

Chapter One

A MYSTERIOUS GIFT

Brad would later remark that Virginia died with the same grace with which she had lived. He marvelled at her effortless elegance, even with today's fever dampening her smooth caramel skin. In the same position, he imagined he would look like a convulsing hippo in a waterfall.

He went back to stroking his wife's curls, which lay like thousands of wriggling worms on her damp pillow. He wondered if he dared risk waking her by combing through some of the tight afro ringlets. Although the last time he had helped in this way, the house's numerous brushes and combs had disappeared the next day. He made a mental note (again) to ask Jenny about that.

His mental note was interrupted by a coughing spasm from the head of the bed.

As the doctor had shown him, he raised his wife's head a degree and waited for the fit to pass.

Brad stole a glance at his watch. Jenny would be through soon to settle Molly for the night, although he had not been unduly worried any flurry of activity had disturbed the crib's occupant. He walked over to the other side of the room to look in on his sleeping daughter, and his blue eyes misted over as they marvelled again at this miniature version of his Virginia.

As he had thought, he needn't have worried. Molly slept on, only grizzling softly from time to time, but remained largely undisturbed and untroubled. Indeed, she had remained asleep and untroubled even through her mother's earlier tearful goodbyes and urgent embrace. Babies can be selfish that way.

More movement from the bed caught his peripheral vision. Turning around, he saw Virginia seemed to want something from under her pillow. Using his initiative, Brad went around to the other side of the bed to help her. Once seized, she handed him the prize she had sought.

"And what is this, my love?"

"It is 'The Gift of Storytelling,' Brad. Now listen, as

we don't have much time."

Brad leaned in closer as his wife explained to him what was to be done. His instructions were to:

- 1) make sure Molly had a happy life;
- 2) keep The Gift of Storytelling safe; until
- 3) he handed it to Molly when the time was right.

Being a man, Brad asked for a clearer steer on instruction number 3.

"Right time, my love?"

"Yes," his wife replied.

"But dear one, how will I know when that right time is?"

"It will be..."

Virginia turned her head to entertain another coughing fit.

"Yes, my dearest?"

Virginia pressed a pink and white handkerchief to the corners of her mouth. She leaned her head back on the headboard and beckoned for a glass of water.

Using more initiative, Brad poured a glass from the jug Jenny always made sure was on his wife's bedside table. Holding the back of her head with care, he put the glass to

her lips. The few drops of lukewarm water revived her after a few moments.

"You were saying, my love, about the right time...", he tailed off.

"Yes, Brad. The right time..."

He leaned in closer in what he hoped was a casual way and not that of a desperate man thrashing around for understanding.

"...will be when the time is just right," Virginia continued.

Brad leaned back, took a breath, then went in again.

"Yes, yes, my love, but when exactly will that be?"

"You'll know, my dear, you'll know."

"But what if I don't know? What if I make a hash of things?"

"You will my dear, you will."

On which pronouncement, Virginia closed her eyes and left Brad and the world to get on as well as they could without her.

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In the weeks that followed, Brad remained uncertain about a lot of things. He was especially uncertain if his wife's final words meant she was confident he would know what to do... or that he would make a hash of things. But mainly Brad

was unsure how to negotiate life without his dearest friend, a friend he needed to help him adjust to this new status of 'widower'.

Standing at the Study's picture window staring at his wife's proud daffodils he willed answers to come. At least he thought they were daffodils, Virginia's patient snippets of horticultural information had not always taken.

Looking at her bountiful garden, it reminded him of her gift for bringing chaos to order. The same order she had brought to the creaking old farmhouse as well as to the once sad and unkempt garden.

Thoughts of his wife's many gifts nudged Brad to remember The Gift of Storytelling she had left in his care.

"What on earth have I done with it?" was his second thought.

Spurred to more action than his startled body had seen in a while, Brad turned away from the perhaps-Daffodils. He could at least try to fulfil one of his wife's wishes today, but only if he could remember where he had put the darned thing. The inspired thought of looking for the darned thing where it had been given to him would come later.

Brad dropped to the floorboards beside the master bedroom's yawning bed. Right arm outstretched, he shunted on

his belly through an alarming amount of white lace and frippery. About half way through to the other side, his fingers closed around the gift he was to have kept in safekeeping.

Brad opened the bottom drawer of his wife's writing desk. A whiff of Lilly of the Valley tugged at his nostrils and renewed his grief. He remembered her irritation when her perfume bottle had come undone.

Brad threw The Gift of Storytelling into the still fragrant draw, and slamming it shut returned to his vigil at the window. Fat, thug-like pigeons fought mean grey squirrels for the assortment of netted nuts hanging from a tree he could not name. He wagered on the scrappy squirrels to win as his eyes observed other life form in the garden since his last inventory.

Jenny, who was not scrapping with anybody, sat on a moss-covered bench on top of which she had placed a blanket to protect herself from the vomit coloured slime. Her face was upturned and eyes partially closed as she hummed a low tune to a promising sky. She pushed a large retro pram backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards until a soft whimpering interrupted her tuneless hum.

