**Love at First Sight**

While waiting for a table at Rubio’s, my favorite restaurant, I was having a quiet drink at the cocktail bar when several high spirited revelers arrived.

Most looked in their late forties, apart from a slightly portly gent with heavily receding hair, who looked twenty years their senior. Even though he was shorter than most, he stood out among them. He wore an expensive pinstriped suit, smoked a large cigar and appeared very charismatic. But it was the woman that stood between him and the man with the rugby player physique that captured my attention.

She was wearing a strappy sequined evening gown that must have been made special, it fit like a glove accentuating her shapely figure. If I said her neck was long, that would be a mistake— but it was a combination of things that projected her feminine elegance. Her short bobbed hair, those bare graceful shoulders, that slight tomboy look and animated actions gave her a sensual look, I found totally irresistible.

Enjoying my aperitif, I eavesdropped on their humorous anecdotes but far too often, my eyes were drawn to this alluring beauty with the infectious laugh.

Embarrassingly, a few times our eyes had met briefly before I’d looked away. But oddly my brain demanded more of her, like a vital elixir I craved to stabilize my equilibrium.

Moments later she laughed again. Hypnotically, my eyes were drawn back and in that split second the corners of her delicious lips curled slightly upwards.

Unfortunately, my excitement was short lived— I’d imagined her amusement was due to what she was thinking.

*‘Whatever my fantasy, it had no chance of becoming reality.’*

That’s when I remembered an article I’d read. It stated categorically that women fall in love through their ears, men through their eyes. I hadn’t believed a word of the rubbish until confronted by this captivating creature.

I’d been widowed five years now and didn’t think I had the technique or drive to find another mate. Yes, of course, I’d looked from a distance, what man doesn't, but over the intervening years neither my brain nor libido had been stimulated by the faintest spark.

But in a trice, this gorgeous woman I knew nothing about apart from she was married, had ignited a bonfire of passion and desire in the depths of my soul.

Yes, she was married— I’d spotted the ring early in our short one-sided relationship.

Did her husband know how lucky he was? Did he adore her, spoil her? By the look of the diamond ring and her dress, I guessed he did. Which put me on the back foot.

Was he the rugby-type dressed in blue blazer and gray slacks? I’d noticed he’d acted a little familiar with her. The James Bond type, overconfident, probably a merchant banker with a Ferrari. Mind you, he’d have problems getting into a vehicle like that with those broad shoulders and height.

I’d earmarked him because on a couple of occasions he’d put a tentative arm around her waist which she’d discreetly removed.

She’d then moved closer to the portly balding gent who reminded me of bank manager but with his expensive suit, cigar and gold Rolex watch I’d just noticed— maybe he was a great deal more. That made me wonder why she’d throw herself away on a guy like that. There must have been twenty years difference between them.

I looked at my tired reflection in the engraved mirror behind the bar, then sighed inwardly.

Yes, the bank manager and I were probably the same age, but I’d suddenly lost my heart and soul to this vision who’d awoken thoughts I’d have preferred to stay dormant. So I consoled myself by ordering another drink— a double.

It was the hand on my arm that made me turn.

“Excuse me,” she said softly.

Her mouth and lips looked delicious, excitement danced in her pale blue eyes, saturating my brain with desire, as she smiled and added, “Would you be kind enough to take a photo of our small gathering? We’re all flying off to different parts tomorrow and might not see each other for a while.”

I vaguely recall gaping at her for several seconds because my mind froze but I was very aware of my inner voice babbling at me.

*‘Speak for God’s sake! Say something apart from, you want and need her’*, as I just managed to utter, “Yes, of course, delighted too.”

This was followed by more inner screaming. *‘Quick, think of something else to keep her close.’*

I took the smartphone I was offered. “Oh it's one of these new-fangled things, you’ll have to show me what to press,” I said.

Her perfume and close proximity were all-consuming, making my hands shake so much I had difficulty taking their picture, then almost dropped her phone as I handed it back.

“Do your hands always tremble like this?” she asked softly.

I gave a lopsided grin. “No— not normally.”

She looked deep into my eyes for what seemed an eternity, as though reading my thoughts, then gave the most delicious impish grin. “Gosh, how wonderful,” she responded coyly, her wide luminous eyes brimming with excitement.

Had she retrieved my innermost thoughts so easily? Knew I’d fallen hopelessly in love without knowing anything about her?

A raised voice made us both look towards the bank manager.

“Jackson, table’s ready, girl,” he said in a kind authoritative tone.

She turned back and offered her hand. “I’m Annabel but family and friends call me Jackson.”

“Very pleased to meet you— I’m Clive,” I responded.

Behind those enticing eyes I could sense her mind deliberating, a moment later mischief sensuously curled her lips as she leaned close to my ear.

