

The McBrides

A Glasgow Comedy Fantasy

By

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Chapter 1

The Prize

The day started out like every other. Agnes McBride gazing sadly across the cluttered breakfast table at her unshaven, half-dressed, bleary-eyed drunkard of a husband, Archie. As she often did, she cast her mind back some thirty years when, as a young, attractive girl of eighteen, she had been courted and won over by an equally handsome, if somewhat shady young man a year or so older than her. He had made her all sorts of promises, how they would live in the best, the poshest suburbs in the city; that she would wear only the finest, the most expensive designer-fashion clothes. They would holiday in exotic locations where only the best people went. In short, he would provide her with a life most other women could only dream of.

Well, he'd certainly done that, all right. Only, it wasn't so much a dream as a nightmare. But it was even worse than a nightmare. At least in a bad dream, you eventually woke up. But this was no dream. This was her reality. Living three flights up in a two-bedroom rented apartment in one of the poorest areas of the city. The building was crumbling about them, but their money-grubbing landlord refused point-blank to do any repairs. As for fashionable clothes, she couldn't remember the last time she could afford to buy herself new pantyhose. Exotic holidays? The last vacation she could remember them taking was a day-trip excursion

to Largs, a coastal holiday resort thirty-something miles from where they lived. That had been four years ago, and she only got that because she threatened to withhold certain privileges if he didn't comply.

Despite being in her late-forties, Agnes still considered herself to be an attractive woman, which, indeed, she was. Of average height, she had finely chiseled features with prominent cheekbones, which merely accentuated her naturally good looks. She had somehow, God alone knew how, managed to keep her trim figure. Some grey streaks were now appearing in her blonde hair, which she always wore to shoulder length. Apart from that, she could easily have passed for someone ten years younger. She rarely wore slacks, preferring dresses or skirts, which allowed her to show off her finely-shaped legs. No matter how often it happened, and it happened regularly, she still felt a sense of pride in her own femininity when men turned to look in her direction.

In her reverie, she was only vaguely aware of Archie, as he sat across from her, his head bowed, almost touching the table, while his hands twined together on his scalp, as if trying to prevent what remained of his hair from flying away. He had stopped munching his toast which came as a blessed relief. Archie's eating habits were a sight to behold, especially at the breakfast table. He didn't so much eat his food as masticate it, and it reminded Agnes of a cow staring into empty space, mindlessly chewing the cud.

She knew she could have done better. She could have done much better, and it wasn't as if she hadn't had the opportunities. There was the man who had come to fix the boiler a few months ago for a start. Stephen, his name was. (Call me 'Stevie', he offered.) He really fancied her, making all kinds of suggestive comments, asking her if she ever got hot in the bedroom. 'Hot and steamy' was the phrase he used. Did she ever get 'hot and steamy' in the bedroom? Did it ever get so warm that she had to sit in just her underwear? "I bet you look

good in black,” he intoned breathlessly. And it wasn’t as if he wasn’t handsome. A cross between Warren Beatty and Robert Redford. A gorgeous face with an immature lopsided grin and deep brown come-to-bed eyes. Oh, yes, it wouldn’t have taken much persuading for her to have a session of *afternoon delight* with this handsome Lothario. But she was a married woman. He too, judging by the gold band on his wedding finger, was in a permanent relationship. This inconvenience didn’t seem to prevent him from shamelessly flirting with her. The only difference between them was that she took her wedding vows more seriously than he did. Pity, though.

It had been a constant source of wonder why she was still with Archie after so many years, especially when all his promises seemed to have been written in disappearing ink. The phrase, ‘*can’t live with him, twenty years in Barlinnie*’⁽¹⁾ for murdering him’ came to mind. But although she hadn’t killed him, she was still serving a life sentence.

“Oh, my head, my poor sore head,” Archie moaned, his voice reverberating off the kitchen table.

“It speaks.” His wife said. “My God, you must have had some night last night.”

“Never mind all that. You’ll need to send for Doctor Gillespie. I’m dying, Aggie. I’m about to collapse on the carpet.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you that a couple of Alka Seltzer tablets wouldn’t cure, ya big lump. I heard you, staggering up the stairs at half-past three this morning, singing your lungs out, so you were. *Left your heart in San Francisco*, did you? You should’ve stayed with it. You can’t hold your liquor. It’s always the same, especially at Hogmanay.”⁽²⁾ Last year, you were off work ‘til, what was it, the fourteenth of January!”

“I remember that, but don’t forget, I had a bad cold,” he reminded her.

“Yes, but how did you catch cold in the first place? I’ll tell you how. You were doing your impersonation of Gene Kelly on the railings of The Suspension Bridge, that’s how! See when I was told you’d fallen into the Clyde, I felt sorrier for the fish, after all the pollution you must have caused.”

“Well, last night was different. I was at a reunion for the Fourteenth Glasgow Royals. Don’t forget,” he continued, stabbing his finger at her chest, “I seen service in the war.”

“Away and boil your head, you big pudding. The only service you ever seen was the cutlery service in Maryhill Barracks. The war was over before you got your posting.”

“Well, so what? I was still prepared to go and fight for my king and country. I couldn’t help it if I was called up too late to do my bit.” He defended himself.

“You were prepared to *what*? I remember your mother the day those two M.P.s came to your house in Bridgeton. You were in your bedroom trying to hide, an’ your mum telling them that you were an under-cover agent, and mustn’t be disturbed.”

“So I was,” he laughed, “only it was under the bed covers.”

Despite herself, Agnes giggled too, sharing his reminiscence at the fond memory. He liked to see her laugh. *God knows*, he thought, *I’ve given her little enough to laugh about these past thirty years*. He would never be sure if he really loved her when he proposed. Come to think of it, he wasn’t sure if he ever actually *did* propose. All he seemed to remember of that time were flashes, like still photographs riffled together into a moving mosaic. Him lying in bed with her; the bedroom door being kicked in by her two hulking brothers; her shouting rape (a lie!); him being hauled out of bed and being punched and kicked all over his body; her shouting at her brothers not to belt him ‘downstairs’; then being given the usual choice – marriage or death. Through his injuries, and the eye he could still see out of, he remembered looking at her and deciding there were worse things in life than being wed to a not bad

looking dame. And, as he further recalled, he didn't fancy having more of the bejaysus kicked out of him by two sub-human creatures whose combined intelligence might just have been enough to be able to allow them to peel an orange. They'd had not had a bad life together, he reflected, as he watched her nagging at him. No, he could never say that he loved her, but, all things being equal, he didn't hate her, either.

“Are you going to sit there all day? You'll be late for work. Now get your butt off that chair and scram.”

The realization that he would be late for work did more to sober him up than any amount of black coffee. “Oh, Jesus, if I'm late again, my gaffer'll have my P45⁽³⁾ in his hands. Have you made my sandwiches?” Within ten minutes, he had washed and finished dressing, brushing the remnants of toast crumbs from his trousers as he hurried out the door.

He was in the street before Agnes realised that he had left his morning paper behind. He had never done that before. It was like a ritual. After breakfast, he would fold up the newspaper and put it in the right-hand pocket of his jacket. His lunch always went into the left-hand pocket. He would read part of the paper on the bus, and finish it during his meal break.

