

## Nine Minutes

*Not again!*

Joan struggled to her feet and edged out into the aisle to allow the boy beside her to leave his seat for what felt like the fiftieth time since they had departed from Halifax over two hours earlier. It seemed like every time she managed to become immersed in her book, he wanted to get out again. He was worse than a two-year-old! Even when he did stay in his seat for more than ten minutes, his body was in constant motion, making it impossible for her to relax. She didn't know if he was unconsciously moving in time to the music issuing through his headphones, or if his twitching was simply a matter of pent up teenage energy with no constructive means of release, but it was most annoying.

She supposed that the simple answer would have been to trade seats so that the young man could bound up and down out of his seat at will without having to disturb her, but she had taken a bad fall on some early winter ice seven years before, and ever since then her knee ached whenever she was confined to one space too long. She had deliberately booked her flight early and selected an aisle seat so that she could stretch out her left leg alongside the seat in front, and she wasn't willing to give up her small privilege for the sake of an ill-mannered, hyperactive teenager. Nor, with the flight full of Christmas travellers, was there any opportunity to move to a different seat, well away from her unintentional tormentor.

Despite her aggravation, Joan did feel somewhat sorry for the boy. Though probably no more than fourteen or fifteen, judging by his pudgy, ill-formed features and acne-spotted skin, he was already bigger than her seventeen-year-old grandson, Alexander, and could not possibly have been comfortable in the tiny space allotted to passengers in economy class.

Contorting herself around the chair back that had reclined well into her space, she dropped into her seat with a sigh of relief. The young woman across the aisle, who had been kept busy throughout the flight entertaining her small daughter, exchanged sympathetic smiles with Joan. When they had first boarded the plane, the older woman had groaned inwardly at the sight of the child, fearing that she would raise a ruckus throughout the flight, but the little girl had proven to be a remarkably good traveller, content to colour, do puzzles, and listen to her mother read her stories. The two women had exchanged a few words when Joan returned a runaway crayon, and Joan learned that the little girl's name was Jamie, she had just turned four, and they were returning from a visit with Jamie's grandmother in Halifax.

Smiling wryly at the irony of the four-year-old being a far better traveller than her own seat companion, Joan retrieved her book from the seat pocket where she had tucked it during his most recent exit. Crossing her fingers, she sent up a quick prayer that the boy would take a long walk this time. Maybe if she were lucky, he wouldn't return until the pre-landing announcements were made. A glance at the third occupant of their row showed that the middle-aged man was still sound asleep, as he had been almost from the moment of take-off, his head resting against the window. She shook her head in wry amazement. He reminded her of her ex-husband, Peter, who could have slept through a tornado, and most certainly *did* sleep through all the two a.m. feedings when their children were babies.

Thoughts of Peter and their family turned her mind to their daughter, Lydia, whom she was en route to visit for two weeks. Since her divorce, Joan spent every second Christmas with her eldest child and her family, but even years later, a subtext of bitterness suffused their reunions. Of her three children, Lydia had had the least success in dealing with her parents' break-up, irrationally blaming her mother despite the fact that Peter

was the one who ended the twenty-nine year marriage. Samuel and Kristen had adopted more of their mother's attitude: that after almost three decades of serial infidelities, it was well past time for a clean, final break.

Shaking her head to clear it of that melancholy track, her book lying forgotten in her lap, Joan turned her thoughts instead to the previous night. She had been packing her small suitcase as Corrie watched from her perch on their bed...

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"Now before you go over to Danny's on Christmas Eve, don't forget to check and make sure that Merlin has lots of food."

"C'mon, Joanie, I haven't forgotten to feed that flea-bitten fur ball in six years."

Joan paused in selecting underwear to cast a caustic glance at her partner. "And don't think that Merlin has forgotten what happened that Christmas, either. I swear, the day after Halloween that cat starts worrying about me leaving him alone with you."

"Geez, you make one little mistake and you're branded for life. Besides, it's not like I didn't set out food for him."

"And how exactly was he going to get to it with him being locked away in the basement?"

Corrie had the grace to look momentarily sheepish. "Well, you have to admit, he certainly reduced the resident mouse population in those four days."

Joan tossed a pair of rolled up socks at her unrepentant partner, who batted them neatly into the open suitcase. "Just promise me..."

"I know, I know. I will. I'll make sure the fur ball is safe, well fed, and has the run of the place. I swear, his name should be right beside ours on the deed to the house. God knows he rules the roost here!"

Joan wasn't misled by her partner's good-natured grumbling. Corrie was the one who had found the abandoned, near-feral kitten by the docks and brought it home nine years earlier. She knew that Corrie's gruff, forthright manner often intimidated strangers, but those who knew her well weren't fooled in the least. The devotion of her family, the power of the ocean, an intimate moment between lovers — all these could move her soft-hearted partner to tears.