Jenny reached into the pram and gathered the child to her, a child wrapped up to withstand the harshest winters of old.

As Molly settled into her chest, Jenny rose and walked infant and pram back to the house resuming her nameless hum.

Brad turned away from the window with absolute certainty of one thing: his wife's faith in him had been misguided.

"You would have done better, my love, bequeathing your treasures to someone who knew what they were doing," he said to the Study walls.

This thought clutching at his heart, Brad fell into his wife's armchair and curled into himself.

Outside the perhaps-Daffodils nodded in agreement.

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Jenny stood in the doorway gazing at her employer and appraised the frame crumpled into the criminally overstuffed armchair. She would call the haberdashers next week, but right now there were more pressing matters at hand.

With an impatient flick of her apron, Jenny wiped away her own silent tears and barged her way into her employer's personal space. This was the name he had given the Study on the last occasion she had tried to clean it. This time she went in busying herself like a tropical cyclone.

"Over my dead body or yours, Mr Bradley, are you moping around this room again today. What would Miss Ginny think? Come on, help me open some of these windows and let in some fresh air. Smells like a skunk died in here."

Jenny turned her bulk to fuss with windows partially covered by too-heavy brocade curtains. Something else the haberdashers could replace, she thought.

"What? Oh, it's you, Jenny. I didn't hear you knock," Brad said unfurling himself into a semi-upright position.

"I didn't."

"What were you saying about Virginia?"

"I said Miss Ginny wouldn't think much to this state of affairs."

"Except 'Miss Ginny' isn't here so she can't think a darn thing about anything can she, Jenny?"

Jenny turned around to get a better look at her employer.

"You'll be minding how you speak to me, Mr Bradley, and while you're at it you can save that Godless talk for your poker buddies."

"But, Jenny..."

"Don't 'But Jenny' me. It's no wonder you feel like grey bathwater sitting in this stale room. What have I told you about keeping these windows closed for days on end?"

"Jenny?"

"Yes, Mr Bradley?"

"Just how much longer are we going to pretend I can do this?"

"Well, Mr Bradley, a good start at 'getting on' might be to re-acquaint yourself with a razor in the mornings. Have you seen yourself? But of course you haven't. You haven't seen much of anything lately. Grizzly Adams has nothing on you."

"Jenny, give me a break. My wife died. You remember that, don't you?"

"Again with the tone. Yes, Miss Ginny died and it's a crying shame, but what you're doing to yourself, this house and Miss Molly is a criminal shame."

"I'm trying, Jen, it's just so..."

"I'm not saying it isn't, Mr Bradley, but at some point you're going to have to leave the dead in peace and start minding the living."

"Yes, because it's all so easy isn't it, Jenny?"

"I didn't say it was easy, Mr Bradley, but it's definitely necessary."

"Except, I can't handle 'necessary'," Brad said under his breath.

"Maybe not right away, but there is one thing we can

tackle that's easy and necessary."

Brad had forgotten about the housekeeper's supersonic hearing.

"And what's that," he asked, kneading the first two fingers of each hand into his temples.

"Have you been listening to me?" Let's get these windows open and some air in here, and when that's done, light the fire before we fetch Miss Molly in from her nap.

"Why?"

"Why what, Mr Bradley?" Jenny asked over her shoulder, grappling with a window which refused to be liberated.

"Why do we have to light a fire for Molly? You're going to take care of her upstairs as usual aren't you?"

"That was yesterday, Mr Bradley. Today, you're taking charge."

Jenny ignored the look on her employer's face and returned to beating up the window.

"What? Jen, please, I can't."

"As I've said before, Mr Bradley, I was happy to stay on to help you with a child Miss Ginny was feeble-minded enough to leave in your care, but she's your child, not mine."

"Jenny, would you please stop terrorising that window for a moment and listen."

The sharpness in her employer's voice made Jenny turn around once more.

"I know I have to take hold of things eventually, just not right away. It's too soon, okay?"

"It's never too soon to get a grip, Mr Bradley."

"Besides, Jen, I have no idea what a baby needs."

"They need the same as all of us I should imagine."

"And what's that, Jen?"

"I think you know, Mr Bradley, I think you know."

On this pronouncement, Brad jumped to his feet, walked over to the stubborn frame of his housekeeper and spun her around to face him.

"I wish I had the faith of the women in this house. I don't know, I tell you. I DON'T KNOW!"

Jenny repressed the urge to put an arm around her employer's throat and put him into a headlock. Instead she placed one hand on his shoulder and gave it a soft but firm squeeze.

"You will come to know, Mr Bradley."

Brad looked unseeing into his housekeeper's eyes.

"Jenny would you please leave. I can't do this right now."

Jenny drew a breath through her nose which heaved her

bosom nearly to the tip of her chin. Exhaling, she stepped around her employer and made for the door.

This is going to need more than a starting pistol, she thought, as she headed out to look for bigger guns.