Always. But not this morning. He had been in such a rush in his hungover condition to get to work on time he'd forgotten to take his paper with him. *Ah, well, no point in it going to waste, Agnes said to herself. It's not often I get the chance to see a paper. I'll just have a wee quick read through it, then get started on the housework...*

After glancing through the first few pages, she threw the paper down in disgust. *No bloody wonder he buys this paper, she thought as her eyes alighted on page three, historically the page in the tabloids where the photograph of an almost naked woman would be found. Many budding actresses and singers had first found fame, or perhaps infamy, on this page. These girls should be ashamed of themselves. What mother would ever allow her daughter to go*

parading her body in such a shameless...? She stopped as she suddenly remembered where she'd first met Archie. If *her* mother knew what *she'd* been up to...

As she scanned through the rest of the newspaper, a glossy supplement fell out. Agnes was about to discard it when she noticed some advertisements, and the products were ones she would replace if they ever got the money. *Might be a few bargains*, she said to the empty kitchen, as she leafed through the pages. But this wasn't an advertisement, at least, not in the usual sense, and the 'adverts' were not promoting the items for sale. These were the prizes in a competition, all the appliances Agnes needed. *Oh, but there'll be thousands of people entering this thing*, she thought. Still, as she reminded herself, if she didn't do it, she had absolutely no chance. At least if she tried, well, you just never knew...

Several uneventful weeks passed, and Agnes had forgotten about her entry until one day, on her way to her local shopping plaza, she met her friend and neighbour, Maisie Anderson. After exchanging the usual pleasantries, Maisie asked Agnes if she subscribed to *The Morning Globe*. "Yes, Archie has it delivered. Why do you ask?"

"Well, Eric, our eldest, works on the paper, and he says he heard that it was someone from around here that won first prize in that competition they ran a while back. But keep it to yourself," she added, putting her finger to her lips.

"Yes, now I remember, I entered it myself."

Maisie gave her friend a suggestive wink. "Maybe it's you, eh, Aggie?"

"Don't be daft. I've never won anything in my life. Except Archie, and he was the boobie prize." Maisie smiled. She knew Agnes's husband very well. To say that Archie was the boobie prize was paying him a compliment. At least a boobie prize was usually useful for

something. As the two women parted, it struck Agnes that she couldn't even remember what the prize was. She turned to find Maisie to ask her, but her friend had already disappeared into one of the shops. It wasn't that important, she guessed. It would be someone else who had the good fortune. It would never be her...

On her return home, she found some envelopes behind the front door. There was the usual amount of junk mail, and a couple of bills, addressed to her husband. He had made it clear from the start of their married life, that he was the man of the house, and it was his responsibility to earn the money and pay the outgoings. True, Archie didn't earn much, but the pay was regular, and despite his heavy drinking, he presented his pay packet to her every Friday night. Yes, he had usually opened it, but only so he could have a couple of start-of-the-weekend pints on the way home.

It was the last envelope that caught her attention. It was embossed with the logo of *The Morning Globe* on the top left-hand corner. And it was addressed not to Archie, but to *her*. She tore open the envelope even before she could think why the newspaper should be writing to her. What had she done to...? Then she remembered. The competition. The bloody competition. Had she really won the prize she sought after all? Agnes unfolded the enclosed letter and began to read. "*Dear Mrs. McBride, We are pleased to announce that after careful scrutiny by our judging panel, you have been awarded first prize in our recent competition, run in conjunction with the Rafferty's Bakery Chain. I would be obliged if you could call my office at your earliest opportunity to discuss the hand-over ceremony which will be held next month in our newspaper's premises. We hope you will get much pleasure from your good fortune, and look forward to hearing from you shortly. Once again, our heartiest congratulations.*" And it was signed by the Features and Advertisements Editor, Brian Glyndebourne .

It was not until she had read the letter through for the third time that its import began to sink in. She had finally recalled what the prize was. Had she really won all that new kitchen equipment? The fridge/freezer, the cooker, the oven, the coffee maker, all the cutlery, crockery, so much, she couldn't even remember it all. And now it was hers. Well, it would be shortly. She felt heady, light-headed, and staggered to a chair before collapsing onto it, still clutching the letter tightly in her fist. *Wait until Archie hears about this*, she thought to herself. *He won't believe it*. Agnes was shaking with excitement at the thought of how her dowdy kitchen would soon be transformed. She would be the talk of the street. Christ, she'd be the talk of the whole neighbourhood.

She was staring vacantly around the room, already planning where each of the new appliances would go. It wasn't a large apartment, but at least it did boast a good-sized kitchen. Just as well. She had to calm down, had to get herself together. She went to fill the kettle to make herself a cup of tea then stopped. Bugger tea. At a time like this, she needed something a bit stronger than a pot of Tetley's. She went to Archie's *special reserve* cupboard. This was where he kept his secret stash of booze. At least, he thought it was secret, but Agnes had discovered it a long time ago. She rarely drank, and on the odd occasion when she did raid his stock, she always remembered to top up the bottle with tap water. Archie never commented on the taste or the reduced strength of his alcohol. Either he never noticed, or perhaps he thought he had just got used to the ABV content of the liquor. Or maybe he was aware of his wife's occasional tipling, but was just too polite, or frightened, or embarrassed to mention it.

Agnes opted for his bottle of Martell brandy. It wasn't the best brandy out there, but it would do. This was a celebration, after all. The working-class toasted their good fortune with whisky. The gentry celebrated with brandy or champagne. Well, yes, she was working-class and proud to be so. To augment Archie's feeble income, she had a part-time job as a cleaner

in one of the city's office blocks. You didn't get much more working-class than that. But fuck it. This was a special occasion. A very special occasion. She had to tell someone. She was bursting to shout from the rooftops that she had won this fabulous competition. Should she wait for tonight, and tell Archie first? By rights she should, but she couldn't contain herself that long. She shouted it into the empty house as loud as her lungs would let her. "I've won this fucking competition. Me. Agnes Huddleston McBride. I've done it. I've fucking done it!" Although it made her feel better, she knew she wouldn't relax until she had told another living, breathing, human being. Who should it be? Well, of course, it had to be Maisie. Hadn't she been the one to break the news that it was a local who had been successful? Grabbing her house keys, Agnes slammed the front door behind her, and ran across the road to her friend's tenement block. Racing up the stairs, she hammered on Maisie's outer door. "Maisie, Maisie, let me in. It's Aggie. I have to see you right now. It's urgent. Please, Maisie, let me in!" Alarmed by her friend's incessant banging, Maisie quickly allowed Agnes to enter. "What's wrong, Aggie? Are you hurt? Is it Archie? Is he O.K.? What is it?" Maisie asked, concern making her voice tremble. Agnes thrust the newspaper's letter out in front of her. "Here. Read this. It'll explain..." she gulped, unable to complete her sentence. Maisie took the letter from her and read it silently before slowly looking up at her agitated neighbour. "My God, Agnes. Oh, good Christ, it's *you*! It *was* you that won it. Someone local, just like Eric said. Oh, God, you need a drink. I know I do. Reaching out to return Agnes's letter, Maisie smelled her friend's breath. "On second thoughts, maybe you've already had enough. I'll put the kettle on."

