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The Queen of New Beginnings

Written by Erica James

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*The Queen of
New Beginnings*

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Chapter One

Clayton Miller had a new hobby. Some might argue it was more of an obsession than a hobby and certainly he knew Stacey wouldn't hesitate to use the word obsession. She would probably say that it was yet another example of his rampant self-absorption.

Maybe she was right. Either way, he didn't care. So what if he now spent what Stacey would describe as an unnatural amount of time writing his obituary? It served the purpose of keeping his mind active whilst distracting it at the same time. Not that he went along with the Use It Or Lose It evangelists. On the contrary. He believed in using his brain as little as he could get away with in the hope that it wouldn't be worn out when he needed it most. Look at Iris Murdoch. One of the sharpest minds of the last century and she still went ga-ga. Why? Because she wore her brain out. Case closed.

The obituary page was often what he read first in a newspaper; he enjoyed peering in through the gap in the curtains of a stranger's life. Frequently, though, he found himself speculating just how accurate the descriptions were. The question he was facing with his own obituary was just how truthful he should be. The lure to embellish his life with a flourish of colour here and there was proving strong.

Clayton Miller, aged only forty-four and undoubtedly one of the most prolific and best comedy scriptwriters this country has produced, tragically died on his way home to his weekend retreat in the country from

an award ceremony during which he'd been given a much-deserved lifetime achievement award for his contribution to the world of comedy; the standing ovation he received went on for a record twelve minutes and fifty-two seconds. An hour later his Bentley Continental GTC Convertible was involved in a head-on collision with a Vauxhall Astra driven by an unknown man. The unknown man survived the crash, but will spend the rest of his life with the death of a truly exceptional writer on his conscience.

A private funeral service will take place for the much-missed Clayton Miller, followed later by a memorial service at Westminster Abbey where his legion of fans can pay their last respects.

In a bizarre twist of fate it would later be revealed that the unknown man was none other than Barry Osborne, Clayton's one-time best friend and writing partner.

He was not a vindictive man by nature, but circumstances had altered Clayton's thinking when it came to Barry – or Lucky Bazza as he thought of him. He couldn't go so far as to kill him off in his imagination or wish a gruesome life-threatening illness on him, but he did think it appropriate that if Clayton should be unfortunate enough to meet an untimely end, Lucky Bazza should suffer for it. If only with a guilty conscience. A fair exchange in Clayton's opinion, given that Bazza had robbed Clayton not only of his writing career, but his long-term partner as well.

But so much for embellishment. A truthful obituary would sadly fall well short of the glowing tribute Clayton had in mind for himself. All that would stand up to a lie detector would be Clayton's age. By no stretch of the imagination could he now be described as prolific. Nor did he own a Bentley. Or a house in the country. And since he hadn't written anything more coherent than a shopping list or his obituary in the last three years, there would be some people who would call him a has-been. A failure.

If it hadn't been for recent events – he squeezed his eyes shut at the memory – he would be lucky to get more than a couple of lines in the papers: *Clayton Miller, co-writer and creator of the hit series Joking Aside, died today aged forty-four. Separated from his long-term girlfriend six months ago, he lived alone with only his writer's block for company.*

But if he were to die right now, as a consequence of recent events he would garner quite a few column inches. Though God knew what they would write about him. Probably they would point the finger at his mental balance and say he'd been off his rocker. crazier than Britney Spears. Or more out of control than Messrs Brand and Ross. They might even hint that his death was not from natural causes, that he had engineered it as a way out.

He opened his eyes. Another five minutes trapped in this rattling, airtight Nissan taxi and engineering his suicide would look remarkably appealing. The car's suspension made it seem like taking a ride on a jelly – not that he'd ever taken a ride on a jelly; who had? – and its lurching motion was causing his stomach to pitch and heave. He was sure that his face was as green as the toxic, pine tree-shaped air freshener dangling from the rear-view mirror. The driver had the heater switched to hot-enough-to-melt-the-dashboard and worse, the man kept coughing and sneezing. Bubonic plague was probably in the offing.

Clayton blamed his current predicament on Glen, his agent.

It had been Glen's idea for him to hide out in some off-the-beaten-track place where the press wouldn't find him. Doubtless it would prove to be one of those places where there were road names like Lower Bottom Lane, Big Bottom Lane, and Up Your Bottom.

Whatever hellish place he was destined to take refuge in, he hoped the driver knew the way, that he hadn't been lying when he'd looked at the address Clayton had given him at the station. There was no sign of any satnav equipment on the dashboard, which Clayton took to be a good

sign. It ruled out the possibility of a bossy-voiced woman misdirecting them down a one-way track to a ravine and their certain death.

Death. There it was again. It kept popping into his thoughts at the slightest provocation. Was he suicidal?

Murderous, more like it. He could happily take out all those journalists who had written about him lately and never experience a moment's regret. It wouldn't solve a damned thing, but since when had revenge been about solving anything?

He wiped at the steamed-up window and looked out. Nothing. Zilch. Just miles of empty fields and drystone walls. Wherever he was, with the light fading, it looked suspiciously like the end of the world. He closed his eyes once more and tried to picture himself in happier times when he had been at the height of his creativity.

It was dark when the Nissan finally came to a stop. The ratcheting sound of the handbrake being yanked on woke Clayton. He stepped out of the car and stretched. Weary and dishevelled, he was in need of a long hot shower.

He looked up at the house and didn't like what he saw. It was huge. Huge and unwelcoming. It seemed to glower down at him with the kind of I'm-bigger-than-you attitude that had terrorized many a school playground since time immemorial. It made him want to run and hide.

'It's some place you've got yourself here,' the driver said as he hauled Clayton's luggage out of the boot.

'It's not mine,' Clayton answered him.

'Just visiting, then?'

Eager not to part with any information about himself – Glen had warned him to keep his mouth shut – he shrugged and nodded evasively. He paid the man and watched the tail lights of the Nissan disappear down the lengthy, straight drive and into the night.

Alone, he sought out the large flowerpot he had been instructed to locate, and rummaged around in the dark until he found what he was looking for. What kind of a

neighbourhood was it that you could leave a key under a flowerpot in this day and age?

He let himself in and at once experienced a pang of longing for the toxic warmth of the Nissan taxi. The house was icy-cold. Was this his punishment? To freeze in hell?

How Stacey and Lucky Bazza would love that.