, much worse than Gordon. I can’t imagine. Many do struggle in silence.” Maddy’s stomach churned resisting the imagery of war atrocities.

“The doctors put Dad on experimental drugs, for Alzheimer’s, to slow it down. We had a helluva time getting him to take it. He refused to take drugs or medication as a matter of course. Said it was a Nazi conspiracy. Because the Nazi’s funded the Bayer company and did all kinds of secret nasty oppressive and controlling deeds. My mom made him marijuana brownies and he did so much better without knowing.”

Gloria caught herself short. “Oh, I’m sorry Maddy. I got off track there. Let’s talk about something else, shall we?”

“Oh, it’s okay. To tell the truth Gloria, I never could talk about the war. It was easier for me to think of it all as a bad dream I once had. Thank God, I was so young and naïve. None of us, and I mean no-one, had any idea just how bad it really was. It was a horrible after shock to see and read about Prisoners of War. We had no idea how bad they had it. For Gordon and I, it was having our home and Irene that saved us. We spent most of our spare time at the river, which helped enormously.”

Gloria tenderly touched Maddy’s hand, “I want you to know, that I am here for you now.”

Touched by the open caring display, Maddy choked a tear. “You say your Dad had Alzheimer’s, is there anything awful I should know about?” Maddy asked, dreading an answer to the true reality of life.

“Hmm, I think the hard part for my Dad was when he was in-between lucid times. I could tell that the self-confusion was embarrassing. Later, he took his clothes off to go skinny dipping with my Mom, but they were at the wishing well fountain in the mall. I am now a seasoned Alzheimer’s warrior.”

“Oh, good grief. I hope, when my last moment comes, it’s a quick croaking. I don’t want to be a burden to anyone.” Maddy’s eyes went stern, deadly serious.

"It's a gift Maddy, a hard journey for many. I swear it can be a gift to caregivers who understand the process and are aware enough to not take any confrontation personally. There are moments of laughter, and humour within the turmoil, and there is nothing wrong with that. The sufferers of the disease are living in the moment and do not know otherwise. They are enjoying a laugh, a memory of the past." Gloria smiled, knowing she enjoyed the time with her Dad.

Maddy appreciated that Gloria was painting a positive picture of the disease and yet, recalled and different story of one nursing home resident. "One of my friends was fine until she went into that nursing home. I think she gave up and let Alzheimer's consume her. Her daughter had to hide the knives and unplug everything in the house when her mother came to visit. She didn't last long after that. I hope to God; I don't linger."

Appreciating Maddy's concern, Gloria reassured, "I will do my dandiest to keep you home and safe. I'm sure that Robert agrees." She turned to accept Robert's nod.

"Gloria Love, do me a favour? Robert? I want an appointment with my lawyer. It's time to get finances and requests in writing, before it's too late. If you don't mind, I'd like your help writing out a game plan before we talk with the lawyer, and I'd like you both there. I don't want to put you out or if you're not comfortable being involved, I'll understand."

"I am happy to be on your support team. Girl power!" Gloria motioned thumbs up. "Oh, there are some interesting natural remedies in the book from your mother and Rosie. Lizzy and I are researching alternative health options for you. If you are okay with that, we can try some."

At home, the women gathered in Maddy's kitchen. Maddy smirking, made a grand dramatic point of sliding the yoga leotard tights into the garbage bin. Lizzy chuckled and sprawled on the floor to chase Maple the pig, snit-snorting and laughing. "Oh, Maddy Old Gal, you're the best. I like you, you're an old woman with attitude. Hey, don't you just hate it when your body is making fart noises, and you think it is the coffee maker, and it's not on?"

Maddy threw a tea towel at Lizzy, "Oh you think getting old is all snickers and giggles?"

"Well yes." Chimed Gloria, "I'm almost finished menopause, so I figure I'd better start laughing more, or else take up crying."

Lizzy chimed in, "Oh ya. Here's one for both of you then; you know you're getting old when everything bought at the pharmacy is for extra-fast relief because you don't have time to wait for a product to take effect."

Gloria and Maddy rolled their eyes, turned and scuttled about the kitchen making fresh strawberry jam. Lizzy under foot, snuggled Maple and undeterred, blurted, "Hey ladies, I've got another old fart story for you.

"The old man had decided his old wife was getting hard of hearing. So, he called a doctor to make an appointment to have her hearing checked.

"The doctor said he could see her in one week. In the meantime, there's a simple test the husband could do to give the doctor some idea of the dimensions of the problem.

"Here's what you do. Start about forty feet away from her and speak in a normal conversational tone and see if she hears you. If not, back up another few feet, then another few feet, and so on until you get an answer.

"So, that evening she is in the bathroom and he is in the living room, and he says to himself, 'I'm going to try this and see what happens.'

"'Honey, what is for supper tonight?'" No response.

"So, he moves to the other end of the room. 'Honey, what is for supper tonight?'" No response.

"He moves into the dining room. 'Honey, what is for supper tonight?'" No response.

"On to the bathroom door, only a few feet away. 'Honey, what's for dinner?'" No response.

"So, he walks right in. 'Honey, what is for supper tonight?'"

"'Oh, for the love of God, I want to toilet in peace! I've told you five times; HAMBURGERS!'"

Gloria rolled eyes, and Lizzy giggled, pleased to tell the old joke. Maddy quickly changed the subject.

“Growing up in the depression, most people around survived by either farming or conspiring with one.”

“Oh yes,” Gloria agreed, placing a pot of water to boil. “I spent my early childhood on my Grandfather’s farm. He grew corn and hay for animals, mostly. Our neighbours had cows, pigs, chickens, and a donkey. When I was about ten or so, my grandparents lost the farm. I don’t think that they ever recovered from the depression, they were in debt up to their eyeballs.”

Maddy plunged hands into a sink brimming with icy water swishing strawberries. “The Depression was hard on everyone, but war was a whole new kettle of fish.”

“Maddy, I’d like to change the subject for a moment.”, settling in at the table and sipping coffee.

Robert slid in through the back door in time to eavesdrop on the women amidst an intimate conversation. Uncomfortable, he slid down the hallway to the bathroom, trying not to interrupt or eavesdrop, yet ears were glued to the mood and words.

Maddy plucked the last of the strawberry stems and glanced to Gloria, concerned. “What’s on your mind Love?”

Gloria paused, washing the last of the jam jars and lids while gauging Maddy’s mood and energy level. Not wanting to miss opportunity to help Maddy find peace, she said, “Well, we didn’t talk the plane crash. You told us the story, but we didn’t talk it out afterwards. I am wondering if you have deeper insight?”

Instantly drawn back in time to hear heavy metal crashing into waves, spilling out and near drowning, she felt the burden of memory slightly lighten. Maddy dried her hands on a tea towel then tossed it over a shoulder and sat beside Gloria.

“I do feel better. Thinking on it now, I know that I didn’t do anything wrong, per say. I suppose I always assumed that the bad feelings about it all were guilt, remorse for errors in judgement and such. I think, the crash was an impossible situation and I did the best I could, with what knowledge and skills I possessed. The same with Jack, Rosie, Gordon, and Irene. Sometimes life just throws us a curve ball and we find ourselves in the shite of things, scrambling to do the right thing, save the ones we love. I know some aspects of life are not in our control, beyond doing the best we can. I am thinking, I’ve been feeling survivor’s guilt. I just don’t know what is my cross to bear and what isn’t. You know, why did I survive? Virtually unscathed, unharmed. Who was I to be spared an attack by Pastor Jacob? Why did I get to come home and start a new life, while Alice and Gertie did not? Why did I continue to live when Irene and the baby did not have such a choice?

“It seems an awful waste of a good life; to feel bad for continuing, living a fruitful life, when so many others could not. I can see, how this troubled Gordon. He pulled so many lifeless bodies out of the water. I suppose he was also bothered and must have wondered why he was never physically injured. He was injured by visions and memories that hindered his every day abilities.

“So, Gloria, my Love,” Maddy stretched and thoughtfully added sugar and pectin to the jam pot then answered, “I guess the answer to your question is this, I didn’t gain any new insights about the crash, though a little more objective about the self-guilt that I carry. Gordon had said to me, before he died. ‘Talk it out and allow the light of day to bring forth insights, to set your spirit free.’ I’m not sure if talking it out can change what happened, as much as, changing how I feel about it, lessens the burden; a little.”

Gloria beamed, “I didn’t talk to you about the crash after you told us the story because I was thinking about my own feelings about my husband and daughter’s deaths. I stayed up half the night, thinking and sorting events out in my mind. I don’t know why we are spared, we have to believe that there is for a reason.”

“Yes, Love.” Maddy patted Gloria’s hand, comforting in mutual understanding. “You know, we must believe that lost loved ones would not want us agonizing over the details of their deaths.

Who are we to dictate how long another will live, or when it is their time to go? I know that my Loves would want me to enjoy life, live life to its fullest; come what may.”

“So, true,” Gloria wiped a tear with a dish towel, “and not to be confused with required grief of tragedy.”

Maddy sighed, stirring the jam pot. “Loss of a loved one can be so utterly profound if you don’t believe in an afterlife.”

Brightening, Gloria smiled. “Oh, I agree. I see visions of my husband often and I feel my daughter’s spirit constantly overlooking her daughter Lizzy. It gives me profound comfort.”

Maddy sat back in a chair, glancing at the gorgeous young Lizzy who laid half under the table, snuggling Maple while carefully listening to the older women. Maddy said, “Yes, I’m sure that many people dismiss spiritual visions, but if they would only admit to undeniable experiences of their loves one’s spirited presence, they might be relieved of grief and guilt. I know my people are with me. I just don’t want to see ghostly manifestations or experience cold touching. I’d faint.”

Lizzy had been listening and edged closer to sit with the women and whispered to Gloria, “I see spirits Nana. I always have. I just don’t talk about it.”

Warmed by the reassurance of her granddaughter’s spiritual comforts, Gloria radiated.

Maddy nodded in respectful acknowledgment, turned to stir the bubbling jam pot then returned to an earlier point, “I’m not saying that I’m all happy with what caused the crew’s death, I still and always will, feel awful about their demise. Terrible things happen to good people.” She paused. “No, I can’t believe that our loved ones who have passed over, would want us to spend our remaining years agonizing over what cannot be un-done. If it were me, that passed over first, for whatever reason, I would request for those left behind to live life to its fullest and not to look back. I suppose with the Alzheimer’s diagnosis, it’s been a bit of a wakeup call. Now, I rather feel as though any happy times experienced, I am also sharing with spirited loved ones.” She chuckled, “I guess I better have more fun.”

Gloria nodded, turned away tearful, and whispered, “I felt that! I felt as though I’ve been shaken to the core so many times in life but now, I feel light as a feather. I like that. I like what you said.”

Lizzy hugged her Nana and Maddy as Maple snort-wedged between legs. “I love awesome old-gal-squishy-hugs! I love you two old farts!”

Robert, taking it all in from a distance, whispered, “Me too.”

Unaccustomed to being touched, hugged, or involved in such an open display of affection for the past twenty years, Maddy, half patted their backs and pulled away.

Sensing the old woman’s discomfort, Gloria also leaned away and asked, “What do you miss most about Gordon?”

Embarrassed with such a personal question, yet giddy to have someone so interested, she replied, “Oh my! Oh, his touch. Yes, holding hands. Oh, he was a big burly man, a big teddy bear. I miss his hugs. His hugs were right up there with flying solo. When I close my eyes, I can sink into his arms and drift among the clouds, as though experiencing what heaven will be like. It doesn’t get better than that. Though, raising Irene and flying were comparable in other ways.”

Sighing with her own loving memories, Gloria smiled. “I sure relate to that except I’ve never flown in a plane. Do you miss flying?”

“No. I honestly was content after being self-grounded. I think I might like to enjoy the sensations again. I was and still am, happy with my choices; to come home and start a family with Gordon. Oh and, don’t get me wrong, I’m not requesting an invitation to go up in a plane again, just to enjoy the sensation of calm and peacefulness.”

Maddy turned the stove down, “Well girls, this jam is ready to jar, and I’ve had enough serious talk for one day. If you don’t mind, jar this batch and leave the dishes. I’d like to take a short nap then take some of this jam to Lydia and the gang, shall we?”

Robert, choosing to be alone with his own thoughts and feelings on the matters discussed by the women, quickly slid out the back door and down to the river cottage.

With the little red wagon filled to overflowing with jams and cakes, the women made their way to the nursing home in time for desert. Seeing so many new faces, Maddy was unaware that the home was so full. Where had all the new residents come from?

The dining-room mood was somber. Lydia beamed when noticing them arrive, "CHUCKABOO FRIENDS! BEES KNEES!!" She wheeled the motor chair to greet them. Mary approached, "Boy am I ever glad to see you ladies."

"What's going on?" Maddy sensed an altered mood, released Maple-the-pig. It rapidly scooted to snuggle with Lydia, then nudged each resident with a tail wagging pig hello.

"Oh, my, well, we're officially full of residents. That new elder care worker, Gretchen, something or other, seems to be working overtime recruiting. So many people, I'm so busy tending to them, and just don't know how to entertain them. They laid off the recreation staff just after I started, and now it will be two weeks before the new staff begins."

"Oh, I see," Maddy scratched her head in thought. "Well, how about we begin with some fresh homemade jam and cakes. That ought to be a pick-me-up for most."

Gloria and Lizzy beginning to feel familiar and comfortable in the home, tended to dish out desserts, while chit-chat erupted into familiar competitive banter.

Two women, who obviously knew each other well, opened a deck of cards and one began to shuffle, "Don't get all miffed with me, but what in the hell is your name again? I can't for the life of me remember."

The other sat quiet for a moment and tisked while thinking. "It's not that I'm offended, it's just that I'll have to think on it for a bit. I'll get back to you when I remember."

Mary rolled eyes, amused by the comedy routine that had everyone erupting in fits, farts, and giggles.

Encouraged, one dealt cards while the other continued, "What in the hell is that thing in your ear?"

"My hearing aid, you, dumb arse."

Squinting, leaning over the table, "Nope! No, you, dumb arse, it looks like a god-damned suppository!"

"The woman wiggled it loose, and held it at arm's length, "Son of a gun. Hmm, well I guess we all know where my hearing aid is."

"Another thing, I see you haven't been to church lately, have you forgiven all your enemies already?"

"Nope."

"Then why aren't you going?"

"Don't have to go to forgive them. I've just outlived them all."

The comedy banter split off to individual table groups, as the women served the last of the desserts, each table competing in their own comedy banter competition.

"Old man Barns doesn't sow wild oats any more, you can't get seeds from dried up prunes."

"I don't remember if I am being forgetful."

"Yup, some days you are a dog, some days you are the fire hydrant."

"Having my kids sitting in the back seat while driving, does not cause accidents; having a back seat is the cause all of those kids."

"I used to enjoy a happy-hour drink, now having a naptime during happy-hour has kept me sober."

"I used to be fabulously social, now all the names in my address book begin with Doctor."

The room echoed with raucous laughter.

The next morning, Maddy parked the little red wagon in front of the grocery store, occupying the front entrance while slowly tying a small piece of rope to secure the wagon to a shopping cart rack. A young woman impatiently jostled arms of groceries was looking for enough space to pass through or around Maddy. Turning to face the young woman and make way while fumbling with a string knot, Maddy caught the woman's disgruntled facial expression morph into a patronizing smile. The impatient woman wavered, straining to wait for the old woman to slowly move. Not wanting to appear rude, the young woman feigned a smile then slowly spoke loudly, articulating as though Maddy was both deaf and of simple mind, stating the obvious, "Oh hello Ma'am, you've come to do a bit of shopping, have you?"

Clearly the young woman was daft. Maddy patronizingly patted the young woman's hand, then not waiting for further conversation, she wheeled a shopping cart and slid into the store. Seeing Robert and Gloria giddily chatting at the fruit and vegetable bins. Maddy stopped abruptly to hide. Not wanting to interrupt the blossoming love process, she backed away, purchased milk and bread then set out for home.

Gretchen was grocery shopping too and watching the love birds from the cleaning products section. Calculating and on fire, she made a move and boldly pushed her cart between the two people, aggressively shifting attention to herself.

Aghast, each backed away to make way, and waited for the woman's verbal reason for the aggressive intrusion.

Gretchen, hands on hips glared at Robert, judgmentally eyeing him from head to toe then tisked and pursed her lips, spitting, "Well, if it isn't the free loading man-gigolo."

Reeling insulted and angry, Robert arched his back; hurt and indignant. "Excuse me???" He had never intentionally free-loaded off anyone. The jab cut deep, hitting on a vulnerable humanitarian button. His true cause was to figure out ways to look after Maddy while she maintained her dignity and independence. Embarrassed for being a rent-free guest in her little cottage at the river, irked his pride. The gigolo insult smacked, a blatant insinuation of elder abuse and he was instantly livid beyond self-control. His fists and jaws clenched, vacillating between wanting to explain the situation to Gloria, and wanting to punch the rude and intrusive Gretchen.

Grinning satisfied that she had obviously impaled him, Gretchen turned to attack Gloria.

"Well, if it isn't the new neighbor. I saw you buying marijuana off some young punk outside of the library yesterday. Don't deny it. I saw you with my own eyes. I see you visiting Madeline all the time, and with that young girl in tow. I wonder if you're dealing or sharing illegal drugs. I wonder what Children's Aid Society would think?"

Gloria was stunned into mortified silence. She gasped, embarrassed and humiliated, in front of Robert. She had only bought the medicinal marijuana to slow Maddy's Alzheimer's disease. Remembering how the substance had helped her father, she was aiming to offer it to Maddy, in hopes that it might ease symptoms and slow down the Alzheimer disease. She had not thought that someone would be spying or trailing her movements. She thought that actions had been stealthily discreet. There was notion of elder abuse, or of a possible police and Children's Aid Society investigation, or the ramifications of drugs changing hands. "I, I, I, have no idea what you are talking about." She glanced to Robert, his eyes darting wildly, trying to restrain aggressive actions.

"Uh huh!" Gretchen huffed, smirked with delicious satisfaction, turned on heels, nose up and headed for the checkout counter.

Gloria and Robert turned to each other, both faces burning crimson red, and with mouths agape speechless. As they both turned back to watch the mad woman huff away, their eyes caught the woman's heavy butt cheeks bounce erratically; her white pants bared a brownish yellow blotch. Either she had soiled her pants or sat in a liquid that gave the appearance that she had.

Turning back to each other, the sight of her pants was enough to break Gretchen's hold on them and they relaxed, snickering.

"What a bitch!" Gloria cursed. "Bloody hell, she does reek of Lily of the Valley, flowers of the dead."

Robert sighed, "This is war!"

Gloria stiffened when sensing Robert's angered tone.

Robert turned to consider her opinion. "What is it? What's on your mind?"

"Every person gets grumpy occasionally and everyone has a boiling point moment. Some people are like porcupines with a sticky outer personality and a soft under belly. Some have an offensive skunky aura that must be avoided. Look, my hands are shaking. That woman is a scorpion. She aims to annihilate."