Looking at Agnes as she got the cups ready, Maisie asked, "So where are you going to keep it?"

"Keep it?"

“Yes. Where are you going to keep it?”

“Where do think I’m going to keep it? In the kitchen, of course. Where else do you think I’d keep it?”

“The *kitchen*?” Maisie burst out laughing. “I don’t know how much you’ve had to drink, my girl, but I don’t think you’ll get it in the kitchen.”

“What do you mean, ‘I won’t get it in the kitchen’? Where else would I put it?”

Maisie slowly shook her head at Agnes’s ignorance of what she had won. She didn’t know. She really didn’t know what she’d got. “You think you’ve won all the kitchen equipment, don’t you?”

“Yes. What else would it be? Of course, it’s the cooker, the fridge and everything. Isn’t it?”

“Not exactly,” Maisie grinned as the kettle came to the boil.

“Well, what is it, then?” Agnes asked in exasperation.

“Oh, Christ, if you don’t know, I really don’t know how to tell you...”

“Maisie Anderson, will you please just tell me what the fuck have I won?”

Taking a deep breath, her friend said, “Agnes, my dear, you’ve just become the proud owner of a brand-new showroom condition Rolls-Royce!”

Chapter 2

Glyndebourne

Agnes looked at her friend dumbstruck, as her hand went by its own accord to the side of her face, her fingers splayed out over her mouth. She knew the words Maisie had just spoken, and recognized them for what they were, but she might as well have said it in Swahili. This didn't make any sense. She didn't want a bloody Rolls-Royce. What use would a car like that be to them? And besides, neither of them even drove. Why had she not seen this when she entered the competition? The answer came to her immediately. She hadn't seen it because she didn't want to see it. All she was interested in was the kitchen equipment, and this thought made her blind to everything else. If she'd read the competition more carefully, she would have seen that it had been sponsored by a bakery, famed for its morning rolls, so what else would the top prize have been? Finally, as she recovered her powers of speech,

Agnes said, "Oh, Maisie, what the hell am I going to do with a Rolls-Royce? How on earth could we leave a car like that at the close? It would get nicked the minute we left it there, or at least, some wee hoodlum would smash a window and break into it or make off with the tires. It's a stupid bloody prize and I'm even more stupid for entering the competition in the first place. Oh, Maisie, what am I going to do? *Help!*"

Maisie pursed her lips giving Agnes's plea serious thought. "Why... why don't you phone the newspaper and tell them your...er...circumstances. I'm sure if they thought their special prize was going to be vandalized or stolen the minute it was left unattended, they might be... well... sympathetic." As she was warming to her theme, she continued, her eyes sparkling with the thought of having solved Agnes's conundrum, "You could say that you would be

happy to forego the car, and take the second prize instead. There must have been a runner-up, who would have had a similar letter telling them they'd won all the kitchen stuff. Imagine how they'll feel when they find out they've just been upgraded. As far as I can see, it's a win-win situation for all concerned. What do you say?"

"Can I borrow your phone?" Agnes dialed the number on the letterhead, which connected her to the newspaper's switchboard. After the initial inquiry, she said, "My name is Aggie, er, Agnes McBride. I am the person who has won your competition. Could you put me through to..." She re-read the letter to refresh her memory, "... to Brian Glyndebourne, please?"

"Of course, Mrs. McBride, and congratulations. You must be very thrilled, eh?"

"Yes, very thrilled." Agnes replied without any emotion.

"Hold on and I'll put you through. Won't be long..." She heard the line go dead, but only for a few seconds. Suddenly, a voice boomed in her ear, "Hello, Glyndebourne!" His introduction sounded like a declaration of war. It was meant to. He had no time for weak-kneed sycophants who yes-sirred their way through life. He much preferred the type of employee who spoke his mind even at the expense of disagreeing with his superior. His tenet had always been, *'if they can be intimidated by me, then they're no use to me.'* He knew he had a brusque and abrupt attitude, and it had always served him well. But he hadn't yet met Agnes Huddleston McBride.

Agnes was put off by his blunt manner, but quickly recovered her composure. "Hello, Mr. Glyndebourne. It's Agnes McBride. I've just won your Rolls-Royce competition, but I..."

Glyndebourne cut her off brutally. "And congratulations to you again. I take it you received our letter?"

"Yes, it came this morning, but I have to talk to you about it. You see..."

Once again, the editor interrupted her flow. “Oh, is the time not suitable for you? That’s...oh, wait a minute, I don’t think we gave a time on the letter did we? Still got one or two last minute details to work out. So, what can I do for you, Mrs. McBride?”

“Well... you see... that is... er... I don’t want it.” She heard herself say.

“Don’t want what? The publicity? I’m afraid there’s not much we can do about that. That was the whole point of the competition, after all. I’m afraid you’ll just...”It was now Agnes’s turn to be rude.

“No, it’s not the publicity. It’s... it’s the car. I don’t want the car.”

At that precise moment, everything came to a complete standstill, and the whole world stopped turning, at least in the mind of Brian Glyndebourne. Did he hear what he thought he had just heard? No, surely not. He must have misheard her. Who in their right mind wouldn’t want to own a Rolls-Royce? To him, the very notion sounded ludicrous. He squeezed his eyes shut as if this action would somehow negate her words. Trying to keep his temper in check, he took a deep breath before responding. “I’m sorry, Mrs. McBride, I don’t understand. You... don’t... want... the first prize? The prize you won? What’s going on, Mrs. McBride? Why don’t you want it? ”

So, Agnes explained her predicament, and the solution Maisie had thought of, making herself cry down the phone line. Mr. Glyndebourne was a reasonable man, she hoped. He would see the situation she was in. Surely, it wouldn’t be too much trouble to give the prize, *her* prize, to the person who obviously wanted it much more than she did. “Look, why could we not just swap the prizes around? Apart from you, and a couple of people in the newspaper, and my friend Maisie, nobody else knows I’ve won. I wouldn’t say a word and Maisie here knows how to keep her gob shut.”

Glyndebourne couldn't restrain himself any longer. God knows, he'd tried, but it was no use. This woman was trying his patience. No, she was *frying* his patience. "If you didn't want the Rolls, why did you enter the contest in the first place...?" and it took all his self-control not to add, "...*you silly woman.*"

"Have you not been listening to me? I never saw what the top prize was. I only seen the kitchen stuff. How many more times do I have to say it?"

An exasperated Glyndebourne said, "It's not as simple as you think it is, Mrs. McBride. We've given your details to the garage that's supplying the car. Most of the documentation has already been completed with you as the winner. Do you realize the inconvenience it would cause, not to mention the damage to the paper's reputation. No, I can't allow this. Whatever happens, everyone will have to see you accept this car from us and Rafferty's Bakeries. That's it. Final."

"Yes, fine, but there's just one wee, tiny problem with that."

"And what's that?"

"I can't drive. I don't have a license."

"Well, your husband, then," said the frustrated editor.