Decades at sea fishing with her brothers had left their mark on Corrie. Fiercely weathered skin, raw-boned features, and piercing blue eyes disguised the soul of a truly gentle woman, one who had treated her with nothing but love, kindness and endless consideration from the time they had met over twelve years before.

She had never encountered a human being with more rock-solid integrity. Corrie's brothers would have laid down their lives for her in a heartbeat, and her unstinting love and loyalty made her a favourite of her extended family of nephews, nieces, and cousins. Joan considered herself unbelievably lucky to be the one spending her life with the woman of the sea.

"Hey, darlin'. You're staring."

The gentle remonstrance jerked Joan out of her thoughts.

"Have I ever told you how very, very glad I am that pin stuck in Nova Scotia?"

Corrie smiled understandingly. "Me too, love. I think it was meant to be, eh?"

"Absolutely." As Joan resumed her packing, she smiled at the memory of how they had met.

At the time Peter dumped her, she was working as an office manager for a pugnacious young lawyer, Aaron Laughlin. Though he had only been in practice for eighteen months, she retained him in the divorce. It was a nasty fight. Despite the fact that she had originally worked to put him through university as he studied for his MBA, Peter tried to hide substantial assets and deny his long-suffering wife an equal share of the marital property. Gleefully, Joan remembered what the outcome of his perfidy had been.

Her ex-husband gloated openly that his high-priced lawyer would chew up Joan's neophyte in court. What he didn't count on was the ferociously tenacious nature of the young man, who regarded Joan as a second mother and was determined to see that she got her due.

She got more than her due, and it still amused her to remember Peter's face when the judge rendered his decision, allotting her the family home, half the investments, two of her ex's beloved BMWs — one of which she used to compensate Aaron for his hard work — and a healthy stake in her ex-husband's eventual retirement package. She later sold that back to Peter, not wishing to maintain any long-term connection with him other than what was absolutely necessary through their children.

By the time the legal battle was over, however, her life in Toronto had lost much of its appeal. Her son Samuel was working as a teacher in Yellowknife, and her youngest daughter, Kristen, had a rising career in broadcast journalism in Vancouver. Lydia, who had sided with her father despite his long string of adulteries, punished her mother for the divorce by rationing the time Joan got to spend with her beloved grandchildren. It was Aaron who one day gently suggested that she take a long vacation and think about what she wanted to do with the rest of her life. When she couldn't decide where to go, he playfully suggested sticking a pin in a map and letting the Fates guide her.

Initially Joan dismissed the fanciful idea, but eventually the romance of it all overcame her innate pragmatism and she allowed Aaron to present her with a worn map of Canada and a straight pin. She closed her eyes, and heard a rustle as he turned the map around and around so she had no idea which way was which. Then he told her to choose, and without opening her eyes, she stuck her pin just off the coast of Nova Scotia. Giggling like a pair of school children, they made plans for her to go on a lengthy driving tour throughout the Maritimes, and within a week, she was on the road heading east along the Trans-Canada highway.

Much to her amazement, Aaron's prescription proved sound, and as the weeks passed while she explored from Newfoundland to Cape Breton to Prince Edward Island, she rediscovered a sense of peace that had eluded her for years. The tourist season was long since over by the time she actually made it to the east coast of Nova Scotia, and she had her pick of charming bed and breakfasts wherever she went. Curiously, her journey had eventually ended not far from where the pin had stuck in the map.

She stopped opposite Peggy's Cove and across St. Margaret's Bay, in the village of West Dover, where she took a room in a lovely seaside B&B run by a friendly, garrulous couple named Sarah and Tim McDonald. She didn't plan to spend more than a day or two in the area, but swiftly became enchanted by the region. Walking long stretches of rough beach, she laughed at the noisy seagulls swooping overhead and scurrying out of her way, and allowed herself to be mesmerized by the choppy waves driven shoreward by the late fall winds.

On the second day of her stay, Joan wandered down to watch the small fishing boats return with their daily catch, and with that seemingly mundane act, her life began a momentous change. Many months later, she would look back and laugh as she remembered Aaron's urgings to let Fate guide her. It certainly did seem as if a benevolent Fate had stepped in.

While she watched the small boats dock and the crewmen unload the day's catch, one boat in particular caught her attention. The 32-foot Cape Islander was weathered and drab, no bigger or smaller than its sisters along the quay. Squinting, Joan could make out the name, *Ermaline*, in stark black letters on the stern. The three-man crew worked in fluid concert as they swung the fishy cargo up out of the hold and onto the dock. It was only when the shortest crewman began smoothly beheading the fish with a strong, even stroke that Joan realized she was watching a woman.

Oddly pleased to see a woman working such a challenging job in apparent equality with her male crewmates, Joan continued to watch the stranger until the three finished for the day and departed. She returned the next day and the next, each time edging closer as she awaited the arrival of the *Ermaline*. Sarah McDonald provided her with some details about the boat, and she now knew that the woman's name was

Corrie Kennedy, and that she and her brothers, Danny and Nick, had fished off the *Ermaline* with their father since they were children.

