

# POPLAR HILL

a novel

Stephen Ramey Glines



Wilderness House Press



## *Prologue*

### *Kitty's Wake — July 1, 1994*

“CAN YOU COME UP FOR ME WAKE?” she said in her mock Scottish accent.

“Gee Mom, I didn’t know you were dead,” said Jimmy, laughing.

“Well James, I’m not ... yet,” said Kitty, “But I am on that slippery slope. Besides, a wake is the best party a person can have but the guest of honor rarely gets to enjoy it. I plan on enjoying mine!”

By the time Jimmy arrived in Poplar Hill, word had gotten out that Kitty was having a wake, a living wake and it was going to be an event. Everyone in Pictou county knew about it.

“How many people are you expecting?” Jimmy asked.

“Oh, a few hundred, I suppose,” was the answer.

Jimmy didn’t believe it. Twenty or thirty people, he thought, so he set out all the chairs he could find in the house, about fifteen, at the top of a natural amphitheater in the back yard.

The first hint that he was wrong came around five the next morning when he woke to the *beep, beep, beep* of a truck backing up.

“Go down and make them coffee,” his mother yelled from her bedroom. “That would be the CBC crew from Halifax, up to film me wake.”

This was followed almost immediately by a crash at the back door.

“Hello Kit,” boomed a voice from the kitchen below. It was Earl, the dairy farmer down the road. “The people from the home are here and want to move their kitchen into your garage. I’m going to cut the field for the cars. Now, I’m only going to cut about ten acres since it’s not really ready for haying yet, but you should have room for a few hundred cars if I calculate right.”

A few minutes later Jimmy was dressed, and Kitty was standing in the doorway of her bedroom looking completely disheveled. “I’ll make my grand entrance in about an hour, after I put myself together,” she said with the biggest grin Jimmy had ever seen on her.

By the time Jimmy got downstairs, he could hear Earl on his tractor out in the field mowing. Someone from the Odd Fellows Retirement Home had started a big percolator of coffee in the kitchen, and a coffee-filled thermos was on the kitchen table for early comers. It wasn’t even 6 a.m. but there were already several dozen cars and a large truck in the field. Two cars from local radio stations were parked on the front lawn, and two TV remote trucks were blocking the front of the driveway. A harried producer was yelling instructions to a grip about cabling.

The garage was now filled with industrial-grade restaurant equipment borrowed from the Odd Fellows in Pictou and the smell of bacon grease soon rose into the air as the four cooks and six servers prepared to cook breakfast and lunch for ... hundreds.

About eight a.m., Kitty was ready to make her grand entrance. The diamonds were real, the emeralds and jade necklace were real, but to anyone who inquired she would say, “Oh heavens no, they’re paste. The real ones are in the vault in New York.” Kitty loved saying that to people. It left everyone from farmer to “Socially Registered snoot” scratching their heads, wondering. Jimmy loved it. About the only

thing Kitty wore that wasn't insured for thousands of dollars was the green cotton dress she had bought in Halifax for \$30 because it matched her jade necklace.

When Kitty was sure she looked the part of "the grand dame" (with the word "grand" pronounced with a rolled "r"), she carefully snuck down the stairs making sure no one was in the kitchen so that she could perform her morning rituals in private. These included taking a dozen pills chugged with a cup of coffee. She preferred doing all that in private. When she was ready she stood up from the kitchen table, threw her shoulders back, thrust her chin forward and marched into the sunlight.

By now there were thirty or forty people milling around in the yard. Kitty made the rounds, inspecting preparations like a general before a battle. She made little suggestions that were swiftly acted upon with a big smile and a "Yes Chef."

She was the boss, or rather, had been. The twenty or so people from the Odd Fellows Home had mostly worked for her as either cooks or as part of the dining room staff. For over twenty years Kitty had been the undisputed queen of the Odd Fellows kitchen.

She was, after all, the only internationally licensed and certified "Master Chef" in all of Pictou County, and one of less than a half dozen in the entire country. Of all the places in Nova Scotia Kitty could have cooked, she chose to make the Odd Fellows Retirement Home her kitchen.

While Kitty and her staff boiled dozens of pounds of peas, mashed potatoes, and roasted meat for the fifty or so residents of the home, she conducted gourmet cooking classes for the farmers wives and laid-off machinists that constituted her crew. They loved her for it. They had their very own Julia Child in the kitchen. Kitty not only looked like Julia Child, big, tall and buxom, but she had the same demeanor, and high pitched squeaky voice. They were cut from the same cloth, doppelgangers.

The lawn sloped gently away from the house so Jimmy

thought that anyone attending his mother's wake could sit in the chairs up by the house or on the grass, while anyone who wanted to speak could stand at the bottom of the natural amphitheater, bordered by brambles.