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Like a prize fighter, Brad bent his head from side to side to relieve the stiffness in a neck which did not appreciate falling asleep in an armchair - again.

He stood and stretched out a spine which also protested as he reached for the ceiling with his fingertips.

Looking across at the grandfather clock, Brad saw the pendulum readying itself to strike 9 'o'clock.

That's odd, he thought, Jenny would normally have scared up breakfast by now, but there was definitely a distinct lack of the mingling smells of bacon, pancakes, maple syrup and thick black coffee.

Before investigating this anomaly, Brad looked around for the slippers he had discarded the night before.

He bent to look under the desk and held onto its leather surface to steady himself - and to keep his back from further complaining. He used his toes to feel around for the familiar threadbare material of his favourite slippers. Of course Jenny was right and they would need replacing soon - but not yet.

However, a determined toe poke to the right was rewarded not with his slippers but with a high-pitched screech like that of a feral cat or a mother bird protecting her unhatched young.

Startled, Brad bent rusty knees to lower himself to allow his head to peer into the murky depths of the desk's underbelly. His head snapped back as his eyes adjusted to something that couldn't possibly be there.

"What the..."

Barefoot, Brad hurtled through the hallway towards the kitchen.

"Jenny, Jenny! Why's the baby under my desk? Who put the baby under my desk? Did you put the baby under my desk? Jenny, answer me."

Except Jenny wasn't in the kitchen.

What was in the kitchen was a cream envelope propped up against the maple syrup jar.

Brad seized the postcard sized envelope and ripped through to the card inside. He read with widening eyes the five words inscribed in Jenny's precise, copperplate handwriting:

"Over to you, Mr Bradley."

Grinning, Brad read the housekeeper's note for a third time. He had to hand it to her, his old friend certainly knew how to make her presence felt - or not felt in this case.

He returned to the hall to shout up the stairs, "Okay, Jenny, I get it. Lessons learnt and all of that."

Silence.

"I'll just grab a coffee," he continued, "and I'll meet you in the Study."

Silence.

"And I don't suppose I've left my slippers up there have I?"

More silence.

Brad made his way back to the kitchen.

At the 'ping' of the coffee maker, Brad poured coffee he had had to make himself into a cup he had had to find himself. Leaning on the breakfast bar sipping the strong inky liquid, he ruminated.

He supposed he had taken the old dear for granted. Only natural she might be feeling a bit put out. In fact, when last had he really thanked her for all she did around the place?

His memory couldn't serve up an answer.

He'd need to rectify that... and maybe let her have a couple of hours off in the week when Molly took her nap.

Unless of course it was his tone with her yesterday that had ticked Jenny off? Hell, he'd just apologise for everything to make sure all bases were covered.

With that decided and coffee finished, Brad pushed the housekeeper's note into his pocket and headed for the Study.

The wailing filling the house earlier appeared to have stopped, so no doubt Jenny would be there already taking care of baby business - and with a lecture primed and loaded to hit him smack in the face, no doubt. He braced himself for the tirade of words which were undoubtedly in his near future.

Brad craned his neck around the Study door, body half in, half out, eyes darting around the room like an apprehensive frog. Better to find out in increments just how mad she was before taking a full body blow, he reasoned.

"Jenny?"

He slid the rest of his body into the room.

A room empty except for a renewed wailing coming from under the desk.

Brad lay the pink and white basket containing his beet red and agitated daughter atop Virginia's writing desk. He lifted the angry bundle into the crook of his arm and attempted the rocking motion he thought he had seen Jenny use.

For this consideration, his daughter began to holler louder than before. When he tried next to put her on his shoulder, she writhed herself north and south, east and west, contorting herself into a tight ball of fury. Brad held on tight as his daughter threatened to dart to the floorboards beneath.

Where on earth was that woman?

"Jenny, quick, I need you," he shouted over Molly's now hysterical cries.

During the writhing and bawling of infant and parent, Brad's eyes caught two items partially hidden among the lace blankets of the vacated baby basket - a full baby's bottle and a cream envelope.

Brad ceased the bottle and manoeuvred Molly into the crook of his arm again. He shoved the lifeline into her mouth and in the blessed silence which followed eased them both into the desk chair. Laying his head against its butter-soft leather he remembered the cream envelope.

In the same neat and familiar handwriting, Brad read the four words the note contained:

"You can do this."

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Bundled up against the crisp February sunshine, Jenny watched father and daughter through the window, taking care to

remain unseen.

They were sitting in Miss Ginny's armchair and the note Jenny had written lay discarded at her employer's bare feet. He held Molly in his arms, gazing into the child's face as if seeing her for the first time. His free hand twirled her soft, chocolate ringlets.

After a while, Brad rose and carried his daughter at a careful pace back to the desk and the abandoned baby basket. He lowered Molly into the belly of this man-made womb and hovered, poised for any sign of fresh agitation.

Satisfied there would be no renewed storm, he walked over to the fireplace and began laying the fire.

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