Joan had no idea why she found the female fisherman so fascinating, but she couldn't deny that she did. She told herself that it was simply a case of being intrigued by the unconventionality of the woman's profession, but when Corrie passed by with her brothers, Joan hungrily searched the woman's face. When she tried to analyze her unusual inquisitiveness, she told herself that she was merely curious about what would impel a woman to take up such a hard and demanding life — that maybe the answer to that question would serve as a guide to finding her own future. She guessed that Corrie was about her own age, in her mid fifties, but it was hard to tell for sure from the tanned, weatherworn skin. She knew that she liked the strong features, the greying hair that curled out from beneath her fisherman's cap, and the deep laugh lines around the keen blue eyes that glanced briefly over to Joan as the trio passed.

On the fourth day, Corrie stepped away from her brothers as they passed Joan's bench, and without a word sat down beside the startled woman. As both of them stared out over the spume rocking against the quay, neither woman spoke for a long moment.

"Ever been out on a trawler?"

"No. I've only ever gone on a cruise ship."

"Wanna go?"

"I... Yes, I think I'd like that."

"Be here tomorrow at four thirty. We won't wait for you if you're late." Corrie stood and looked down at Joan, frowning slightly. "Got any warmer clothes than those?"

"I'll find some."

"Okay. See you in the morning."

And so their relationship had begun. Joan found out later that Corrie had quizzed Sarah about the city woman who was staying with her, and the B&B proprietor had cheerfully filled her in on all that she had gleaned from her guest. Joan never stopped to ponder the strangeness of the whole situation. Right from the first moment she set foot on the *Ermaline* in the pre-dawn hours and was greeted with gruff warmth from all three of the Kennedy crew, she felt at home. She quickly discovered that Danny was the joker of the siblings, that Nick, the youngest, had a beautiful singing voice, and that Corrie was the most introspective. All three shared a deep love of the sea and family.

The weeks wore on and the crew prepared to switch to lobster fishing through the cold winter months, but still Joan lingered on — unable to pinpoint why she stayed, but helpless to leave. Sometimes she would accompany the crew, but more often she would meet them when they returned with their catch.

There were no clear delineations as the women moved from a tentative friendship along the path to becoming lovers. A fierce January storm one Friday night offered a convenient reason for Joan to stay overnight at Corrie's rather than brave the short distance back to the B&B. She never knew how she summoned the courage to leave the guestroom and walk down the hall to the master bedroom, but she found the door open and Corrie sitting up in bed, as if she had been waiting. Settling into Corrie's welcoming arms had been the most natural experience of her life, and by the morning Joan knew that safe harbour was where she wanted to spend her life. When the wind and snow finally settled the next day, Corrie suggested they pick up her belongings from the B&B and bring them home.

"And that was that," she said aloud, as though concluding a narrative.

"What'd you say, love?"

Joan smiled at her partner as she tucked the last sweater into the suitcase and zipped it closed. "I was just remembering the look on Sarah's face when we gathered my things and moved them in here."

"Aye, she looked like the cat who'd swallowed the canary, didn't she? Said she'd been wondering how long it was going to take us to come to our senses."

“Poor Tim. She never let him forget that he lost their bet.”

“Hah! That’s what he gets for saying I was too hard-headed to ever recognize what was right in front of me.” Corrie snorted. “Lot he knew!”

Joan laughed as she pushed her partner back on the bed, elbowing the suitcase out of the way until they were snuggled comfortably together. “They’ve been good friends.”

“Hmm, that they have.” As she caressed her partner’s face and tucked strands of silver hair behind Joan’s ear, Corrie seemed disinclined to discuss their old friends.

Blue eyes met hazel as each woman seemed intent on memorizing the other’s face. They would only be apart for two weeks, but ever since Corrie had left the uncertainties of the sea for a life on the land, the only time they were ever parted was every second Christmas. Joan had taken Corrie with her the first Christmas after they became a couple, but it had been such a disastrous trip, with Lydia thin-lipped and icy with rage, that they had cut their visit short. Incensed at her daughter’s behaviour, Joan would have foregone all trips back to Toronto, but Corrie wouldn’t allow that, insisting that she go visit her family at least every second year. They had settled into the routine of alternating Christmases, but it never got any easier for them to part in late December.

“I wish you could come with me.”

A deep sigh seconded Joan’s sentiment.

“It’s just not fair. I hate catering to my daughter’s prejudices—”

“Shhh, love. It’s enough that Samuel and Kristen accept me. Lydia is her father’s daughter, and she’ll never look at me as anything other than your roommate. She still thinks you ended up living here because of some burst of menopausal madness.”

“Don’t I know it! But I still say it stinks.”

“Now, honey, you know it’s worth it to get to see Alex and Tammy. They always look forward to having their grandma visit for the holidays.”