“Clive— you have the most intriguing and delicious come to bed eyes,” she whispered before walking off, leaving my senses joyously overloaded with her thoughts and perfume.

As the group settled at their table, Josh, my in-the-know barman, relayed who and what.

She was married to the bank manager type, who was, in fact, the heavyweight property developer, Simon Thrift. He was always doing something very borderline, which often got him in the news. I was assured by Jose that Slippery Simon, as the press had tagged him, had bought matching black Bentley Mulsannes for himself and his wife.

An hour and a half later I’d drunk too much, so carefully navigated myself out of the establishment trying not to look foolish.

Gilbert the head waiter opened the door, thanked me and handed over a small printed promotion slip.

“This is for you, sir. Come back and see us soon.”

I found the slip the following day— a wine tasting event with free nibbles and snacks— then realized it was a month out of date but as I went to throw it away, I noticed something had been written on the back.

*1st of the month, meet you here at 8.30pm.*

*Signed Jackson.*

I sat down and beamed inwardly. Gosh, was this my lucky day or what?

The other good news. Due to my debilitating hangover I’d delayed my early morning trip, so hadn’t become trapped in the congestion that had gridlocked the motorway.

News reports stated dozens of vehicles had been involved in a huge accident. Sadly seven people had been killed and eight others were in intensive care.

Two weeks later, I was at the cocktail bar waiting for the beautiful Jackson to arrive.

I was still sat there at ten thirty, alone and feeling rather foolish.

A much younger woman.

Who’d said enticing things— or was she mocking?

Who’d written an invitation— but that was weeks ago.

On top of that, it was April fool’s day.

By midnight I lay in bed staring at the ceiling with a heart so heavy and empty, I’d never felt so lonely in a long time.

↭

The following year on April 1st, I sat at the same bar drinking a gin and tonic, thinking about how that brief encounter had captured my heart and also inspired me to write.

My first book *‘Ships That Pass in the Night’* had saved my life mentally. Oddly, Jackson had awoken a desire to tell stories that appeared to come out of thin air.

↭

Another year on, I arrived back from New York after signing over the film rights to my story and as it was April 1st, I thought a celebratory drink would be appropriate.

My usual driver had picked me up from the airport and we were heading into town.

“Stanley— if you can get me to Rubio’s Restaurant by eight thirty, I’ll double your fare,” I offered.

Thirty-five minutes later I handed over the extra cash, then dragged my small suitcase into the overcrowded restaurant.

My chilled champagne would’ve been better shared but only with the woman who could quench my inner thirst. In these familiar yet public surroundings, that brief encounter had drastically changed my life. Unknowingly, she’d stolen my heart and soul but also stimulated me to share that love through my writing.

Sadly my beautiful enigma had been seriously injured two years ago in that motorway crash and had lain in a coma for months.

Her husband's photograph was splashed across the media for days after the awful pile-up because he hadn’t survived and shares in his company had plummeted.

It had taken me a couple of days to find Jackson’s hospital. I didn’t know or understand why I needed to be there for her but the pull was almost spiritual.

Obviously, I wasn’t allowed into her room but on the second day, I met Gwen her grandmother, who was happy to have someone to talk too.

She told me a great deal about Jackson, a lot of it amazing and funny, some distressing.

Her family had disowned her because she’d married a man who wasn’t to their liking— a slick city type who had clawed himself up from humble beginnings.

Over the following three weeks, Gwen and I had arranged to attend the hospital on alternate days, where we’d read books and newspapers to our coma patient.

My time alone with the beautiful Jackson spurred me to conjure up several new story ideas. My vivid imagination had already fabricated our own detailed history about how we’d met and become friends. Some I’d already used to subdue Gwen’s curiosity; I couldn’t own up to the truth— she’d think I was a stalker or worse.

The cat almost came out of the bag when I told her I was going away for two months on business. If I’d said I was promoting my book and she’d read it, I’d have been done for.

By the time I arrived back in the UK, ten weeks had passed and all I found at the hospital was a short letter from Gwen.

*‘Clive, you're a very naughty boy. You should have told me the truth. But I will forgive you, your beautiful story brought Jackson out of her coma. So I’m taking her to Switzerland to recuperate.’*

I’d tried to find where they’d gone but my book success had kept me travelling, making time rush by at breakneck speed.

↭

Back at Rubio’s, I picked up my ‘anniversary’ glass of champagne and took a long drink.

I’d just arrived back from New York with a signed film contract, also a very large paycheck and Josh was refilling my glass. I smiled inwardly. Some April fool’s day, I thought.

“Good evening, sir, are you eating with us tonight?” the head waiter asked as he arrived at my side.

“No, thanks, Gilbert— just popped in for a quick drink.”

He nodded and smiled warmly. “We haven’t seen you for a while. Promoting the book no doubt. By the way sir, congratulations, my wife and I loved it,” he added before moving closer and lowering his voice.