"Yes. Yes, she does. Like I told Maddy, it's an old warriors tactic. Intimidation intended to make the target engage in battle and self-destruct." Robert concurred.

Home and exhausted from grocery shopping, Maddy shifted in her easy chair as Lizzy made herself at home, slumping on the couch and scratching behind Maples ears.

"Hi kid." Maddy yawned, happy for the girl's company. "You don't talk much."

"Never have much to say. What do you want to know?"

"About you. Whatever you want to tell me."

"Hmm. You already know I like listening to Billie Holiday's music and I love my pig." Maple rolled over to accommodate a belly rub.

"I like you kid, I really want to know more about you. Go on." Maddy nudge-elbowed, sincere.

Gauging the old woman's sincerity and maternal caring, Lizzy shifted away from Maple and gazed toward Maddy's family photos on the mantle. "Well, I miss my Mom and Dad, but I don't remember what they look like unless I see their old pictures."

"I can relate to that. Go on."

"I remember once when I was little and sitting on the porch with them. We had this cool porch swing and we were swinging and hanging out together. I don't remember what they were talking about. I just remember being curled up between them. It was nice."

"That is a lovely memory."

"I was too young to remember much of life with them, so I make up other memories."

"Like what?"

"Oh," Lizzy smiled, happy to share, "In the winter, at Christmas. It's snowing, and we're bundled up together under a thick blanket, on a horse drawn wooden buggy sleigh. Horse bells jingling, Christmas lights and hot chocolate."

"That too is a lovely memory. I don't think it matters if it is made up, Love. I think the love you share with your parents transcends the spirit world. They are with you, always."

"Thank you."

"Anything else?"

"When I was younger, I used to worry that I'd be sent to an orphanage. You know, like Oliver Twist and be corrupted, picked on and demoralized."

"But, you don't worry anymore, do you?"

"Nah, I grew out of the orphan stage."

"That's good."

"Ya. After I moved in with Nana, for a while I was still afraid, but one night, I realized that she was afraid of thunderstorms. I crawled into bed and held her. She told me that when she was a little girl, during a lightning and thunderstorm, the barn caught on fire and all the horses, cows and smaller farm animals died. The fire was so big, too fast for anyone to get in and save the animals or able to quench the flames. It took a long time for the fire department to arrive, and by the time they did, destruction was over."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I was sorry to hear about it too. I realized that Nana needed me, so I couldn't possibly go away and live anywhere else. I wasn't afraid of being sent away anymore."

"It's a good thing you were there. She's a lucky woman to have a grandchild."

"Ya, I know. It's worked out well, so far. Hey Maddy, Old-Gal? I've been meaning to ask you about all those fuzzy fish hook things. What are they for?"

"Oh those. I see you've been in the guest cottage."

"Ya, Robert talks to me about writing, I like that."

"That's good. They're lures, for fly fishing."

"Oh?"

"Ask Robert, if you're interested in trying fly fishing out."

"I'm allowed?"

"Of course, my Dad and Gordon didn't make them to sit forever on display and collect dust."

"What's the fuzzy stuff on them?"

"Again, you ask Robert to explain more, he knows all about that stuff. He used to fly fish with my Gordon. What I can tell you, is that some have deer hair, feather bits, bug parts, and who-knows what. I don't know what is what. I think it all depends on whether it's for fishing bass or trout, or what-ever kind of fish swims in water."

"One had thin clear line all wrapped around, a mess."

"Oh, that one likely got tangled, snagged on a rock, or tree branch, or on an underwater log, and maybe they just never got around to untangling it."

"Oh."

Maddy yawned, laid her head back and instantly dozed briefly. Hearing herself snore, her head bobbed, and she rallied awake. "Oh, hi kid. How long have you been here?"

"About half an hour."

"What? Why didn't you wake me up? What were you doing, sitting here watching an old woman snort in her sleep?"

"No, Maddy Old-Gal. We've been chatting."

"What? No, we haven't. I've just woken. Why would you say such a thing?"

Understanding memory lapse, and saddened by the blatant reality, Lizzy replied, "Nah, just joking. I just sat down."

Confused and annoyed, Maddy grumbled, humorously, "What's on your mind girly?"

"Nothing, just came over to ask if you needed any help with anything. Do you?"

"Nothing to think of. Maybe tomorrow."

Still confused, after Lizzy left with the pig, Maddy turned and gazed out the window. There was something not right about the conversation, why would the young girl say they had been talking, then say she just arrived? Had she been chatting and forgotten, within moments? No, the young girl had not been joking, Maddy could tell by the girl's reaction. Embarrassed for a moment, knowing this was an insight of events to come, it was time to get back to business, for memory would be soon fading and illusive.

Maddy joined Robert, Gloria, and Lizzy on the patio. A sip of brandy and Maddy allowed the memory of why the navigator was out of the planes seat. Maddy looked directly into Robert's soul. "I have always wondered why Gertie was out of her seat and now I remember that she was reaching for a Star of David medallion. I saw a prisoner of war number tattoo on her wrist. We all thought, she had led us to believe that she was just an Italian."

Robert and Lizzy exchanged a glance. Incredulous, Robert blurted, "Shite!"

Lizzy calmly said, "Wow. A brave woman to join the war effort, but stupid for being out of her seat for a medallion during emergency procedure."

Each fell into their own thoughts of various dangers of war.

Maddy paced, "There's more. I just had a glimpse. I also remember before the crash that I had to get the plane and ammunition to front lines check point, but then when I was in the water and slammed against the plane, I noticed that the landing gear was half engaged and oddly twisted. The gear must have jammed when the plane was hit by enemy fire. I didn't know for sure, the instrument panel and gauges were out. I knew for sure when I was in the water and saw the jammed landing gear, as an after thought, that I couldn't have landed safely on the air strip. I didn't know, until then."

Gloria reeled, "Oh Maddy, imagine if you had tried to land on the air strip? At the base? With bombs and ammunition on board?"

"Oh my!", Maddy whispered, thoughts imagining the hangar and ground crew ablaze.

"Jesus, Old Gal! You could have taken out the entire air base, all the planes, the hangar, and the tower, not to mention, a thousand or more service people?"

"Robert is so right. You did the right thing by banking out toward the water." Gloria gasped at the thought of lost lives, the many rather than a few.

Running fingers through his beard, when being thoughtful, Robert leaned forward and glared deep into Maddy's eyes. "Don't question yourself. Do you hear me? Your mates may not have made it, but you likely saved a thousand other lives that day. And damn it, I've been around the military many, many times over the course of my career and good god woman, I can't for life of me, figure out how you managed to stay out of a spin, and scuttle that plane down on the water in one piece."

"I don't know either, Love. I don't know. The whole episode rather unfolded in surreal motion." The memories did little to alleviate feeling guilty about the plane crash and loss of crew mates. Uncomfortable with where this conversation was rapidly leaning toward, and before someone used the 'hero' word, wittingly, she looked to Robert and quickly changed the subject.

"Enough of me and that damned crash. Enough. How about you, Love? I want to hear about your article. How's it going? What's it about?"

Accepting the diversion tactic, Robert drew a hand over his face to draw out strain, allowing his mind to shift. "Oh, it'll be my last piece on Afghanistan. It's easy to get in there, a whole other matter to get out. I suppose it'll serve as a warning for anyone heading over there; it's a fascinating culture, just don't get involved in any tribal war. Too many years of complex resentments, betrayals, feuds, and misplaced honour.

My God, still five million people longing for refugee status, somewhere else, almost anywhere else.

"You know, long before nine/eleven, the factions were still somewhat communicating. For too long, the refugees have been stuck between a rock and hard place; the Soviets on one side and English India on the other. It is the money mongering capitalistic feckers that are responsible. Jesus, both were using spies on the other and in between, a volatile game of monopoly with the Afghan tribes stuck in the mix trying to form a common front; insurgency.

"Pretty much sums up many capitalistic countries; invading, occupying, and then inserting themselves as the ruling authority. Anytime there is war of any kind, follow the money trail. Ah gees, I'm getting all pissed, stop me now."

Gloria stood, "Okay! I'd be happy to interrupt. I've made brownies and coffee. Let's de-stress a little with dessert."

Robert raised eyebrows and eyes lit up with a childish sweet tooth. "Brownies? My favourite."

"Well, actually, I've made two different kinds. One kind for Maddy and consenting adults, and another of Lizzy's innocence." She winked to Robert and nudged his arm.

"Oh, come on Nana, we all know what makes your brownies so special, I'm old enough."

"No. It's not worth being arrested over."

Maddy queried, "What are you all talking about? What kind of brownies are they?"

Gloria grinned, "Giggle brownies."

"I'm in need of giggles." Maddy winked to Lizzy.

Maddy, Gloria, Lizzy, and Maple nosed around Orville's Farm and Feed store while as Orville Junior huffed and waddled, following the girls and feeding the pig treats.

An apologetic Maddy lovingly laid a hand on Lizzy's shoulder, "I'm sorry it has taken so long to get you here to meet Orville and to learn about your pig. I think I lost track of time. If I forget anything else, please, remind me."

Orville huffed for breath under his massive weight. Chest puffed, happy to share a lifetime of experience and knowledge, he pontificated. "The pig is a female, a sow. An intelligent creature, smarter than a dog, lovable and loyal. You've got to feed it this stuff, only pig feed kibble. No junk food. The pink skin and grey bum is typical of Pot Belly Pigs, and it likely won't grow much more than eighteen inches. Maple should average a hundred pounds, no more or it'll get sick; maybe go deaf and blind. A Pot Belly can't carry more weight. Tie Maple up in the back yard or fence it in, and let it graze on grass. In winter, give it lots of extra greens; celery, lettuce, and such. Pigs need a high fibre diet.

"Yup, the back yard'll be good. Maple will like to play but watch it around dogs; dogs might want to nibble on pork chops. Adversarial, they are. Pigs have a hankering for compost, so be prudent."

At ninety-eight, Orville was the perfect likeness to his father; six-foot-tall with a belly equaled in circumference. His belt was a hoola hoop, holding up bibbed coveralls. It jiggled when he laughed, and Orville laughed often.

Unlike his father, Orville smiled and laughed at his own silly jokes. His salesman style was infectious. The store had always been a hang out for those who needed a lift in spirits. People often hung about, siphoning his happy spirit then felt obligated to buy products they did not need. Contrary to his father's nature, Junior was a wise old soul who lived a simple life style. His heavy-set frame is a mystery of longevity that defied professional medical minded folks.

While the store had survived the great depression, two world wars and phenomenal social change, it's interior had not. In hard times both Senior and Junior would sell off old inventory to make ends meet. In abundant times, both donated their shared wealth. The old man hosted community picnics and dances in the style of old time music jamborees. Folks hearing about the events, drove from far away counties, just for the feeling of happier eras gone by and good old fashioned homey atmosphere.

School chums, Junior, Jack and Gordon learned to play instruments under the patient watchful eye of the seasoned musicians. Jack on harmonica, Gordon on a bag pipe chanter and Orville Junior, balancing a guitar on his belly like a small table.

There was late night dancing by lantern light and fireflies. The younger boys playing until the moonshine ran out, or took its toll, or when the sun came up. East Coast jigs, ballads, and waltzes, filled their repertoire.

Catching herself drifting off in memory, Maddy forced herself to focus in the here and now.

Gloria proudly chimed, "Oh no, I don't think Maple will need training instruction Orville. Lizzy's already got Maple following her around like a puppy; opening doors, the fridge door and opening the fruit drawer, helping herself to the apples and celery. When Lizzy is doing her cleaning chores, Maple follows behind with her own cleaning cloth. Such a hoot to watch."

The trio of women drifted into the back-storage room as Orville lectured on various feed blends and what brand contained what ingredients.

Maddy heard reminiscent past music from the boys. Slipping in thought, she followed the three into the back room while bridging the gap between the past and here and now. 'Yes, if you go to the nursing home on a Wednesday afternoon, you might find some of those old-time jamboree musicians having a little jam session. Some of the older patients might not remember much of anything, but they can still play a fiddle or guitar like a master. In fact, on a good day, you might

find youth and professionals from across Canada, popping in for the fun of jamming with some old-time musicians.' Maddy said in her own thoughts.

The three emerged from the feed area, Lizzy carrying a bag of pig kibbles in arm as Orville ushered them to the cash register.

"So, what happened to your pig that she had to get the cone of shame?"

Gloria turned to Lizzy for the story as Maple tried to shake off the veterinarian's plastic neck collar.

Embarrassed, Lizzy giggled. "I thought Maple was safe to be let off its leash, but Maddy's compost was on the other side of the fence. Maple wedged through the wire. It might have been all right, until backing out, a wire poked its snout. The Veterinarian said that the scrape wasn't too bad, but with the ointment on, Maple would try licking it off, thus, the big plastic collar. We all signed it. Would you like to sign it Orville?"

“Your courage inspires me –
not just the medals that you’ve earned,
but the battles that you overcame within your soul.”

Chapter Seven ~ Battles

Dapper suited, hair cut and boldly solid in a professional mood, Robert stood stiffly in front of the surly old Judge LeBeau.

The majestic judge, bigger than life with old time grey hair, powerhouse-hunched over the desk and formidably eyed Robert. Silently sizing each other up, man to man, a thousand unspoken words passed between them. Maddy caught Robert slightly eye-roll toward Gretchen, who dramatically feigned pain, gingerly holding crutches and with a casted foot atop a chair.

Maddy had insisted that she was fully capable of representing herself at the hearing, yet Robert pleaded that he needed to turn the table with Gretchen. The situation had become personal; to stand for his aging mother-in-law and for himself. Now, Maddy was seeing a side of Robert, she had never seen, and grateful he was standing up in front of her. Gloria and Lydia sat on each side as Maddy’s supports.

Shaking a fist toward Gretchen, Lydia shouted, “SIDE WINDER!!! DOUBLE CROSSER!!! FLOUR FLUSHER!!!

“ABUSE!” Robert, let the word hang in the air, reverberate off the hallowed walls of justice and waited for all to absorb the tone. He casually slid off eye glasses for effect.

Judge LeBeau slammed the ornate gavel, its resonance echoing. He glared at Robert, “Quiet in the court! Sir, this is a competency hearing, not a criminal procedure.” He wiped a runny nose with a tissue, nostrils revolting against the powerful stench of Gretchen’s cheap perfume.

“Your honour,” Robert caught the judge’s attention, “the Neurologist assessment before you, indicates that Madeline is only at level one Alzheimer’s, with no other concerning health conditions, continues to live independently and manages her own affairs. She is taking the proper medication and attending workshops. On behalf of Madeline, we formally dispute Gretchen’s home assessment findings; that Madeline is at risk of self harm. We firmly disagree and maintain that she is fully capable of continuing to live independently within her own home and manage all affairs, at this time. I can assure you, that if I had any concern, whatsoever, that she is, or will be foreseeably negligent in self care, or the care of guests in the home, I would take appropriate action to rectify the situation. Immediately.”

“What relation do you have with Madeline, within power to speak on her behalf?”

“I am her son-in-law, your Honour.”

“Are there any other direct living relatives?”

“No sir.”

“Gretchen, do you have anything to add to the written home assessment, you have submitted?”

Gretchen dramatically struggled with crutches to a stand, angry to be challenged by Robert. “I most certainly do, your Honour.” She reached for a copy of the assessment. “Self harm is easily quantified, for example; dated medication in the medicine cabinet . . .”

Robert interrupted, "Your Honour, the only dated medication in Madeline's home was hemorrhoid cream, that hardly constitutes a danger."

Gretchen countered, "Loose floor mats and food stains on clothing."

Robert eye rolled, "Easily rectified."

"Jars of sulphur and molasses, and goose fat," Gretchen said, stressing, "Natural products are the elixirs of death."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Robert waved a hand, "those are simply spring, and fall detoxes; old time remedies and perfectly safe. Hardly indicates incompetency or negligence in their use."

Arching her back with indignancy, Gretchen turned directly to the judge, "I wasn't finished! I am getting to my point." She wielded, pointing a finger at Maddy, "Clearly, Madeline is incompetent and negligent. Certainly, this is not how a reasonably prudent person would live and behave. Failure to exercise care of self and others in her home; as is visible by my injury." She dramatically winced, favouring a hurting ankle."

"Your point is, Miss Gretchen?" The judge peered over eye glasses.

"Yes, when I entered Madeline's home, to complete the home assessment, I was expecting some moderate dust, however, I was not prepared to be greeted by garbage strewn over the kitchen floor, and your Honour, I was attacked by a wild feral pig. In the home, your honour!"

The judge raised an eyebrow and looked to Robert and Maddy, both swaying their heads, 'No'.

"As I was being attacked, I tried to defend myself by backing away. I slipped on the garbage strewn on the floor. Madeline neither tried to stop the pig nor immediately tend to my care. Rather, she sat in a chair and laughed hysterically in a demented wail! Clearly negligent house keeping, clearly demonstrates incompetent judgement by having a wild animal in the house. Do you see, your Honour? Madeline is clearly incompetent, negligent tending to a wild animal and my injury. Again, clearly not how a competent adult or reasonably prudent person would behave. Clearly negligible and this incident demonstrates that Madeline is clearly at risk of self harm, and to others. Hysterical and demented psychotic is my professional opinion. I had to navigate a poorly maintained construction zone, when entering the house. Her son-in-law is not a qualified contractor." Gretchen grinned piously at Maddy.

Maddy shrunk. For the first time in her life, since Rosie came home traumatized by the war, Maddy felt powerless and belittled by an authority figure. Fighting back tears, she turned away from Gretchen's glare.

Gretchen slumped back into a chair, victorious. She believed that she could not be challenged, by anyone. Her word was, law, a slam dunk.

The judge sat silently writing notes as Robert stood calmly waiting then asked, "What do either of you have to say about this, Robert, Madeline?"

Maddy moved to stand, willing to submit an apology. Robert touched her shoulder and motioned for permission to continue. She nodded, 'Yes'.

"Your Honour, while what was presented is wildly demonstrative of Gretchen's claims, I can assure you that it can all be easily explained. What was viewed and transpired is not how it seems."

"Go on."

"First, I admit that I am not a qualified contractor, I am assisting a certified carpenter, in building a new porch for Madeline. Now in the matter of the pig incident," Robert paused. "Your Honour, if the bailiff will open the door for a moment, you will see for yourself."

Nodding, the judge sat back, arms folded, curiously looking forward to this rebuttal unfolding.

The bailiff opened the door to allow Lizzy to enter with pink-ribboned Maple trotting dutifully at her side. "Come Maple." Lizzy said, then slipped into the front pew beside Gloria and Lydia, "Maple, sit. Stay." The pig lovingly nudged Lydia, who beamed with pride, cuddling, petting and cooing the pig. Maple dutifully stayed put where it was told.

The judge raised bushy eyebrows. "Am I to assume that this is the wild feral pig reference in the plaintiff's report?"

Robert, relaxed, knowing instantly that Gretchen's slam dunk, had dissipated.

Teeth clenching, Gretchen raised an angry voice, trying to alpha dog over the judge to sway the court's opinion, "Your Honour! This is ludicrous. You cannot have a wild animal paraded in a court room!"