“Well, Alex does anyway.” Joan knew that whatever fiction Lydia had originally told her children about their grandmother’s life down east, Alex at least knew the truth from his many summertime visits to their home. He loved Corrie almost as much as he loved his grandmother, and nothing thrilled him more than going out on the trawler for a day’s fishing. Given Tammy’s cool reception the last few times she had phoned, Joan thought it probable that Alex had finally informed his sister of the real situation, and like the mother she so closely resembled, the fifteen-year-old had decided her grandmother’s living situation was a personal embarrassment. It was hard enough dealing with Lydia’s deliberate obtuseness on these biennial visits; she wasn’t looking forward to taking attitude from Tammy, too.

“Tammy’ll grow up one day, love. You know all teenagers are a pain in the whatzit anyway.”

“Alex wasn’t. He never gave us one minute of trouble when he came here.”

“Only because four years ago Graham threatened to tan his behind if he didn’t watch his tongue and treat us with respect.”

Joan’s eyes widened. Graham was Danny’s oldest son, and Alex’s longtime idol. The boy had been a frequent crewman under Graham’s command on the *Ermaline II* during his summer visits. She knew for a fact that if Graham said “jump”, Alex would only ask “how high?”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me this before?”

“Didn’t see the need. It was a matter between a captain and his crewman, and didn’t need to go any further.”

Joan knew there would be no more discussion of the issue. Corrie had deeply rooted beliefs about the sea and those who sailed her. She was according Alex the respect due a seafarer, and even though Joan burned with curiosity to know what prompted the laidback Graham to issue his threat, she knew the matter was closed. Instead, she wriggled a little closer and wrapped her arms more tightly around her partner’s lean

frame. Though Corrie hadn't been to sea on a regular basis for almost three years, Joan fancied she could still detect the clean, sharp smell of wind and brine in her lover's hair.

"I'll miss you."

Though they weren't meant to, Corrie's whispered words stung. Joan almost abandoned her plans to fly to Toronto right then and there, but practicality reared its impertinent head. Lydia and her family were expecting her. Danny and his wife Nancy would welcome Corrie for the holidays. And they simply didn't have so much spare cash that they could just abandon the expensive flight ticket. So, knowing that the next morning she would have to bid her partner goodbye, she set out to show her exactly how much she would miss her too, in a long, tender, exhaustive farewell.

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Lost in the sweet memory of their leave-taking, Joan sensed the return of her restless seatmate, even through closed eyes. Stifling a sigh, she undid her seatbelt and struggled out into the aisle again. The boy ducked his head in what might have been an apology for the inconvenience, or might just as easily have been a display of youthful self-centeredness.

Glancing at her watch before she slid back into her seat, Joan noticed with relief that the scheduled arrival into Pearson International was only twenty minutes away. She smiled as she pictured Alex's eager face. Though his driving scared her mightily, she was grateful that he had volunteered to pick her up at the airport. It would give them a chance to catch up on things privately. She loved her daughter and her granddaughter, but her grandson was the apple of her eye, and made even the brief separation from Corrie bearable. With that comforting thought, she finally opened her book again, determined to pass the remainder of the flight lost in its pages.

"Do you smell that?"

Surprised to hear her seatmate's voice, Joan turned to him. "Excuse me?"

"Do you smell that? Like something burning or something." The boy's nose wrinkled and twitched in emphasis.

Joan's olfactory senses had become less keen with age, but now she concentrated on sniffing the air, and immediately detected a pungent scent that seemed to be drifting back from the front of the Airbus 320. Murmurs arising from her fellow travellers indicated that they too were becoming aware that something was amiss. A flight attendant hurried down the aisle, and though he passed too quickly for her to see his face, Joan could clearly see the tense set of his shoulders.

Speaking as reassuringly as her sudden nervousness would allow, she murmured, "Perhaps someone was smoking in the washroom. I'm sure they'll handle the situation quickly, and..." she glanced at her watch again, "...it's not long before we'll be down on the ground anyway."

Belying her optimistic words, the acrid smell grew stronger, and within moments it was no longer possible to deny that there was smoke in the cabin. Surprisingly, there was no uproar from the passengers, only a fearful, deepening hum. Glancing across the aisle, Joan saw that the little girl was watching her mother intently, one tiny fist clenching a crayon as it rested on her mother's arm. The young woman, obviously trying to stay calm, quietly began to sing a song to the child.

Suddenly, thick, clammy fingers sought Joan's out, and she allowed the clearly frightened boy to grasp her hand. Patting his arm gently with her free hand, she was about to attempt to comfort him again when the plane gave a sudden lurch and dropped unknown metres before leveling off. Most worrisome of all, a forest of yellow masks abruptly fell from the overhead bins and dangled in front of them like ominous harbingers of doom.

There was a collective gasp from the passengers, and the four-year old began to cry. Joan reached for the oxygen mask, trying to remember all the pre-flight instructions she had routinely ignored. As she fumbled with it, she saw the young mother fit a mask on the sobbing child, and then hurriedly put on her own.