With a smile on her face, and a gleam of triumph in her eyes, she said, "He..." and they both finished the sentence in unison, her with joy, him with grim acceptance, "...can't drive, either." "Look, Mrs. McBride, no one is telling you to keep the car if you don't want it. Just accept the prize you won graciously, if that's not beyond you, and we can sort something out later. But you won the car, it's yours, and there's no way that can change. After the dust settles, then simply get rid of it. You might even be able to sell it back to the garage. Put an advert in *Exchange and Mart*, I don't know, anything. Believe me, with the price you'd get

for it, you would be able to buy a hundred sets of kitchen equipment. Please, I'm asking you, I'm *begging* you, please just take the prize you've won, and we can discuss the rest later. How does that sound?"

"Are you mad? Getting the star treatment for winning the car, then selling it right after, back to the garage it came from? That would make me look like a right idiot. I don't think so."

The paper's chief editor, Danny Kitchener, was retiring, and Glyndebourne was first in line for his prestigious job. If this bloody woman had scuppered his chances of landing the position he craved, he would run her over in her own fucking car, and bury her body in a shallow grave. No one connected to this promotion had considered the problem that he was now saddled with. No one at Rafferty's Rolls, certainly not him, no one could have possibly foreseen this turn of affairs, and it was up to him to fix it. Thinking quickly, he said, "Look, it's Monday now. Give me a few days to talk with some people and see what we can come up with. Hopefully, we'll find a way out of this... situation that will have a good outcome for both of us. I'll organize a taxi to collect you on Thursday, say, two o'clock. How does that sound?" Before Agnes could reply, she heard a click on the line, then – nothing. He had had enough of this woman for today. He had had enough of this woman for a lifetime of 'today's'.

"Aye, two o'clock on Thursday will be just fine," Agnes said into the silent telephone.

Archie arrived home at the usual time, and right away knew that something was wrong. There was no cooking smell coming from the kitchen. "Hey, you," he shouted affectionately, "Where's my supper and where are you?" He found her sitting in darkness in their living room, slowly turning to face him as he stood at the door. Archie could see her outline silhouetted in the unlit room, the sight causing him to take a step back in fear and confusion.

He fumbled for the light switch, and as the room burst into brightness, what he saw caused him to shake uncontrollably. Agnes's eyes stared sightlessly at him, and her mouth was contorted into a hideous grin. She seemed to be only semi-aware of Archie as she rose from her chair. "Aggie, Aggie, are you alright, dear? What's the matter. What's wrong? Is it me? What have I done?" This had been Archie's default position for much of their married life. Assume guilt, whatever it was. It just saved time, later.

"Do you know, I've been sitting here for hours, wondering how I was going to tell you; wondering how you would take the news; dreading you coming home, and now, d'you know, it doesn't even seem to matter anymore."

"What doesn't matter anymore? Agnes, you're scaring the shit out of me. What's wrong? Are you O.K.? You're not... you're not... dying, are you?" Archie had gone chalk white with fear. He had never seen his wife like this. All sorts of situations flashed through his mind. She'd been to the doctor, and he'd given her bad news. He'd given her the worst news a person could hear. That had to be it. Agnes was dying.

"Sit down," he heard her say. *Oh, no, she was going to break the news, news he was dreading to hear.* No, for once in his life, he had to be brave - brave for both of them. He must not show the emotions he was feeling. He had to be strong – for her. "What is it, dear? You can tell me. Just... just say it in your own words. Take your time. We've got all night. We'll get through it together, whatever it is." He put his arm tenderly around her shoulder. She knew what he was thinking. Well, wouldn't he be in for a surprise?

So, Agnes began hesitantly to tell him all that had happened earlier that day, gaining more confidence as she spoke, until she was finally back to her old self. Archie's eyes opened wide in disbelief. "We've won a Rolls-Royce? Oh, man, that's fantastic. My God, I can't believe

it. A *real* Rolls-Royce, you mean. Not a wee model, or anything? A proper car that you can actually *drive*? That's incredible. And there was me thinking..."

"Listen, you. For a start, *we* didn't win anything. It was *me* that won the bloody thing, and I'll be the one to say what we do with it. What's the point of having a car like that, when neither of us can even drive?"

"Oh, but I *can* drive," Archie proudly announced. I've got a license and everything." He reached into his inside pocket and pulled out a grubby and torn document, which he held up for Agnes to see. "*You*? A driver's license? When the hell did you learn to drive, and why did you never let on?"

"Oh, I took lessons years ago, but I didn't tell you in case I failed the test. You'd have just laughed and made fun of me. But I *did* pass. I never told you, because one day, I hoped to have enough money to buy a wee car, and surprise you." He shrugged his shoulders. "I'll probably need a few lessons to refresh my memory, and that, but I'm legally allowed to drive, so we *can* keep it. I can't wait to see the looks on my mates' faces when I drive up in my swanky new motor."

From being concerned about Agnes's imminent demise to crowing how he would show off their car to his friends was more than Agnes could bear. It wouldn't even be so bad if she could drive, but she had never been interested in learning. What would be the point? As Archie had just said, they were never able to afford to buy a car. Lessons would just have been a waste of money; money they could ill afford to spend. But this revelation of his had come as a surprise. No, it had come as a shock. So, the wee bugger could drive, eh? Maybe... no! She had made up her mind. The car would have to go. Final.

"Over my dead body."

"If necessary."

“Look, why don’t I come with you when you go to see this newspaper guy? Just to find out what it’s all about, eh? You know...”

“You will do nothing of the kind. You will go to your work, you will go to the pub, or you can take a dive off the Jamaica Bridge for all I care, but you will not, and I mean *not* go within a mile of that newspaper office. Do I make myself clear?”

How he had ever persuaded her, she would never know. But through whatever fate controls our destiny, she found herself sitting next to Archie in the taxi that was taking them to her appointment with Glyndebourne. The trip was mostly conducted in silence. She was thinking up arguments to justify refusing the car, while he was thinking up objections to her excuses, and reasons for keeping it. The revelation that Archie had a drivers’ license came as an unnerving blow, but not an insurmountable one. The atmosphere was so frosty that that the taxi driver had to turn up the cab’s heater.

They arrived at the newspaper offices just before the appointed time, and were shown up to Glyndebourne’s office. The editor ushered them in with all the panache of a Roman gladiator about to face two starving lions. “Well, it’s nice to finally meet you in person, Mrs. McBride.” Looking at Archie, he said, “And this, no doubt, is your husband?”

“Oh, there’s no doubt about that, Mr. Glyndebourne. No doubt at all.” Turning to Archie, she whispered in a tone that could be heard above the general hubbub of a busy metropolitan newspaper. “Pull up your zip, and fix your tie. And behave yourself. Do you understand.”

“Yes, I understand. ”

Going to sit behind his desk, Glyndebourne indicated the two chairs in front of him, motioning the couple to sit down. After they were all seated, the editor said, “Well, Mrs., Mr. McBride, I’ve been giving this matter some serious thought, and I believe I’ve...”

Agnes made to interrupt, but Glyndebourne silenced her. “Please let me finish first, Mrs. McBride, then you can have your say.” Agnes sat silent, chastened by Glyndebourne’s order. “As I was saying, I think I might have found a solution to your, er, *our* problem. Just suppose, suppose, I hasten to add, that you accept the car, the publicity, and so forth. Now, what you would say would be something like this – ‘as neither my husband nor I can drive, I have decided to donate...’”