Sliding glasses down his nose in an over-powering gesture, he put Gretchen in her place, "Excuse me?" He stated.

Gretchen slunk, fuming, eyes darting trying to think fast; words, excuses to prove her point. Ignoring an interjection, the judge motioned to Robert, "Please continue."

Robert reached over to Maple and gave it a pat then turned back to the judge. Professional and courteous, Robert's voice began, "Maple, this fully trained pet pig, belonged to Lydia. Lizzy here, is the current pig's care giver and Madeline's next-door neighbour. The pig was injured recently and was wearing a cone of shame, er, I mean, a protective cone, such as what a dog would wear, protecting a scrape on her snout. Lizzy had asked Madeline to look after the pig for the day, while she attended to a summer student job at Orville's Farm and Feed establishment. Madeline had just tended to the dressing on Maple's snout, which explains stained clothing and the need to go to the bathroom to wash up. Pig's love food, and while perfectly behaved and playful, a hungry pig cannot resist an open bag of pig food on a counter. So, you see, when Madeline was needed to answer the door, Maple here, was simply devouring kibbles when the bag spilled over and dispensed across the floor. No more and no less of a concerning behaviour. You see, Madeline was born and raised country, and assisted Lizzy in the knowing of all that is needed to care and handling of a pet pig. You see, pet pigs are like happy, playful loving dogs." Robert pointed to Maple, snuggling with Lydia and Gloria.

"Gretchen took it upon herself to forcefully enter Madeline's home, uninvited and boldly scurried from room to room, without permission. When she entered the kitchen, she merely took a bit of a loop-dee-loo and slipped on kibble feed, not garbage. She was not attacked, as she stated. Maple merely greeted her, as any happy dog might."

"And what do you have to say about Gretchen's injury? There is a serious liability issue here as well as a competency attending to Madeline's care," said the judge, his eyes brightening while observing the pig.

"Of course, your honour, Madeline had absolutely no indication that Gretchen had been injured, she was merely chuckling at the sight of the playful pig. She did ask Gretchen if she was all right. In fact, per Madeline's statement, Gretchen stood and walked out of the door, of her own accord without visible impairment to any body part. Sustaining an injury, well, this is the first time that either Madeline or myself have heard of this."

The judge pushed further. "Madeline, I understand that your son-in-law has your permission to speak on your behalf, is his statement of the incident accurate, as you perceive it to be?"

Madeline stood, respectfully, gaining confidence, and politely said, "Yes, your Honour. One-hundred-percent."

"Lizzy, please escort your pig out of my court room. I have seen enough." He slid glasses back into place and wrote notes.

Gretchen, weakened and losing ground, panicked. Forgetting implicated injury, she easily stood, leaving crutches leaning against the table. "Your Honour, this is a farce and a distraction. Clearly I have demonstrated that there is both existing and foreseeable concern here."

Annoyed, the judge slid glasses off. "Something further?"

"Yes. Yes, there is. Let us not forget that Madeline is ninety-two years old, has Alzheimer's disease and as such, cannot possibly live independently in her own home. In my professional opinion, she needs long term professional residential care and certainly, twenty-four-hour care as the disease progresses. I will not condone anything that places her in harms way."

Observing the woman standing tall, with defiant shoulders back, he had to accept the point taken. The judge squirmed and looked to a worried Maddy. He clicked the pen, his concerned eyes sizing the little old woman's manner, searching her eyes and demeanour for competency.

Robert calmly rifled through his briefcase and held up a file folder. "Your Honour, Madeline is a seasoned World War Two Veteran. She is quite astute, and aware of her condition and prognosis. At this time, she merely wants to spend as much time as possible in her own home. I stress the point, that she is only in stage one and is still fully capable of managing her own affairs."

Feeling bullied, Gretchen interjected, "Well Sir, I understand that you are a reporter by trade and not qualified to make such a medical determination; is this not true?" She said with profound indignancy.

Robert turned hard, "Perhaps you are not either, Gretchen. Isn't it true that you've been fired from your last two jobs for bullying elderly people into nursing homes and then assuming a realtor role, and selling their homes? Coercing vulnerable people into hiring you as their real estate agent to sell their homes and disposing of their life belongings?"

The judge straightened, eye brows raised. Gretchen reddened, livid and embarrassed at being caught.

Shifting thoughts back to the facts of the case before him, the judge eyed Robert and calmly said, "That will be enough of that, Sir. This is not a criminal court hearing, nor are we questioning Gretchen's competency. I will ignore the previous outburst. Do you have anything relevant to add to Madeline's case?"

The point had stalled Robert's counter attack. Casually opening a large envelope, he motioned for the bailiff to take the file to the judge.

"I may not be a qualified Alzheimer's specialist, but our lawyer, neurologist and community care team, are. Madeline has already notarized a new will and estate, made concrete legal plans to accommodate the advancing disease. I have moved into a separate dwelling on the property. Her neighbour here, Gloria, is a qualified nursing assistant and has been hired by Madeline. We are currently seeking to hire a different Community Care Consultant, other than Gretchen, to oversee and manage this case."

Robert turned to Gretchen, "Gretchen, you are fired. I wouldn't trust you to look after my worst enemy!"

"You can't fire me! You do not employ me! I am employed by the nursing home and under government contract."

Everyone looked to the judge, who sat back, contemplating this unfolding farce. "In fact, Miss Gretchen, he can request a different community care worker. If Madeline agrees." Stated the judge.

All eyes gravitated to Madeline, her smile and confidence returning.

Robert continued on a roll, "Gretchen, you're fired. Unless you want to take the matter up in court with our lawyer?"

Gretchen gasped, and indignantly fought for composure.

The judge laughed within, and composing himself, asked, "Do you agree to continue to follow up with your doctors and maintain a support system, Madeline?"

"I do, your Honour. One-hundred-percent."

"This case hearing is closed."

Gretchen huffed, gathered papers, and hobble ran out of the court room, dragging crutches.

"BEES KNEES!!!" Lydia shouted, shaking a fist at the departing woman.

Robert whispered to Gloria as they exited, "Do you think this is the last of her or will she retaliate?"

"I don't know. I'd like to hope that she'll move on. We'll have to keep an eye out and see if she plays another hand."

The after-courtroom party at the five and dime diner ensued with a platter of pie slices, bowls of ice cream, sprinkles, and Elvis music, Maddy smiled from inside out. Feeling overjoyed and blessed with a family of friends, she excused herself and headed alone to the bathroom.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Maddy could not remember where she was or why she was in the strange place. Breathing through the panic, she braced against the sink's counter.

As an elastic snap-sensation flicked inside of her brain, a whoosh of dizziness sent her reeling. Bracing hands on the sink, the water facet's drip, drip, drip triggered a plane crash memory. Frantically hammer-pounding on the hatch door, trying to force it open, Maddy met only resistance. Whispering words of panic, she heard herself say, "I've got to get the girls out, God help me!" as the cock pit filled with water, she punched the hatch. Jammed solid and not budging, she turned attention to the windshield. Expanding the crack, seemed to be the only way out. Turning and wading through ice cold water, she searched for something hard to smash against the crack to widen it. Grabbing a hold of a toilet bowl brush and aiming at the bathroom mirror, Maddy gasped upon seeing her own reflection of an old woman.

Panting, Maddy sat on the toilet and cried. Shades of life to come; after so many years of holding the past trauma at bay, she knew that Alzheimer's symptoms were forcing a crack on her ability to keep memories hidden. She would not let go and give into fear. Panic shifted to warm a confidence over the dangerous situation. No, she was not negating any responsibility for her part in the crash and the death of her air mates, merely straining to live life joyfully. It had been a rationale that she had told herself since the war; that loved ones would not want her to dwell in despair, shame, and guilt. If she had been the one to pass over first, she would only want remaining family to relish every moment and enjoy their lives to the fullest.

Forcing herself to calm and focus, the flash-back moment slowly dissipated to the comforting sounds of loved ones outside in the diner.

Time was running out. She would tell no one, rather relish each remaining moment of lucidity.

It took four full days of sleeping, eating and constant napping for Maddy to recover from the competency hearing and plane crash flash back. Finally emerging somewhat refreshed, she joined Robert on the patio for an early summer morning coffee.

Coffee poured, and tea biscuits served, Robert proudly read aloud his latest article;

"Coercion and financial abuse of the elderly, and of our military veterans remain a crisis. It is a national problem of epic proportions. We as a Canadian society, continue to fall far too short in caring for those who have served us all with their lives. Survivors are suffering from insufficient government, military and former employee pensions, with meagre to no medical benefits coverage. This vulnerable sector is often left in their care of adult children or government care facilities. Without fair and objective legal advocacy, they are left to the mercy unscrupulous authority figures who take advantage of minuscule estates.

"We are negligent, and we abuse our power over our most vulnerable.

"Coerced and manipulated, seniors and veterans' houses and contents are being sold with profits falling into unscrupulous hands. There are long waiting lists for expensive extended and long-term care services that this sector cannot afford. Due to rural doctor shortages, many are suffering without appropriate medical supervision and must cope with revolving medical support staff at local walk-in clinics This vulnerable sector does not, as a matter of course know their legal rights, are unable to speak to the right of self-determination, nor do they have the wherewithal to protest any misuse of power. It is common knowledge that once a senior enters a care facility, that they often rapidly decline. A person's spirit evaporates when they have worked all their lives and lose independence, dignity, self-determination and finances.

"There lurks among us, shady unscrupulous telemarketing swindlers and identity thieves who exploit and leave them in dire straights.

"It is imperative we take care of those who came before us. We live in unrepresented abundant privilege that our elderly and veterans paved the way for us. Appropriate care of our elderly and veterans must be given a top priority. I personally call for a full review of existing programs and quickly address all service provision gaps. New legislation can easily be implemented as well as an allocation of funds and services to properly support them. This includes and is not limited to safeguards that ensures our seniors can comfortably transition without intimidation and coercion."

Maddy gasped, covering hands over her ears. "Oh, Robert. Stop!!!"

"What?" Robert shrugged his shoulders. "You don't like it? It's just a rough draft. I'll professional it up, but that's the gist of it."

"It's not that I don't like it, Love. It's that I don't want to hear it! I don't want to spend my remaining time, engaged in another battle! Do you see Love? What time I have left, I want to relish."

Robert scratched his beard, "Oh, I'm sorry Old Gal." Disappointed, he glanced over the two remaining pages. "It gets better." He hoped, she would acquiesce.

"No, Love, don't be offended. You carry on. It's an important topic to be left in the hands of the younger generation. It's upsetting and it's not how I want to spend my time; carrying the torch and being upset. The competency hearing was more than enough of a win."

As the days passed, with Gloria's assistance, Maddy was satisfied that following her passing, the house maintenance and family heirlooms could easily be transferred to Robert's care and direction. Special gifts to those closest to her had been set safely aside in her bedroom.

Gloria, in the meantime, had perfected the giggle-brownie recipe. Robert arrived home from the city to find Maddy glossy eyed and stoned. Slamming the door, he suddenly realized his fear of watching Maddy deteriorate and dying.

Helpless, he became livid with Gloria for feeding Maddy pot brownies. Over the back-yard fence, raised voices drew neighbourhood attention. Bits of harsh words ping ponged between Robert and Gloria. The woman had blossomed and changed since her arrival, and while it was obvious to Maddy, that the two were soul mate life partners, the arguing pair had not come to the realization yet. This was their first fight and it rattled Maddy. Relaxing, old woman's wisdom understood the natural process and order of events in life.

"Gloria! What in the hell are you thinking?"

"Oh, Robert, get off your high horse, you know it's medicinal." She showed no sign of shrinking and stood her ground. Gloria was blossoming into her own, and Maddy was proud.

He puffed up a defiant chest, "Bullshite!"

"What are you so afraid of? What archaic thought is rattling around in your brain that would ever assume that I don't have Maddy's best interest at heart?" Gloria expressed her irritation.

Robert stammered, conflicted by Gloria's bold truth. "What if it makes symptoms worse? What if it accelerates the Alzheimer's?"

"Oh, I see. Did it ever occur to you that I have done my research? It's not ordinary pot, it's a blend of other natural ingredients."

"Oh." Sheepish, he bowed to her confident stand, "Oh."

"You can apologize anytime."

He quizzically glanced at her, "Huh?"

"I understand that you do a lot of advocacy for veterans, and have seen a lot of shite in the middle East, but, Maddy is not one of them, and I'm not one of their abusers."

"Is that what you think?"

"Yes. Don't make your veterans issues about her."

Robert was angry with being directly made accountable for his own passionate issues. "Well, I think she's wrong. Her story as a pilot and not being properly benefitted and honoured by the government and military, is important and I am going to fix it."

“Did she ask you to do that? Didn’t she tell you that she didn’t want you to make a big deal out of it? Didn’t she tell you that she doesn’t want to spend her remaining time digging up old war issues?”

Sheepish, Robert stared at his feet, toe ends angrily stomping a dandelion into the earth. “I have a headache.”

Gloria grinned with sarcastic humour, “Well, I happened to have some special brownies Robert, that will take care of that. But, I’m still waiting for an apology.”

Stressed to the point of being annoyed, Robert retaliated. “I’m not giving up on this story or this investigation. I think it would do the Old Gal good, to know what the military records state as fact about the incident, and of the crew women. I know you both want me to let it go, but I have impeccable instincts when it comes to this stuff. I know when I’m onto to something important. I’d like her to have some peace of mind about the ordeal, before . . .”

“I understand your intent. What if it dredges up painful memories, what if the information is upsetting and accelerates her Alzheimer’s?”

“Fine! I’ll be mindful to not to overload her with stress. I am not giving up on this! I’m expecting a file from the R.A.F. any day now, through the freedom of the information act. There’ll be information in that file, that’s going to lighten her burden. Call it a hunch.”

“Robert, forgiveness is a solo endeavour. Don’t you know that? She’s already spent a lifetime, carrying responsibility for the death of her crew mates. Worse, for not being able to protect sister Rosie from Pastor Jacob, and from the men who raped her during the war. For not being able to save Irene and baby. Robert, you can’t protect the people you love from the shite of life. It’s not your burden to carry when you did all that was humanly possible, given the hand that you were all dealt. Besides, forgiveness, is a singular inside job.”

Gloria had intentionally hit a hot button, Robert’s Achilles heal. She was now referring to his first wife, her death, and the death of his child. Aghast at her audacity to speak of it, to blatantly, challenge him to the core, he gasped with anger and hurt. “Wow! I can’t believe you would throw that in my face, as if just casual conversation. I’m, blown away!”

“If you think it is callous of me, then you don’t know me at all. After everything I’ve been through in my own life, I know what I’m talking about, and, so do you.” Gloria defensively crossed arms, waiting for Robert to choose a crossroad; either continue the self berating guilt, vented through the advocacy for veterans, or forgive himself for not being able to save Irene and child. Gloria knew of the woes she had lived, having lost loved ones; parents, daughter, and husband. It was only when moving here and under the forces of menopause that brought new insights and perspectives into her mind.

Robert quietly fumed, angry, hurt, his mind racing as he stood frozen in place.

“Look Robert, I know grief. If you take some time to re-think, you’ll see that there are just shite-times in life, that are out of your control. We can’t begin to fathom why shitty things happen to good people. It’s not your fault. You might feel like I’m overstepping boundaries here by being callus or trite. Seriously, meeting you and Maddy is the best incident that’s happened to me in a long time. It pains me to see both of you carrying around such painful burdens. You each have to deal with your own burdens, not the burdens of others. I’m telling you straight, because I care a lot about both of you. And if you don’t want to grasp onto that fact, well, then, you’ll just have to sort it out the best you can. It just seems to me, that it’s an awful waste of life, to carry guilt when it’s not your burden to carry.”

Swirling flustered and teary, Robert swore, “I have a fecking headache! Frankly, I’m too hurt and angry to talk to you right now!”

Robert slammed the back door, calling inside to Maddy. “Old Gal? I’m going up into the attic to lay down some new insulation I bought and check the electrical wiring. Okay?”

Maddy roused from the bedroom window chair, paddling through the hall long enough to nod an acknowledgment to Robert as he whizzed past. She shrugged shoulders and returned to

the bedroom and sat watching Gloria, furiously pull weeds. She wanted Robert to be at peace with himself. Gloria had challenged him to the core. It had been a tough but wise play on her part. Her respect for the woman was growing day by day. Gloria had quietly assumed a support care giver role for the old woman, yet rarely indicated that she had ever been through her own hardships.

After the war, Maddy and Gordon had been excited for weeks, waiting for Rosie's pending visit, bringing her new husband. While they had chatted on the phone once when she came home, it had been a strained conversation pertaining to the details of the rape and military dismissal. At the time, her heart longed to be wherever her younger sister was, and distance did little to dissipate concern for her wellbeing. They had not seen each other in person since before both departed overseas. Rosie had come home only once, enduring Dad's passing. She had moved far away to live with her new man. Soul-longing for a wish coming true, Maddy relished to catch up and rekindle a sisterly bond. She and Gordon had cleaned the spare bedroom, renovated the bathroom, and told little Irene stories of Auntie Rosie. Irene was about to meet an only family Aunt.

Their family greeting turned cold in the driveway. Maddy had looked to Gordon, surmising that this visit was the not the social call expected. Gordon took Irene and Rosie's husband for a walk down to the river and back, allowing the sisters to sort themselves out. Uncomfortable leaving Maddy alone in a strained situation, Gordon prattled on about fly fishing while Maddy made tea in the kitchen. It was curious that Rosie did not seem anxious to tour the house, see her old room, reminisce about happy times or comment on changes. As soon as tea was made, Rosie sat quietly waiting for Maddy's attention. Their mutual mood had turned cold, confrontational.

Uncomfortable and straining to lighten the air, Maddy whispered, "I wish you hadn't moved so far away Rosie. I feel like I don't know the woman you have grown into. I get the sense that you're not just here to introduce us to your husband. I see you didn't bring any suitcases in. You're not staying, are you? You've got something on your mind. What is it? What's the matter?"

Rosie was void of sisterly love; a darkness had settled into her soul. Studying Maddy, she chewed at a corner of a lower lip, obviously stifling harsh words, that had been previously rehearsed. Releasing restrained emotions, words spit forward, embedding knives of pain into Maddy's heart.

"Why didn't you protect me?"

"What????"

"You know damn well what I'm talking about. Why didn't you protect me?"

"Jesus, Rosie!" Hurt and cornered, Maddy squirmed, fighting back tears.

"Well?! Why in the helllllll, didn't you, protect me?"

Maddy's mind and emotions raced for past incidents and her lack of help. She had been on the hunt for Jack that fateful morning of the rape. Assuming, that Rosie was with mother, she had dressed pretty to make Jack promise marriage, only to find him badly beaten. Rosie had been lured off by Pastor Jacob and his dog. It had been a horrible day all around. Neither incident had ever left her heart. Two people that she loved had been violated, on the same day. Too young to fathom the gravity of the long lasting traumatic effects of sexual assault, it had taken years for her to stop re-living it all. Tears welling, Maddy's gaping wounds cracked wide open. Maddy sat frozen, tears trickling over cheeks and welling at lip corners. She searched Rosie for a softness, a connecting sisterly bond, to transcend the abyss. What was it Rosie needed to hear?

