Born Bad

Josephine Cox

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Extract

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Part One

Weymouth, July 1956

Love Hurts

Chapter One

Harry Blake felt as though he was the last man on earth. It was a lonely, disturbing feeling.

In this rare moment of quiet, the long-ago memories were like moving pictures in his tortured mind; vivid, aching memories of love and loss, of pain and joy and the people and places that had shaped his life so far.

Even now, in this moment of solitude, with the soothing throb of the ocean in his ears and the bright sunshine bouncing off the water, he could not rest easy.

Today was one of those perfect July days when the heart soars and dreams are allowed.

But not for Harry. Not today. Maybe never again.

All about him, ordinary people were enjoying their ordinary lives. Above him, the seagulls mewed and swooped, and sounds of laughter echoed across the sands. Harry was oblivious to all of that.

This was a day for families, a day for fun and being together. But not for him, and not for her. No amount of laughter or sunshine could change what was happening in his life.

He had no say in the events unfolding. Events which, in a few short months had changed his world – and that of his loved ones. Only once before had he felt so lost and alone, and that was many years ago when he was a fresh-faced lad of eighteen.

Back then, he had made a decision which had haunted him ever since; a hard decision, forced on him by youth and circumstance. Because of his decision, lives had been fractured – including his own – and for that he would always blame himself.

Today though, he was caught up in a completely different nightmare. This time, he had played no part in its creation, because unlike before, he had no way of influencing the outcome. This time, it was

all too final. Too cruel.

Deep in thought, his gaze absentmindedly followed the sailing-boats. Wending their way through Weymouth Harbour, their tall white sails billowing as they thrust along on the crest of a gentle breeze, they were a magnificent sight.

Vaguely aware of the playful children building castles in the sand, a kind of rage cut like a blade through his heart. She should be here, he thought. Sharing it all with us.

He could see her now, the chocolate-brown hair and the pretty dark eyes that crinkled in the corners when she laughed, her long slender legs swinging as she perched on their garden wall, and her smiling eyes uplifted to the sunshine.

Sara was a good woman, a woman of kindness and humour, and now, for reasons he would never understand, something had happened. It was happening right now, at this very moment. Relentless and unforgiving, it would go on until the end.

Nothing he could do would halt the inevitable.

‘Daddy!’ The little boy’s voice cut across his

dark thoughts. ‘Please may I have an ice cream?’

Composing himself, Harry turned and nodded.

Excited, the boy jumped up and down. ‘And can I have strawberry sauce?’

‘Go on then.’ Harry wondered at the way life could still go on, when inside, his world was falling apart. ‘Here’s a shilling. Try not to get it all over your shirt.’

Pushing the chocolate-flake into the ice cream, the big man serving behind the beach-front café counter passed the cornet to the boy, joking, ‘Your daddy doesn’t want an ice cream, then?’

Holding the cornet carefully with both hands, Tom curled his tongue along the ice cream. ‘He can share mine if he likes!’

‘’Spect he’s got his mind on other things, eh?’ Leaning down to hand the nipper his threepenny bit change, the man glanced across at Harry, thinking how sad the young fella looked. He could only have been in his thirties, yet he was bent and haggard like an old man. Curious, the older man observed Harry a moment longer, before turning away to serve his other

customers.

A few moments later, still heavy of heart yet openly smiling and chatting for his son's sake, Harry led Tom along the Esplanade and on towards where the car was parked near the statue of George III. 'Are we going to see Mammy now?' the boy asked eagerly.

Harry took a moment to answer, his gaze sweeping the child's appearance. His thick mop of dark hair stood up as though in fright, and the pink strawberry sauce was plastered around his mouth. Oh, how he loved this child, and Sara ... his Sara ... his precious, wonderful Sara!

Swamped with emotion, he took the boy by the hand and ran him across the road.

'Just look at the state of you!' he said huskily. 'We'd best clean you up, before your mammy sees you.'

Slurping on his ice cream, the boy ran and skipped, laughing heartily while his father pretended to chase him.