When Kitty saw the arrangement, she thought it might work better if the chairs were at the bottom of the incline. She enlisted the help of some children who were scurrying about to move a plastic lawn chair to a position more to her liking. She dropped into the chair and immediately fell over backwards, doing a full somersault, into the brambles.

She lay on her back in astonishment. Her first thought was, *Did I break anything?* She wiggled her legs, arms and neck and finally her nose and concluded that all but her dignity was intact. Next she carefully checked her necklace and earrings and concluded that they too were intact. Finally, she looked up and said to the gathering crowd, "I could use a hand here." A TV cameraman put down his camera and waded into the brambles to help. Kitty promised him some extra cookies to take home as he pulled her to her feet. Dusting herself off, she bowed to the assembled, but speechless, crowd and announced that she thought that James was better at arranging chairs than she was. The laughter broke the tension when Kitty announced to the multitudes that the arrangements were, "Splendid altogether."

As noon approached, the smell of cooking hamburgers and chicken filled the air, and the crowd had swelled to more than two hundred. The reporters, there were now about a dozen, TV, print and radio, were having a field day taking pictures and interviewing everyone willing to be interviewed. Some were interviewed multiple times.

Anyone who appeared to be a local dignitary — and that included anyone dressed better than the average farmer — was made to run the gauntlet of reporters, giving their name and having their pictures taken as they walked from the road to the back yard. For many, it was extreme flattery

and more peacocks and peahens emerged from the gauntlet than entered it. Some of the dignitaries were real, as real as there are such things in Poplar Hill and the rest imagined themselves to be. Kitty was pleased.

There was the retired politician, a respected member of parliament in his day whose motto was “No soft soap with Harvey A., vote him in election day.” Kitty had a full collection of soap dishes that Harvey had given her over the years. He had always made it a point of visiting Kitty when he was running for re-election because she listened to what he had to say and, even when she vehemently disagreed with him, she would draw him out as few others could; besides, she always fed him well and sent him on his way with a glass of sherry. Harvey always gave a great interview and the reporters loved it. He played the Grand Old Man to Kitty’s Grand Dame image.

Not to be outdone were the two gentlemen in full kilt, men Kitty had called her “Gentlemen Callers.” One, Wendell MacEamailinn, had spent his life in the Canadian Air Force. He had never been married and had retired as a brigadier. He always showed up unexpectedly at her door wearing a kilt, with a military jacket bedecked with colorful ribbons. Kitty had asked him several times what the ribbons were for and had always gotten something that sounded to her like “brahump bump bump” in return. Everyone whispered that he was important and famous but Kitty had never heard of him and his name never came up in the Canadian media so Kitty really didn’t know what he might be famous for. Of course, Kitty would feed him whenever he showed up and send him on his way with a glass of sherry or two. She often wondered if he was trying to get up the nerve to ask her on a date, but it had never come to that.

The other gentleman, in a rather more traditional kilt, was said to be the chief of a minor branch of an obscure clan. His clan had, apparently, been encouraged to leave Scotland

for one reason or another and had settled on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia. Daniel MacDaniel was his name and a thicker brogue could not be found this side of Newfoundland. Daniel had come in handy whenever Kitty needed an escort to some function or another. He was always obliging and would drop whatever he was doing to escort Kitty to things like the annual Hector Society fundraiser. He once gave up a vacation to Bermuda to escort Kitty to an event in Halifax.

Jimmy had learned from Barb, Kitty's one time neighbor and friend, that Kitty and Daniel had had a minor romantic fling when she was in her fifties but it had never developed beyond an occasional night in a Halifax hotel. Their picture had been in the Halifax paper, and that made him a petty celebrity to Kitty's minor celebrity status. Kitty thought Daniel could swagger in his kilt better than anyone she knew, better than the brigadier who always slumped a little in public.

After running the gauntlet of reporters, Daniel bowed to Kitty and kissed her hand slowly making sure all the TV cameramen and press photographers got a good shot. Kitty just laughed and curtsied in return, she loved it.

By one o'clock the field was filled with cars as were the ditches on both sides of the road for half a mile in all directions. Jimmy overheard one radio reporter estimating "well over 400 people in attendance." Almost everyone had been fed and Vince, Barb's husband, had already made an "emergency" trip into Pictou for more beer.

Lined up at the top of the hill were Kitty and her "dignitaries." The radio, TV, and print reporters took their turn interviewing Kitty and the others. Jimmy overheard Kitty answer one TV reporter's questions with, "I'm far from dead but I do have a number of life threatening conditions so I thought I'd enjoy my wake while I still could." When she spoke to her local friends, Kitty often feigned a Scottish brogue but



whenever she was “on stage” her voice was far more theatrical and reminiscent of the voice of a 1930s Hollywood starlet. It sounded almost English, a mid-Atlantic accent.