Jack had never spoken of his ordeal, venting hurt though dare deviling and taking life ending risky chances. Rosie had closed in on herself, feigning normality, a 'carry on' business air. Nearly succeeding and transcending the ordeal, Rosie ventured overseas to nurse, only to be violated all over again by commonwealth soldiers, men that were supposed to be protecting her.

Traumatized and powerless to dispute the military's stance of ignoring her case, further damaged her spirit. To resolve the case, the military sent Rosie home. The sensitive, loving, caring and compassionate little girl of the past, had grown hard and angry over the post war years.

“It’s not fair, Love. I am so sorry that travesties happened to you. I’m so sorry that I wasn’t there to protect you. Mom, Dad, Jack and Gordon and I, were emotionally devastated. We all thought you were with Mom that day. I was only a year and half older than you, I was just a kid too. When I finally got you to sleep that night, I sat on the floor beside you, sobbing. You were hurt and so was Jack, and I didn’t know the reasons why. I didn’t know how to fix it. At first it was disbelief and confusion, I wanted details and to understand exactly what had happened, but I was too young to grasp the circumstances. Then I was just sad, and I felt your pain, emptiness, fear, and anger. I figured that Mom would know what to do, to help you. I did think about killing Pastor Jacob, like everyone else. I was relieved when he disappeared. You have to know, that I was always worried about you; overseas and now.”

Rosie sat back, crossing arms defensively, holding a stubborn stance by not letting Maddy off the hook. She drove staring accusation into Maddy’s already existing guilt.

“Jesus Rosie. I’ve never forgiven myself for not making sure you were with Mom that morning. If I had, history would be different. I remember seeing the kids at school and how they looked at you, at us, differently for a long time. It was Dad that told me it was wrong to carry guilt. It was selfish and small minded to assume God’s role of sorting things out. He told me it wasn’t yours’ or my fault, anymore than anyone, it was the attackers fault. I must tell you, even back then, his words didn’t lessen my pain for you. It took me a long time to sort guilt out enough to carry on with my own life. Like Dad said, it does no good to any one, to crawl into a hole of regret, guilt, and pain. He said, I wouldn’t do you any good feeling bad and responsible for what happened. It felt like a dream, a bad dream. I know that Dad, Mom, Gordon, neighbours, all had a hand in Pastor Jacob’s disappearance, I just don’t know exactly how. No one talked about it. Having him gone, didn’t take away your pain, did it?”

Rosie was quietly livid and unflinching.

“It was difficult for all of us Rosie.” Referencing the family’s reactions in the conversation, Maddy felt mildly comforted, not so alone in a corner. “I expected and hoped that you would have found some relief when Jacob disappeared. I don’t know Rosie, years had passed, the war came and we all tried to get on with our lives. Tried to get on with a normal life, after the war, though pain and sorrow never truly went away, you know. I was just your sister and I didn’t know how to help, other than be a supportive sister. I’m sorry it wasn’t enough. I hated seeing you in pain, your spirit for life snuffed. I always found it unnerving how the military debriefed situations. You never know what they write down because records are sealed. I regret that they didn’t make those soldiers accountable for what they did to you. It’s unacceptable that they just sent you home, damaged, and with no support.

“Like Dad said, there are just some shite situations in life where you don’t get answers, you don’t get to make bad people accountable. When you’re in emotional pain, you can’t clearly see the bigger picture. I don’t know Rosie. What can I do now? Dad said that forgiveness is not about letting bad people off the hook, but, so that you can get on with life. Please don’t take this the wrong way, Rosie. I know I’m fumbling here, but I’m just trying to tell you a bit of how it was for me.”

Maddy felt Rosie’s anger in the pit of her stomach and tearing at her heart.

Grasping for heavenly support to connect with Rosie, Maddy stammered, “It might sound callous and trite Rosie, but there is truth in what Dad has said, forgiveness is not about people you love letting you down or the perpetrator, so much as, it’s about finding some peace of mind and body. Find a way to let go of the pain so it doesn’t hold you back from living a fruitful life. Please don’t take my suggestion the wrong way, just think about it. You must know I love you, and I would never intentionally have done anything to put you in harm’s way. You have to know that, don’t you?”

Rosie stared, chewing on a lip corner, eyes were glazed. She straightened, and chest puffed in an alpha dog stance. “You think you’re such a big shot, aren’t you? Oh, lad dee da, everyone thinks you’re so brave to fly airplanes. Just a God damned fancy taxi driver, a flying bus driver; was all you were. They don’t know the shite-truth about you, do they?”

“Jesus Rosie, I never put myself on a pedestal. I never boasted. I was proud of my service, and flying, for awhile. I was happy to be in the air, for a long time, until the crash.” Maddy’s mind glimpsed thoughts of losing Alice and Gertie under her responsibility. She had failed. She had forgotten, and only now remembered a previous phone conversation after the war, when she had confided her pain and dread for crashing the plane. It was an awful void in time spent in hell, in not knowing for sure if the crash had been caused by self pilot error, or mechanical, or the electrical storm, or possible enemy fire. Feeling as though she had just been called out on the whole issue; a jab at a vulnerable Achilles heel, she felt betrayed by the sharing of a confidential confession with her sister. The guilt pain piled on top of Rosie’s incident.

Quivering, Maddy added, “I can’t believe that you’re throwing guilt back in my face. I told you about the plane crash in confidence. I don’t know if I made a mistake that day. I told you that. I’ve always been sorry that I wasn’t there for you. Jesus, of all the people involved in hurting you, why in the hell are you still so angry with me?”

Rosie abruptly stood, slid on a sweater then paused, “You were always Dad’s favourite. A spoiled brat!”

“What? That isn’t true! He loved you, as much or more.”

“Whatever satisfies your mind, big sister. You just toddle on with your life and take no responsibility, you fucking coward!”

Maddy’s jaw clenched, from the hurtful force of the accusation. In moments of confrontation, time becomes surreal as a hundred thoughts and emotions swirl. It would have been so easy to become the alpha dog and slam base her, annihilate, and put the woman in her place. Yet, it was also in this moment, after Maddy’s thoughts settled, that the original bonding of sisterly love surfaced.

“Wow. Painful shite your carrying around there, little sister.” Maddy paused, fighting against the urge to retaliate. “You know? I don’t feel guilty about my absence during what happened to you anymore, just sad. I did the best I could.” She choked tears, “God, don’t you know? What pains you, pains me too. I can’t begin to imagine how awful the attacks were, and how you have had to endure.”

Maddy got up from the table and blew a runny nose with a tea towel before turning to face Rosie glaring defensively with arms folded. “I do know this; first; I love you and always will, no matter what. Two; Mom and Dad warned both of us to stay the hell-away from Pastor Jacob, many times. I remember them both saying that they didn’t trust his creepy charming smile. I know that compassion can be a trap and the prick used a puppy dog to sway you from Mom, Dad’s, and your own judgement. You were just a little kid; it wasn’t your fault.”

Maddy’s tirade hit a nerve, and Rosie looked away, fighting back tears. “I suspect that’s what might have happened overseas? You went to check on that burn victim, late at night, without an escort. Those soldiers used false charm and your compassion to take advantage of you.

“Compassion is your gift to the world. You are an angel if I ever knew one. Maybe it’s time to let yourself off the hook, Rosie.” Maddy suggested.

Years of resentment and anger vibrated through Rosie’s body. She shook, her face crimson and livid. “Fleck you Maddy!” Grabbing her purse, Rosie bolted outside. Slamming the car door, she sat cold and stiff. Sliding sunglasses on, Rosie’s man slid into the driver’s seat and started the engine.

Aghast, Maddy ran after the car, hands slapping on the passenger window. Rosie’s face was drawn, ignoring her sister’s plea of, “Rosie! Rosie! Don’t go like this! . . . ROSIE!!! . . . ROSIE!!!”

Rosie’s man gunned the car forward to close the conversation, obedient of a wife’s demands.

The car picked up speed and Maddy’s hands on the window slipped away. She shouted, “ROSIE! Rosie, for the love of God, claim your life! Claim your soul. Be bold. Be brave. Take a stand to save your own soul.”

Maddy had not known that Rosie had heard her last words. She had turned in the seat, teary eyed to watch Maddy, a loving sister fade from view.

That moment was the last time and the last words the sisters had exchanged. Birthday and Christmas cards went un-responded to. Rosie's husband intervened to say that she was busy, or napping and unavailable to come to the phone. Even now, after all these years, the truth was; Maddy had never fully forgiven herself, for not looking after Rosie that day, for not making more of an effort to connect with and help Rosie through years of traumas. The ordeal of not saving Rosie only served to validate that, somehow, she was also responsible for crashing the plane, for not saving the lives of two crew mates, her daughter and granddaughter. Guilt on top of guilt.

Rosie's last words had stung and reverberated in Maddy's memory for years. If it had not been for raising Irene and Gordon's post war traumatic stress to occupy her time and mind, she may well have slid into a similar depth of resentment as Rosie. Gordon found a way to cope, and flashback terrors subsided. They managed to move on with life, with the child rearing of Irene.

Maddy had often wondered what if? In tired or bored times, her mind always reverted to the 'what if's'? What if she had not gone looking for Jack, would Jack had died alone in the still hut? Would those drunken men have finished him off? What if she had taken the time to check on Rosie? What if she had convinced Rosie to stay home and away from the war?

What if Alice had control of the plane that day? Would Alice have crashed the plane? Would Alice and Gertie still be alive?

Robert was beside himself the night of Irene and their baby's death. The blizzard storm brought eight feet of snow crusted in freezing rain, impassable to a hospital.

Trauma and unwanted changes makes a person question the ability to make decisions. To focus on the 'why's' and 'what if's', can make people crazy. Like Dad had said, 'You cannot begin to fathom the mysteries of life, you can only get on with life and grow after the turmoil's of life.'

Sexual assault is different somehow. Jack had never recovered, the stress leaking into daredevil stunts, along with drinking of alcohol, taking risks, defying physical injury and death; for a while. A darkness had crept into Rosie and Jack's souls; a journey of self-destruction. A darkness in their core, that seemed nearly impossible to reason with.

No. Sexual assault is a whole other kettle of fish than war trauma. The nasty deed of rape embeds a dark seed that festers, from the inside out and lingers forever, festering mind and body.

Guilt had haunted most of Maddy's adult life. It was only in remembering Dad's wisdom, that had saved her from sliding into a pit of darkness. As a child, and young adult, Maddy could not fathom how Dad had found a way to work through Jack and Rosie's ordeals. No? No, he could not have. Not completely.

A parent and loved ones never truly get over traumas like that. Children can only be protected from the atrocities of life to some extent. Elders can only try and plant seeds of strong wisdom in children to weather the shite-storms of life. Adversity is a tornado of conflicts that twist perceptions of what life is all about. Stability is corrupted from being able to enjoy the good of life. Some challenges are embedded to the core, that people can not allow themselves to recover. For Rosie, pain had taken root to eat away as cancer rots, from the inside out, a disease of incurability.

"Oh Rosie, sweet, sweet Rosie." Maddy muttered, day-dreaming memories of sharing a single bed, and making room in the house for Jack and Gordon. Playing with dolls, until Maddy had grown out of child's play. Catching fireflies in canning jars for summer night lanterns. Playing hopscotch on the only paved section of the road. Sewing alterations on hand me downs, to fit a smaller sister. Picking strawberries and baking pies. Brushing Rosie's hair for an hour every night. Playing hand sing-song games.

Somewhere during the time of Rosie's incident with Pastor Jacob, Maddy had grown out of girlish ways, and since that time, Rosie had felt abandoned on every level.

The older sister had grown adolescent obsessed in love with Jack. A crush that had not faded, despite his natural inclination to be with the same gender. A crush that had not fully dissipated until Irene was born. It was Gordon's consistent dedication to wife and child, his slow and steady striving to overcome the atrocities of war that turned the tides of adult love and won Maddy's admiration. Theirs was a love that had grown closer over the years. Jack had been a passionate unrequited soul mate, whereas, Gordon was a life partner. There was a difference, and only now, she truly appreciated Gordon's steady stable presence in her life.

Yes, Rosie had always been the sensitive one, like Mom, like Irene. They were of the same DNA personality.

Rosie's husband had called four days after Irene and the baby's death to advise the family of Rosie's death a month prior. There had been no funeral service, as per her request. Maddy never heard from the husband again. It had been a triple death whammy, and it took years of self preservation to not slide into despair.

Wise people say that knowledge of Ancestors comes around again in life, and in watching Gloria now, reminded Maddy of father. Old soul wise and somehow, managing to tell people what they needed to hear, rather than what people wanted to hear. It is a tough position that often entails that the receiver turns away, hurt, angry and offended, like Rosie had. As Robert did now. Being wise in the timing and delivery, Gloria's tough love advice would ultimately challenge Robert in such a way as to offer him a way out, to overcome a great hurdle and grow a little freer.

Listening to him thumping around in the attic, obviously still hurt and angry, Maddy hoped he would see Gloria's wisdom, let guilt go and allow her love.

Sooner than later.

Time was declining, Maddy was talking less and less, having difficulty expressing words at times, or participating in casual conversation. When shopping, she forgot common words of grocery items, and viewed a list written in a strange foreign language. Yesterday, she got lost mid-sentence, forgetting briefly who Robert, Gloria and Lizzy were, and why they were in her house. Twice she dozed off while chatting with Lizzy, who was always hanging around, asking questions, wanting to hear life stories.

And yes, she prayed, hoping to be still lucid when Robert and Gloria become a couple and inherit her house. She was getting tired of existing in a tormented mind.

"OLD GAL?" Robert shouted from the attic.

"Yes Love?"

"Okay, new insulation looks good. Electrical looks okay, good for another four years, I think. Gees, you've got a lot of stuff up here; a possible fire hazard. I'm tripping over boxes up here, what do you want me to do with all the boxes? Shall I bring them down for you to sort through?"

"Oh. You can bring them down, maybe stick them in the garage for now. There's nothing I want. You can look through and see if there's anything you want, though. Ask Gloria if she wants any of it. If not, we can call Goodwill or something."

"There is one box, I think you should check out. Looks like it's full of unopened military letters."

"Oh, I forgot about that. Gordon would pick them out of the garbage after I threw them away, adamant that I might want to look at them some day. Stubborn beggar. I was determined to do away with them after the war."

"Why?"

"Oh, I wanted to move past that time and I suppose, I was angry about the way they handled Rosie and the soldiers that assaulted her."

"Oh, I see."

"You can look through them if you want. Understand that I don't want to, I don't want to know about any of it."

"Fine, fine," Robert promised, though crossed fingers to cancel out the promise.

"Oh, Robert? Is there a trunk of old clothes still up there?"

"Um, ya, I see it."

"Could you please take that over to Gloria and Lizzy. I want them to have it, if they want it or have any use of it."

"I'll bring it down, but I won't take it over there."

"Oh yes, you are! And right now, I don't have time to argue with you, young man."

"No! I said; not right now! Frankly, I'm really pissed, hurt and angry with her." He slammed a box on the attic floor to demonstrate his firm decision.

"Oh yes, you will! And while you're there, you're bloody well going to apologize to her. You're only angry because you know damn well that she's right."

Robert became silent. Maddy took the cue and pushed forward.

"Robert Love, the best thing that's ever happened to you, is Gloria and she's smart. She's a damn good woman and you know she's right. So, she's given you a tough challenge; an offer of a life time, an opportunity. You've spent most of your life alone, growing up and after Irene died. Don't be alone anymore. This kind of love is a once in a lifetime. Go and apologize and talk it all out. It's what you both must do. Man-up and go be vulnerable, let her call you on your shite and for god's sake, pay attention. Honestly Love, it wasn't your fault. It was nobody's fault. You couldn't have done anything other than be the loving husband that you were to Irene. Gordon and I have always felt lucky and blessed to have you love our daughter. Go.

"Gloria'll help you free your soul from carrying the guilt of Irene's and the baby's death. That guilt never belonged to you, my Love. It's time to talk and allow the painful past to fade."

Robert groaned and growled, "RRRRRRRRR!"

Maddy smiled, knowing that he would rally to the challenge.

"Oh, and tonight's party will be a celebration of life, to cheer and honour all of our lost loved ones. I'll call Lydia's worker and have her join us. I'm ordering pizza, so no one should bother cooking. The five and dime diner has a flyer saying they deliver pizza now, so let's do that."

Hearing silence echoing from within the attic, she bellowed, "Come on, chop, chop. Get on with it, Love."

Robert would likely need an hour to talk, cry and be alone before dinner. Maddy slid into her favourite chair to nap in peace.

“In the circle of life,
all things eventually come around again,
offering new insight and growth.”

Chapter Eight ~ Respect the Wildlife

With Lizzy working for the summer at Orville’s Farm and Feed, Robert deep in porch renovations or on a computer, and Gloria tending to her own house renovations, Maddy slipped off with the grocery wagon to enjoy a day of shopping on her own.

As the early evening summer sun began to slide below the tree tops, she could not figure out for the life of her, why she was at the airport, splayed out in the grass beside an empty wagon. Her tummy grumbled from hunger. She headed for home.

“Old Gal! Where have you been all day?” Robert ushered her through the house and straight out the back door. Gloria and Lizzy had a late dinner prepared.

“Oh, I started out to go shopping, then decided to lounge in the grass at the air port instead. It was so lovely; I haven’t done that alone in years, and I just wasn’t ready to come home.”

“No worries.” Gloria offered her a plate. “Sit. You must be famished.”

Maddy avoided the woman’s eyes, Gloria instantly knowing the excuse was a lie. Robert was lost to any insight. Gloria nodded, a cue that the secret was safe, for now.

Maddy reached down, avoiding eye contact with Gloria and coo-petted Maple.

“Where is Lydia? She is not coming tonight?”

“Oh no, she didn’t have a good day today. She had a bit of a fall, must have been caused by the heat.”

“Oh.” Glancing around the table, Maddy added, “Oh this is ever so lovely, thank you. I would have just made a sandwich and gone to bed. I am whooped, but I am hungry.” Enjoying the lucid moment, and evening nature’s ambiance, she scanned the table then hesitated, her attention landing on the big scrap book beside Lizzy. “Oh, what have you got there, woman-child?”

Swallowing a mouthful of food whole, Lizzy answered, “Oh, that’s my book. I started keeping a scrap book journal, since the day I met you.”

“Oh, how interesting. What kind of things do you write about, if you don’t mind my asking?”

Lizzy grinned, looked at Nana and Robert then back to the old woman. “You, silly.”

“Me? What for? Why?”

Grin-chuckling, “Because you’re an old woman with attitude. I like your style.”

“What? What could you possibly think of me that’s worth-while knowing?”

Lizzy reached out held Maddy’s wrinkled hand. Shyly embarrassed, Lizzy stumbled to say, “I interview people who know you, do research but . . . Maddy Old Gal, you talk in your sleep. You fall asleep in your easy chair and well, you talk; tell fascinating stories of your life. They’re interesting. I like hearing them.”