The boy did not fully realize the situation, but things had begun to change some time ago, when he had sensed a sadness in his parents. When he was near they smiled and

pretended that everything was all right. But when they thought he was not looking, they would hold each other for a long time and never let go. Then his mammy went off to hospital, and the house felt so lonely without her.

When, just now, the sadness touched him, he thought of Jack.

Jack was a frog he had caught from the brook in his long-handled net.

He loved that frog; he fed it and cared for it, and even made a little pool for it to swim in, with plants to hide under, and when he called its name it would come hopping out to see him. One day, Jack went away and he never saw him again.

Tom was upset for a time. Then his daddy got him another frog who looked exactly like Jack, and that was fine. He remembered it clearly. When he was sad about Jack, his daddy had put it right, so now whenever he was sad, he believed his daddy would put that right too.

There was nothing to fear, no one to hurt him, because his daddy was here. In Tom's little world everything was warm and wonderful, and that was how it should be.

As they walked on, Harry chatted to his son, and for a while his heart was quieter. His world had crumbled about him, but so far, the child had been protected.

‘Daddy, look!’ The boy brought Harry’s attention to the flower barrow. ‘Yellow roses.’

Remembering, Harry smiled. ‘Mammy’s favourites,’ he mused aloud. If she could have red, pink or yellow roses, she would always choose the yellow ones.

‘Can we take her some?’

Leading the boy to the stall, Harry fished a handful of coins from his trouser-pocket. ‘Why don’t we get her a dozen, eh?’

A short time later, the two of them were nearly back at the car, Harry deep in thought, and the boy alongside, clutching the bunch of roses in one hand and his melting ice cream in the other.

With his sticky fingers, the boy threw the remains of the cornet to the seagulls. When they quickly swooped down and carried it away in their sharp beaks, the child was fearful. ‘You won’t let them hurt me, will you?’

Harry reassured him. 'I would never let anyone hurt you.' Lifting the boy into his arms, he inwardly cringed at the knowledge that soon, the boy would hurt like never before.

As he was bundled into the Hillman Minx, Tom asked, 'Are we really taking Mammy home today?'

'Yes, son.' Starting the ignition, Harry fought back his tears. 'Your mammy's waiting for us right now, so we'd best get a move on.' He cleared his throat.

'Daddy?'

'Yes, son?'

'Why did Mammy send us away today?'

As he moved off from the kerb and into the traffic, Harry recalled how Sara had been adamant that she needed a little time, that she wasn't ready and they must come back later. 'I think she wanted to make herself look pretty for us,' he said eventually, and smiled to himself.

His darling wife could be a bossy tramp when needed!

'When we get Mammy, can we go to the park?'

‘That would be nice, but I don’t think so – not today, son.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because …’ Harry swallowed hard before going on. ‘Maybe we’d best leave it for another day.’

‘Look, Daddy! New baby ducks.’

‘I know, and I’m sure Mammy would love to do that, but … like I said, another day, eh?’

‘She will like her roses though, won’t she?’

Harry nodded.

‘Can we go to the park for my birthday next week then?’

‘Mmm.’ Harry’s thoughts were elsewhere.

The boy took his dad’s mumble as a yes. ‘Mammy said she’s got five candles for my cake. I’m a big boy now.’

Harry smiled wistfully. ‘You certainly are.’

‘I’m starting school next week.’

‘Not next week,’ Harry gently reminded him. ‘It’s next term – in September.’

‘Oh.’ The boy was downhearted.

‘Hey, Tom, don’t be like that.’ Harry glanced at the boy in his mirror. ‘It’s only a few weeks away. It’ll be here before you know it.’

The boy grinned. ‘I’ve got my red cap – and my black blazer,’ he said proudly.

Harry played along. ‘Soon you’ll be all grown up.’ He recalled the day when Sara went shopping with Tom for his uniform, and how excited their son had been. Dear God! That was such a short time ago. So much had happened in between, it seemed like a lifetime.

