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Forgiveness: for Whom?

"Oh, the old bones don't move like they used to," I told my best friend Louise, as we walked along the beach.

"Oh, dear. Is it your back again?" Louise asked, catching her long grey hair and whipping it into a ponytail.

"When is it not acting up?" I said, leaning on my cane, emphasizing my limp.

"You should swim at the 'Y' with me. It will help your back, dear. Maybe you should go back to that specialist. I do worry about you, being alone in that godforsaken, cold, drafty house."

"That doctor was a quack. All he wanted to do was operate. With no disc left he said he could solder the joints together. I didn't like the sound of that. I think he wanted to misdirect me. All he wanted was money," I said, looking out onto the ocean as whitecaps smashed the breakwater.

"I told you, fifty years ago, when you won the lottery and decided to buy that monstrosity, you had to fill it to the rafters with children and grandchildren. But you decided to stay single. Now, you are an old maid," Louise said, slowing to my pace.

"There was no man who met my expectations and I wasn't about to settle for anything less."

"There is no such thing as 100 percent perfect love. You have to make the effort. You have no social life. You rarely come for walks anymore. You need someone to love. A companion, sweetheart, would make me less anxious for you."

"I have you. You dote on your great-grandchildren, your grandchildren, your children and your husband, God rest his soul, was with you for over forty years. You were lucky."

"A marriage, like a friendship, is hard work. It's not luck. You and I were partners in that garden centre for thirty years and do you remember the fights and arguments; what we went through and yet we stayed together?"

"I remember little about..." I began.

"You don't remember? In May, our busiest month of the year, we had over a hundred employees, 50 greenhouses, a store, and mulch and soil bins. We worked a man's work all day and at night, you insisted on doing the bookkeeping. You would never let anyone

touch the accounts, not even at tax time. The pressure you were under. The times I fought with you to get help, but you insisted you trusted no one but yourself."

"Please, don't ramble on about it," I said, picking up an exquisite oyster shell. "Look, at this beautiful shell. You could make it into a necklace for one of the kids. You're so creative."

"If I didn't know you better, dear, I would think you are avoiding our conversation. Like always. However, if you insist on that, then, yes, give me the shell. I could shellac it and give it to Henri. He would love it. He's at that age," Louise said, taking the shell from me. "It's almost perfect. Just like our relationship," Louise continued, linking her arm through mine.

"Nothing is almost perfect," I said, as we reached the beach area.

We picked a spot surrounded with rocks noting the tide coming in, but I could go no further. Laying out our blankets, I collapsed on the sand and moaned a long sigh of relief. Digging through the basket, Louise laid an icepack onto my back then covered me up with a blanket.

Two old ladies, I thought. I was taller than Louise's medium height, but I looked my age with my blue hair and old lady gait. Louise looked ten years younger. She was always working on her body: exercising, eating the right foods, and getting the proper sleep. I never slept well, tended to isolate, had a nervous stomach and ate all the wrong foods—I only ate what I could microwave. Some nights I ate at Louise's. I didn't exercise unless Louise forced me come out of my shell and do these kinds of excursions.

"Shall we rest then eat?" Louise asked.

"Definitely. But don't let me sleep too long, or else I won't sleep tonight."

After utilizing Ombrelle Spray Lotion SPF 30, I took a pain killer, and within minutes we were asleep.

I began rehashing my nightmare. The one where I am convicted of a crime so heinous and spiteful, I am sentenced to death. The waves of shock overtook my body and I began to shake from head to toe. In my nightmare, Louise is screaming at the Judge saying I'm innocent, but in the—

"Lina, wake up! Damn you, wake up!"

Coming to consciousness, I realized Louisa was screaming at me.

"We slept too long. The tide has us cornered and the wind is driving the waves against us. We're pickled," Louise screamed.

There was no way out. We had managed to muddle ourselves in. For the time being we were safe, but if the winds continued in this storm like fashion, the tide would rise to staggering heights and we would be as good as dead.

All we could do was watch the water as it slowly rose. No one knew where we were. We clung to each other and shook with the knowledge that we would most likely die.

"You have always lived your life thinking of others and putting them before yourself. You were never a thoughtless person. You are so vibrant, so full of life, I have always admired you," I said tears in my eyes.

"Hey, let's not talk about good-byes yet. We have been through life together. I couldn't have asked for a better friend."

"I'm a fake, Louise. I am lower than a snake's belly. I deserve to die. I have cheated and committed an act so despicable, I could never be forgiven," I said.

The water lapped against my breasts and Louise remained quiet.

"I wanted so much out of life. There was a time when I thought I could do anything. Be anything. If I worked hard enough, fought hard enough, I could raise above this person that had such high expectations for the world. I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to be number one. Instead, I lied and cheated the only person who ever cared for me and loved me in spite of my flaws. That person is you. I love you, Louisa, with all my heart."

"And I love you too, flaws and all."

"You don't understand."

The tide was creeping upward; my bosom was now covered with water. I didn't have much time.

"Louise? I have to confess. I need to do one unselfish act while I'm still alive. I cheated you. When we were in our 20's, a number of years after the business took off the ground; I embezzled money from the company. I didn't win that lottery, which enabled me to buy my house. I was scared that you would suspect, so I made that up to cover my theft. If I could take that moment back, and erase those five years, I would. If going to jail would bring it right between us, I would hold out my hands and be handcuffed. It's what I deserve. Sorry is an empty word. But it's all I have now. My life has been miserable because of a mistake, an ideal I had when I was mature enough to make the right choice. I-I—"

"Lina? Your self punishment is enough. It was many years ago as you say. We all did stupid things. Maybe not to your degree, but I never stopped loving you. I knew you

would hate yourself and I always hoped you would overcome that. I could have told you a thousand times that it was okay but I didn't."

"You knew?" I asked incredulously, tears streaming down my cheeks.

"Yes, Lina. The long hours. The not letting anyone including myself look at the ledgers. When Stephan wrote his Chartered Accountants exam, our business during those years was his first job. He was sworn to secrecy to never reveal to anyone, inside or outside of the family, including you. I knew and figured if you needed that money so much that you would betray me, then you needed it more than I. As long as I was financially comfortable and able to provide for my family, I didn't care. There is no forgiveness."

"We're going to die, here, and you forgive me. I don't deserve you and am prepared for what my maker has for me on Judgment Day," I cried.

"We're not going to die. Look," said Louise, pointing to a zodiac coming our way.

"Forgiveness for you, for only yourself, Lina that is what is important now. You have been a friend to me, a surrogate mother to my boys and grand and great grandchildren. You've paid your debt. Come, we go in peace."