Aghast, Maddy squirmed. “What? Ridiculous! I most certainly do not!” She looked to Robert and Gloria for validation. Catching their smirking grins, turned back to Lizzy. “I don’t know whether to be embarrassed or honoured. Good god! I had no idea. I hope I don’t say anything intimate or inappropriate.”

“No. No. It’s fine. It’s all good. Besides, if you did that, I would walk away and give you your privacy.”

Gloria intervened, “Here Maddy, have a glass of lemonade, you look a bit parched. Lizzy please, let her drink and eat.”

“I know Nana.”

“Oh, you are right, I am thirsty.” Maddy slugged the drink. “Can I look at your book?”

Lizzy scrunched her face. “Hmm. I brought it to show you. If you don’t mind, I would like to wait a couple of days before you have a look. Robert is helping me to figure out a few things, I need a bit more time.”

Maddy gulped down potato salad and cold ham between yawns. “No Love, I don’t mind. I am rather tired from this heat. So, if you wonderful people don’t mind, I’m going to finish eating and go to bed. Thank you again for doing this. It’s a wonderful treat. You’re all spoiling me. Oh wait, anything else going on around here, that I should know about?”

Robert was engrossed in re-filling his plate, eating as though he had not eaten in days. Lizzy snuck bits of salad under the table for Maple.

Gloria wiped her mouth with a napkin, dabbing at a lip corner. “Oh, I have news. I was thinking about fundraising to build a veteran’s memorial garden and bench in the park, so that everyone could enjoy it. Well, I was talking with Orville today and town council denied the project. Some of the women think it would mean too much bother to constantly tend to another garden and the lawn caretaker was pissed. They say the caretaker is getting close to retirement and that it’d be more work. He’d have to mow around it; too much fuss and bother, but more importantly, he would want a substantial pay increase. They balked at that. Well, Orville Junior offered the side garden area of his store, but that just doesn’t seem right. We figure that people would want nature ambiance and a bit of privacy, not some store front that stinks of pig poop.”

Maddy yawned, “Oh, I’m not surprised. Well, what are you going to do?”

Lizzy set her glass down and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “Well, we were pretty bummed, but Robert says we could, but shouldn’t bother fighting town council on it. He said we should choose our battles wisely.”

“Oh, did he now?” Maddy chuckled, noticing that Robert had blossomed over the past few weeks. Calmer, he had obviously mended a riff with Gloria and seemed back on his professional game.

Gloria poured coffee from a thermos and handed out mugs. “Maddy, we’d like to ask you something. Your permission and thoughts. Lizzy would like to build a garden down at the river and maybe add a garden bench with name plaques on it. A place for us to sit and commune with nature but with all our loved ones who have passed on. We were thinking of having plaques made, with the names of our loved ones. A little verse, quote, poem, or symbol. You know, like a fly-fishing lure for Gordon, a Rose for Rosie. A briefcase for my husband, a daisy for my daughter. A nature spirit for your Mom and Irene and so on. What do you think?”

Maddy surveyed each of them and wiped a tear. “I didn’t think it was possible to love all of you more than I already do.”

Robert beamed then stretched, pushing an empty plate forward. “I have to go to Ottawa tonight to chase down a lead for a project I’m working on. I’ll be back tomorrow morning at the crack of dawn. Old Gal, if you don’t mind, I’m itching to sort through the garage. Gordon’s tools are still there, and I’d like to make a work space. Is that all right with you?”

“Make yourself at home. Gordon would be happy that you’ll use the space and tools.”

“Oh Maddy,” Gloria chimed, “I think I found the perfect bench in a store in the mall. It’s solid, sturdy and will last for years and years. Would you like to come and see it, or do you trust me to buy it?”

Maddy yawned wider, “Do whatever you want.” Maddy creaked to a stand, weary on aging legs. “Lizzy, why is it that you aren’t working tomorrow?”

“Oh, Orville Junior’s grandson is arriving to take over the business. The old man will stay on working until he wants to retire. His grandson just finished farm business at a university.” Lizzy replied.

“Oh.” Maddy nodded then added, “Orville Junior is older than I am, can’t believe he didn’t retire forty years ago. Stubborn old beggar. I’m not sure who kept who going all these years, the business or him.”

Gloria mused, smiling. “Yes, it’s hard to believe he’s pushing a hundred, doesn’t look over seventy. He’s one in a million, just like you.”

Maddy grinned, “I wonder if the grandson looks like Orville? That would be nice.”

A thunder storm and heavy summer rain hammered through the night, well into the day and did little to dissipate the early summer heat. Maddy had chosen to stay cozy inside and wait out the storm when the rain tormented the mosquitoes, horse flies and deer flies. Gloria arrived with another bushel basket of strawberries under an arm, seeking canning recipes.

Delighted for the company and opportunity to share a variety of old fashioned home preserving recipes, handed down from her own mother, she rallied to the task. Watching Gloria, quickly set to the task of shucking, washing jars and lids, she realized that the woman was fully experienced and capable.

“Oh, you didn’t just come here for more of my canning advice, did you?”

Gloria grinned, embarrassed. “Yes, and more. You caught me out, I was just about to expand on my request.”

“Oh?”

Gloria turned serious. “First, I have news.”

“Oh?” Maddy’s concern peaked.

Sliding a caring hand on Maddy’s shoulder, Gloria said, “Lydia’s worker, Mary called, and was asking for you. I would like to go with you, if wanting to visit and spend some time with her, I assume.”

“Of course, maybe we can take some jars of strawberry jam?”

“For sure.” Gloria turned away, thoughtful.

“What else is on your mind Love?”

“Nothing in particular. I hope you don’t mind, I’ve just been missing my daughter and husband more than usual. Probably because Robert and I are becoming closer. I’d just like to share some girl time.”

Maddy grinned. She couldn’t remember the last time that she had serious girl bonding; likely since before Irene died and before that, with the gals from the Air Auxiliary. She bum-wiggled a happy dance and slid on an apron.

“Shall I make coffee or break open a bottle of wine?” Maddy winked.

Giggling, Gloria suggested, “Hmm, coffee first, wine after the strawberries are cooked and ready for jarring.”

“Where are Lizzy and Robert this afternoon?”

“They’re both in the garage, building garden boxes. They have the first one almost ready. God, they’ve got a barrel of burning cedar going in there, to keep the mosquitoes away, so they can leave the door open and not asphyxiate from the paint and varnish fumes. They’ve got Gordon’s old record player going and playing old blues tunes. Robert is trying to introduce her to rock and roll classics. She complained that it made her ears and nerves hurt. What a kid. Born in the wrong era.”

“I can’t tell you how happy it makes me to have you all here and comfortably settling in.” Filling the sink with cold water to wash the berries, “Oh, do you know what this reminds me of?”

“What?”

“Cooking and preserving was Mom and Rosie’s thing. I had to learn a lot from scratch. When I came home from the war and married Gordon, I struggled to learn. God, I remember buying a bushel basket of green peppers for a dime. I thought I had gotten the deal of the century. Shite, brought them home and filled the sink with chilly water, dug my hands in and started peeling and slicing them until my hands were burning so bad, even icy cold water wouldn’t calm them. They were on fire from the inside out. Bloody hell, it took two hours for my hands to stop burning. Red and swollen, they were.”

Gloria snit-snorted a giggle, “Oh, jalapenos, were they?”

“I didn’t know the damn things existed. Fancy new import that I knew nothing about. I could have kicked that market vendor’s butt, for not telling they weren’t sweet peppers.” Chuckling a thought, she added, “Thinking back on it now, I guess he didn’t want to deal with them. Likely, none of us country bumpkins knew what they were or what-in-the-hell to do with them.”

“That is funny! I love it. Tell me more stories like that. My Mom died when I was young, I don’t remember any of her stories. It’s like you’re filling a void in my life.”

Maddy wiped hands on her apron and poured coffee, smiling. “Well, I remember when Gordon had decided that he was going to be a teenager again. He had saved up pay working extra hours at the lumber mill, to buy a second-hand motor cycle. That bloody thing was falling apart. I was growing increasingly fond of him, for his practical and stable nature. He wasn’t always a steady smooth thinker, he often learned the hard way, how to fix and maintain the car and motor cycle. Well, Irene and I went to the dump with him one day, to look for a battery. It wasn’t until an hour or two later that he started complaining that his bum was hurting, sore. After he whined a couple of times, I told him to drop his drawers, so I could have a look. My God, rubbery hamburger, his bum cheeks were peeled raw, no skin! I swear to God. I didn’t know if I was going to pass out or cry. He had sat on a battery leaking acid. Couldn’t sit down for a month, even with the prescribed soothing balm and soft comfortable bandage. The poor man. My goodness.”

“That is a good story. For some reason, it reminds me of the first time I had the luxury of an electric dishwasher. I had just inherited Lizzy, as a baby. I was so tired and flustered learning how to look after a baby again. I didn’t have my wits about me then, so filled with grief of losing my daughter. Oh, my goodness, I thought having a dishwasher was such a brilliant idea but had no idea how to work the damn thing. I thought I would save money by not buying fancy special dishwasher soap. Thought I’d save a bundle by just using ordinary dish soap. The pots and pans were particularly crusty, so I doubled the amount, letting lots spill in. Turned it on, proud of myself, then wandered off to put laundry away, while little Lizzy was puttering around in pink one-piece pajamas. When I came back into the kitchen, the floor was covered in a sea of bubbles and she was in the middle of it, squealing with delight, swim-sliding and gliding.

“I went to the liquor cabinet and drank wine directly from the bottle, plunked myself down in the bubbly wet mess and watched her play for an hour. One of my favourite memories. It was such a special moment. I didn’t know how I was ever going to get over losing my husband and daughter, keep working and raising another baby girl, until then. I knew then that I just had this warm loving feeling flush through me. I knew that my husband and daughter, the Angels and God were with me. Telling me, and showing me, that they were around. That they were helping me, supporting us, showing me the way.”

“Oh Gloria, that’s beautiful. That is worth sharing.”

“Do you have memories of Robert, you are willing to share?”

Grinning, Maddy refilled coffee mugs. “Oh, I do! Irene and Robert had only known each other for two months when they decided they wanted to get married. They were too young, we thought. Hell, they didn’t know themselves well enough as adults. We had never met him before that day when she brought him home. They met at Orville Senior’s county jamboree. He had been raised by his grandparents. He was a city boy, fresh out of high school and interning at the county

newspaper. Anyway, he pretended to be interviewing her, about her experience at one of Orville's jamborees, a means to talk with her longer. A good pick up line.

"Anyway, they kept in touch and when she brought him home, Gordon liked him right off, but wanted to get to know the lad better. I thought Gordon was out of his mind, having the stranger stay the weekend in the guest cottage, down at the river. I thought he was crazy, having a young boy in such proximity, at night, with our daughter sleeping upstairs. I began to catch onto Gordon's wisdom when he gave the kid a list of chores." Maddy snorted a laugh and wiped a running nose with her apron. "Oh, my God, at sunrise, Gordon woke him up and told him to till the garden. Sleepy Robert didn't complain until a garden snake crawled up the shovel and bit his hand."

"Holy Dina! Really?"

"Yes but get this. The poor kid's day got worse."

"Oh, my, what happened?"

"Well after a quick doctor's visit, some cooing by Irene and some lunch, Gordon took him out to the garage. A mother raccoon had tucked its babies in the rafters and the kits had slid down between the walls. Robert was to reach in and grab the kits, hand them to Gordon, to put them into a box, to be relocated out in the woods. Well, all was going fine, until . . .,"

"What?" Gloria paused stirring a pot and slung a tea towel over a shoulder. "What happened?"

"The mother was still in there, quietly watching. I guess it didn't like what was happening, so, promptly bit the young man. Back to the doctor's they went and the first of many rabies needles in his belly. You know, Robert didn't complain or whine, just curled up on the couch and slept."

"Oh gees, poor guy." Gloria winced.

Maddy smirked, "It gets better."

"Are you kidding me?" Gloria said, aghast.

"No. Gordon let him sleep through the night. Sunrise the next morning, Gordon was geared up in a fly fishing suit and woke the young lad up to go fishing. The poor kid was so done in. Such a good sport though, didn't complain about the bugs, or snake and racoon bites, which must have been hurting something awful. Well, first cast and wouldn't you know it; he flipped the rod back, and then forward, the fly hook lodged into his ear lobe. Gordon had to bring him back. Irene was beside herself. Gordon had to get the wire cutters, cut the hook and used plyers to get the damn thing out."

"Good God!" Gloria gasped.

"Oh, the kid took it all in stride, but Irene was crying and openly scolding Gordon. 'Enough Dad,' she shamed him.

Gordon grinned and rather than being annoyed with the outburst, he put Robert in a head lock and gave him a noggin noogey, you know; knuckle rubs to the head. Afterward, when we were alone, Gordon said that it was the first time since Jack and my Dad died that he felt so fond of another man. He said that it didn't matter now what might be, because he liked the kid and was going to keep him around, no matter what."

"Ahhh, that's so sweet." Gloria cooed.

"Gordon always called him 'Dingle Berry' after that. Until, Irene died, then it wasn't so cute or funny anymore."

"What's a dingle berry?"

Chuckling, Maddy turned to clean strawberries, "Those are the little bits of toilet paper balls left after . . ., you know . . ., finished wiping your business."

"OH! Too funny. I think I would have liked your Gordon."

"He would have loved you."

"Ah, thanks for saying that."

"You're welcome. Wanna hear a bit more?"

"For sure!" Gloria washed the jars and set them to boil in a big pot on the stove for sterilization.

"Well this is not funny, but, canning like we are, just reminds me of something else. We didn't have pesticides like the crop dusters. Gordon and I were so naïve most of the time. We had a brilliant idea to grow our own mini apple orchard, like our grandparents had. Years went by and as they began to bear fruit, well, that summer came a horrible tent caterpillar infestation. The trees were hidden in massive webs. We couldn't walk anywhere near them without raining caterpillars dropping into our hair, on our shoulders, and stepping on them. It was gross. Orville Senior told Gordon to make long wooden poles, wrap the tips in burlap, soak the tips in gasoline, light them on fire and burn the caterpillars out. It was the only way to save the trees and fruit. Wouldn't you know it, but just as the webs caught fire, a gust of wind picked up and carried a burning chunk of web and a cluster of thin branches and landed it on the outhouse roof. That old shite-house went up in flames, and oh-my-God, the smell was unbearable for two days."

Gloria's face beamed. "That's a delightful story, Maddy!"

"Gloria?", Maddy said plunking down into a chair, thoughtful.

"Yes?"

"Thanks for not ratting me out to Robert, about the day I went to do groceries and ended up at the airstrip all day. I know you were onto me."

"No problem. I get it. Your secrets are safe with me, providing that you are not in harms way."

"I'm ever so grateful," said Maddy, her voice draining of self worth.

"By the way, I looked up the ingredients of your new pharmaceutical medication and it contains an anti-depressant. I don't think you need it, do you? Are you feeling slightly depressed or sad? I haven't seen any signs, so just thought I'd ask."

"Oh, I didn't know that. Don't think I feel any different. I wouldn't say I've ever been depressed, though a little sad lately. Not depressed, just a little sad that I won't be around to be with all of you. If there is a way, like those gone before us, I'll find a way to let you know that I'll be watching over all of you."

"Ah, that's sweet, thank you." Gloria cooed.

"I do have a favour though? I'd like you to help me set up a trust fund, to ensure that Lizzy has a college or university fund, and for you, when needed, if that's all right?"

"Well, I have my husband's life insurance and my own pension, Lizzy has her parent's trust fund and Robert told me that he still has one from his parents. In fact, I doubt that Robert will ever completely retire. I think he's really enjoying his writing and advocacy for the veterans. Is there something else you'd like to do with your finances?" Asked Gloria, concerned about Maddy's intention.

"Oh, I gather that you and Robert are officially a couple and are discussing the future?"

Gloria blushed, "Well, yes. Yes, we are a couple and talking about moving in together."

Maddy nodded thoughtfully. "I thought so. Can you be straight with me? Would or do you or Robert, foresee doing with my house after I'm gone? Too small for you, Robert, and Lizzy? Any brilliant ideas?"

"Oh, definitely. Robert would never sell your home. I agree, a little small for all of us."

"Do you think Lizzy might like to have it some day?"

"Oh Maddy, how lovely! You know, I think she would love that. Hmm, I think I have an inspiring idea. How do you feel about it becoming a veterans' retreat or writer's sanctuary? For a while anyway, until Lizzy sorts out her adult life. I have a strong hunch that writing is what she was born to do. That and, pig raising." She laughed.

"Gloria Love?" sighed Maddy, losing a grip on earthly objects of sentiment.

"Yes?"

Maddy reached a hand out and held Gloria's. "I love the idea. And, thank you for talking straight. I don't know how you came to be so wise and straightforward, but I tell you, you have no idea how much I appreciate it. I feel so blessed to be guided."

Gloria looked calmly into Maddy's eyes, "Simple. It's how a lawyer treated me in my time of need and it's how I treated others, how I hope someone will treat me, the next time I am in need. I'm through menopause and I don't have patience for anything less, anymore."

"Yes, menopause will do that." Maddy yawned and stretched. "Oh love, if you don't mind, I'm suddenly exhausted. I'm going to go sit in my chair and close my eyes for a bit. If I nod off too long, please; give me a nudge and wake me up in forty minutes. I don't want to sleep away what remaining time I have."

"You got it."

"Oh, and if I do mutter in my sleep", she grinned, "Let me mutter.

"Well, I won't eavesdrop in on your dreams, unless you say my name."

"Forty minutes, tops." Maddy doubled checked.

"Forty minutes, you got it. Besides, you've got kitchen work to do when you wake up."

Sirens and flashing lights alarmed Maddy out of a dreamy afternoon nap. Robert and Gloria's excited voices filled the kitchen.

Lizzy nudged, "Maddy Old Gal! Wake up!"

"Huh? What's going on?" Maddy groaned alarmed. "What's wrong?"

Excited, Lizzy blurted, "Nothing super bad, just freaky."

Maddy wiped sleepy eyes, rallying, straining to catch up. "Huh?"

"No one is hurt. Well not recently." Lizzy held the old woman's hand, in reassurance.

Mumbled voices drifted from the kitchen; a strange baritone woman's voice calmly asked questions of Robert.

In a clear professional voice, Robert said, "Young Lizzy and I went down to the river to set up a garden box and a bird house. The rain storm has washed away the shoreline of that one big cedar tree and it has topped over. Maple was snort-digging around in there, in the root hole and . . . found it! There's a dead body under where the tree once stood, in the root hole."

Alarmed, Maddy burst fully awake, and gingerly made her way out of a chair, loudly asked, "What?"

Lizzy beamed with interest, loving the dramatic intrigue of the unfolding event, "Oh, and there's a police woman out in the kitchen, Lydia's granddaughter, just transferred here from Toronto, heard about Lydia losing her house and wanted to be close, to keep an eye on her grandmother. Anyway, she is trained in forensics. Took a status and pay cut to take a job to be closer to home. Her name's Jackie and she figures the body is of a middle-aged man and has been buried there for about eighty years. He had a dog leash in hand."