“The lady sat at your usual table has asked if you’d autograph her copy.”

I glanced over but could only see her back. Moments later after signing, I went over to offer the book back.

“Do your hands always tremble like this?” I asked.

“No— not normally,” she responded with a delicious impish grin, as I sat opposite.

“Gosh, how wonderful,” I said, then added softly, “I've waited a long time for this moment.”

She leaned closer, her alluring eyes overflowing with that captivating excitement I’d longed to see again, as she whispered.

“So have I, Clive— so have I.”

**A Country Tale**

**Audrey’s Dark Side**

Whoever had knocked at Dora’s front door was either in a hurry or angry.

With no outside light due to the electric being off, Dora couldn’t see anything through the tiny spyhole and when the urgent knock suddenly came again, it made her jump.

“Who’s out there?” she demanded.

“Dora, Dora,” came a whispered reply, “it’s Audrey, please let me in.”

Once inside, she removed her hat and raincoat before hugging Dora.

“What’s going on, Aud?  You’ve been rather conspicuous by your absence of late.  Over the last couple of days, I’ve been to your cottage twice and you don’t answer your phone. Where have you been?”

“Sorry, I’ve been in hiding.”

“Why on earth? Wait— before you answer, come through, I’ll make us a pot of tea,” said Dora, picking up the candle and heading for the kitchen.

The flickering light accentuated the mellow colours in the sandstone walls, making the kitchen look soft and cosy but Dora nearly dropped the candle. Hurriedly she’d cleared documents from the pine table and stuffed them into a drawer.

“I hope you’re not in trouble again, Aud? I’m just coming to terms with the last incident but now the police have found that tattooed chap—”

Audrey put her hand on Dora’s arm and frowned.

“What chap?”

“Oh! Heavens above, haven’t the police spoken to you yet?”

“I’ve been in hiding, haven’t I?”

Dora studied her companion for several seconds, before pouring hot water into a teapot.

“So you don’t know the boys in blue have apprehended a youth they believe was involved in your robbery?”

“I haven’t opened my door or answered my phone.”

“But Aud, why do you need to hide?”

“Tell me about the tattooed character first.”

“There’s nothing to tell, really.  While we were gadding about in Italy, the police asked Sue where you were. I presume they wanted you to look at photos— see if you recognized him.”

Aud nodded, then took a sip of tea she’d been handed.

“So why are you hiding from the police?”

“I’m not— it’s someone from South Africa.”

Dora gave a wry smile and rolled her eyes.

“No, Dora— nothing remotely like that. But this must remain between us. It could put people in danger.” Audrey serious tone wiped all expression from her friends face.

Moments later Dora’s she beamed.

“Shall we make a pledge of secrecy with a tot of malt whisky— and would you mind,” she paused and lowered her voice to a whisper, “would you mind awfully if I had a ciggy?”

Audrey grinned and shook her head. “You’ll have to force my hand with regards to the malt.

You know I don’t drink— well, in the old days I did but,” she paused and made eye contact. “Let’s have that drink and I’ll tell you what’s going on.”

Moments later the chink of crystal glasses was folded by silence, as both women savored the flavor and warmth of their drink.

“Gosh— that’s some good stuff you have tucked away, Dora Mathews.”

Dora nodded as she took a long draw on her cigarette, then held her breath for a few moments before slowly letting it go.

Sat with her eyes closed, she spoke softly in a low voice.  “I do miss my husband.”

“I miss mine too,” Aud replied, before emptying her glass. That response brought Dora’s thoughts to the here and now, as she refreshed their glasses.

“Thought you’d not gone down that road?” Dora responded in a measured tone.

Audrey sat back, warming her whiskey, he eyes fixed on the glass.

“We both worked for MI5— until he was killed.  Then I left but went back two years later to go undercover in South Africa.”

Dora took a quick swig, followed by a long draw on her ciggy, her eyes held steady on her guest. “Bloody hell, Aud, you were a spy? No wonder we found the vicar so easily.” She paused and leaned closer, her eyes fixed on Audrey’s.  “You still working for them girl?”

Her companion swilled her drink around her glass for a moment before responding. “Only sort of,” then put a finger to her lips before changing the subject. “Dora, this whiskey is beautiful. I do hope you have a spare bed?”

“All made up and ready girl,” she said in her military voice.  “So, who’s looking for you?”

“It’s a long story. Complicated. Suffice to say, my clandestine source from years ago, who’s just been snooping around my cottage, was working for two paymasters. I knew this, so worked him accordingly but when my opposite number realized he’d been duped, it was too late. We got what we wanted, then let the operation fall apart and my double agent vanished. I thought he’d been killed, so was staggered when he turned up again.”

“Is your life in danger now?”

Audrey shrugged.  “He’s bitter because of what happened to his brother. A longer story.”