“Here, wait just a minute, you,” spluttered Archie. “I *can* drive, and I want that car. How can we not get it? Agnes won that Rolls fair and square. I’m really looking forward to...”

“See if you don’t shut up, all you’ll be lookin’ forward to is a long spell in the Vicky.”⁽⁴⁾ Now keep quiet and let the man have his say. Alright?” Archie stopped talking, sitting with crossed arms and a defiant expression. If looks could kill, the rest of the meeting would need to have been conducted through a spiritualist. This wasn’t over. Not yet, anyway.

Glyndebourne looked inquisitively at Agnes. She knew what he was thinking, and merely shrugged her shoulders, raising her eyes toward the ceiling. Taking a deep breath, the features editor continued, “As I was saying, you would donate the car to be auctioned for charity. In recognition of your wonderful gesture, we, that is, the paper would supply you with another car, naturally more in keeping with your, er, circumstances. In fact, we’ll even tax and insure it, and fill it with fuel. What do you say?” He asked her eagerly. He was sure whatever charity would benefit from her largesse would not mind the newspaper deducting the cost of the replacement vehicle. They would still stand to gain a sizeable amount. Tax free.

The room was consumed with silence. Not even the chairs creaked as Agnes considered his proposal. It was, to be fair, a good offer, she admitted to herself. Before she could formulate her reply, Archie said, “We’ll take it!”

Ignoring Archie’s outburst, Agnes replied haltingly, “Well, I don’t know...”

“Here, wait a minute,” he began to object.

“Who won this bloody prize, anyway?”

“It was my paper.”

“It’ll be your funeral if you don’t shut up!” Agnes was worried. Things hadn’t gone the way she had expected. Here it was – a solution acceptable to all parties, and didn’t she know it. But the buses had always suited her when she needed to use them, which wasn’t often, and she certainly didn’t like the idea of not being able to use her own prize. *He’d* be laughing his head off. *He* could drive. *He* could use it whenever he damn-well pleased. It would be his car to use whenever he wanted to. No, this wasn’t good enough. Not one little bit. She needed time to think, to talk to Glyndebourne without the useless baggage sitting beside her. Turning to her husband, she said, “Archie, I’ve forgotten my fags. ⁽⁵⁾ Be a sweetheart and run out and get me some.” Rummaging in her purse, she took out more money than she knew they cost. “Here,” she said thrusting a note into his hand. “And get yourself something at the same time.”

Archie’s reaction reminded of Glyndebourne of a chameleon, darting its tongue out at its prey. If anything, Archie’s response time was even quicker. The editor could only stare in amazement.

“I’ll not be long,” he said as he left Glyndebourne’s office. “Just you two have a nice wee chat to yourselves. I’ll be back soon.”

It was only when he was out of the building that he remembered that Agnes had quit smoking a few weeks earlier. This thought perplexed him, but only for a second. He fondled the banknote carefully, kissing the portrait of the Queen with the sort of affection a father might show his young daughter. Agnes knew she’d never see the money again, nor any change from

it, but this was an investment, and like most investments, you had to speculate to accumulate. If she played her cards right, it would be money well spent.

“That was one of the most incredible things I’ve ever seen,” marveled Glyndebourne.

“Oh, that?” Agnes smiled. “I’ll tell you, if there was an Olympic gold medal for scrounging, they could just put his name on it, and let him keep it.”

“I assume that was to get your husband, er, otherwise occupied.”

“Aye. You’re a very astute man, Mr. Glyndebourne. Now, can we really get down to brass tacks. ”

Glyndebourne sighed. “What do you want, Mrs. McBride? I’ve given you a fair offer. Surely you must see that.”

“Yes, well as far as it goes, I suppose so...”

“As far as it goes? What the hell... I mean, what do you mean?”

“Well, it’s all right for him. He can drive, but I can’t, and the cost of driving lessons...” she let the rest of the sentence hang in the air between them, uncomfortably, like an ex-wife at her late husband’s funeral.

Glyndebourne shook his head, but it was not to reject her demand. He was just tired of this woman, and her unreasonable behavior. But if he thought she was finished, he was in for a rude awakening. “Very well, Mrs. McBride. I’ll make sure you get some driving lessons as well. Now, do we have a deal?” Glyndebourne had spent two workless days and two sleepless nights working out this proposal. He’d had to get approval from the bakery and agreement from the newspaper’s board of directors. Like him, they could see the extra publicity and goodwill it would generate for his newspaper, not to mention the bakery, was

almost priceless. He had turned a potential disaster into a glittering triumph. His elevation to the top job was now all but a mere formality.

So, he had agreed to give her driving lessons. That was good news. It meant that when she passed her driving test, and she *would* pass her test, especially if the examiner was a man, she could also drive the car. The next bit, however, was going to be trickier. Glyndebourne stood up, assuming they had reached an accord. Agnes remained seated. “Um, there’s just one more small thing,” she said.

“And what’s that?” Surely she wouldn’t also demand his first-born child.

“Well, it’s like this. You said I was going to get a lot of publicity, and everything. Is that correct?”

“Yes...?”

“That might mean a lot of folk coming to my house to see the prize-winner, right?”

“What exactly are you driving at, Mrs. McBride?” His vision of sitting in the editor’s chair was once again receding. “Listen. My house isn’t what you’d call shabby, exactly, but it’s not Buckingham Palace, either. Now, if I’m going to have all these folk from the radio and the T.V. and all that in my house, well, it doesn’t look very nice if your place isn’t, how shall I put it, up to scratch, if you see what I mean. Now, a few wee improvements would make a big difference, and make me a lot happier to accept your other proposals.”

Glyndebourne wasn’t a stupid man. He could see right through her scheming ways, could see what she was after. This was too much. He had restrained himself up until now, but he could hold himself in no longer. “No, Mrs. McBride. Absolutely, definitely, categorically, no! Seriously? After all we’ve offered you. You’ve got some nerve, I’ll give you that. There’s no

way that anyone in this newspaper would agree to that. To receive a free car, *and* all the kitchen equipment? Why that's downright... immoral. No, I won't do it."

"Mr. Glyndebourne, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"What is it?"

"This Rolls-Royce, the one I won; how much does a car like that cost?"

"Well, I don't know the exact price, but I would reckon about ten thousand pounds, give or take."

"And how much is the car worth that you're giving me in its place?"

"I would think about a thousand pounds, or so."

"So, in other words, you're doing me out of nine thousand pounds. That doesn't sound fair, does it?"

"Doing you out of?" Glyndebourne exploded. "Mrs. McBride, if I may remind you, it is *you* who is refusing the prize. We were more than happy to..."

"Aye, well, that's beside the point. What I'm saying is that me 'n Archie are nine thousand pounds down on the deal. And I really need that kitchen stuff, the cooker, the freezer, the dishwasher, the oven. Ours are all years old and badly need replacing. My man earns around thirty quid ⁽⁶⁾ a week. How long do you think it would take us to save up to buy all that kitchen equipment?"

"I've really got no idea."

"Neither have I, but I reckon it would take about a hundred years. I don't know about you, but I don't reckon on living that long. I'll tell you what. How about this? Never mind all the rest of the stuff. Just the things I said a minute ago. The cooker, and dishwasher, and that.

