Bourne toWrite... creative writing workshops

Clara's Hand

by Smita R. K.

The letter arrived three days after Clara's funeral— written in her hand. After that, another warning arrived on the first Friday of every month, each envelope addressed in Clara's unmistakable hand.

Stan told himself that she must have written the letters before her death and arranged for them to be posted in sequence. It was the only reasonable explanation. She was dead, and he had inherited her considerable fortune.

Throughout their twenty-year marriage, he had been compliant and committed. Clara had not been an easy companion; many people would vouch for that. Some said she merely had high standards, but such standards made ordinary life intolerable: a misused word, an uneducated accent, a shabby manner of dress. Conversation had to be elegant, clothes immaculate, manners charming.

Stan possessed few of these lofty virtues, yet Clara had married him. He walked with a slight limp and generally wore casual clothes suitable for crossing muddy fields with his dogs.

He had no interest in sitting in the drawing room in the evenings, making conversation with pompous guests from nearby manors. He had a habit of fumbling and dropping cutlery whenever he was nervous or on edge.

Clara made him nervous.

She watched for mistakes, and under her gaze, they came. At the first clatter of a spoon, his easy nature and self-assurance deserted him. One error led to another until the situation became ridiculous, with guests staring at him as they watched the domestic drama unfold.

It was easier to linger at the edges of the drawing room, half-hidden behind sofas and chairs, smiling and filling glasses. Sometimes, if he was lucky, he could sneak unnoticed into the servants' room and have his dinner there, away from Clara's cold gaze.

And now there was this posthumous letter from Clara.

It said simply, 'You will not get a single penny until you become a good man.'

Puzzling. What did she mean?

Then, the following month:

'I know what you are doing, Stan. I always knew.'

It was impossible. She could not have known.

The letters unsettled him. He was a placid man, and now that Clara was dead, along with all her reprimands, he was even more placid. There was no one to stop him, and he could be as shabby as he wished.

As he had done on so many evenings, he went walking across the fields with his dogs. Once he was out of sight of the manor, he deviated from the path and took a less-trodden one leading to a little cottage with a light glowing in the window.

There, he spent a very pleasurable hour. At times, it could be longer, provided Clara did not notice. He had been wise enough to do this only once or twice a week to avoid suspicion.

In the gentle, warm company of the cottage's owner, Stan bloomed like a flower. Clara's cold criticisms lost their power to freeze his inner core. They could dampen his mood, but in the cottage, that mood would always be restored.

Three months after her death, he continued the routine: once or twice a week, the deviation from the path, the light in the window as daylight faded around the tiny cottage. An hour or two spent in tranquillity, and then back home.

His dogs liked the cottage too. The owner always had treats for them.

Stan did not need Clara's money. As long as he had a roof over his head and a comfortable life, he did not hanker for more.

And yet, she seemed to know something about him.

She had said that she 'always knew'.

Why had she not confronted him while she was alive? Why had she planned it this way—these letters coming through the door on the same day every month?

Stan began to feel a sense of foreboding at the beginning of each month. What would she have written this time? The thought made his stomach churn, and he found himself starting at unfamiliar noises.

Stan was a placid man, accustomed to his ways.
But that was changing.
Clara had always known how to upset him.
And she was doing it still.