"What on earth?" Maddy rubbed eyes, as pieces of life's puzzle fought hard to fit into place. "A man? Under the cedar tree? Eighty years, she figures?"

Lizzy was thrilled by the excitement. "Ya! Can you believe it? Any idea who it might be?"

"Lizzy Love, go and get Orville Junior, right away and tell him to meet me outside in the garage. It's an emergency! He'll come. Run! Go."

Maddy, slipped down the hall to the bathroom, her mind scheming. She and her mother had given the pastor poison jam. Gordon had been sure that his lead ridden fish had killed the man. Orville's family had once confided trying to off the predatory pastor. Maddy slid on a sweater and slithered out the front door, unnoticed.

Having voiced their speculations that the body was indeed that of Pastor Jacob, Maddy worried that the cause of death maybe revealed and result in a murder investigation. Orville and

Maddy shook hands, vowing to navigate an investigation with as much discretion as possible. In covert alliance, Maddy and Orville Junior entered the back door into the kitchen, as building activity assembled inside Maddy's kitchen. Gloria calmly tended to making coffee and set out sandwiches while Robert made introductions.

"We think we might know who it is," Maddy interrupted the Officer taking notes.

Officer Jackie raised a curious eyebrow. "And who do you think the man is?"

Maddy turned to Orville Junior, who avoided direct eye contact with the Officer and inhaled a sandwich to avoid being the centre of attention. Boldly, Maddy offered, "I think it's Pastor Jacob. He went missing about eighty years ago. Church members and an officer were looking for him, for a while."

Gloria poured Maddy and Orville Junior a coffee, eyeing the two with suspicion. Catching Maddy's odd tone, Gloria stared deep into eyes, catching an acknowledgement that Maddy and Orville knew more than what Maddy was offering. A hidden and questionable truth that was lost on Robert and Officer Jackie.

Maddy stood back leaning on the counter, arms crossed, smirking. 'Gloria sees right through me,' she thought.

Gloria's smirking facial expression, added, 'Oh really? I know the gist of a bigger story and this isn't it.'

Maddy watched Gloria glance at Orville Junior and back. 'And Orville is here as your cohort, in a cover-up'.

"Hmm." Officer Jackie's mind sifted and sorted. "I recall that story. A long unsolved cold case. What else do you remember?"

Maddy glanced to Orville Junior, who slugged down coffee and reached for another sandwich. He was leaving the telling of the questionable truths to her, present just for moral support, only. 'Coward', Maddy thought.

"Well, we never saw or heard from Pastor Jacob again. He always had a wonderful smile, but there was something creepy about him. People tithed with food and other goods, as we did with church folks back then, but by and large, parishioners did not socialize with him or knew him well or where he came from."

Officer Jackie wrote notes as her mind formed opinions and further questions. She already knew the basic story; grandmother Lydia, as a child, had been brutally defiled by the man.

Maddy ignored Gloria's peering eyes, who respectfully kept silent.

Robert rubbed at beard whiskers, thinking, knowing of another version of the story as well. "I remember hearing that story too." He was letting Maddy and Orville Junior know of his full support, catching on and surmising that whatever Maddy was about to concoct, was a much better and fitting end to the case.

Investigations were instinctive, yet the Officer sat back, silent, and respectful, allowing the old woman to paint an interesting picture. She clicked the pen's plunger. "Any ideas on what might have happened? Any rumours of concern?"

Orville Junior uncomfortably shifted his large belly and feigned wanting another coffee.

Maddy continued a line of thought. "Well yes, there was a group of bad men, camping out up the mountain ridge. This was a small community where everyone knew everyone, strangers came and went, but these fellows, stood out. My cousin Jack and some friends had a still up there, a forty-minute hike up behind the lumber mill. That's about the time those ruffians showed up and stayed for a while. They had roughed up my cousin Jack bad, for the want of alcohol and money. During the depression, there were a lot of transient workers, mostly Hobos. The Hobos were good quality men, sometimes whole families traveled by foot or hopped freight trains. They had a culture about them, you know; morals and class. Ordinary folks who had fallen on hard times. These other ruffians were not Hobo people. I saw one of those bad men once, so drunk, he stood to pee and passed out, still peeing. I saw a few of them following Pastor Jacob around town, a few times."

"I see." Officer Jackie did not seem convinced. She glanced to Orville, who only nodded in agreement.

"Why are you hesitating? Something wrong with putting two and two together on Pastor Jacob's case?" Maddy challenged, sensing Officer Jackie might have heard the true story and had found contrary information misleading. She let the question hang in the air.

"Well, I can see how you and Orville Junior might think that, and it seems logical. But . . ."

Officer Jackie tapped the pen nib against the note pad with controlled aggravation.

Orville Junior looked up to stare at the officer, praying she would not remember various other stories about the community coming together to commit avenging murder mysteries of 'Who dunnit? Or, did we all do it.'

Maddy nudged Orville Junior's elbow under the table, letting him know that his demeanor might be a give away.

Officer Jackie caught the nudge and leaned forward, her mind sifting and sorting facts versus rumour and speculation. "Well, it will take some time for forensics to find the underlying cause of death, clearly ascertaining the true cause of foul play." She paused, clicking the pen closed, thinking as all waited.

Lizzy stood behind Maddy, physically demonstrating full support. Feeling the girl's toughness, Maddy relaxed in the moment

Officer Jackie leaned forward and peered directly into Maddy's eyes. "I heard a different version years ago, from my grandmother, Lydia." Eyes scanned for Maddy's reaction.

A poker game played out, each bluffing the other, waiting for the player to tip their hand.

Maddy was solid, feeling the support of the others in the kitchen, empowered and determined to protect the integrity of community, and of Lydia, and Rosie's plight.

Officer Jackie leaned back, tilted her hat and continued pen clicking.

If Jackie loved her grandmother enough to transfer, and alter an entire career, take a status and pay cut and make home in a tiny rural community, then perhaps Maddy could use it in a way, to gain an edge. She pushed forward, pulling out the maternal trump card. "What is it? What's on your mind Love?"

The woman squirmed, and Maddy knew that she had her.

"I can accept your version and suspicions, but from what I can tell, it doesn't appear that there was any direct blunt physical trauma, at least not that I can see, so far. We'll know more after forensics, of course." She stared, clicking the pen while thinking. "Any idea who these men were or where they came from or where they went?"

"No. No idea. We were just budding young teenagers at that time." She glanced to Orville Junior, who only nodded in support. "Is there something else, that you think doesn't fit?"

"Yes, yes there is. I shouldn't be revealing details of an ongoing investigation, but . . ., what I can't figure out, is that there is over a hundred tiny porcupine quills embedded in the remains. Even if he had fallen onto a porcupine, it doesn't explain, why he'd have been covered in them. Any thoughts on why that might be?"

Maddy understood immediately, as did Orville Junior. "Ah, ha. So, my parents warning of a large porcupine den up river was true; the porcupines finished off Pastor Jacob." Said Maddy with confidence.

Officer Jackie looked to each, seeking flaws in the story.

"All right. What am I missing here? What do you know?"

Maddy beamed, her mother had sketched Pastor Jacob's ultimate demise in her journal. Orville Junior, lost in his own memories, had a renewed respect for his own parents in Pastor Jacob's demise.

Jackie, feeling comfortable, shifted from investigation to be a member of community. "Look, I know the story, all, right? I know that a lot of community folks had a hand in contributing to the man's death." She looked directly to Maddy, "I know what he did to your sister."

Maddy felt an old pang of hurt and guilt, her eyes teared and face blushed.

Jackie took her hat off and patted fingers against hair before continuing, "Look, I'll go with your story, out of respect for my own parents and grandparents. I just want to know, who else was involved?" Jackie straightened, bracing against the challenge.

"You wouldn't believe us if we told you."

Jackie crossed her arms, defensive, "Try me!"

Comfortable, Orville spoke up, "Pretty much everyone in the community. Pastor Jacob hurt a lot of people. I do recall being warned as child to respect the porcupines down by the river.

Robert stepped forward, "I wouldn't have believed it either Officer. If you don't mind waiting a minute, I'll show you a few sketches and you can make up your own mind. Lizzy; please produce Maddy's mother's journal."

"Oh, I've got it right here in my back pack." Lizzy rummaged, sifted pages and handed it to Jackie, at the right spot.

Officer Jackie glanced, arched back and pulled away, "Are you people having me on? Is this a joke?"

Each shook their heads in unison, Robert whispered, "I can assure you, it's no joke."

"Ah come on people." She looked to each again then sat back, scratching her head, and looked back to the illustration. "Are you trying to tell me that all of you believe this?"

Each nodded.

Orville Junior glanced over the sketches then grinned. His neck fat jiggling as he confidently spoke, "We warned you, that you wouldn't believe it. As Maddy's mother's sketches indicate and my childhood memories of legends about Mother Nature warnings, nature will seek revenge."

Officer Jackie shifted in the chair, processing facts. "I found a dog leash, and many community members reported that he had a dog. It is possible that the Pastor's dog could have run after a skunk, pulling the Pastor. In a twist of fate, the Pastor may have fallen on a family of porcupines. He was laced with quills. He could have rolled in turmoil until bleeding out, and likely died on site. I saw this happen to a dog once. So, are you suggesting that a family of porcupines killed the man?"

Each nodded.

Jackie sighed and clicked a pen. "I was born and raised in rural Sault Ste. Marie and I do know that strange incidents occur. I recall a case once, where a bear mauled a body then buried it. It is possible that a bear could have buried the Pastor's body, as bears do with a kill, to eat later. Fate would have it that the bear forgot about its stash. Or, if the stories are true that many community members tried to poison the man, the bear may not have liked the taste of a poisoned meat. I noticed that the earth in that area of the river is boggy which could create ideal conditions to mummify remains. Assuming this theory is true, the Pastor would have laid there in a mummified state." Thoughtful, Jackie leaned back in the chair and smirked.

"Forensics is going to have a field day. I wonder what they'll come up with," she chuckled. "Jesus, they'll have a field day with this case. Who will believe that a family of porcupines would kill a man."

"Well, whether you believe or not . . .," Maddy paused, choosing her words carefully. "You've got swarms of police down at the river, digging around for evidence and all they will find is porcupine quills. They better not disturb the porcupine den and cause too much disruption, or . . .", she hesitated as Jackie raised an eyebrow. "Well, after all, it is a forest and all animals have a right to live there and defend their home. Nature has a way of taking care of disrespectful and bad humans."

Maddy paused as Orville Junior leaned forward, looked Jackie straight in the eye and in a matter of fact voice stated, "Believe what you will Miss, just don't piss off the wildlife and nature spirits in the forest!"

She arched, sat back, eyeing them with disbelief and sensing that they all seemed sane and intelligently normal, she sighed. Sifting reality with the lure of nature, she clicked the pen. Sighing

and then glancing at her watch, “Well look at the time, I’m officially off duty.” She stretched as all waited for a statement on the matter.

Gloria opportunistically stepped forward. “Well, Jackie, wonderful. We were just about to go out onto the patio for evening cocktails.” She indicated the patio through the window, motioning an invitation. “So, you might as well join us. You could use a glass for strength.”

Without waiting for Jackie’s refusal, she took her arm, “Come on, we don’t bite. We’re not crazy people and you’ll be safe. Come, join us for a glass of wine. Robert? Could you please zip over and get Lydia, if she’s feeling up for an outing visit?” She studied Officer Jackie’s bewildered frown. “Your lovely grandmother is a regular and favourite guest here. We usually have a celebratory theme each evening”, She chuckled, “This evening we’ll toast the Porcupines, for a job bloody well done to avenge Rosie and Lydia assaults. You’ll see, your grandmother will concur, and loves to visit Maple.”

Sheepishly, accepting the hand of friendship, Jackie complied, “Oh, you are the one that inherited my grandmother’s pig?” she groaned, “What have I stepped into?”

“What if I crash?
Oh, my Love,
I promise that no matter what,
you *will* fly!”

Chapter Nine ~ The Circle of Life

Lydia nodded, head bobbing from picnic lunch sleepiness and soothed by too much wine, sat safely latched in the motorized wheel chair. Maddy stretched out on a blanket to watch dandelion fluff float and dance on a gentle breeze softly carrying white bits skyward. She had seen many snowy days and bear-claw snow-shoed behind Dad. The first week of every November, little-girl-Madeline dragged a toboggan work sled along winding trails along the river and cedar forests, as he hunted for deer and rabbit. Later, young Jack and Gordon would assume the bulk of the hunting.

A Christmas tradition was making snow-angels with Rosie, arms and legs splayed with mouths wide open, tongues extended, catching drifting snowflakes. They dug tunnels in snow mounds to make forts. Knocking stalactite icicles off the shed roof, and ice-popsicle licking, their sisterly bond was unshakable.

Once a year, every January, after Jack and Gordon began residing with the family and the only time Maddy had followed the long road along the river to the far lake’s open water, the family had packed and bundled for two weeks of ice fishing. A hut assembled among throngs of other ice fishing huts, a different community grew during the short season, sharing resources, campfire stories; mishaps and victories of landing big fish. Long days had been spent sitting huddled over a hole in the ice with a small woodstove offering coziness and steady warmth and keeping a pot of tea warm. Winter camping at its finest, kept all comfortable and warm in grandmother’s hand knit wool socks, mittens, toques, and scarves.

All you needed was a shovel to call your own for the day, sit on the spade at the top of the top level on the mountain, and using the handle to steer, zig-zag and zip down through the cedar groove, and tumble into a mass of giggling children’s bodies at the bottom.

Tiny, under-weight Irene was born on such a winter’s day. Delicate and fragile, Gordon kept her huddled under his wings, always. Compassionate and emotional like her Aunt Rosie, she always wore Halloween faerie wings all year until school mates’ and other children ridiculed her into leaving them home, in a closet. She could not stop sucking a thumb until thirteen, a bed time ritual, as though a self-soothing way to keep the harshness of the world at bay that she had absorbed somehow and could not filter out. A March blizzard brought an early melt then freezing rain, only to dip the temperature to forty below again. Venturing out with Irene in hand when the wind had stilled, everything was covered in an inch of ice and resembled a magical winter wonderland. Wisps of air movement clinked frozen tree branches, gently chiming in song. It was the little girl’s awe of wonder and reverence that is remembered to this day, a pitter-patted in the old woman’s aging heart.

Irene with child and Robert had brought new life, a welcome family expansion and a brief heavenly respite from Maddy and Gordon’s private life and past war memories. Only months later, to lose all.

Twenty Christmases alone after Gordon passed and after tending to the nursing home residents, Maddy kept holidays to herself, content with memories and avoiding all other community merry making celebrations.

Now the house had new life, new purpose and laughter.

“WHATS A DOODLE?” Lydia was rousing, waking with a start, shaking Maddy out of reverie.

“What? What’s that Lydia Love?”

“EH?”

“I don’t know, you asked me.”

“EH?”

Snickering, Maddy rose to a sitting position, “Never mind. How are you feeling Love? Are you okay?”

Smiling, “FIT FIDDILE! GIGGLE MUGS! HALF RATS! BEES KNEES!”

“Glad you are feeling fit, happy and half inebriated. What shall we do now? Or do you need to go home?”

She batted a hand and shook her head, ‘no’.

“Oh good. I’m glad, we’ve just got started. I was thinking of a stroll through town. Maybe gawk at the town characters and get some ice cream?”

Lydia drooled and slurred, “Hmm . . . , PEE!”

“I have to pee too. More of those special giggle brownies too, Gloria made?” Maddy stood, wobbling, a hand blocking the sun from eyes. The nearest public restroom was several blocks away. Not wanting to lose the fun momentum, she eyed Lydia. “Too far to get to a restroom. Let’s be rebels and wee in the bushes.”

Unseen by the giddy women, Gretchen sat in a parked car, video taping the scene. ‘Obviously the two were intoxicated. Retaliation and revenge is sweet. Pure vindictiveness,’ Gretchen conjured for a court hearing statement of the women clearly demonstrating inappropriate behaviour, being intoxicated and performing criminal activity, and Madeline’s negligent care of a more vulnerable person. She bloody-well had Madeline and she knew it.

As though to validate, actions, Maddy squatted and bared her bum. Gretchen gasped, “Public indecency!”

Jump dancing with underwear around ankles, Maddy shook ants off, as she trampled over an ant hill, giggling.

In a euphoric act, Lydia drove the wheel chair around Maddy; around and around, laughing, “WEEEEEE . . . GIGGLE MUGS!!!”

Snit-snort-laughing, Maddy stumbled upon a ground nest of wasps. Instantly, wasps flew up and inside her loose blouse. Whipping the blouse off, wasps stung and tenaciously clung to Maddy’s under garments.

Lydia screamed with delight, enjoying Maddy’s dance. “WOOOOHOOOOOO”.

Gretchen was overly excited and had stepped out of the car to boldly position herself to film the unfolding situation. The women were caught red handed. Madeline was a prime target and captured on digital format. ‘The old bat will be sent to the nursing home within days.’ Gretchen said in thought, for she had proof absolute. A slam-dunk.

Unknown to Gretchen, Officer Jackie was also sitting in a police car watching the scene unfold while eating lunch. Giggling, she enjoyed the sight of her grandmother having such fun. Catching on-to Gretchen’s intent, Jackie set the sandwich aside and began video taping Gretchen video taping the scene. Jackie was acutely aware of Gretchen’s bullying intervention upon her grandmother Lydia and was aware of Madeline’s competency court hearing. Clearly; Gretchen was intent on using the footage to incriminate the fun loving, carefree old women.

Overjoyed with Lydia’s rally from a small stroke, Maddy smiled, saying, “Come on girlfriend, I’m bloody hungry now, lets go get pie and ice cream.”

Lydia, still locked in teenaged rebellious state, boldly drove the wheel chair down the middle of the street. The chair's caution red flag dangling behind, balls to any drivers. It was her small moment of anarchy. Maddy followed, pulling the red wagon behind, picnic goods tossed about in the wobbling wagon.

Lizzy, catching sight of the old women, scurried to catch up and join in the parade. Striding beside Maddy with Maple sitting in a shopping cart, the pig donned sunglasses and a small hooded sweatshirt.

Slinging an arm around Lizzy, Maddy giggled, "God Ladies, I've always chuckled at the local characters and now I am afraid that we've become them."

Lydia and Lizzy grinned.

Resisting Maddy's motioning to the diner, Lydia hesitated. Maddy asked, "Not ready for pie and ice cream?"

Shaking her head, NO! Lydia put the wheel chair into fast forward and headed for and stopped at the base of the water tower. Wide eyes looked up.

Maddy plunked a thin bum onto the picnic table seat to watch workers paint the water tower. Nibbling on Gloria's special giggle brownies, she placed a brownie into Lydia's wanting hand.

"I don't know about you, girlfriends, but these brownies clear my brain of lingering fog, lighten me up and give me childhood energy."

Lydia beamed, motioning a 'Cheers', with a chunk of devoured brownie.