“Blimey Aud, thought you had such a neat and tidy life. No hidden depths. I’m so surprised to learn that— well— How on earth did you ever get involved in something so dangerous?”

“I was an adventurous woman looking to make a difference. It didn’t work out that way. Another long story that can wait,” she laughed, holding her empty glass towards Dora.

“I wonder how your snooper found out you were living here?” Dora asked, making her guest shrug.

“I don’t know— but he’s the least of my worries.”

“Oh dear, Aud, more bad news?”

“Yep. Unfortunately— all due to Major Jefferies.”

“What? Wants you out of his cottage?  Or suing you for the loss of his antiques?”

“Neither— he’s the reason I was sent here in the first place.”

“Wait, wait, I need another ciggy.” Dora jumped up and started opening cabinets.  “Now where did I hide that?  Ah! There you are my beauty,” she muttered, pulling a small Toby Jug off the top shelf.

After blowing dust off its cellophane top, she gave Aud a lopsided grin. “Things are getting desperate! The last of my special rollups.”

“Dora Mathews, you’re joking? Is that cannabis? Where on earth do you get that from?”

Dora grinned and winked.

“A friend I deliver meat to. I keep these for special occasions and it’s not often you meet the female James Bond, now is it? You want to try a joint? It’s very therapeutic.”

“Now who’s got hidden depths Mrs Mathews?”

“In the old days Aud, my hubby and I had some memorable moments. We were adventures and a bit reckless like most young things starting out but now, all I have are beautiful memories.” Dora beamed at Aud. “So, Mrs Bond, spill the beans on Jumping Jefferies?”

“Why jumping?”

“Well, he’s always been like a cat on hot bricks.  He seems to live on his nerves.”

“I’m sure he does, if he’s got a conscience,” Audrey said in a sardonic tone.

“You know things about him?” Dora quizzed.

Audrey held her glass towards her companion and changed the subject.  “So Dora Mathews, you’re sworn to secrecy?”

Dora chinked glasses. “My solemn oath.”

“I’m going to need your help very soon.”

The candlelight glinted in Dora’s eyes. “Do I get to carry a gun?”

“Sorry No— not even a pretend one.”

Dora smirked before taking a puff on her joint.

“Ok, tell me more,” she said while holding her breath.

“Until two years ago, Major Jefferies was one of MI5’s smartest brains.  A very clever man, some of his plans are so complex, it would take an extremely astute mind to understand, let alone unravel them. And here the twist; one plan is very close to revealing a double agent— that’s why I’m here.”

“Does he know you’re watching his back, Aud?”

“No, and it must stay that way. His son Jason works at the British Embassy in Poland.  Many months ago he was compromised in a sex trap; the woman was a Russian operative.  Now he’s being blackmailed and passing sensitive information to his Russian controller.”

Dora’s face was a picture of fascination and wonderment. “This is much better than the James Bond film I saw on the telly.  But why don’t you just nab the lying bastard and throw him in prison for betraying his country?”

“He’s not, Dora. Its one of his father's contrived plans.” She paused and swirled the whiskey around her glass.

“The Russians think they have someone terrified of losing his job, wife, and disgracing his father.  But the secrets he’s passing are sanctioned by MI5 or fabricated by Major Jefferies.  Ultimately this will force his Russian control to identify the double agent within MI5.”

“So what do you want me to do?”

“Expect a call from me within the next seventy-two hours.  We’ll need to make a delivery to the local airport, so make sure you have petrol.”

“But the airport isn’t operational.”

“I know, but I can arrange to have this delivery picked up from there.”

“So what sort of delivery is it?” Dora asked.

“Probably a very small crate.”

↭

At 2.30am two nights later, Dora backed her vehicle into Audrey’s driveway.  It was raining lightly but the wind made it cold and bleak. Even so, Aud was outside waiting, in a black jumpsuit and padded jacket with a dark woolen hat pulled down over her ears.

As Dora opened her car door, a tall man also dressed in black appeared out of the shadows, startling her but Aud quickly introduced him.

“Not to worry Dora,” she whispered. “This George, he’s on our side.”

Dora spotted a wooden crate on a few bricks next to the house. “Is that our delivery?”

Audrey nodded. “Yes. It’s all ready to go.”

“It’s bigger than I thought.”

Dora tapped the top. The box was three feet square with a few small holes and gouges in the wood but no other markings.

George stood one side of it, Aud on the other.

“Dora help me this side, it's not that heavy, but we should be able to manage.”

Once the box was loaded in the rear compartment, they headed off to the old airport at a brisk pace. Aud glanced at her watch before turning to George, who’d squeezed in next to the box.

“We’re on schedule but need to make the next phase go as quickly as possible.” She patted the driver’s leg.  “You’re quiet, Dora.”

“Just a bit nervous,” she replied.  “Odd to be doing this so late at night.”