*“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your first officer speaking. We are experiencing some difficulties with air quality, but have been cleared for an emergency descent into Toronto. Please don your masks, bring your tables and seat backs to a full upright position, and obey all commands of the flight crew.”*

There was an eerie silence when the PA abruptly went silent, as the flight attendants swiftly worked their way down the aisle ensuring everyone had adjusted their masks correctly.

Joan fancied she could hear the engines straining, but realized it was only the thunder of her heartbeat mixing with the sound of the flowing oxygen and obscuring external noises. For a brief moment, she felt that she couldn't breathe as she gasped for air under the mask, but a reassuring hand fell on her shoulder.

“Just try to breathe normally, ma'am. That's it. Slow and regular.” The flight attendant reached across her to adjust the boy's mask, then moved quickly to the next row.

Joan glanced across the aisle, to where the young mother had her arms wrapped around her child, holding her as closely as she could without unfastening their seatbelts. In the window seat on the opposite side of Jamie, the businessman who had been working on his laptop throughout the flight was now sitting rigidly upright, fingers digging deeply into the arms of his seat. In her row, the man next to the window, having awoken into a nightmare, looked dazed and confused. The boy was clearly terrified. His pudgy face was so pale that she feared he might pass out, and tears flowed down the sides of his mask.

She took his hand and cupped it between hers, resting their entwined fingers on the abandoned book in her lap. His watery eyes conveyed his gratitude. They looked at each other for a long moment, their fear creating a common ground that bridged the distance of age, gender, and experience, before the boy's eyes closed. Joan wondered what he was thinking — whether the childhood instinct to close your eyes to make the monsters go away had reasserted itself — then, still holding the teenager's hand, she found refuge in her own thoughts.

*Corrie. Oh God, darling, I'm so sorry. I love you. Remember that always.*

She wished she had a cell phone. She had always regarded them as an annoying feature of modern life, but now she longed for one last chance to tell her lover how she felt. The smoke had thickened, and her eyes began to water almost as much as the boy's. She tried to control her breathing as she had been instructed, but dread made it difficult.

Leaning forward as far as she was able, she still couldn't reach her purse. Frustrated, she hooked her toe in the strap and dragged it out from under the seat in front of her. Letting go of the boy's hand, she grabbed out her wallet and a pen. Tearing off the title page of her book, she rapidly composed a note.

*My dearest Corrie,*

*If we don't make it, please know that my last thoughts were of you. I love you with all my heart, darling. I so wanted to grow old with you. Thank you for these last twelve years. They have been the best of my life.*

*I'll see you again.*

*Forever love,*

*Your Joan*

Folding the note into quarters, she stuffed it inside her wallet. She was aware that the chances that the note would survive any impact were slim, but she had to try. The urge to reach out to Corrie one last time was overwhelming. She tried to decide which pocket would offer the best hope of retaining the wallet, then finally pushed it deep in her front pocket, grateful that she had opted for a pantsuit instead of a skirt that

morning. Realistically, if the aircraft crashed, her wallet would most likely be burned up or lost in the wreckage, but she was going to take the chance, no matter how improbable.

The aircraft bucked and dropped again, knocking her book to the floor, and she heard a moan from the boy. She wrapped her arm through his, and he clung to her like a frightened child. The terror in the cabin was almost as thick as the smoke. She spared a thought for the mother and child across the aisle, and for the many families that would lose loved ones if Flight 617 never made it to Toronto. With not an empty seat to be found, there were almost a hundred and fifty people on the aircraft. But she didn't have time to mourn for all those families. She could only think of her own.

*Corrie.*

She grieved that it would end this way. Her lover had never fully recovered from the events of five years before, when the *Ermaline*, with Corrie, Nick, Danny and Graham aboard, had been among the flotilla of small boats that had put to sea with hopes of rescuing survivors of Swiss Air 111. The jumbo jet had crashed into the Atlantic off Peggy's Cove. The *Ermaline* and her sister trawlers reached the debris field swiftly, but it had been instantly apparent that there would be no survivors found; all 229 people aboard had been killed. Still, the crews worked all night recovering remains and debris as they were joined by Naval, Coast Guard, and RCMP auxiliary boats.

When the *Ermaline* and the other small boats straggled back to dock the next day, Joan was waiting, along with other families. There was little talking as tired fishermen with bleak expressions tied up their boats. Corrie had hugged Joan fiercely and whispered, "Not a damned thing we could do for those poor souls."

She never spoke about what they had seen, but for weeks afterward, the sea washed up the evidence of that night along their coast: a doll bobbing in the water, a passport wedged between rocks, a coat wrapped around a piling...and worst of all, the grim human remains that haunted the residents of St Margaret's Bay. As so many did, Joan and Corrie opened their hearts and homes to the relatives who flocked to the area, and found their own solace in helping and comforting where they could.