There. I'm prepared to compromise if you are. What do you say?" Agnes wasn't speaking the whole truth. Her *dishwasher* was, at this precise minute, on his way to spend Agnes's money, and her *fridge/freezer* was a cool-box that she put ice into to keep her milk and butter chilled. Glyndebourne actually smiled. If this was her idea of 'negotiating', she would do very well indeed if she ever went into business. He was too tired to argue any more. "Very well, Mrs. McBride. I'll see what I can do. I'm making no promises, mind."

But Agnes knew he would get these appliances for her. By hook or by crook, he would manage it somehow. As her hand reached the door handle, Glyndebourne called to her. "Mrs. McBride, you are the most evil, loathsome, contemptible, avaricious woman I've ever met. And if you ever want a job on this newspaper, just call me!"

She was in the street before she remembered Archie. *He'll be in the nearest boozier*, she assured herself. But where, exactly was it? She walked back to the building and asked the doorman. Seeing his shocked expression, she explained that that's where her husband would be. "Is he a wee guy, about five feet six with not much hair?"

"Aye, that sounds like him. Why?"

"Because he asked me the same question about twenty minutes ago. It's called *The Printer's Rest*." And he gave her directions how to get there. Sure enough, that's where he was, turning Agnes's pound note into several shorts, and saying to everyone and to no one in particular, "See my wife, she's the brainiest woman in the world. She's the one what won the Rolls-Royce. A bloody Rolls-Royce. Would you credit that? My wife, Agnes McBride."

Fortunately, the pub was almost empty, and the few drinkers who were there didn't seem to be paying him much attention. Agnes marched up to the bar, tugging at his drinking arm.

"Right, you, it's time to go home. They didn't organize a taxi, so we'll have to get the bus. C'mon. It's getting late."

“Just one more for the road, eh, Aggie?”

“The road can buy its own drink. We need to get back.” “Aw, Aggie...”

“Never mind, ‘aw, Aggie’.”

He was still clutching onto his whisky glass as she hauled him from the bar.

A few days later, Agnes received another letter from Glyndebourne. It was not quite the letter she was expecting. Its contents were far more satisfying. *Dear Mrs. McBride, With reference to our recent meeting, I am pleased to advise you that the bakery, the newspaper board and myself have agreed to the revised terms of your prize as discussed. In place of the original prize, which will be auctioned for charity, you will now receive a Ford Fiesta car, fully taxed and insured for a year together with a full tank of petrol. For insurance purposes, we will need your husband's full name, address, date of birth, and any driving convictions incurred within the last five years. We will also arrange driving lessons for you to the value of fifty pounds. We are also pleased to announce that as a further gesture of goodwill, you will be supplied with all the kitchen appliances and accessories as advertised on the original promotion, which we trust will be to your satisfaction. The handover will take place at our offices on Monday 30th. October at 10.00 a.m. Please arrive thirty minutes prior to the ceremony so can familiarize you with the procedure. We look forward to seeing you then.*

And Glyndebourne had appended his signature to the letter.

So, they were giving her everything. How good was that? She must really have impressed the editor with her forthright approach. Agnes could not have been more wrong. Glyndebourne was incensed at having to give her even the appliances they had agreed upon, but when he contacted the supplier to place the order, however, he was in for a shock. They told him that to get the kitchen equipment for the price agreed, everything on the prize list had to be

ordered together, otherwise, each item purchased individually would cost much more. There would be very little difference in cost between acquiring just the items he and Agnes had agreed upon, and another complete set of appliances.

Agnes phoned Glyndebourne to tell him that she had received his revised offer, and was happy with it all. When he heard it was her on the line, for a horrifying, heart-stopping moment, he panicked, spilling his polystyrene cup of coffee all over his desk and the documents he was reading. “Oh, bugger it, that’s all I need,” he swore, just as the receptionist put her through .

“And a good morning to you too, Mr. Glyndebourne.”

“Hello, Mrs. McBride. No, er, it’s not... that is... I’ve just knocked over my cup of coffee. My desk...” He mumbled as he tried to mop up the spill with some paper tissues. “I’m sorry about that. What... what can I do for you?”

“I’m just phoning to say that I’m happy with all the arrangements, and everything. That was all. Just being polite, like.”

Glyndebourne didn’t know what to expect, but with this woman, it was always safe to assume the worst. He exhaled gratefully that she was only telephoning to confirm receipt of his letter. Unfortunately, he blew a little too hard, knocking over again the remains of his cup of coffee. “Bloody hell, that’s all I need,” he said, a little more loudly than he meant to.

“Well, if that’s going to be your attitude, I’m sorry I took the trouble to ring you. You might at least show a wee bit more appreciation for my efforts. I was trying to be nice, if you must know, to make up for what happened last week. I might as well not have bothered,” she said, trying for sanctimony.

“No, you don’t understand... I... I...”

“Oh, I think I understand well enough. Am I not good enough for the likes of you, eh? Just because I didn’t go to some hoity-toity public school, and learn all the airs and graces you seem to have. Just you remember, Mr. Glyndebourne, it was people like me that made this country what it is today.”

Glyndebourne chuckled to himself at this last remark. Never a truer word was spoken. As far as he was concerned, the mess that Britain was in was exactly because of people like her. He refused to rise to her bait, and allowed her to finish her rant. She seemed to subside by returning to her previous statement, “As I said, all I was phoning for was to tell you that everything was O.K., and I’m happy to proceed.”

“That’s great news, Mrs. McBride, and I’m truly sorry for what I said, or, rather, for what you heard. It wasn’t directed at you, honestly. You can take the word of a hoity-toity ex-public schoolboy.” Agnes smiled, despite herself. Maybe Glyndebourne wasn’t as big an arse as she thought he was. “And is the time convenient for you?”

“Well, without consulting my diary secretary, I’m not sure, but I’ll cancel any previous engagement I might have forgotten.”

Now it was Glyndebourne’s turn to grin. “That’s very gracious of you, Mrs. McBride, to eat into your busy schedule.” Perhaps Agnes wasn’t the ogre she made herself out to be. Oh my God! He’d just thought of her as *Agnes*. He had used her first name! What was happening here? Just as he was about to end the call, Agnes said, “Here, Mr. Glyndebourne, I’ve just thought of something.” Glyndebourne’s heart sank. What now? What could she possibly have come up with to make his life even more miserable than she already had? “I’ve just been wondering. If they put me on the T.V., will I get an appearance fee?”

The editor breathed a sigh of relief. This was a problem for somebody else, thank God, and one he did not have to consider. “I’m afraid you’ll have to take that up with the television

companies, Agnes. That's got nothing to do with me, I'm afraid." There! He'd called her *Agnes*. Out loud this time, and not just to himself. He really found himself warming to this dreadful woman. He was actually beginning to like her! No, this couldn't be happening; could it? They said their goodbyes and hung up. Glyndebourne may have thought his troubles with Agnes were over. They were anything but; in fact, they hadn't even started.