His thoughts retreated into the past. They say your bad deeds come home to haunt you. Was it true? he thought. When he had caused all that pain eighteen years ago, was the payback always lurking in the shadows?

Deep down, he had always known his past would return with a vengeance. After all, it was what he deserved.

But Sara did not deserve it.

And neither did their son.

For one sorry, fleeting moment, someone else crossed his mind – a girl named Judy.

Flooded with guilt, he thrust her from his mind. That was a lifetime ago.

And this was now.

*** * ***

The nurse was a happy young thing, with dark expressive eyes and a broad Scottish accent.

'Just look at yourself,' she said, holding the mirror up to Sara's face. 'See how bonny you are.'

While Sara checked herself in the mirror, the nurse went on, 'Nurse Bridget has done a fantastic job with you. She knows more about make-up and fashion than I could learn in a lifetime.'

'And I'm very grateful.' Sara could not believe the difference in her appearance.

Nurse McDonald chatted on. 'You do know she's off to a fancy job as a make-up artist in one o' them posh London salons? Apparently, when she was a bairn, she always wanted to be either a nurse or a beauty consultant. It was her dad who persuaded her to go in for the nursing. "Nurses are always in demand," he told her, "so you'll never be out of a job".'

She groaned. ‘Have ye ever known a man not to interfere?’ She didn’t wait for an answer. Instead she chatted on, ‘Bridget reckons her dad’s a born interferer, like all men, always thinking they know best.’

Sara was sympathetic. ‘Dads are like that. I suppose he was only thinking of Bridget though. It sounds like he really wanted her to have a solid future.’

‘Aye ... could be. Anyway, she’s leaving on Friday, and she’s happy as Larry. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad for her, but at the same time I can’t help but envy her. There she’ll be, dabbling in cosmetics and meeting rich, famous people. And there’ll be me – stuck here changing beds and emptying bedpans.’

Sara smiled at that. ‘Ah, come on, Aileen. You would never want to be anything but a nurse, would you?’

During her long and gruelling stay in hospital, Sara had come to know this kindly girl, and like all the other patients she had great respect for the staff who cared for them; each and every one a true professional. But Aileen McDonald was special; a dedicated nurse, born to care for others.

Sara reminded her now. 'You may not realise it, but you have a real gift ... a magical way that puts us all at ease.' She glanced about the ward. 'There isn't one single patient here who doesn't love you.'

The other young woman glowed with pride. 'Do you really think so?'

Sara nodded. 'Ask anyone here, and they'll tell you.'

'So, I'm good at being a nurse but I'm a real dunce at make-up, is that what you're trying to say?'

Sara chuckled. 'We're all gifted in different ways. Nurse Bridget has the talent to brighten a patient's face, while you have the God-given talent to brighten a patient's spirits.'

Embarrassed and humbled by Sara's remark, Nurse Bridget gave her a peck on the cheek, 'Alright,' she conceded, 'I'll admit, I'm no genius when it comes to make-up ... in fact, sometimes when I'm in a rush, I can't even put my lipstick on straight, and once when I was in an almighty rush, I got on the bus with one eyebrow plucked and the other looking like a shaggy dog. When I got out my mirror and tweezers to finish the job, I got some

very peculiar looks I can tell you!'

Laughing at that, Sara then reached forward from her wheelchair and picked up the hand mirror from the bedcover where she had lain it. Taking a second glance at herself, she said, 'I still can't believe that's me!'

The discreet sweep of mascara and eyebrow pencil made her brown eyes appear bright and sparkling, whereas before they had been dull and lifeless. Also, the delicate mask of cream foundation skilfully hid the dark hollows beneath her eyes, making her look even younger than her thirty-two years. Amazingly, with careful use of tinted face powder, Nurse Bridget had somehow managed to flush Sara's pale skin into a soft pink glow.

Ravaged by a debilitating illness and the harsh, invasive treatment over the past months, Sara's long flowing locks were gone, and in their place was a cap of fine, closely cropped hair.