The rich fishing grounds were closed as an eighty mile exclusion zone was imposed while recovery efforts went on, and Corrie took a job driving snow plow for the first winter. When the *Ermaline* did set sail again, months later, Joan could tell that Corrie's heart really wasn't in it, and when they received their compensation cheques from Swiss Air two years after the disaster, Corrie left the sea for good. She started a small engine repair shop out of their garage, and though Joan occasionally caught her staring wistfully out to sea, Corrie rarely ever set foot on the new *Ermaline II*.

Joan knew that when she was gone, Corrie wouldn't be left alone. Her family — their family — would rally around her with the fierce loyalty they had always shown the two. Rather than leave his sister alone with unbearable thoughts, Danny would keep her talking until dawn night after night. Nick, quieter but no less devoted, would probably coax her out on the *Ermaline II*, believing that the sea and hard work had the power to heal. Friends would inundate her with enough food to last six months, and show consummate sympathy in honouring the bond that had been broken. But it wouldn't be enough, and that made Joan's heart ache, even as fear made her limbs tremble.

A tiny voice reminded her that Corrie had been a most unexpected gift in her life, and she should be glad to have had their twelve years together, but she didn't care. Greedy or not, ungrateful or not, she wanted more, so much more. She wanted to wake beside her partner every morning for at least another couple of decades. She wanted to linger with Corrie's clan when they gathered around their tables on long winter nights to tell tall tales, drink homemade wine, and sing the old songs. She wanted to laugh with Samuel and Kristen, and see their children marry and have families of their own. She wanted to see time heal the breach between her and Lydia. She wanted to see who her favourite grandson eventually fell in love with, and revel in the joy of watching Corrie cradle Alex's first born. She wanted so many things, and she was deeply angry to be robbed of her dreams.

*“Ladies and gentlemen. We’ve been cleared into Toronto and will be on the tarmac in just a few minutes. Those who are able, lean forward now and rest your head on crossed arms or brace yourself against the seat in front of you. When the plane has come to a complete stop, the emergency slides will deploy from the forward, aft and wing exits. Leave all personal belongings behind and proceed quickly but in an orderly fashion to the nearest exit. I repeat, leave all personal belongings behind! Do not attempt to carry anything with you. Ladies wearing high heels should remove them and leave them behind. When exiting, jump onto the slide, and when you reach the bottom, step quickly away and go directly to the buses that will be awaiting you. Flight attendants, prepare for emergency landing.”*

Heeding the announcement, Joan gave the boy one more quick, reassuring squeeze of the hand, and then leaned forward. She concentrated on her breathing and tried to recall which exit was the closest. As far as she could remember, she was about halfway between the rear and wing exits, so she decided to simply go with the flow of the crowd. Eyeing her shoes, she decided that the inch wide heel couldn’t be considered high by any stretch of imagination, but thoughts of her unreliable left leg haunted her. What if she fell? What if she was crushed under the mass of a panicked crowd? What if she couldn’t make it off in time?

*Stop it! If this plane touches down safely, you **are** going to get off! There’s no alternative. You do what you have to do, even if you have to hop down the aisle to the exit. Corrie’s waiting for you to come home!*

Then, braced by her self-admonition, but wishing fervently that she had pinpointed the nearest exit as soon as she had boarded the plane, Joan waited. Her mind raced wildly, unable to settle as thoughts of her loved ones tumbled over and over in her head. For the first time, she was almost grateful for Lydia’s intransigence, because it had kept Corrie off this flight. She could only imagine the helplessness that the young mother across the aisle must feel. There was nothing she could do to affect the outcome; the fate of her little daughter was completely out of her hands. And no matter how much she loved that tiny girl and how fiercely she would have fought to protect her, nothing she could do would save her if the plane crashed. Joan found even the thought of the mother’s anguish unbearable, and though a small part of her wished that Corrie was there to offer the steadfast comfort of her strength, a larger part was glad that her lover was safely in her garage workshop.

Joan could hear the hoarse breathing of the boy beside her and feel his husky leg jerking nervously against hers. She hoped that he wouldn’t panic and trample over her if they did make it safely to the ground. And as the plane descended sharply, she said a small, but fervent prayer:

*If I can’t be around, You look after her, okay? And let her know how much I love her, and that I’ll be waiting for her. I’m depending on You...*

The plane touched down with a violent bump, but Joan was simply grateful to hear the roar of the brakes as the aircraft was rapidly brought to a halt. People instantly surged to their feet, ripping off masks and crowding into the aisles.

“For Christ’s sake, people, calm down! We’ll all get out, but you have to stay calm!”