“We do odd stuff to keep people safe, Dora.  Anyway, the rest should be plain sailing.  We just have to make the drop-off and we’re done.”

When they arrived, George went and spoke to the gateman. Dora saw an envelope being handed over.

Aud then directed her towards two large hangars, before pointing at a small twin-engine plane that stood in shadow, between the buildings.

“You need to be alongside that,” she said.

As Dora pulled up, two men appeared and opened the vehicle's rear doors.  She could see what was going on via her rearview mirror but couldn’t see their faces, due to them wearing ski-masks.

Quickly retrieving the box, they lifted it into the plane’s cargo bay before slamming the outer door. Seconds late one engine fired up and the other prop was starting to turn, as Aud shouted, “George, let's clear the area.” As the words left her lips, the gloom around them suddenly transformed.

Headlights and blue flashing lights appeared from every direction, as dozens of vehicles approached at speed.

The clandestine group fled in different directions but were all intercepted by dozens of men dressed in black jumpsuits, carrying automatic weapons.  A few scuffles broke out but were over in seconds.

Audrey was pinned against Dora’s vehicle with her arm jammed halfway up her back.

Moments later the wooden box was retrieved and the lid prised opened, allowing Major Jefferies’ head to emerge.  After hands and feet had been untied, he stood and removed his gag as he surveyed the scene, illuminated by dozens of car headlights.

“Everyone accounted for?” he asked in a wry yet authoritative tone.

The well-built man standing next to him was wearing a black balaclava that hid all but his eyes— which gave away his team’s success.

“Yes, sir, the raids in London have taken the remainder of this cell into custody.”

“Capital,” Jefferies uttered. “Now, let’s clear up, then we can all stand down,” he ordered, walking towards Dora.

“Well done, Sergeant Mathews,” he said in a light amused tone.  “A very long time since we’ve worked together. Good to see you haven’t lost your touch,” he added, as two officers led Audrey away.

“Your double agent, I presume?”  Dora asked, shaking the hand she was offered.

A sardonic smile curled the Major’s lips as he changed the subject and said in a low voice, “If my memory serves, Sergeant, it was Italy 1944. How on earth did you manage to get through enemy lines with that vital information?”

Dora’s mind darted back to the dangers they’d battled through to save others. Then she smiled warmly at the man in front of her.

“Would you be wanting your usual leg of lamb for Sunday lunch, Major?”

He grinned, tapping an index finger on his nose.

“That will work perfectly, Sergeant. Now would you care to join us?  I happen to have a very agreeable malt whisky— and some interesting smoking material.”

**To Be Continued**

***Maybe***

**Hidden Talent**

As far as I can remember, I’d never been very good at anything.

At school, I was neither top nor bottom of the class and it was the same with sport.  I could run, jump and swim but would’ve been lucky to advance to the semifinals.

It wasn't as though I was uncoordinated, dim or overweight.

OK— if you believe what’s written in women's magazines, then I was carrying a few more pounds than was supposedly correct for someone of medium height.

My Dad would always laugh when I brought up the weight topic.  This was usually when I’d asked Mum if my bum looked too fat in what I was wearing but Dad would always take the time to reassure me.

“It’s just puppy fat darling. Its nature’s way of preparing your body, so you grow from a pretty girl into a beautiful woman.”

But it was strange because even though his reassurance did help my confidence, I’d still always ask Mum the same question just before leaving the house.

Another topic Dad encouraged me with was my hidden talents, or as I thought, my total lack of.  Every friend I had could either run like the wind, swim like a fish, draw like Picasso or attract more boys than you could shake a stick at.

“Brenda, everyone has hidden talents and yours will come to light in their own good time.”

But I’d come to the conclusion I didn’t have any, therefore was destined to be ordinary and average at everything.

↭

After I left school a few years later, I tried a couple of different jobs but ended up as an accounts clerk for a pharmaceutical company, which was the biggest employer in Barnard Castle.

Barny, as it was known locally, was a small market town that, over the years, had grown up around the eleventh-century medieval castle.  The castle itself overlooked the River Tees and was a short walk from where I worked.

My new office mates had cajoled me into joining their weekly keep fit group.  I wasn’t that enthusiastic about sweating so much but this was where I bumped into Bill.

Well, actually, it was his car that I bumped into first.

Pulling out of my parking space, I’d misjudged the angle and scratched his driver's door. Even in the moonlight, it looked terrible which made me feel worse because there was only a small red mark left on my bumper.

I left a note with my phone number, owning up and adding that I’d pay for the repair.

Three weeks went by without a word.  Then he phoned and thanked me for leaving the note and could we meet to discuss what needed to be done.

Friday evening I arrived at the Three Horseshoes pub, with instructions to ask the barman for Bill.

When I inquired, he made a face and said in a semi-low voice as he leaned towards me:  “If he owes you money or you’re pregnant, darling, you don’t stand a chance.”

