

New
Beginnings

- *at Clementine Court*

Chris Bakos

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&

to the memory of Tammy Wynette.

Chapter One

It was the early hours of a September morning, deep in the heart of the city. A train clattered by as it passed over the viaduct. Its half empty carriages transported shift workers and the late-night revelers, too poor to afford a cab and too drunk to drive.

A cat yowled its displeasure at something, while the moon, momentarily exposed by the overhead clouds, cast an eerie glow across the sky. Otherwise, all was quiet and dark, save for one solitary light, its glow muffled by a pair of burgundy curtains.

Inside, John sat at a table with sleep seemingly absent from his agenda. The hair on the back of his neck bristled as he turned to his companion and said, "It's an ill wind that blows. Changes are coming, and I don't know if we'll like them. It's time to get the cards out."

"An ill wind ..." Bonanza Bill, his parrot, repeated, before launching into his maudlin song, "*D.I.V.O.R.C.E.*," he lamented.

"Shut up Bill," John said as he reached into a drawer and pulled out a purple pouch containing his tarot cards. With great reluctance, he spread the cards face down on the table in an arc before randomly selecting nine, their stories yet to be revealed.

Meanwhile, a floor below Betty let out a moan of protest as her husband Max dug his elbow into her ribs, farted and rolled over. With a wrinkle of her nose, Betty drew close, spooning his body, with only mild reproach, long used to his windy ways. Fifty minutes later, still awake, Betty heard the creaking of the floorboards above.

"Seems I'm not the only one who's up," she mumbled.

Gingerly she crept from the bed, anxious not to wake Max. She shrugged her ample body into her cozy fleece bathrobe and then slipped her feet into her furry mules and wandered into the kitchen in search of the milk and a pan.

She measured out enough milk for two and poured it into the pan and set it on the stove to heat, before reaching into the cupboard for the tin of cocoa powder. When the cocoa was ready, she carried the two cups upstairs and knocked on John's door.

"Come in, come in whoever you are," called Bonanza Bill, the parrot, echoed by John.

"Hello love, I thought you might like a cup of cocoa."

"Thanks. It's a bit past your bedtime isn't it?" John glanced at the clock and raised an eyebrow.

"Our Max woke me up, and I found myself lying awake unable to sleep."

“Seems to me that only happens when there’s too much going on upstairs.” John tapped his head. “A trouble shared and all that ...”

Betty’s cheerfulness deflated like a shriveled balloon. She cupped her cocoa in her hands, deriving a little comfort from the warmth. “You’re not going to like it ...” Butterflies fluttered in her belly, and she chewed on a fingernail, anxious to offload the decision that had stalled her sleep.

“No?” John felt a sense of dread.

“*Stand by your man ...*” sang Bonanza Bill.

“Shut up Bill, please,” said John holding out a banana chip to him.

“Bonanza Bill, Bonanza Bill, the name’s Bonanza Bill,” squawked Bill, accepting the banana chip.

“The thing is,” Betty blurted out. “We’ve had a full house all summer, and it’s left me feeling worn out. It’s hard work running a B&B.” She rushed out the words before her courage failed her.

“You’ve got a lull until Christmas. Why not take a sunshine holiday break? Recharge your batteries. Surely Max could get a week off. After all, he’s nearly retired,” John replied, not willing to accept the truth of her words.

“Actually, I think it’s time for us to both take it easy. I’ve decided to sell the house and move to somewhere smaller. Maybe even travel a bit, as you say.”

John groaned and rubbed a hand through his hair.

“You’ll be bored within a month with nothing to do, and what about your garden, eh? Max will never leave that. People come to stay at your place just to see your garden!”

“Well thanks very much John, of course, my great hospitality has nothing to do with it!” Betty folded her arms.

“Oh, away with you Betty, you know you’re the hospitality queen! I only meant that the garden ...”

“I know what you meant,” Betty interrupted. “And I know why you don’t want me to sell, but you’ve wallowed too long. You need to move on. My mind is made up, John. I’m putting the house up for sale.” She placed her hands on her hips and eyeballed him.

“But what about me, don’t I get the first refusal?” John’s voice rose in a whine.

“You can’t afford to buy this property, but you could buy something smaller. New beginnings!” Betty nodded. “Let’s talk more in the morning. Right, now, I’m off to warm my feet on Max’s back.”

“Night, Betty. Thanks for the cocoa.” John smiled before lowering his chin to meet his chest.

“You’re welcome.”

As Betty turned to go back downstairs, she heard John mutter to Bonanza Bill, “See, I told you there was an ill wind blowing, the cards never lie.”

Betty washed the cups, leaving them to drain, before heading back to bed.

“Holy mackerel woman, your feet are freezing!” Max said, woken abruptly, as Betty rubbed her feet against his calves. He was soon back to snoring, joined quickly by Betty in a lighter frame of mind.

Later the next day, Max was out at his monthly gardening meeting as Betty sampled her casserole in the crock-pot. “Mmm, lovely.” She replaced the lid and turned down the heat. “I’ll just give you another hour.”

Satisfied, she settled her ample backside in the rocking chair by the fire and closed her eyes. It wasn’t too long before the memories came flooding in, like a film playing in her head.

For all of her sixty-three years, Betty had lived in the same four-story house, forty of which had been shared with Max. When Betty was a girl, the attic rooms had been stuffy and hot in the summer and cold and damp in the winter. There was no central heating back then, and the panes of glass had rattled as the winds of winter howled.

Betty would lie in her bed all cozy as a child, with a hot water bottle tucked down by her feet and her duvet snuggled to her chin, as she listened to the storms raging outside.

She had never been afraid, perhaps due to the security of loving parents. As an adult, she still enjoyed a crashing and clattering thunderstorm and delighted in the rare snowfall, blanketing her world in white.