Joan had no idea who shouted the words, but they served to quiet the distraught passengers long enough for the exits to be thrown open and the chutes deployed. She held back, bracing her arms on the seats to allow the young mother with her daughter now clutched tightly in her arms to go ahead, even as she could feel the boy behind her urgently pushing her forward. Glancing back, she saw that despite the tears on his face, hope had displaced the terror in his eyes, and energized with a similar optimism, she wriggled out into the line followed instantly by the boy and the man in her row. Though she knew everyone was moving as swiftly as possible, it seemed to take forever before she reached the open door. And then, abruptly it was her turn.

Urged on by the flight attendants, Joan flung herself out onto the evacuation chute, bounced slightly, and barely had time to breathe before she was being pulled to her feet and hustled away. It was only as she reached one of the buses that she turned back to survey the scene left behind. The last of the passengers were hurtling down the chutes, and the airplane was surrounded by emergency personnel and so many vehicles with

flashing lights that it looked absurdly theatrical. It was controlled chaos, and she half expected an explosion any moment — for the airplane to go up in a fireball in a “*Die Hard*” sort of way.

Suddenly strong arms wrapped around her.

“We made it!” The boy’s voice cracked, but that didn’t disguise his utter relief and exhilaration.

Not sure if her ribs would withstand the bear hug, Joan nevertheless smiled. “Yes, we did. We sure did.”

He pulled back, then, glancing back at the plane, he asked mournfully, “D’ya think they’ll let us get our stuff back? My mom just gave me that MP3 for Christmas, and she’s going to kill me if I come back from dad’s without it.”

“I’m sure they’ll eventually let us reclaim our possessions, but I suspect your mother will be thrilled just to see you alive and well.”

Rapidly regaining his equilibrium now that his feet were on solid ground, the boy gave Joan a cocky grin. “That was a close one, wasn’t it?”

Before Joan could answer, an airline representative urged the two of them to board the bus, but she thought about the boy’s remark as they drove towards the terminal. Had it been a close one? Or had it been something fairly innocuous that had been magnified by the fact that they were trapped inside a metal tube, hurtling through the air with no place to escape to? She assumed she would eventually find out, but right now, she was simply boneless with relief and eager to meet up with Alex. Glancing at her watch, she was shocked to see that only nine minutes had passed since the emergency had begun.

*No way!* She tapped the face of the watch, incredulous that the interminable moments of terror had actually been so brief. Then, with a shaky laugh, she decided to simply accept it. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered but that she — that all of them — had gotten down safely.

Half an hour later, Joan found herself wishing peevisly that the airline personnel could be half as efficient as the flight crew. Just when she began to wonder if she was going to get to see Alex any time that day, and feeling thoroughly “processed”, the passengers were released to the arrivals area.

Joan had no problem spotting her tall, worried-looking grandson, and before she could say a word, he swept her up into her second bear hug of the afternoon. Over his shoulder, she smiled to see the boy who had been her companion-in-terror fall into the arms of a large, burly man who was weeping openly, and Jamie and her mother wrapped up in the arms of a young man who couldn’t stop kissing them both. Even the sleeping man who had reminded her of Peter, and who had retained his dazed and bewildered look throughout their processing by the airline personnel, was walking away arm-in-arm with a middle-aged woman who appeared to be talking his ear off.

“Jesus, Grandma, are you okay? They weren’t telling us a goddamn thing out here, but I went upstairs and I could see all the lights and fire trucks out on the runway.”

“I’m fine, sweetie.” Joan allowed herself to enjoy the comfort of her grandson’s embrace for a long moment, and then she gently pulled away. “Alex, do you have your cell phone with you?”

Aware of his grandmother’s longstanding dislike of cell phones, Alex blinked in surprise. “Uh, yeah, of course.”

“May I borrow it, please?”

He fumbled in his jacket pocket and pulled out the phone. She took it and looked at it curiously, trying to decipher how to use it. Alex grinned and flipped it open. “Where do you want to call, Grandma?”

She gave him the number and he cheerfully punched it into the keypad before handing over the phone.

A dearly familiar voice answered. “Kennedy Small Engines. Corrie speaking.”

“Hey, love.”

“Joanie! So, how was the flight, darling?”

Joan started to laugh and couldn’t stop. It wasn’t until a combination of Alex’s worried looks and Corrie’s frantic queries jolted her back to sobriety that she was able to answer.

“Oh, Corrie, you have no idea! Listen, I’ll tell you all about it later, but right now I want you to do something for me.”

Her voice still worried, Corrie answered, “Of course. What is it?”

“Call the airline and book the next flight to Toronto. I will not spend another Christmas without you by my side!”

Dead silence greeted her words for a long moment. “Um, honey? That’s not going to wash with Lydia. You know that.”

“I don’t care. I want...I need you here.”

“Sweetheart, I’m not even sure I can get a seat now. They’ve probably been booked up for weeks now.”

“Then I’m catching a train or a bus or whatever will get me home to you as soon as possible.”

“Joanie, what the hell happened? You were fine when you left this morning. What’s going on?”