This remark made the big man next to me chuckle, then he joined the conversation.

“Bloody hell, Jerry, you're supposed to say I live in South America,” he said with a chuckle before his twinkling blue eyes focused on me.

“Pleased to meet you, Brenda.  I’m Bill, your blind date,” offering me his huge hand.  The other held his pint mug— and made it look like a shot-glass.

He was a tall, well-built guy in his early thirties.  His dark blond hair was cut very short, making his round face look chubby and because of his ruddy complexion, I presumed he spent a good deal of his time outdoors.

As we sat and chatted, I learned his girlfriend was now his ex.  She’d been using his sports car without his knowledge and was also having an affair while he was working on a North Sea oil rig.

He was very enthusiastic about his work and told me he was now in charge of directional drilling.  His other loves were his car and his motorbikes.

Two hours into the evening, I was smitten by this rugby-loving, biking oilman who had such a considerate and gentle approach.

Two years later we were married.

After another year, I was in the operating room, screaming at the top of my voice as I attempted to give birth.

My language was terrible but it only made Bill laugh, as he tried to coax me to *‘Bear down, girl’,* as he put it.

I also yelled at the nursing staff, demanding that they *‘Get this thing out of me, before it splits me in half.  Then what good will I be to you, Bill Mason, you bastard,’* I’d added.

At this point, Bill had yelped and gritted his teeth because my fingernails had drawn blood on the back of his hand.  But at that moment, everything to do with the delivery began moving extremely quickly.

Minutes later they propped me up on a couple of pillows, holding the most beautiful, gorgeous, stunning baby girl I’d ever seen.  The doting father's face was a picture to behold.  Tears of joy filled his eyes, as a huge finger delicately stroked his daughter's cheek.

When asked if he’d like to hold his first born, he’d backed away from the bed but moments later his huge hands cocooned the small bundle containing his child. To everyone’s amusement, he picked her up as though she was made from the most delicate porcelain. Then stood grinning like a kid with a new toy or, in his case, a new motorbike.

After handing back the precious bundle, he bent forward and kissed me. “Well done, you.  See, I told you it would be easy,” he said with his usual smirk, then kissed me again. “Love you,” he added.

I ran a hand lovingly over his unshaven cheek, which triggered a memory of my Dad.

*‘Everyone has talents, Bren, but sometimes they come to light in their own good time,’* he’d often say.

Well, I’d proved I could produce beautiful offspring.

But after going through eight months of feeling like death, followed by sixteen hours of the birthing process, I’d come to the conclusion that Emily was going to be my first and last.

But little did I know— my real talent was still in no rush to come to the fore.

↭

I was sat at my kitchen table with a cup of tea, gazing vacantly at a cake I’d not long taken out of the oven.  Cooking was a very useful talent I’d inherited from my mother and over the years, these culinary skills had put a few extra inches on Bill’s waistline. He was somewhere in the middle of the north sea and was due home in a couple of weeks.

Emily, our baby, was a few days away from her twenty-second birthday.  She was living in Perth, Australia, doing something in microbiology.

So I was quietly reassessing what to do next.  Not so much with the cake, more about my life in general.

When Bill came home, he had his bikes and buddies.  I’d been involved with that part of his life early on, doing the pillion rider thing but now with my rheumatic knees playing up and having to wear all that heavy riding gear, I really couldn’t be fussed.

A sudden knock on the door startled me.

My eyes registered the kitchen clock as my mind flashed through a list of people it could be but none fit the time of day or the day of the week.  Due to everything in my life being almost preordained.

The electric, post, insurance and dustbin men always came on their designated days and normally around the same time.  Mind you, I’d heard the Jehovah Witness people were in town again.  Well, if it was them, I’d just say no thank you and close the door like I did last time.

I was confronted by a slender Gypsy-looking woman.  She had on a red, black and green headscarf but worn like a bandana, the same as Bill’s biking mates.  This brightly coloured scarf held her abundant black curly hair away from her worn attractive face. She might have been fifty but looked older, due to being in the sun too much, but her dark brown eyes reflected the joys of life.

“I’m so sorry to disturb you,” she said in a kind genuine manner.  “Would you mind terribly if I took a small cutting from that beautiful bougainvillea at the corner of your garden? I can’t remember seeing such an amazing deep purple,” she asked.

“You're very welcome to take as much as you like,” I replied.

Smiling warmly, she stepped forward and handed me a small sprig of heather.  “This is all the way from Dartmoor, close to where I live on the south coast.  I can’t say it’s lucky but it does have a very pleasant fragrance,” she offered.

As I thanked her, she breathed in deeply, then said the strangest thing.  “If I’m not mistaken a fruitcake with extra ginger?”  Then laughed and added, “Just like my mother used to make, God rest her soul.”