The main floor of her home used to have a reception room, living room and off of the rather large kitchen was a pantry and a cold store to preserve the foods that were now kept in the fridge and freezer.

The next three floors had housed twelve rather small and poky bedrooms, including two in the attics. Occupants had a choice of an outdoor toilet and an indoor bathroom, which was considered to be something of a luxury when it was first installed. With its free-standing claw-foot bathtub, it had proved very popular with the guests who were allocated one use per one week stay.

Betty and Max had long since renovated and now there were six guest bedrooms, two of which had an ensuite. The other two bedrooms shared a communal bathroom for a lesser nightly charge.

Max and Betty’s living area was compact but private, although they frequently spent their evenings chatting with their guests in the communal lounge.

On the second level of the house were the guest accommodations and John occupied the third level where he had his own suite complete with a bedroom, living room and bathroom, but only the smallest of kitchens without a stove. There was just an area to keep his microwave, bar fridge and coffee pot, as all his meals were eaten with Betty and Max.

The fourth-floor attic rooms had long since been closed off and replaced with proper insulation. The rattling windowpanes were now double glazed, although Betty

secretly missed hearing those howling winds as she snuggled up to Max on stormy nights.

Hoping for a classic look that was both timeless and practical, Betty and Max had installed black and white tiles in the kitchen and painted the walls cream.

The rest of the house had the original hardwood floors restored to their former glory with red Persian carpet runners throughout.

The walls were decorated with an elegant cream and red-striped wallpaper and the bathrooms, keeping to the theme of the house, were tiled in neutral tones with thick, plush towels of red.

As a girl, Betty had loved it when the house was full of guests. She helped pitch in when she returned from school. It had never seemed like a chore to help her mother in the kitchen, mixing, chopping, sautéing and serving the prepared food. From the time, she was old enough to grasp a wooden spoon and steady a bowl, if it was within her capabilities, she did it, never questioning the tasks assigned to her.

Where had the time gone?

She remembered the day her son Trevor was born. They didn't have a crib for him, so he slept in a drawer. When he grew bigger, Betty brought him into the bed with her and Max.

Max worried that Betty would squash him as she cuddled him to her side, but she was always conscious of his little body beside her. Betty claimed her closeness was why he slept through the night within weeks of his birth.

Betty let out a sigh and whispered, "Oh, Trevor, you were a good boy."

He was long gone but never forgotten.

Thinking out loud she said, "Aye, we've seen a lot in this house where I was born." She reached for her cup of tea then remembered she'd finished it earlier.

Settling her backside deeper into the cushions of the chair her thoughts took her back again to her mum and dad, dead now for many a year. In their day, the lodgers were mostly the men from the ships that came to port.

Britain in the nineteen fifties was a time of growth and prosperity and the sailors, unaccustomed to the jangle of money in their pockets, delighted in coming inland between sailings. Full of enthusiasm, they rushed to the city eager to embrace the chance of a bit of fun.

That was how Betty had met Bonanza Bill, John's parrot. He was not only a colorful bird but had a quirky personality to match. The bird was just a youngster when they were first introduced in 1970. He was brought back from overseas by a sailor on one of the last sailings before the ships were sold. Their demand diminished with the increasing popularity of commercial flights.

Bonanza Bill's original owner, Ted, a retired sailor, spent twenty years caring for Bonanza Bill. The parrot always accompanied him on his visits to Betty's B&B.

On what would turn out to be Ted's last visit, he expressed his concern over Bonanza Bill's fate. Ted had been diagnosed with lung cancer, and this was his last hurrah before the disease took over. His family was not willing to take on the care of the bird.

Ted's demise coincided with the death of Betty's son Trevor in 1989.

John had been Trevor's closest friend from the time they both started high school. He already lived in Betty's house, and deep in mourning for his friend, he drew comfort from Bonanza Bill. With Max and Betty's approval, he adopted the parrot, and the pair had been inseparable ever since.

So many 'firsts' had taken place in the house. Not only for Betty as a child growing up, but also as a wife to Max, mother to Trevor, and hostess to all the paying guests.

Some families came to stay for a week every year while their kids were growing up. Many a friendship was born over the years, but the times were changing. Folks were traveling further afield for their holidays.

Yes, the time was right to sell, Betty thought as she drifted off to sleep.

Max, a sturdy man with weather-worn craggy features and kind eyes, returned home undetected. He glanced over at Betty who appeared to be dozing.

He eased off his wet shoes and put on his slippers and was just about to tiptoe out of the room when Betty opened her eyes. He crossed the room and leaned down to kiss her. "Hello, love," he said.

"Max! I didn't hear you come in." She glanced at the clock.

"Clearly not," Max said with a chuckle.

"I've been tripping down memory lane." She let out a sigh.

"Oh Betty, I hope you haven't been upsetting yourself. When's that fellow from the Estate Agents coming? It's not too late to change your mind."

"Do you mind my selling the house?" Betty asked with a searching look.

"Nay love, I just want you to be happy, and you deserve a rest, so if this is what you want, then I am all for it," Max reassured. "John's not going to like it, mind."

"It is what I want, and it's about time John got his cage rattled," Betty said forthrightly. "Frank Williams, the Estate Agent is coming tomorrow."

"On a Sunday, goodness, he's keen!" Max remarked. He opened the fridge door and peered inside as his stomach growled.

"Yes," Betty agreed.

She stood and attempted to brush out the creases from her skirt. "Frank knows a property developer who may be able to help us; Daniel something.

I've told John of our plans. And you're right, he's not happy. Now, go and get washed up. I heard your stomach growling from here! Dinners ready, it's your favorite, lamb casserole."

"Lovely." Max rubbed his hands in anticipation.