Chapter 3

A Second Win

It was Sunday 29th. October, the day before Agnes was due to receive her prizes. This day was usually a lazy one for them, their usual routine being to get up when it suited them, and leaf languidly through the Sunday papers whilst eating breakfast. The rest of the day would be spent either watching the T.V., or playing cards. Archie once asked her if she'd play strip poker with him, and to his amazement, she agreed. He didn't know that her old man had been a professional card player for a while, and had taught his daughter everything he had learned. Agnes proved to be a quick study, and easily picked up all the tricks that her dad had shown her. Their games usually ended with Archie being naked and shivering, while Agnes rarely had to remove more than her top clothes.

She eventually confessed to the deception, and promised not to do it again. Since then, they had passed many happy Sundays with the curtains closed, while they indulged in their harmless hobby. At first, they didn't bother to pull the drapes; after all, they were three flights up, so why bother? That was until an embarrassed Maisie confronted her friend one day with the fact that her upstairs neighbour told her that she could see right into their front room, and what they got up to on a Sunday. Since then, they ensured that the window coverings were firmly drawn together, and the lights in the room were off.

However, this Sunday was different. The excitement was getting to be too much for Agnes. She paced about the living room, wondering how the next day would go, imagining all sorts of nice and wonderful things happening. No, it was no use. She had to waken Archie. Whether he liked it or not, she wanted him to share it with her. To share what she was

feeling. She stole into their bedroom, yanking the bedclothes from him. He woke instantly, startled by her abrupt actions.

“Here, what the hell’s going on? Leave me alone. It’s fuckin’ Sunday. Can I not get any time to myself? Away you, and...” The rest of his words were lost to posterity as Agnes pulled the bedsheets down, then hauled at his pajama sleeve and pulled him towards her. Mistaking her intentions, he made a grab for her, trying to pull her down on top of him. “Oh, so you want to play, do you? Well, I think I could...”

She slapped his hands away. “Not now. I’m sorry to wake you, but I can’t relax. Tomorrow is going to be a big day for both of us. I couldn’t sleep, and I’ve been up for hours.” Archie’s temper was softened by his wife’s anxiety. Yes, tomorrow was going to be a big day, right enough. He ushered her into the kitchen. “Why don’t you sit down, and I’ll make us both a brew, eh? That’ll calm you down a bit.” Agnes readily consented, and took a chair while Archie fussed about getting everything ready. Without asking her, he put some slices of bread under the grill to toast. While this was going on, he retrieved the papers from behind the front door. As he returned to the kitchen, she said, “Here, I’ve just remembered. Have you got a decent suit to wear? We can’t have you turning up at that newspaper office with all those T.V. folk about, and you looking like something the cat dragged in.”

“Aye, of course I have. I’ve got two suits in the wardrobe.”

“One of those suits is the one you got married in, and we’ve been together for thirty years. It’s the moths that are keeping it from falling apart.”

“Well, the other one, then. It’s newer.”

“Aye, but not by much. Are they clean, at least?”

“They should be. I hardly ever wear them. The last time I had it on was at Willie Mason’s funeral, and that was about ten years ago. The last I heard he was still dead.”

“This is no time for jokes, ya clown.”

“I know. I was just trying to get you to lighten up a wee bit. Listen, it’ll not be me they’ll all be looking at. You’re the one what won all the gear. It’s you that’ll be the one that everybody’ll be wanting to see. I’ll just be on the sidelines, like Prince Philip.”

“Aye, and he’s been known to put his foot in it as well. Just make sure you’re presentable. See if you let me down, you’ll be wearing that suit for a long time.”

“How?”

“Because you’ll be buried in it.” While Agnes was finishing her breakfast, Archie went to fetch his pools⁽⁷⁾ coupon and a pen. He opened his newspaper at the football results page and began to check his copy entry against the results of the previous day’s soccer fixtures. His pursed lips became tighter and tighter as his forecasts seemed so wide of the mark of the actual results. But then, as he marked off the next column of his forecasts, he began to get animated. He had correctly predicted six straight draws in a row. He glanced at the newspaper, then back at his entry coupon. Oh, Christ, another one. That made seven. He’d only need one more. By now, he was almost too frightened to scan the page. He looked at the final two teams he had forecast to draw their game; Heart of Midlothian and Glasgow Rangers. Both teams had been having a good run, and Rangers were doing really well, but this was a home game to the Edinburgh side. That would balance things out in Hearts’ favour. It was a good bet for a drawn match. Maybe a goal each, perhaps two for each side. It would have been an exciting game in any event. He found the result. Oh, Jesus, Mary, Mother of God! Three each! A score draw, just like the other seven he’d predicted. Fuck, fuck and fuck again! He’d done it; but had he? Maybe his eyes had missed a line. The results were printed

close together and his eyes weren't what they used to be. He started again from the top, marking each one off as he looked down the line of results. Finally, he got to the last one. The Edinburgh game. And this, too, was definitely a score draw. And the bottom of the page. It looked as if it could be a jackpot week. Hundreds of thousands of pounds, maybe as much as a million, going to the winner, or pooled between several lucky players. Even if he had to share the prize, there would be thousands and thousands of pounds just for them.

He couldn't help it. He started to sob. In all the years he'd been doing this competition, and the many fantasies he'd had of winning, he never saw himself crying, but now that he'd actually done it, tears of joy were coursing freely down his face. Agnes looked up from her own newspaper and saw him. He was staring at her, not knowing how to put into words the stupendous news he had to impart. "Archie, love, what's wrong? Who's dead? Is it somebody we know?"

"No, Aggie, nobody's dead. Would you come over here for a minute? I need you to do something for me."

"What is it? What do you want me to do?"

As she sat beside him, he said, "You know how to check a pools coupon, don't you?"

"I should think so. I was doing it for my dad when he went blind. How?"

Giving her the copy entry, he pointed at the sixth column of crosses. "Just run your eyes down that line, and mark them off against the results. Then tell me what you see." Despite Agnes having known about 'the pools' for much of her life, she couldn't imagine why Archie wanted her to do what he had asked of her. She put her reading glasses back on, then scanned the results, checking each one with the cross Archie had put against the corresponding teams on his entry form copy. At last, he said, "Well, what do you see?"

“They’re all score draws. So…” and it was only then that the import of what he’d asked her to do hit her. “Oh my God, for fuck’s sake. Does this mean what I think it means?”

“Aye, Aggie, it does. I’ve done it! I’ve won the pools. I’m rich, Aggie. I’m a bloody millionaire!” For a few seconds, they looked at each other in stupefied amazement. Then, as if reading each other’s thoughts, they stood up together and, grabbing hands, they danced around the table. “I don’t believe it; I just don’t believe it! Are you sure? I mean, it couldn’t be a mistake or anything, could it?” Agnes asked him.

“That’s why I asked you to check the bloody coupon. Just in case I got it wrong, or something”

“No, Archie, there’s no mistake. We’ve done it!”

“I’ll need to phone in, and make a claim right away.”

“On a Sunday? Will there be anybody there?”

“Oh, aye. Most folk check their coupon same as I do, on a Sunday. Someone’ll be there, alright.” He lifted the telephone. There was no dial tone, and that was when he remembered. He forgot to pay the phone bill. The company had cut the line.

“You fucking eejit!” Agnes railed at him. “We’ve just become millionaires, and you didn’t think to pay the bloody phone bill! I should wring your scrawny neck, you wee imbecile!”