“What’s going on is that I was reminded — in rather dramatic fashion — that you are my love and my life, and I refuse to pander to my daughter’s ridiculous disapproval any longer. She’ll always be welcome in our home, but until you’re welcome in *her* home, I won’t be spending any more Christmases out here.” A thought occurred to her. “Honey, let me call you back in a bit. I think I might have a way home.”

She handed the phone to her startled grandson and waylaid a passing airline representative. Judging by the solicitous, albeit time consuming, way the passengers of 617 had been treated once they were on the ground, she was quite certain the airline would bend over backwards to get her a flight home. She was right. The rep led her and Alex to a customer service desk, and within moments they were working to find her passage back to Halifax.

“Grandma, you want to get back on one of those things right away? Don’t you want to spend Christmas with us? I mean, I know Mom can be a pain sometimes, but I was really looking forward to it, you know?”

Joan turned to her troubled grandson, fully aware of the disappointment on his face. Her face softened and she raised a hand up to his face. “My dear boy, I was looking forward to spending the holidays with you, too, but you heard what I told Corrie, right?”

He nodded miserably.

“Ma’am, here’s your ticket and boarding pass. Your flight leaves in two hours. Please be at your departure gate by two thirty.”

Joan accepted the papers, then clarified, “My luggage will be transferred from 617 to the return flight?”

“Yes, ma’am. We’ll take care of everything.”

“Thank you.” Tucking her arm through Alex’s, she guided them away. “Walk with me for a bit, dear.” They walked down the hall until they came to a waiting area with very few people in it. She sat and patted the chair next to her. He dropped into his seat and then leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees and not meeting her eyes.

Joan rubbed his back, as she had done so many years ago when he was an infant. “I’m very sorry to disappoint you, sweetie. That was never my intention.”

“Then why? Why do you have to go home? I know you’re upset about the flight and all, but—”

“It’s really not the flight, Alex. Here, sit up and look at me, okay?”

Sullenly, he obeyed. She sighed. The last thing she wanted was to upset her favourite grandchild, but he was old enough now to understand.

“When your mother was born, I was sure I could never love any human being as much as I loved that tiny, helpless baby. She was my firstborn, and I adored her without reservation.” She chuckled as Alex made a face. “I know, it’s hard to picture your mom at that age, but she was a gorgeous child. And when Samuel and Kristen came along, I loved them every bit as much. When Lydia grew up, she was pretty headstrong, and that was all right. If I’d raised her to be strong and independent, then I’d done my job. What I didn’t expect her to be, though, was so terribly close-minded.”

“Grandpa—”

“I know. She always was Peter’s little girl, and so I made allowances. For a dozen years now I’ve allowed your mother to dictate the way I spend my Christmases. Maybe it was guilt over how badly the divorce hurt her, or maybe I was simply taking the easy way out. Certainly I’ve always enjoyed seeing you and your sister.”

“And Dad.”

“And your father,” Joan agreed, thinking of her quiet, malleable son-in-law. Looking her grandson straight in the eye, she told him, “I’ll always love your mother, dear, and I hope in time she’ll come to accept Corrie’s place in my life, but I’m not going to accommodate her anger, or her hurt, or her prejudices any longer. It was wrong of me to do so for all these years, Alex. I think now that I should’ve forced the issue right from the beginning, and we’d all have been better off for it, but it’s better late than never. Corrie is my partner, and my family too. You of all people know that. I will no longer allow your mother’s feelings to override that fact.”

“But what if we never get to spend Christmas together again? Mom’s pretty stubborn, you know.”

“Well, she comes by that honestly.”

Alex couldn’t suppress a tiny grin. “Yeah, she does that.”

“Sweetie, if your mother cuts us off, then I’ll be very sad, but I’m not going to change my mind. I think with time, once she sees that I’m not going to capitulate, she’ll learn to compromise. If she doesn’t... Well, you and your sister will always be welcome in West Dover, you know that, right?”

“I know that, Grandma. And I’ll talk to Mom. She’s never let me talk about you guys before, but I’ll tell her how cool Corrie is, and how happy the two of you are together. I’ll tell her about fishing with Graham, and how much fun she’s missing by snubbing Uncle Danny. I’ll keep talking until she has no choice but to listen.”

“I guess that stubborn streak got passed down to the next generation too, eh?”

“Damn right! Oops, sorry, Grandma.”

“Sweetie, you’ve never heard Corrie when one of her nets foul.”

“No, but I’ve heard Graham. And didn’t Mom tan my hide the first summer I came home talking like him!”

Their shared laughter lightened the mood, and they grinned at each other.

“So, we’re all right then?”

“Always, Grandma. And tell Graham to save me a berth for next summer.”

“Tell him yourself, sweetie. He’s your captain.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Now, let me borrow that infernal contraption of yours again, please.”

Alex flipped open his phone, hit the redial with a knowing grin, and handed it over.

“Kennedy Small Engines.”

“Hi, love. Can you pick me up in Halifax at about six thirty? I’m coming home for Christmas...”