After all the reporters were satisfied, Kitty rose to her feet and clapped everyone to attention. In her mock Scottish accent and with a flourish of her arms she said, “I want to thank you all for coming to me wake. Any good wake requires a eulogy, and my son James has been kind enough, and brave enough, to have written one. I had asked a professional, our new Reverend MacDonald, to deliver one but he has declined, preferring to wait for a more auspicious occasion. I am sure he will be rewarded for his patience ... in due time.”

Reverend MacDonald bowed deeply to Kitty while grinning from ear to ear.

The moment Jimmy finished reading his eulogy, the loud high-pitched squawk of a truck’s air brakes broke the silence. Everyone looked in the direction of the road. A big yellow school bus had stopped in the middle of the intersection with a plastic banner tied to the side that read, “Heatherbells (all girl) Bagpipe Band.”

A middle-aged woman in a Heatherbells uniform came running up to Kitty panting, “Today was the girls’ annual picnic, and the girls voted to come serenade you at your wake. What would the deceased like to hear?” she asked.

A look of consternation clouded Kitty’s face for a moment then she lit up, “Dirges, nothing but dirges,” she replied with a smile.

Jimmy leaned over to his mother and asked, “I didn’t know you liked bagpipes?”

“Oh, I can’t stand them,” Kitty replied, “but under the circumstances they are appropriate. Don’t ya think?” She winked at Jimmy as she turned her hearing aids off.

Jimmy gave his mother a quizzical look, then they both burst into uncontrollable laughter as several dozen young

girls in kilts, plaid shirts, and bonnets, came slowly marching into their midst playing “Amazing Grace” on their bagpipes and muffled drums. By the time the song was over there was not a dry eye at the wake, all from laughter.

After a half dozen dirges, Kitty stood up and thanked the Heatherbells for coming and told the girls to go get something to eat. The twenty young girls quickly scattered, running for the makeshift kitchen in the barn. The band director let them eat then arranged for groups of three pipers to play while wandering among the guests in the field.

By five o'clock Kitty realized that no one was leaving. The food was gone, the beer was gone, and the press was packing up — if they hadn't already left — and the kitchen had been packed up and was heading back to the Odd Fellows Home in time to cook dinner. Kitty called the Heatherbells band director over and asked her to summon the girls and have them form up in the driveway *en masse*, and play some martial music. After a few tunes Kitty hobbled over to the drum major, grabbed the baton with one hand while steadying herself on her cane with the other and started marching. The band followed.

After marching the girls up and down the street several times, Kitty marched them down the street to their bus, stopped and put down the baton, which the girls rightly interpreted as an order to stop playing.

Kitty climbed up on the steps of the bus and said in her theatrical voice, “I want to thank you all for serenading me at my wake. I now understand why the Scots went into battle with bagpipes blaring. On the one hand, the sound of a bagpipe should rightly terrify anyone not familiar with it, man and beast alike. On the other hand, the sound of a bagpipe has clearly been crafted to wake the dead should there be any after a battle. I want to thank you all for waking the dead today. It's been a battle getting this far, and victory is just over the horizon. Again, thank you all for coming, and I

trust I shall offer you just one more opportunity to play on my behalf.”

The girls were giggling with delight, and the crowd of adults that had followed the pipers were still doubled over in laughter. With a serious nod Kitty handed the baton back to the drum major, waved, turned and walked slowly back to the house. Like a good politician, she shook hands with everyone she met on the way and thanked them for coming. The party was over and in less than 10 minutes Kitty had cleared the yard of visitors after thanking each one profusely.

“Quick, what time is it?” she asked Jimmy.

“Ten of six,” he replied, “why?”

“The news will be on and I want to catch my fifteen seconds of fame.”

They settled in front of the TV and turned to the Halifax news. Kitty’s wake was the “human interest” story of the day. The reporter described the food service while the video panned the makeshift kitchen in the garage then played about fifteen seconds of the interview with Kitty where she described having “a number of life threatening ailments” and ended by panning the “dignitaries,” while bagpipe music played. It was nearly a minute of air time.

“Not bad at all,” exclaimed Kitty. “Let’s see if I get another minute on The National.”

Jimmy timed it with the second hand of his watch, Kitty’s story got exactly thirty seconds.

Satisfied, Kitty announced that she could now, “r-r-r-rest in peace.”

Jimmy saw his mother wince as the pain of a mild angina attack pierced her chest. Kitty sighed, “Yes, rest in peace,” she said to herself quietly, “rest in peace.”