“Goodness me, how amazing, you certainly have a talent for aromas.  Would you like to try a bit?” I asked.

Smiling she shook her head.  “I would love to but, maybe in three months when it's had time to age.”

I gazed at her for a moment or two.  There was something very warm and genuinely friendly about this woman, so I beckoned her into my cottage.

“I just happened to have some left over from Christmas,” I offered, which made her eyes sparkle.

An hour later, Lolly was taking cuttings from my bougainvillea.

“Thank you for this Brenda and for your delicious cake.  It rekindled fond memories of my dear mother,’ she said.

I put out a hand to shake hers but she hugged me like a long lost sister.  Then whispered the oddest thing.

“So why’ve you not exercised your hidden talent?”

I looked at her quizzically, thinking the fruitcake must have contained a lot more brandy than I thought.  No wonder it was popular among my friends.

“Brenda, you haven’t realized you're a fortune teller?”  She smiled broadly, her eyes projecting excitement as she added, “Trust me, you need to do something about that very soon.”

Before I had time to collect my startled thoughts, then come up with a suitable response, she’d turned, waved and walked off towards town, leaving me at my gate, gaping in her direction.

I must’ve sat at my kitchen table for an hour, staring at an old cake tin I’d inherited from my Grandma.

I’d also opened it a couple of times to sniff the remaining cake, to make doubly sure the brandy wasn’t that strong.

Doing that made me smile but I concluded, Lolly must have been on something much stronger before she’d arrived.

Mind you, she had been great company.

That evening I tried my *‘Fortune Telling’* abilities on a deck of cards which Bill uses when his mates pop round. Amazingly, out of twenty-five attempts to guess the card I was holding, I managed to get twenty-four wrong.  The other was half right - I’d said the king of hearts, it was diamonds.

As I lay in bed listening to the pouring rain, I methodically went through a list of family members, trying to think of something that had befallen them.  An event that I could honestly say I’d had an intuitive premonition about but couldn’t come up with one.

The only person that did come to mind was Debbie Watts, a girl in our street who was pregnant three weeks before her fifteenth birthday.  I could see that coming a mile off but so could all my friends.

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Three days after my encounter with Lolly, a young woman who appeared a little upset and a bit teary arrived at my door.

She apologised for disturbing me, then asked if someone in my house was a palm reader or a fortune teller.  Her odd request made me close the door a little, but because the poor girl's face was so pale and she looked at her wits’ end, I brought her in and made a pot of tea.

As we chatted, I asked who’d told her about the fortune teller.

Cindy said no one had but in a very odd dream she’d seen my cottage and remembered walking past a few weeks ago because of the beautiful bougainvillea.

Forty-five minutes later my guest was leaving.  Our short time together was the most embarrassing, most difficult thing I’d ever been through.  I’d asked a few questions, but unfortunately, this started the tears and sobbing because she felt so lost and lonely.  So I’d ended up holding her hand and comforting her because my heart went out to the poor young thing.

It turned out she was pregnant, her boyfriend wanted her to get rid of the child and she didn’t know what to do for the best.  I’d asked if she’d talked to her mother.

Apparently, they’d fallen out years ago, when Cindy had moved to Barnard Castle to be with friends.  She said her mum lived miles away and had her own life, so wouldn’t be interested in her problems.

After Cindy left, I felt deflated— my so-called *‘fortune telling’* abilities had not materialized.  I hadn’t had a clue what to do or say, so ended up holding her while she had a good sob. As my hand pressed into her curly black hair, all I could do was apologise for not being able to give her some guidance.

What did surprise me was how angry I felt towards Lolly and really I couldn’t understand why.

Late that evening everything was turned on its head, due to a graphic dream I had.  It was so vivid, it was like sitting in a cinema— as Cindy’s life unfolded before me.

The poor girl had left home because her stepfather had started sexually abusing her.

Not wanting to break her mother's heart by telling her, she’d left home and moved north, fortunately ending up sharing a flat with four other girls and finding a reasonable job.

Eight years on, she had a better job and a new boyfriend.  He was fifteen years older, a slick smooth type with loads of gold chains and rings plus a flash car.  He’d persuaded her to move in with him and now several months later she was pregnant.

Their relationship wasn’t what the poor girl had expected, so she had come looking for answers but the fortune teller hadn’t been much help.

By seven thirty the next morning, I’d managed to write down every detail of my dream and to my amazement, the answer was plain to see but what good was this revelation now?  I didn’t know Cindy's last name, her phone number or where she lived but the information I was privy to, amounted to life or death for her unborn child.

At ten o’clock I was walking around Barny’s open air-market looking for Cindy.  My plan was simple— I’d keep looking in all eight coffee shops and pubs until she was found.

Three hours later, after stopping only for a coffee at eleven and a bottle of water at midday, I was well on my way to being extremely anxious for the safety of mother and child.

