



**From: Song of the Lilacs**

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## **Chapter 1**

It was a large crowd, despite the rain. A downpour passed and for a moment the sky lightened. Don't like the weather? Then wait five minutes, as Papa would say. His voice surrounded her as the aroma of pipe smoke and the wood stove where he spent hours rocking and puffing, dispensing wisdom and adages like gum balls from the corner store penny machine. She drank in his memories with the freshness of the lawns, the lushness of the trees along their borders and the scent of new summer wildflowers carried on the wind. Such beauty here, so peaceful for a resting place, this was a good choice. As for the weather, well, at least Jack got his way with something today, and she loved him all the more for it.

The showers slicked the lawns and churned the open grave to a molten gash, yet hundreds of feet persevered for a stable spot in the mire. Customers from the coffee shop huddled next to its managers and the owner, sharing umbrellas and subdued remember whens. There were the six Fraser girls - Rose had taught in school and made the bridesmaid dresses for their weddings. Folks from church, friends from the neighbourhood, associates of Jack's. Their dry cleaner. The house painter that had worked for them a decade ago. Fellow teachers, her clients from her sewing shop, the guys from the garage who fixed their car and for the love of God, was that Ralph Godfrey? Rose hadn't seen the former mayor of Lawrence Bay in more than 20 years, when they moved to New Argyle for the fresh start it turned out they both needed, a new life that brought many of these faces here today, for him and for her. And beside them, those who were in her life as long as she was. Margie, her best friend since high school, with her husband, four boys and their three little ones. Her family: Annie, June and Randy, the older boys and their children, the next generation of Malones. The Brandugans, Jack's people, were gathered in a semicircle, in their midst young Jack, Dan to his left, and Charlotte curled into her husband away from the crowd with Jack in the centre. Just like his mother's funeral, she observed thankfully, scanning the quilt of faces, warmth, and energies, assembled by her humble life, stitched together by love, waiting to wrap Jack in comfort and memories. Unlike when he laid his mother to rest, however, he stood in their midst, but completely alone. A man leaves his mother and is joined with his wife. But what of the man when the wife leaves? To whom is he joined then?

The priest wiped rainwater from his book and cleared his throat, struggling to be heard above the rustling bonnets and stifled coughs. *For the love of God, they should be out of this weather, dear souls standing out on a day like this.* She longed to go home and put the kettle on, share with all of them the warmth of her kitchen and good conversation. But could she? It was all so new to her, the being present without being seen, wind a part of her rather than upon her. No one seemed to know she was there, even Jack, who never failed to look up when she entered the room. He stood motionless, staring at the open grave. Perhaps her newfound freedom was an illusion, and she really didn't exist after all.

She felt the trees bowing to the wind. They existed, as did her ability to predict the weather, one of many things learned at Papa's knee. Many a day she sat at her kitchen table and guessed correctly whether Jack should book a tee time or take his umbrella, all from watching the five fir trees in her front yard. A fine Mother's Day present, she had joked to herself when she first laid eyes on them, scrawny little sprigs drooping sadly in their buckets. But Jack was as determined

as she was skeptical, and with Little Jack waving his new plastic shovel, Dan slumping along in resignation and Charlotte protesting the unfairness of child labour, he had the trees planted and watered before she could object. For months, to humour him, she sprinkled their roots with water, clipped dying twigs from their branches, and offered silent pleas for them to grow not for her sake, but for his. *Smarten up, boys, don't want to disappoint Jack, now.* Then as if overnight, the trees thickened and sprouted until they towered over her. Just like her children, reaching for doorknobs one day, their diplomas the next. But unlike her trees, rooted and gyrating in the loamy soil of her front yard, her children now fidgeted in the grasp of their collars, feet squishing in the sod, their trunks fixed toward the burnished box in front of them.

Papa loved the rain. *Farmer's nectar*, he'd wink, stepping out of his sodden boots after helping neighbours caught by the Little River overflowing its banks. Jack, however, detested the rain, growled of floods and flu and ruined golfing whenever the sky let loose its moisture. As for Rose, she came to believe it didn't matter whether it rained, snowed, or was dazzling bright – all gave and took, all had a purpose. It was her job to make the best of it.

