

# Just Good Friends

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As the silver car left Carluke, Brian floored the pedal, glad to be heading into true countryside at last and thoroughly enjoying the power of its huge engine as it pushed them forward and up to eighty-five.

BLISS! Absolute BLISS!

Beside him Anita was trying to get a word into the mobile phone conversation. He smiled, pleased it was not being relayed on his new Bluetooth wrap-around-sound speakers.

'Sorry, Tina, this line is breaking up.' Anita placed her finger over the red phone symbol. 'I think. . . .' She pressed, disconnecting. 'God, Brian, over forty-two minutes and she was still going round in circles. Poor girl, she's lost the plot. Of course, she's years older than me. Your Archie will need to get her into a home soon, as a good brother should. You should have a word with him.'

Brian raised an eyebrow. Anita and Tina (Christina) had been in the same class two years ahead of him at Langside Primary School.

'Better switch it off, before she gets you on redial.'

'Good idea. Can I use your phone? I want to check on Martha, see if she is available.'

Brian stifled a groan. His ex-wife Martha was the third member of the unholy trio and she was still chipping away at him, even after five years. In the settlement she got the house in Newton Mearns and half of his 'worldly goods'. In return, he had claimed the car, the other car, his most prized possession.

Now in semi-retirement, he amused himself with a hobby business buying vintage cars, doing them up with help from Archie's workshop guys, then selling them on from his showroom, making a tidy living. After a year adrift following the divorce, Brian had been bunking up with Archie in his sandstone villa in Newlands, where the vintage Bentley it was secure in a huge triple garage beside Archie's two cars, a Porsche, and a Mini Cooper soft top. The two men had been friends from schooldays, finding each other again after years of unhappy marriages. Not exactly a perfect couple but happy enough and honest with each other about their dalliances with others, often making a foursome with whoever was their flavour-of-the-month toy boys.

The 1967 Rolls Royce Silver Cloud sped onwards, heading for Peebles Hydro where he and Anita would do two forty-minute spots singing with the Silvertones Big Band Sound. It was another forties and fifties dance weekend with the participants all trying to outdo each other, dressed in period clothing.

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As they travelled, his cousin Anita was trying to finalise a group of singers for a charity event she was calling a "Golden Oldies' Singalong" to be held later in the week at the Glasgow's City Halls. This gig was in aid of St Margaret's Hospice in memory of her husband Stephen now dead these last ten years but whose flame still burned brightly in her heart.

'Martha, I'll put you on speaker, Brian's driving, I just . . .'

*'My Brian? You're in the Roller, right? That car should have been mine Brian. I looked after it like the child we never had, all those years when Anita and Stephen took you away from me, on your endless cruise shows with that wee rat, Tommy and his Silvertones. It's mine, Brian. That car is mine. D'you hea. . .'*

Brian hit the recently installed Bluetooth button hidden under the dashboard.

Martha ranted on, into the uncaring ether.

'Anita, switch it totally off, please. Thanks. You do realise this call will generate days of abusive text messages.'

'But Brian, Martha is a brilliant singer. And now she's free of looking after her mother, well . . .'

'OK Anita. Here's the deal. If you get Martha, you'll need to find a replacement for me.'

'But Brian, the hall's booked and Tommy and his Trio from the Silvertones have inked it into their diary. We need another female voice. I can't do the whole show on my own, can I? Not with my throat!'

'What about the girl from the Jazz Choir, Leela?'

'No Brian. She's half our age! And she's Romanian, a refugee! What would she know of our repertoire? And she's an amateur!'

'Actually Anita, Leela's from Motherwell. Her mother was Latvian, her father is Scottish. And she is a great singer, yes? And remember, we all had to start somewhere, yes? And she stood in for Frank on the piano that time at the Jazz Choir. You have to admit, Anita, Leela is very accomplished.'

'But Brian, she's blind!'

'Yes, so? She works with Guide Dogs for the Blind, as a final assessor, you know, before the dogs get assigned.'

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'Does she? How do you know so much about her?'

'We had a coffee. Check the glove compartment. I wrote her mobile number on the back of one of my cards.'

'Was she in this car? With a dog? No wonder my hay fever is acting up. You know I'm allergic to dogs, don't you?'

'Well, yes, she was but no dog, we left Marigold at home. Anyway, I used Archie's Mini.'

'Who's Marigold?'

'Her dog under assessment.'

'So, you met her for coffee, did you? Was this a date? You picked her up from her house?'

'Yes, why?'

'Where does she live?'

'Tantallon Road.'

'But Brian, *I* live in Tantallon Road.'

'Yes, two closes along from you. Same close as Lynne and Frank. She's quite pally with them.'

'Brian, how long has this affair been going on, right under my nose?'

'It's not an 'affair', it's a friendship, that's all. I'm gay, remember? Anyway, Leela's great fun, and she's a great cook too. She came round to ours and cooked her special lasagne for us. Archie said it was the best food he's eaten in years. No, Anita, Leela and I, it's a friendship, yes? She comes round to our place and she cooks for Archie and me and we eat, have a glass of wine and she plays piano and we sing, just the three of us.'

'Oh, what do you sing?'

'Just the usual stuff, you know. She's brilliant at "Puppy"<sup>1</sup>, actually.'

'But Brian, that's mine! You traitor. You know I love that song.'

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<sup>1</sup> *Puppy Love*, written by Paul Anka, 1960.

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'But she *is* good at it, gets all the high notes spot on. Brilliant, actually. She went down a treat at "The Redhurst".'

'You've been singing with her professionally? If you get caught, you'll lose your card.'

'No, no. It was an open mike evening. She won first place.'

'With "Puppy", with *my* song?'

'No, she did that for her second encore. She won with "Cheri Amore", actually. Quite appropriate, don't you think?'

'Oh, Brian, you know I love that song too. At least she didn't sing "Moonlight", did she?'

'Ah... well, actually that was her first encore.'

'Brian Silver, you bloody traitor. How could you! My three most favourite songs and you coached her. Martha was right about you all along. You're a rat, just like your brother Tommy.'

'Ah, look, here we are. Time to gird our loins. *Peebles Hydro, here we come!* How's your throat feeling?'

'I'm fine! How many times do I have to answer the same question? My throat is fine.'

'Great. Let's find Tommy and get set up for a rehearsal and sound check.'

'You go on, Brian. Leave me your keys. I'll catch you up. I'll try Celia for the Hospice gig.'

'Right. But use your own phone, please. And whatever you do, do *not* give Celia my number.'

'Brian, it's not Celia's fault. She's so lonely, now her Alfie has gone to heaven with my Stephen. She thought you fancied her.'

'Did you not tell her about Archie and me?'

'Yes, but she's a bit old-fashioned. She thinks you're just good friends.'