This morning, Nurse Bridget had done her best to breathe life into it, and now, after much tweaking and brushing, she had created the illusion of a natural shine. Moreover, when the wispy ends were

trimmed away, the hair appeared thick and healthy.

Admiring her transformation, Sara patted the beautiful burgundy-coloured dress she was wearing. 'I do love this dress,' she murmured. 'Don't you think my Harry has good taste?'

Nurse Aileen nodded approvingly at the dress with its boat-neckline and pretty buttons, and the clever blouson design that hid the pathetically thin shape beneath. 'I think you look wonderful,' she said, 'and yes, your Harry does have good taste.'

Nurse Aileen recalled how thrilled and excited both Harry and his son had been, earlier that morning. 'We can't wait to take you home, sweetheart,' Harry told Sara.

'We've got cake and everything!' the boy informed her. 'Daddy's made a surprise for you. He's built a special place in the garden where you can sit.'

'Tom!' Harry had groaned. 'You weren't supposed to tell. It's not a surprise any more now, is it?'

When Tom looked downcast, Harry had hugged him hard. 'It's all right, son. All that matters is that Mammy likes it.'

Tom jumped up and down. ‘You will, won’t you, Mammy?’

Sara promised that she would love it.

Harry and Sara had laughed at his innocent antics, while the nurse had looked on, her heart sore. She had seen the pain in Harry’s eyes, and sensed his anguish, which he somehow managed to hide whenever Sara was watching.

‘He’s handsome too, don’t you think?’ Sara’s quiet voice interrupted her thoughts.

‘He certainly is,’ the nurse agreed.

Sara’s mood grew serious. ‘Life is so unfair, isn’t it?’ she asked softly. Then, even before Nurse Aileen could answer, she swiftly changed the subject. ‘So?’ Her smile was quick and bright, though her voice was quivering. ‘You really like the dress he chose?’

Nurse Aileen played along. ‘Aha, I really do,’ she answered truthfully. ‘That burgundy colour is so right for you, and the belt is perfect.’ Wide and hugging, the shiny black belt gave Sara the illusion of shape.

Close to tears, Sara thanked her. ‘I feel like

a real woman.'

'That's because you are a real woman,' Aileen told her. 'Don't you ever forget that.'

Sara gave her a peck on the cheek. 'You're such a good friend. I don't know how I can ever thank you.' She had not forgotten the endless hours this dear, devoted girl had spent talking with her, exchanging secrets and making her laugh through the pain.

'Sara?' the nurse's gentle voice interrupted her thoughts.

'Yes?'

'Why did you make me send them away earlier – Harry and Tom?'

Sara gave a long drawn-out sigh. 'Just for once, I didn't want them to see me looking pale and ill.' She paused, her dark eyes swimming with tears. 'I know it can't last, but thanks to you and Nurse Bridget just for a while, I can pretend there is still something of the woman I once was.'

Her voice broke as she remembered how it had been. 'I so much want Harry to look at me and see the girl he married ... even if it's only for a few fleeting moments.'

Nurse McDonald had noticed how Sara was

fidgeting. 'You don't need to be in pain,' she reminded her again. 'I can give you something to make you more comfortable.'

Sara shook her head. 'Not today.' Her quick little smile was incredibly beautiful. 'Today, I mean to be fully conscious and strong. I need my family to see past the illness, and imagine me as I used to be.'

Bowing her head she spoke in a whisper, as though to herself: 'If they can do that, this effort will all have been worthwhile.'

The nurse quietly persisted. 'All the same, Harry would not want you to punish yourself.'

Sara reached out and took hold of her hand. 'Won't you just be happy for me? I'm going home! After all these weeks, I can't believe I'm really going home.'

She took a moment to let herself believe it. 'Time with my family will be so precious … to listen and talk, and laugh with them.' When a rogue tear escaped down her cheek, she quickly brushed it aside. 'You do know what I mean, don't you?'

Filled with admiration, Nurse Aileen McDonald assured her that she understood. And she did.