Opening a vinegar packet and dabbing the clear watery liquid onto swelling wasp stings, Maddy grumbled, "It's about bloody time they started building a new tower. That old rusted tin can, should have been replaced thirty-years ago."

The three watched with wonderment as construction workers packed up for the day. Ten times the circumference of the old tower and ten times taller, the new water tower was rapidly taking shape of a giant cylinder, encased in cement. Atop, a crane swiveled into park and its operator exited, descending gracefully in a cage elevator. He tipped his work hat to the women, a goodbye.

The town had no other option but to build a new steel water tower. That first day of construction, Maddy knew for certain that she would marry Jack. The original water tower had been an old oversized wooden barrel encased with metal straps. It had been a particularly dry hot summer, drought and unusually high temperatures caused the wood to shrink and the metal to expand. Through expanded slats, water streamed forth, a blessed shower of water that attracted every child in the community. A blessed reprieve from the long water usage ban, children laughed and splashed while mothers took advantage of the easy and abundant water source. With laundry buckets and soap in hand, they lathered and rinsed their dirty children and laundry.

Nearing sunset and the slowing flow of water when wood expanded, pubescent Maddy sat admiring the swarming audience, Jack's personal fan club, to which she was the number one V.I.P. As the crowd dissipated, Jack waved to Maddy, "Let's climb to the top of the tank, I want to show you something."

At the top, she gingerly tip-toed along the ledge and railing, feeling the warm evening breeze drying her hair and skin.

"Okay, stand with your arms wide apart and close your eyes. Be an air-minded dare devil, standing on top of a plane's wing, in flight."

Maddy closed eyes and smiled.

"I want you to always remember this, little Dragonfly. Remember how the wind feels, how strong it is, how it slightly lifts, under arm wings. Smell the warm summer air, smell the changing air coming in the distance, it's about two hours away, but you can smell it. You can tell the wind speed and direction, just by closing your eyes for a minute and feeling the differences, smelling the changes. You will be able to tell what the weather is and what it's gonna do, just by smell and feel. You've got to know the differences, at all times, before you get into a plane, before you take off."

Maddy wobbled, and Jack caught hold of her, "Whoa, easy girl, don't take flight yet."

“How do you know this stuff?”

“The old timers, you learn a lot by hanging out with the old fellows. The ones who went to war and flew the first fighter planes, the crop dusters, the hunters like your Dad and the farmers. If you ever need to know about something, the old timers that have been around the block, are the experts.”

It had been one of the most magical moments of Maddy’s young life; a bird perched on a cliff with wind under her wings. She flew with the wind, yet held safe by Jack’s caring grip.

“Watch the hawks and eagles dip-dive off their cliff perches, that’s how to glide. That is the closest I’ll ever get to heaven. My spirit is free, when I fly. Can you feel the freedom?”

“Ya, Jack. I see what you mean. When I close my eyes, I feel the wind lifting me, blowing through my hair, my spirit is free to soar with the birds.”

Maddy turned to Lydia who was clearly feeling the highs of delight via the brownies with mouth agape, she watched a raven circle and dive. Young Lizzy slid onto the picnic bench and helped herself to a brownie chunk. Maple nudged for a share by stepping up onto the bench, begging, “No pig, you can’t have any of this stuff. She reached into her back pack and offered apple slices to Maple.

“Have either of you ever flown in a plane?” Asked Maddy, her thoughts craving the sensation again.

Lydia and Lizzy with mouth’s full, shook heads; ‘no’.

“Want to? Want to feel what it’s like?”

Quizzical and frisky, Lydia grinned and nodded, as youthful Lizzy spoke for both, “Yes, yes. Please!”

Scanning the perimeter, they did not notice anyone. Lizzy and Maple followed as Maddy wheeled Lydia onto the service elevator. Up, up, up, they went. At four stories high, the wire cage squeaked to a clunking stop.

“Let your hair down! Look up into the sky, take a deep breath. Now close your eyes girls and spread your arms and legs wide, like bird wings. Feel the wind against your face, through your hair and under arms. We are flying, free as birds, spirits gliding on heavenly winds.”

“GIGGLE MUGS!!! BEES KNEES!!!”

“Woooohooo!!!” Added Lizzy.

Officer Jackie slid her car in behind construction material, out of sight. She watched Gretchen slither and crouch behind shrubbery, holding a cell phone at arms length, aimed toward the water tower. “What is that women up to?” thought Jackie.

Approaching Gretchen’s car, Jackie’s eye caught sight of a messy file folder caught Jackie’s attention on the passenger seat, papers slightly spilling out. The passenger side window was wide open, so she leaned in, spread open the file and took pictures of the contents. Back at the cruiser, she made a call into headquarters.

Happily, exhausted, Lizzy pushed Lydia’s wheel chair up the ramp and through the open sliding glass doors of the nursing home.

“Oh, gees, Maddy, can you take over? I had better get home and help Nana with dinner. Are you old farts all right from here? Mind if Maple and I go?”

Maddy waved her off, “Okay, I’ll see you two at home later.”

Maddy had not been inside any of the nursing home rooms since Gordon had passed. While limiting most afternoons to the lounge, reading to residents and keeping them company, she never considered rooms to be a person’s home. Every week for twenty-four years, the place was a familiar meeting place and yet, she had not thought of calling the place; her home. Considering the inevitable, it did not seem so bad. Most of the residents that had been here with Gordon were gone.

Décor had changed with unfamiliar residents and ever-changing staff. Event posters and flyers describing the home remained the same.

With Lydia contentedly tucked in, and snoring, Maddy sighed. 'This may soon be my home. This will do. I will get used to it. Lydia and Mary are here. Many new friends are here.' Thoughts bounced about in Maddy's mind.

It seemed that this summer's day had flown by. Tired, yet not wanting another beautiful day to end too soon, Maddy headed to the grocery store.

The cashier chomped bubble gum while eyeing Maddy's roughly written cheque. "Lady! The numbers do not match the written description and the date says nineteen-eighty-four." She clicked an intercom button to hail the supervisor.

Maddy felt a strange rapid elastic snap sensation in her brain, followed by a woozy rush of blood. She braced against the check-out counter. Instantly angry, an internal hot button had been pushed. The girl had accused her of being negligent, making an error and a grave mistake. Jack was the risk taker; she had always strived for precision. She glared at the young woman. 'How dare she. Bloody hell, I learned to fly and flew in the war by my sensory awareness; instruments were secondary. I've flown by the feel of the bird; sounds and smells. This was how I was taught. I learned the instruments as best as I could, well good enough.' Maddy damn well knew the procedures and emergency procedures and throughout life, followed them to a 'T'. Precision and integrity was her way. Confused, aghast and angry, Maddy defensively crossed her arms, and simply huffed at the insult.

"Oh, hi Maddy," A familiar young man greeted Maddy and eyed the cheque. "Oh, no problem, Maddy has credit here. We'll just keep a note in the register. Her credit is fine."

Suddenly, an anger grew, a retaliation for not filling out the cheque properly. "What on earth are you both talking about? The cheque is good." Maddy seethed.

The supervisor, striving to maintain the old woman's dignity, ran a hand through greying hair while eyes and smile beamed pleasantly. "Oh, I'm sorry Madeline, look. See here? There's a couple of errors. Can't cash it the way it is. You can write another one or we can just give you credit."

Embarrassed, angry and afraid, spittle formed on her lips as she grabbed back the cheque back to inspect it, for herself. The wording blurred into a foreign language. Embarrassed and grateful no one else was in the store, she braced herself, fighting against the tiny elastic teasing in her brain. Clearly, the young cashier had switched the perfectly good cheque for a bad one. Clearly, the young woman intended to make her a fool, a scape goat for cheating the store out of cash.

"Young man, this is ridiculous! This is not mine, she switched them. Fire her!" Reeling, and striving to maintain a respectful shred of dignity, she avoided their accusing eyes, "I wrote a perfectly good cheque."

Uncomfortable, the manager struggled to find a solution. "No worries Maddy, we'll give you credit today."

Angry, Maddy slammed the groceries into the wagon. In a blur of thought she barely overheard the supervisor whisper to the cashier, 'Don't worry about it. She's just getting old. I've known her all my life. I'll fix it. If it happens again, just put it on her credit.'

The man's comments stung. Betrayed and hurt, Maddy sulked homeward. She would mention the incident to Gordon, then he would sort the man out. Catching the slip, she corrected herself, Robert. Not Gordon.

Feeling a fog of dizziness, she sat on a park bench, waiting and wondering why Jack was taking so long. She fidgeted wrinkled fingers, worrying how he would take the news. She would have to let him down easy. Yes, after careful consideration, she had chosen to marry Gordon.

Waking from the effects of snoring and head bobbing, she gasped at the setting sun.

Why on earth was she sitting on a park bench? She had to get home, quickly. Robert, Gloria, Lydia and Lizzy would be waiting for dinner. She had already been caught by Gloria once for being

out too long. She could not be caught again. It was too soon to be sent to the nursing home. She was not ready.

Exhausted, Maddy slipped inside the house to a waiting patio dinner party. Balloons bobbed lightly, and rainbow ribbons swayed in the evening breeze.

“Oh good! Old Gal, you’re home. Lydia is here, and Gloria has dinner ready and boy, do I have news for you. Come, sit.” Robert motioned. Large military envelopes and file folders over shadowed paper party plates.

Eyeing the military envelopes, her intended party mood lapsed, and a lucid moment arrived. “Robert love. You know I don’t want to know any of that. I haven’t had anything to do with them since I left the war. I don’t want anything to do with them now. I told you.”

Robert, Gloria, and Lizzy beamed as Lydia’s head bobbed while gently snoring. Maple rummaged through the garden, snorting with delight, then decided to bask in the cool evening grass.

“Maddy, I know what you said. But I have connections. I’m an investigative writer. I have interesting news for you.”

She shifted, uncomfortably bracing against his insistence. Insistent, he handled a file folder, then placed a photo of Alice with a young girl and an open Happy Holiday card, signed by Gertie, on the table. A note saying, ‘Happy Holidays 1946’ caught Maddy’s attention. Curious, she glared at Robert.

Leaning closer to Maddy, Robert said, “Gertie and Alice did not die in the crash, Old Gal. They did not die that day! You saved their lives.”

“No. That’s not possible! I was told they were sent home.” Maddy strained to recall facts.

“I was groggy from pain medication and barely awake. The ward was very busy and loud. I overheard two nurses talking about sending two bodies home to families at the same time as the Briefing Officer was interviewing me. Did I just assume the Officer meant that Alice and Gertie’s bodies were being sent home? How did they survive?”

“Well, we know that a rescue ship was close by, saw your plane go down and saw the flare. By the time you got Alice and Gertie out of the plane and into a dingy, the rescue was likely well under way. Even though you and your crew were briefly in cold water, you would have been treated for hypothermia. We also now know that Gertie had a serious concussion but did not die until years later. She did go home after the crash to surviving family, in the states. She was not Italian; she was Jewish. I figure that’s why she was reaching for the Star of David medallion; to get rid of it. Perhaps, she didn’t want to risk your lives, in case any crew was captured by the enemy.”

“I don’t remember for sure.” Maddy scratched her head. “This can’t be. I’m dreaming this.”

“I can assure you,” Robert insisted, “it is. You should have opened your mail. Here, this is a Happy Holiday card from Gertie and a thankyou note from Alice.”

Maddy gingerly ran a wrinkled finger over the crew mate’s signatures. Shaking spasms of the hand reached to touch the spirit of lost friends. She looked at Robert, straining to put pieces of the puzzle together, then said, “Oh dear, I must have mixed the nurses conversation about the bodies being sent home with the Briefing Officer’s interview in my mind.”

Robert patted Maddy’s hand. “Understandable, Old Gal. Yes, Alice also suffered concussion during the crash, but she lived a long life. She continued in aviation. This is a photograph of her with her young daughter. You did not give the military permission to release current contact to the general public, but they did forward all received mail to you under military correspondence. You could have connected and shared life moments with your friends. You missed out.”

Tearing, Maddy slumped. Gloria stood behind her, to comfort, soothingly rubbing her back.

“There’s more. You know that the military began releasing records thirty years ago, well I found this.” Robert handed over a photocopied briefing report. “Look, it says that the cause of the

plane crash was due to an enemy assault on the fuselage. Not pilot error. Not your fault. Do you get that?"

Stunned, resisting what her mind had believed for seventy years, the logic of what really happened seemed unbelievable. She blinked and glanced about thinking. 'They are teasing, having me on? Playing mind games, just like the grocery store cashier and supervisor? No.' She chased away the thought, striving to maintain lucidity. Refusing to give into the forgetful fog, she wiped away a tear, as her mind dizzily reeled attempting to absorb facts. Robert was confident, smiling and insistent.

"Here, this is an embroidered badge of a white winged gold fish flying over waves, it acknowledges your place in the Goldfish Club." Robert proudly handed the crest to a curious Maddy then explained, "It commemorates your successful evacuation from a disabled aircraft over water with the use of the Mae West life preserver and a dingy. Listen to what the attached note says; 'Money, position or power cannot gain a man or woman entry to the exclusive circles of the Goldfish Club. To become a member, one has to float between one upon the sea for a considerable period with nothing but a Carley Rubber Float between one and a watery death.'"

Robert beamed, "There is one more interesting bit of information."

"No Robert. Not now," Gloria intervened sensing Maddy's fragile state. "She's already had a long day. Let's just give her some time. We've got all evening, to explain, and to allow Maddy to absorb at a slow pace. She needs to eat, relax, and just sit with this for awhile. It's a lot to take in after all these years."

Quietly eating, Maddy's mind sorted through events and facts. Her eyes caught Lizzy's journal. "What have you got there, Love?"

Grinning proudly, Lizzy pushed it toward the old woman, repeating an earlier explanation. "It's my journal, about you. Remember, I told you about it in an earlier conversation."

Not wanting to be caught out of balance, Maddy feigned a familiarity and snarked, "Of course I do! We talked about it earlier."

The young girl swallowed, "It's a journal of your life; interesting bits I've been collecting."

"How do you know all of this stuff about me?"

"Because, you talk in your sleep. Every time you fall asleep in your chair and you talk a storm, I write it down. I've been collecting interesting bits of your life in case you start forgetting. This journal will remind you of things that slid your memory."

Overwhelmed, Maddy choked a tear. "But, why?"

Lizzy reached and gently stroked the old woman's hand, "Because, I love you".

Antsy to reveal all details, Robert, interrupted the demonstrative moment, "Okay, I can't stand it anymore. Old Gal, I must tell you now or I'm going to burst. There is one more thing that you must know. Don't worry, it's all good. At least I think you'll be relieved."

Maddy set her fork down and braced. "I don't know if I can take much more today. Go ahead. Say what you must say. Give it to me straight."

"All right." Leaning back with a hint of pride, Robert said, "You know how you always thought that Rosie didn't want to have anything more to do with you? How she never responded to phone calls, or greeting cards?"

Nodding, Maddy feared the worst. "Uh huh?"

"Well, it wasn't how you think it was. She must have taken some of your advice given on that last visit. 'Claim your life?' Do you recall saying that?"

"Uh huh. What about it?"

"Well get this; she was escorted off a Canadian military base for being caught as unauthorized personnel. She was in the officer's mess, confronting one of the two men who had assaulted her. Well, the second time she snuck onto base, she was arrested. It seems she was impersonating a female officer, and had slipped a mixture of botulin and cyanide into the other attacker's drink."

“What? What? My sister Rosie? Are you sure?”

“Yes, yes. Absolutely! It seems that she tried to have another formal complaint made and tried to file charges against her attackers. The military personnel at the time, dismissed the allegations. The Military Police charged her with trespassing and assault. She did time in prison. She could have been charged for attempted murder. I figure, this explains why Rosie’s husband told you that she wasn’t available to come to the phone, when you called.”

Maddy hung onto every word, straining to absorb facts. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

Gloria dabbed a napkin, mouth hanging open from intrigue. “What an amazing gal, Rosie was. Though a misguided way of trying to make those men accountable for their deeds. I guess, since the military wouldn’t listen and take Rosie seriously, she took matters into her own hands. More so, she wanted to incapacitate them, so they couldn’t repeat attacks on other victims.”

Robert nodded in agreement then continued, “Look Maddy, here’s a letter addressed to you, before her death. It was a military re-direct, and stuffed in this box in your attic, discarded by you. The gist is, she was sorry for what was said to you that day. She missed being sisters, and an aunt. You were, and always will be, her big sister, the one she looked up to, respected.”

“Huh! Well I’ll be double damned. Huh. Imagine that.” Dizzy with life freeing news, Maddy fidgeted shaking hands. Politeness regained over confusion. “I don’t know where to begin or how to thank, all of you.” She back-handed a tear and swallowed a throat lump. “After Gordon passed, I lived alone for twenty-years. It took me twenty-years to get used to being alone. I don’t know why I did that. I should have called you a long time ago, Robert.” Maddy stood, “No one should ever have to live alone for this long. Right now, I must pee and wash my face, gather myself. I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

Tired, yet refreshed, Maddy gingerly began making her way back toward the patio, when she heard a familiar dangerous voice. Hesitating, she hid behind the kitchen curtain, peering outside as the distinct smell of Lily of the Valley waffled in through the door. Gretchen hunched over a laptop computer, open on the patio table, playing what seemed like a video. Maddy heard Lydia’s and her own voice sounding silly and intoxicated on the computer. Lydia seemed to be sleeping through the demonstration, or simply sat quiet with embarrassment. Maddy reeled with anger. Gretchen had somehow captured video of their giggle brownie eating picnic, and water-tower escapade. Embarrassed and afraid, Maddy backed away. Robert and Gloria were silent. Maddy knew she had been caught in the act. Gretchen had video evidence. There was no way out of this entrapment.

A snapping of nerve endings popped inside her head. Massaging hands soothed the stretch elastic nerve bands across her forehead. Mildly dizzy, her fearful interpretation of the grocery store supervisor and cashier validated that they were also against her.

Maddy whimpered, gasping when hearing Gretchen’s stern words spit and hang so poignant in the air. “Demented! . . . , negligent! . . . , unsafe! . . . , illegal drugs! criminal! . . . , harmful to self and others!”

Gloria and Robert frowned, silently watched the video re-play with mouths agape, and made no counter argument in Maddy’s support, that she could hear.

Gretchen’s video had turned Robert, Gloria and Lizzy against her as well. There was no getting around a new competency case this time. Conceding the obvious, Maddy slid into the bedroom and quickly packed a change of clothes for jail. Gretchen’s presenting case made Maddy resemble a dangerous lunatic. She had already signed the house over to Robert in trust for Lizzy, and handed over Power of Care and Attorney to both Robert and Gloria, so now she was to be shifted off prematurely. What else should she expect?

Red and white flashing lights flickered within the bedroom. Pushing aside a window curtain, she reeled back and hid after seeing a police car. She gasped when Officer Jackie stepped out of a police car and headed around to the back of the house.