Plonking myself on the war memorial steps to rest my throbbing feet, I gazed vacantly at the people milling around.  Then I realized this view was part of last night’s dream, but in that someone was sat close by.

On cue, Lolly suddenly sat beside me.

“Gosh, where did you spring from?” I asked.

“I was in Jacob's Hardware buying a few seedling pots to take back home with me.  Saw you sitting here with the worries of the world on your shoulders,” she replied.

I relayed my ‘*fortune telling*’ nightmare, followed by the amazing dream revelations and why I was now filled with anxiety.  I had no way of passing on this vital information to the person it was destined for.

While I poured out my troubled heart, Lolly sat silently rotating her gold ring around her finger as she rocked slowly back and forth.

I felt oddly empty and had expected reassurance but Lolly’s eyes were closed tight.  For a moment I thought she was meditating but that vanished when she turned suddenly and looked at me with tear-filled eyes.  “So what now?” she asked.

“We need to have coffee,” I uttered.

She pointed across the street to Nellie's Sandwich Shop.

“No, it has to be Starbucks,” a place I’d never been but was in my dream.

“That’s the other end of town, Brenda.”

The moment we walked in, I saw Cindy sat with her back to us— you couldn’t mistake that hair.  Lolly quickly occupied the window seat before handing over some money.

When I returned with the coffees, she leant forward and whispered, “Your conversation should be done privately, so I’ll keep well out of the way.”

As I walked towards Cindy, the anxiety I’d been feeling suddenly vanished.  Maybe I could save the child after all.

Cindy almost jumped out of her skin when I rested my hand lightly on her shoulder.

“Good afternoon, you're just the person I’ve been looking for,” I said.

She’d been crying and her eyes filled with more tears as she apologised for the way she’d behaved at my home.

I sat opposite and comforted her best I could.  Then once she relaxed, I explained about my dream and quickly described her boyfriend, from his tattoos and mustache to the gold tooth he was proud of.  The poor girl sat wide-eyed, in fact, her eyes grew so large they looked like they’d popped out of her head.

Due to this reaction, I felt confident talking about the more difficult subject.

“Cindy— if you really love this man, then you’re in deep trouble because he’s a drug dealer, he has other girlfriends and before your child is born, he’ll be put in prison for a long time.”

Placing her arms on the table, she laid her head on them and began to silently sob. Resting my hand on her beautiful bedraggled black curly hair made me look towards Lolly.

Due to the bright sunshine coming through the window, I could only see her diffused outline but she saw me looking and gave a reassuring thumbs up.

Moments later Cindy sat up and pulled a crumpled hanky out of her pocket.  After wiping her eyes and blowing her nose, she took a deep breath and held it for a few moments.  Then she told me she’d had a gut feeling Harry was up to no good and that most of his friends acted like crooks.

“So what do you intend to do now?”  I asked.

“I don’t know,” she’d replied.  “Well, I do but I don’t know how or if I can do it.  I want to keep my baby, so I need to get my stuff from Harry’s flat.  I can probably find a bed at my friend's place for a few weeks,” she added.

“How’s Harry going to react to you moving out?”

“He’ll go ballistic,” she whispered.

“Would he get violent?”  I asked.

Cindy didn’t respond.  Her gaze fell to her empty cup but I’d already sixth sensed her short arrogant man.  Yes, he’d be violent, I was sure.

“My husband has several biker friends, who’d enjoy going with you to get your stuff.  So no need to worry about that but if you want my advice, I really think you need to make peace with your mother,” I advised.

Cindy shook her head as her eyes glistened with more tears.  “Yes, you're right, but that can’t happen because she doesn't want anything to do with me.” she paused to wipe tears from her cheeks.  “If I’d told the truth about my stepdad, it would have gutted her. I was young and naive so I just ran away. I knew it would hurt but I didn’t want to break her heart and maybe destroy her marriage.  I’d seen how devastated she was when my Dad got killed at work.”

Suddenly Cindy’s face turned parchment white.  Her head dropped forward for a few moments.  “Gosh!  I need some fresh air,” she said, then stood.  “Or it could be food..., something sweet I think.”

“When did you eat last?” I asked.

“Yesterday.”

“That’s not sensible now you're feeding two.”

“You're probably right but I think I need fresh air first.”

Cindy quickly led the way to the door.

I could see the outline of Lolly stood waiting.  Suddenly a large truck stopped outside the coffee shop, blocking out the sun, bringing her silhouette to life.

Her beautiful black curly hair, her loving smile, but eyes filled with tears and cheeks glistening.

Shocked at seeing her, Cindy stumbled but managed to grab the back of a nearby chair. The flimsy support was no help and slid away on the polished wooden floor.

Lolly was quick to react.  She rushed forward and both women were now held securely in each other's arms but oddly, they were both sobbing.