And today, he had done the same thing. It was the rain that got Rose the eulogy Jack wanted for her, that spoke of her to the world the way he couldn't - but wanted to - in her life. As always, Jack set the stage and secured someone else for the spotlight, in this case her baby brother Duncan, now grown and wise, who channeled his grief in description and demeanour that made her both embarrassed and proud. A eulogy that couldn't be delivered as part of the Catholic mass, Jack had been told, but could be added at the end if the weather was too wet to do it graveside.

She knew today's uncertainty would have weighed on him. His every encounter was planned to the last detail: what he would wear, when he would arrive, where he would sit, what he would say, determined to the last thread and syllable. *Everything needs a plan*, he would remind her and she would agree, as far as she could. How could one plan, though, for a day that called for a visit rather than chores, a phone call with sisters rather than a meeting with doctors, a craving for meat loaf instead of baked chicken? Over the years Jack accepted her aversion to planning and left details of hearth and home to her memory and instinct. In turn, she supported his need for structure with ample supplies of paper, time, and patience. *Yes, we will leave Saturday morning, 8 a.m. How much time will I need for shopping? Two hours. Store may be crowded? Okay, then, two and a half. Well, then, yes, two hours is fine if the rain hits early and we have to allow for slower traffic on the road.* Tedious as they were, she loved these conversations just the same. He was in his element then, as if committing details to paper guaranteed their outcome. But for all of his analysis and anticipation, he did not plan for today. Her illness, her death, her grave, all of it beyond his imagination and out of his control, except for the eulogy. He had that, even though the rain that enabled it was dripping from his umbrella to soak his shoulder and shirt beneath. By habit she reached to turn up his collar and was surprised. Where once her head tucked under Jack's arm, she was now neither short or tall. She just was. But as easily as she could feel his warmth through his sodden overcoat she could not touch or grasp his collar, his shoulder, or even his thoughts. He could feel nothing from anything or anyone, as he did in times of intense darkness but for the first time since they met, he could feel nothing from her, either. Her newfound freedom vanished in a choking awareness of damp skin she could not soothe, and a fragile heart she could no longer protect.

She had watched him get ready this morning, facing the tidy array of outfits in their closet as a soldier squares off in battle. Fingers poised atop the shirts, he turned toward the bathroom as he always did to ask her opinion until his eyes lowered, then closed against the solitude. *This one, Jack. The collar fits you best.* To Rose's surprise he slid her choice from its hanger, paused briefly, and found the path she willed him to see, his ritual for meeting the world. Left arm in first, then right, buttoned carefully from top to bottom. Collar raised, tie encircled, *the rabbit goes around the hole, then inside ...* tying knots was never her strength, especially as her arthritis progressed, but Jack's execution of a Windsor knot was flawless. Unlike the boys who kept their ties knotted and slid them on and off as a lasso, Jack always unknotted his completely and had her press them flat for

careful storage next to the shirts. Starting from scratch was his forte. She prayed he would remember that.

He straightened his tie, crouching slightly in the mirror. It was leveled to her height, not his, even though she insisted he raise it up to keep from kinking his back. *You need to look good for your clients. I only need to look good for the mailman, and he loves me just the way I am*, she had teased, but he had insisted the mirror was hers, not his. She watched as he smoothed a palm over each temple, every silver hair perfectly aligned, and reached in the drawer for a glitter of gold. If Rose could have gasped, she would have.

*His wedding ring.*

He was allergic to gold, he had told her, and in their 25 years together had worn the ring only three times. Their wedding day. His father's funeral. Their daughter's wedding day. He slipped the jeweled band over his left ring finger, flexing his hand against the sensation, then reached back into the drawer for another band of gold. An expandable wristband, with an ornate face frozen in time. 2:20. The time he agreed to their first non-date, June 21, 1975. He stared at the numbers, traced the outline of its face, then laid it back in the drawer. 2:20. The time her human heart beat for the last time, four days ago, June 21, 2001. This would be a day of firsts: going anywhere without that watch, and burying a loved one without his wife by his side.