Gretchen was retaliating, the vengeful woman had police back up. Maddy plunked on her bed, knowing she would never sleep in it again. She was going to jail. She sighed with acceptance. Finally, at peace with the notion, knowing it was time. Perhaps life's events had accumulated towards this point; the plane crash, Pastor Jacob, illegal giggle-brownies, and unsafe supervising of Lydia. Heaven knows what other charges would be. She was good to go, and to honourably face whatever was to come. Although it was irksome that all would be at the hands of the scorpion-woman, Gretchen.

Gretchen was a predator, though legally, she had every right to uphold the law. It angered Maddy that the nasty woman was in her own backyard, being accusing and manipulative. It was dirty and low.

Maddy was going to jail, because it was the right thing to do, to be accountable for whatever errors in judgment she had made. The nasty Gretchen would have to wait. Yes, Maddy would make her wait. Hold her head high with dignity, and on her own terms. Empowered and inspired, Maddy decided to take one last walk around the property, to say goodbye to a lifetime of familiarity and of loved ones in the spirit form.

There was no time to confront Robert and Gloria, nor to make another case in self defense; she was so tired. Assuming betrayal, Maddy understood how they would not want to be burdened any longer by an old lunatic woman. Gretchen was surely making a convincing case and had a police escort. There was no time to hold a grudge, she had to think fast.

Quickly, she wrote a last note to Robert;

'Robert Love,

Don't waste time. Just, please take care of business.

Use the money in the clothes pin can, on the kitchen counter. There is approximately forty-thousand dollars, my household emergency funds. Consider it a gift; marry Gloria, adopt Lizzy and make a family, don't waste life's limited time.

Go and see Orville Junior, his grandson, my accountant, and my lawyer; right away! I was going to surprise you, but ran out of time. Go and see if there is anything of value in those old stocks and bonds. Maybe there will be something of value, to be used for war veterans. My lawyer will explain everything and advise you.

Time goes by so quickly. I blinked, and a life time has passed.

Love always, Maddy.'

From the patio, raised voices filtered through the house. Time was running out. Heading for the bedroom door, Maddy hesitated, turned and opened an old tattered travel trunk. Retrieving and stuffing in an old leather pilot cap and aviator sunglasses into a gift bag, she wrote on a ripped piece of paper,

'To: Lizzy, love from an old woman with attitude.'

Pausing to dig deeper into the trunk, she picked out the dragonfly pendant and Mother's old canning and preserving cookbook. Gift bagged, she attached a note to it.

'To: Gloria Love,

Thanks for your friendship and giggle-brownies. I am ever so grateful.

Love; Maddy.'

Anxious to escape, Maddy placed a hand over a thumping heart. Annoyed that time had run out so soon, she calmed and slid on Gordon's old plaid work shirt. Sniffing for the old smell of him, moth-ball and dust smells mingled with aromas of river water and fish. Maddy was oh so homesick

for her man. Tired, yet energized, she checked for movement outside, through the back window. Seeing the small gathering on the patio, in heated discussion, she turned to the door. A dizzy spell wobbled through her head, followed by an elastic snap of nerve endings.

The police car's blue and red lights swirled and blended with the blue flashes of lightening shards of Saint Elmo's fire, and the red flames of the planes' engine fire. Crashing was imminent in the old trauma vision in Maddy's mind. This time, Maddy stood outside of her body in spirit form, viewing the crash sequences objectively, without a trace of trauma fear.

Maddy calmly watched her younger self realize that the plane was going to crash plane, 'Bloody hell, Alice, we're going to crash! Radio and instruments are all out.'

Gertie shouted, 'The tail's been hit. Landing gear is jammed.'

Alice reported, 'This dammed Elmo electrical storm has us in a weird fire. Left engine is on fire and spitting blue.'

As the events of the past unfolded before old eyes, Maddy was proud to watch as a young competent version of herself, settle in to keep the plane's nose up and level for descent. Gertie jostled out of her seat then slammed into Alice, knocking the crew member unconscious.

'Oh God! If I try to belly land on the airstrip, the bombs and ammunition will take out the ground crew and village. I've got to try and get this bird down on the water! Hold tight ladies. God help us!'

Banking wide left, a young Maddy calmly fought to keep the rumbling plane semi-level, though the plane spiraled lower and lower. She prayed against spinning completely out of control and held steadfast. Sixty-feet above waves, crests, flaps down and gliding the plane at one hundred and forty miles per hour, she headed directly away from the shoreline and past a fleet of merchant ships. Both hands gripped to keep the nose wheel high and she braced for impact.

The force of the monstrous plane slamming into a wave, bounced and shuddered the dinosaur structure backward with a heaving groan. The sound of water trickling, shifting of metal and engine gurgling, she jumped out of the seat.

'Think fast! God, please help me!'

Frantically hammer-pounding on the hatch door and trying to force it open, a young Maddy met only resistance and whispered through panic, 'I've got to get the girls out, God please help me!' With the cock-pit filling with water, she turned to the windshield. Eyeing the crack, saw the only possible way out. Turning and wading through ice cold water, she searched for a frame angle to smash the crack open.

Grabbing a hold of a bent support angle, and aiming at the in the plane's window, Maddy gasped upon seeing, an old woman's face staring back, her own image. Old Maddy was back in her own physical body, in her own bedroom with a hairbrush in an aging hand and about to strike the dresser mirror.

Memory shifting to the present, Maddy was aware that her spirit was fully back in her own physical body and in the here and now. Tired, she sat on the bed and whimpered, panting with lost breath. After so many years of holding past traumas at bay, she knew that the Alzheimer's had forced a crack on her control over blocking out past events. There was no higher judgement scorning her deeds. Relieved of the guilty burdens, she now knew for certain that the plane crash, Rosie and Irene events had been out of her control. Significant life events just are what they are, and she had simply done her best in impossible situations. Maddy was proud of herself.

Soon she would completely let go, just not quite yet, there would be ample time while in jail. Memories snapping in and out had worn down her resolve and Gretchen was winning the final round.

Elastic snap sensations flicked inside of old Maddy's brain, and a whoosh of dizziness sent her reeling, hands braced upon the dresser.

Above the old memories of haunting WW2 air raid sirens and zip of fire hitting and shaking ground, she heard Roy's firm, yet calm and comforting voice whisper in her mind, 'You are still

physically capable of handling a plane, so you must fly. Your maximum effort is expected and demanded. When you do reach your maximum, your body and mind will let go. You may be tired right now and think you are entitled to rest awhile. Set aside any notions of going home and making new plans. Set aside worry and being tired, because you have one last job to do. Pride is no longer your concern, because the last place you want to be, is down and out and leaving your last mission unfulfilled. Accept the fact that you will die, and the challenge won't feel so tough. A crippled plane is expendable; the integrity of the whole is not expendable. Your obligation is to your own integrity, that of your crew and the last mission you are fighting for.'

Maddy nodded and straightened, rising to the task ahead. Roy intimately knew what he was talking about, his squadron had been flying over France, Belgium and the Netherlands, chasing enemy Luftwaffe's and bomb attacking German railyards, air fields and industrial plants.

'Confidence and stamina to rise and continue the mission comes from knowing that your small participation and effort contributes for the good of the whole.', she thought.

Roy offered the same calm, firm respectful confidence shown by Billy Bishop one youthful afternoon at the Cedar Groove airport, how Roy and Gordon treated Maddy. Their eyes had reflected that Maddy was fully capable of taking care of business. Drawing on their supportive confidence, she relaxed into the task at hand.

Another whoosh of dizziness sent her reeling, hands braced upon her head as the sensation passed.

In the moment, Maddy fidgeted hands, having no recall of Robert's earlier news of the Gertie and Alice's' survival. Not all brain synapses were working. Straining to focus on the here and now, Maddy remembered that she had just been caught out by Gretchen for some unknown reason and the police had arrived. Maddy remembered only, that she was going to jail.

Having reached maximum effort, too tired to fight Gretchen and acquiescing, residue fear shifted to a warm confidence over the dangerous situation. No, she had not been negating any responsibility for her part in life events and did know why she had survived so much atrocity in this life. She had merely strained to live life as best she could. It had been a rationale that she had told herself since the war; that loved ones would not want her to dwell in despair, shame, and guilt. If she had been a casualty, she would only want survivors to relish every moment, to enjoy their lives to the fullest.

Blissful in a delicious memory, Maddy smiled as she tenderly stroked a sleeping baby Irene's hair, while wrapped in Gordon's arms. It had been during a cold autumn when all three had journeyed influenza. Fevers broken, fireplace heat warmed chilly bones. Maddy's head lay upon Gordon's chest, listening to his strong heart calmly beating. Marvelling at the softness of baby Irene's skin and awestruck, Maddy teared in ecstasy. The loving snapshot in time, had been the happiest and most peaceful moment of Maddy's life. This loving euphoria had easily surpassed the heavenly sensation of flying solo. If Maddy were to articulate what God, the Creator, Allah or Divinity is, surely it would be this loving reverence for life.

It seemed to Maddy that natural disasters and deaths due to illness seemed easier to recover from, as being a natural part of the birth, life and death cycles. Bearing witness to the moral atrocities inflicted upon other humans during war or otherwise, scarred the psyche and soul forever. This was one of life's greatest challenges, to not take the cruel deeds and actions of others, personally.

To channel their post war adrenaline rushes of being on constant high alert and to fill a hole of lost crew mates through the business of re-building the family homestead and growing their own little family, Maddy and Gordon had managed to thrive. Out of the void of loss and trauma now, she knew that she could rise yet again.

"When life looks grim, it is time to get busy", she whispered.

Calmly gathering energy and focus, her attention turned to familiar voices outside on the patio. Time was running out. She would relish this one last moment of independent freedom.

Standing amidst the police car's blue and red lights swirling inside the bedroom, the exertion triggered another smaller elastic snap sensation to flicker inside her brain.

Madly stoic, braced and like every other life defining moment in her life, Maddy strained to clear her mind and focus on what must be done. Confidently, she talked herself through the emergency procedure. "Just keep your nose up, bank wide, stay level and aim for the water."

Energized by adrenaline, she tip-toed downstairs and stepped out through the front door. Stealthily banking wide and staying in shadows, she carefully allowed a wide perimeter around the property. Under a full moon's light, she followed the path to the open river water.

Being a curious pig, Maple trotted behind Maddy, as the escaping woman ambled along the shoreline and aimed for a garden bench.

Maddy plunked onto Gloria's new family memorial bench, her frail body resting limply.

Overheated from the exertion of an already exhausting day, a gentle evening breeze cooled and caressed sweaty skin as she became aware of current surroundings. Summer day heat had given way to night cool smells of pungent earth, river water, fish, grass, and cedar trees. It was a beautiful night; fireflies twinkle-danced over water surface amidst sparkling moonlight ascents against a purple magenta sunset and emerging stars. Cool enough to keep mosquitos close to the warmth of ground cover and away from humans.

Gretchen's showing of the video to Robert, Gloria, and Lizzy, had triggered an objective culmination of old painful memories; the terrible fearful feelings of Rosie and other children being stalked and lured by Pastor Jacob, the roughens who had surrounded and beaten Jack, and the Nazi U-boats which stalked the shadows beneath the water's surface to randomly blow up merchant ships and corvettes around Gordon.

Indeed, most people have hidden fears, shame and guilt that occasionally spill onto others. Then there are those who have a darkness within, an evil intent of predation. Gretchen was surely one who possesses an inner pain so great that she preys upon others. Like Hitler's Nazi's, their aim was to instill fear in the masses in hope that most would simply self-destruct and simply give in.

Gretchen may have won a battle, but not the war. She would gain nothing of value from Maddy's estate. The woman will eventually, atone for her own deceitful deeds. Karma. Perhaps she might harass the wrong person one day.

All financial and legal business had been taken care of; the house, stocks and bonds had already been signed over to Robert, in trust for Lizzy. Three generations of home and family heritage now in the hands of people who were not a biological family.

Maddy sighed as a warm light washed through her being. She was at peace with the home intruder's invasion of her son-in-law and new neighbour women. A writer in retreat and war veterans would soon inhabit her family home. Surprised by how insignificant this all seemed in retrospect, she relaxed.

What use is the house to her, from jail? Yes, this was a perfect outcome.

Maybe Lizzy's journaling would turn the young girl into a fine writer one day. There were still so many more stories to be told. She imagined Robert coaching the girl about putting jumbled stories into perspective. Maddy imagined visiting years later, in spirit form to inspire the young girl. Arriving in dreams and showing the girl how to spirit fly a plane.

Dizzy, mind fogging, exhausted and content, Maddy's thoughts calmed as she leaned back into the bench. Maple sprawled awkwardly on the ground with its snout nuzzled between Maddy's cold feet.

Petting the pig slightly, Maddy closed eyes to rest. Spent, she calmly allowed a final elastic snap sensation to pop inside of her head and a grip-stabbing pain in her heart to pass then gasped one last breath.

Gordon sat beside her, sliding an arm around her shoulder to lean in, he smiled. "Hello Love. Beautiful evening."

“Oh, hello Love!” Maddy cooed, “I’d thought you’d gone and left me for some reason?”

“Oh, my Love, it’s good to see you, but, I’ve never really left you.”

Maddy smiled and patted his soft hand. “Oh, I’m ever so glad to see you. I’ve had a dilly of a day. Thank you for coming, Love.”

Gordon squeeze-hugged her, patting her hand to calm the anxiety of the day.

“Shall I sing our song; ‘Maddy, Remember When’? Would you like to hear it?”

Maddy beamed, “Oh that’d be lovely.”

“Maddy, I strolled down by the river,
to watch the blue water flow.
Maddy, I fished by thee old sand bar,
where we use to dream long ago.
Maddy, gone is the green valley,
where we would walk there among,
the daisies of summer’s endless days,
when we were so young.
Maddy, old father time says we’ve aged,
though wishing for the youth of way back when.
Our smiles will tell a written story of life,
scribed by nature’s pen.
Maddy, we cannot out-live our time,
or repeat those songs of old we’ve sung.
Maddy, forever fair you will be,
when we were then so young.
Maddy, our earthly time shall be,
no longer to repeat songs we’ve sung.
Dear Maddy, forever fair you will be,
when we were then so young.
Maddy gone is the green valley,
where we would walk there among,
the daisies of summer’s endless days,
when we were then so young.
When we were then so young.”

Slipping out of the evening mist, Jack appeared as handsome and young as she remembered him at his best. He smiled and motioned, for them to come. Jack turned to point to an old crop duster. Squinting, Maddy saw Irene, the baby, and Rosie huddled in the back seat. They smiled and beckoned her to come. Thrilled to see them and remembering the joyful thrill of flying; free, Maddy’s spirit rose from her physical body and walked over the river water’s surface to join them.

Maple grunted, nudging its snout at the heels of Maddy’s disappearing feet.

Advancing closer to the plane, Maddy noticed Alice and Gertie waving. Dad and Mom stood opened armed and welcoming as a bright light of hope from behind the plane. Everyone reached to encompass and embrace her.

“Oh, hello everyone.” Greeted Maddy, both arms reaching out for long missed hugs. Cool water tickled toes, as Maddy wiggled feet in the warm river bottom.

Maple, bee-lined back to the patio table and squealed with nervous excitement. Lizzy shushed it, “In a minute pig.”

Suddenly the table argument subsided. Officer Jackie's verbal arrest rights narrative to Gretchen hung in the air as she slid hand-cuffs on the shocked woman.

Officer Jackie flipped an open file folder onto the patio table and exposed its contents. Photos and copies of surveillance documents open for Robert and Gloria to see. Gretchen unaware of detailed evidence, stood solemn, eyes wide, waiting, stupefied. Against police procedure yet erring in favour of relieving Madeline and her family any further undue stress, Jackie shared the copies of the evidence. Two dozen realtor agreements, and Power of Attorney letters, all with dozens of practice signatures upon each, had been acquired from Gretchen's home.

Officer Jackie shoved Gretchen forward. "This goes beyond fraud. You are in serious trouble. I wonder what they'll do to an elder abuser in prison?"

Lydia woke with awareness, shook a victory fist at Gretchen and swore, "PODSNAPPERY; Ca ca ca CAN'T REFUSE FACTS!!! You, you, you SIDE WINDER!!! LOCK UP!!! BEES KNEES!!!"

Gloria turned to Lizzy, "Oh shite. Quick. Go and find Maddy. Hurry, we must tell her the good news right away."

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~ Book cover design, background image and senior woman courtesy of 'rebecacovers' Fiverr.com

~ Book cover photograph and end of chapter Nine photograph of young female pilot Photography by: Sharon Porter/Model: Cassandra McMillan. Copyright April 3, 2017, Jan Porter.

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About Jan

Award-winning author and philosophical muse Jan Porter brings indigenous cultures, spiritual phenomena and unsung heroes to life in her notable collection of prize winning books.

A connoisseur of literary fiction with a strong female lead and universal self-help books, Jan not only seeks to move and entertain with her humorous and heartfelt novels, but also to advise her worldwide audience as they look to her for counsel on angels, spiritual fulfillment and life after abuse.

Born in rural Ontario, Canada, contemporary women's fiction author and self-help guru Jan grew up in the great outdoors, where she was captivated by the otherworldly allure of indigenous cultures, mysticism and tales of northern wilderness.

She discovered her destiny to become an author during her teenage years when she came across old copies of Voltaire's *Candide*, Margaret Caven's *I Heard the Owl Call My Name* and the works of William Shakespeare.

All masterpieces in their own right, the worn covers and tattered pages of these books, plays and novellas unearthed a passion for writing, and inspired Jan to transform her thoughts into words.

Handwritten scribbles became typewritten short stories, articles and poetry, but it was only after a long career in Human Services that Jan decided to shine the spotlight on her writing and bring her female protagonists to life.

After completing a Spiritualist / Metaphysical Minister's degree, she cocooned herself in a northern Ontario lakeside sanctuary, where she penned books with strong female heroines and self-counsel course materials that had long been in various stages of completion. Little did she know that one day her work would win various book awards!

With each new release, Jan continues to share the wisdom of unsung heroes and explore the human condition in literature. As a philosophical muse of human nature, quantum physics and the spirit world, Jan's popular fiction novels and self-help books are profound, moving, and inspiring, and often humorous and entertaining to boot.

Awards:

- Two-time winner of the Bookworks Book of the Week Award
- Reader's Favorite Award for 'Soul Skin, Woman, have you had enough?' and 'Angel Guides, love communication'

Proud member of:

- The Writer's Union of Canada
- The Mohawk College Alumni Association
- The Bancroft Spiritual Centre
- Founder of the Soul Works Gifting Foundation (ad hoc)

Published Books (formerly published with Moose Hide Books, Canada):

Literary fiction novels and novellas

- **NEW RELEASE:** *Maddy's Wings – brand new fiction book!*
- *Soul Skin, Woman, have you had enough?*
- *Peaceful Warrior Woman*
- *Izzy's Ghosts – in progress*
- *Barefoot Annie – in progress*

Self-counsel books

- Angel Guides, love communication
- Angel Guides, love communication – *workbook journal*
- Spiritual Biz, passion and fulfillment in a changing global community
- Soul Calling, your angel guided life purpose
- Sacred Space, body mind soul after sexual abuse
- Life After Abuse, a practical healing guide for survivors

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