She tried again to embrace him, to protect him from the rain on his skin and the storm within, envisioning her arm around his waist, palm flat against his spine, her head resting in its familiar spot against his chest. She felt his muscles knot as the showers begin anew, coating the top of her casket and pouring over the burnished handles like tiny waterfalls. *It must have cost a fortune. Such a waste just to put my old bones in the ground.* He liked the eulogy, this was a tangible sign he could share a love that they could never describe or explain to anyone, even themselves. She could feel him tense as ashes smothered the top of her casket, his throat straining against the lump rising with each creak of the pulley lowering her body into the ground. *A week ago, he was told I would come home, we would wait for the surgery and I would be cured.* Now the casket was all he had left, all he had to show the world how much she meant to him, and in a few moments the groan of pulleys and quick-march of time would forever bury this one last connection between her world and his. She was gripped by a sudden chill – deeper than the pounding of the rain, more urgent than grief.

*A seed needs to crack its hull before it can bloom, lass.*

The wind howled with surprising fierceness and there tore through her an eruption like shattering glass, echoing with a thousand cries and swallowing Jack in a surge of greens and violets until the jumble was sucked like a giant tornado into a huge black hole in his chest, over his heart. He stood immobile as before, the crowd weaved slightly in the gale but kept eyes and ears tuned to the priest. Only she seemed to have felt the catastrophe within him, could see his heart shattered into a million beads of tears, churning inside him like boiled blood, frothing and viscous as it drained into darkness.

Papa was never wrong, but what she felt was not a crack but an explosion, like surf battering the causeway until its boulders tumbled askew. She had sat by her window the night of that storm, miles away from the harbour but aware something in the dark was changing, breaking, being forced into a plan not its choosing. The next morning, her hand in Papa's, they walked the beach and inspected the damage. She wondered how folks on the small island would get to town without their bridge. Papa had patted her shoulder and pointed to the boats moored at the dock. *The way Nature intended.* Rose had looked at the tiny causeway, now unfinished, an aching gap in its midst. *Some things are meant to be left*, he had said, and she thought of it no more.

Jack remained motionless, the polish of his shoes smeared by mud, her coffin now level with the ground and draped for burial. Throughout their marriage a glance, a touch, and a quiet acceptance of walls unyielding was all they needed to share. He protected her from her fears, and she from his. But now, she saw through the walls into a darkness that kept him safe, yes, but also

left a part of his soul stunted and starving, as a garden neglected by sun and a farmer's care. Their time together on Earth was done, but their love was just about to bloom, and now her glance, her touch, her very presence was unseen and unknown. The casket settled to the bottom of its grave with the groan of a drawbridge creaking shut. Her essence burned in frustration as rain beat its relentless rhythm on her casket, the cars, his umbrella, unheard by the man too consumed in grief to notice. Grief that was her doing. Grief that could only be undone if he opened himself to his life ahead.

The service ended, her two young men flanked their father as he stared at the dripping leaves, the ragged tree line, anything but the open grave until he was swallowed in hugs and handshakes, relieved for the moment by the diversion. She watched as one son, then the other, made their way to the line of cars and glimpsed a hint of purple peeking from a rain-laden bough. Borne upon the moistened breeze its fragrance wrapped her in the familiar and new, past and future.

Lilacs.

It was late in the season for lilacs, but here they were, unmistakable and undeterred by the calendar or the weather. Like her body in the grave below, completely unplanned.

*I'm here, Jack.*

He breathed in their scent and paused. He closed his eyes and inhaled again, slowly.

*That's right, Jack, I'm here.*

Then he scanned the crowd for a face, a gaze, a sign, but saw nothing. His head dropped, snapping the moment snapped like a string in the wind, and he was gone, stepping over puddles to the waiting car, mind blank of all but the duties that lay ahead, the shattered bits of his heart firmly locked behind the drawbridge, the key sinking with her casket.

Floating atop her grave, she lifted to the heavens the only power she seemed to have left. *How do I reach him?* She prayed. *How do I put his heart back together?*

Her answer appeared as a memory, the harbour of her childhood, fishing boats lining the wharf, an island in the harbour's centre, a finger of boulders jutting toward it but faltering partway there.

Jack's life, a link partially finished. As the memory took form so, too, did a bridge, completing the link not with boulders, but with words.

*If you're puzzled, lass, go back where you know. Find what you lost, see where to go.* Her father's voice again, burr of the Highlands carried on the musky smoke of his pipe.

Her thoughts swirled golden, the shiny pink of new life mingled with the burnished tint of memories.