“No, wait! I’ll run across the road to Jim’s. he’ll let me use his, I’m sure.” Jim was Maisie’s husband, a large, hulking brute of a man, who was not averse to using his fists to get his point of view across, when reasoned argument and logical debate didn’t work. Archie was at the front door, when Agnes reminded him that he was still in his pajamas. “At least put a pair of trousers on, you fool. I don’t want the first expense off our winnings being a police fine for

you being arrested for indecent exposure!” “Oh, aye, right,” he grinned sheepishly. “Oh, wait a minute. It’s just after eight o’clock. Will they be up yet?”

“Yes, I think so. Maisie’s always complaining about her sore back, and how she can’t sleep. Besides, her man’s on a Sunday shift this morning. She’ll be up.”

Five minutes later, he was banging on the Andersons’ door. “Jim, Maisie, it’s Archie. Let me in. I need to use your phone. It’s an emergency!” Getting no response, he banged louder and harder, shouting through the letterbox. “Jim, Maisie, I need to use your phone. Let me in!” For a further few seconds, there was no response, then, guttural, neolithic sounds emanated from behind the door. “Who is it?” The voice sounded as if it came from the grave. “It’s Archie; Archie McBride. Let me in!”

“This isn’t your house, McBride. Away, and give us peace, ya drunken swine.”

“I’m not drunk. I need to use your phone. It’s an emergency!”

“Use your own bloody phone! Away, and stop pestering us! Away home.” And Anderson turned to go back to bed. Agnes had misunderstood. It was not today, but the following Sunday that her friend’s husband was on a Sunday roster.

“I can’t use my own phone. It’s been... I mean, It isn’t working.”

“See if you don’t get away from my front door right now, I’m going to...”

“I need to use your phone,” Archie persisted. “I’ve won the pools. I need...” He got no further, as the front door opened, and a brawny, tattooed, hirsute arm dragged him inside.

“How did you not say so before, pal? Come away in. I’ll get us both a drink to celebrate, eh?”

Anderson made a show of dusting down Archie’s pajama jacket, as he ushered him into their living room. “Just you take your time, and make your call. We’ll be right outside.”

By this time, Maisie had joined her husband, disturbed by all the hubbub outside their bedroom door. “What the hell’s he...?”

“Shush! You wouldn’t believe it. He’s won the fuckin’ pools, but his phone’s not working so he’s came to use ours.” Maisie had just woken up, and still didn’t grasp the import of what she had heard. “He’s... what?”

“I told you. He’s won the pools. He’s phoning in to make a claim.”

“Christ, first the car, now this. What the hell’s going on with those two?”

“Car? What car? What’s this about a car?” In her confusion, Maisie forgot that she had promised to keep Agnes’s win to herself, but Jim was in no mood to be fobbed off. He shook his head in disbelief as she recalled the events of a few weeks earlier. “A Rolls-Royce? Are you telling me that those two deadbeats have won a Rolls-Royce? Are you fuckin’ serious?”

“Yes, I am, but keep your voice down. I promised Aggie I wouldn’t tell anybody until she’d actually got it home.”

“So first she wins a Roller, then he wins the coupon? It’s not fair, so it’s not. It’s not right. Especially a wee no-user like him. I’ve been doing the pools for years, and never won a sausage. How comes he gets to...?” His sentence was left unfinished as Archie came back into the room. “Right, that’s it. I’ve given them my details, and they’re going to look out my line. Might be a few days, then they’ll write to me, and tell me how much I’ve won. So far, I’m the only one who’s called in. That’s got to be a good sign, eh?”

“Aye, a good sign,” Anderson echoed, his hatred of his neighbour barely bubbling beneath the surface. “Will you not stay for a wee celebratory drink? It’s not every day you meet someone who’s won the pools.” Archie was not known ever to turn down a free drink, but on this one occasion, he made an exception. “No, I’d better not. If I’m away much longer, Aggie’ll think I’ve bought a one-way ticket to Rio.”

“Aye, well, suit yourself.” Anderson gulped down the measure he’d poured out for his neighbour. As he made to leave, Archie said, “Would you both do us a favour?”

“What is it?”

“Will you not tell anybody just yet. I’d like it to be a secret for a wee while, if you don’t mind.”

“Your secret’s safe with us,” they promised.

By the afternoon, everyone in the suburb knew about their good fortune, and people came in their droves to stare up at the apartment where the lucky couple lived, at least for the time being. It took four police cars and the rest of the day to keep the sightseers away. “What the hell did you say to the Andersons?” Agnes asked as the crowd finally dispersed. “You didn’t tell them to invite everybody round for afternoon tea, did you?”

“Of course not. They promised...”

“Aye, well, I’ll be having words with that woman the next time I see her. That’s all I need. Now, everybody’ll be pointing me out in the street. See when I get my hands on her...”

“Och, Aggie, it was bound to get out eventually, anyway.”

“Not by me, it wasn’t. Getting a wee car is one thing. That was just about possible for us at a stretch, but now...”

“Well, what’s done is done,” Archie answered her philosophically.

“You didn’t blab your mouth to anybody else, did you?”

“Absolutely not.” Archie held up his right hand, as if he was taking a courtroom oath.

“O.K. I believe you. Take your hand down. You look like an overgrown boy scout, standing like that. This changes things, this does. Archie, you might just get your Rolls-Royce yet.”

“Yes, I know. I’ll be able to buy a different one for every day of the week.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. Remember I turned down the Rolls-Royce from that newspaper? Well, seeing as we’ve won the pools, I’ll be able to buy a nice house in the suburbs. Oh, Archie, I’ve always wanted a nice big, swanky house in one of the posh areas, and now we’ll be able to afford to buy one, we’ll have plenty of room for your Rolls-Royce.” Her possessive references were not lost on him. “Just a minute. You’ve never done a coupon in your life. I do the pools, and it was *me* that won all this money. I’ll be the one that says what we do with it. What do you mean, *you’d* like a nice house in the suburbs? Do I not get a say in any of this?” he asked her.

She glided over to where he was sitting, and from behind him, she gently put her arms around his neck. Bending her head forward, and lowering her face next to his, she nibbled at his ear. “Of course, you can have your say, my love,” she whispered gently. Then, without warning, she yanked his hair back viciously. “And as long as you agree with me, you can have anything you like.” She came round to face him. “You listen to me, you snivelling little nobody. That money isn’t *yours*. It’s *ours*! O-U-R-S, *ours*! If I left it all to you, you’d drink it away within six months and smoke yourself into an early grave. Now, you listen to me. A house isn’t just a house; it’s an investment. I doubt you even know what the word means. All my life I’ve wanted nice things, decent things, and to get away from these common surroundings. All the things I couldn’t have. I’m not complaining, because I know you couldn’t give them to me, but now you can, and, by God, I’m going to have them. Do you hear me?” She let his hair go, and for the second time that day, he felt tears falling down his cheeks. But these were not tears of joy; they were tears of pain, of sorrow, and of hurt.

“If this is the way things are going to be,’ he sobbed, “you can have the whole bloody lot. I don’t want a fuckin’ penny. You said I’d kill myself with drink and fags, and you were probably right. But you’ll kill yourself, too. You’ll kill yourself with...” He struggled to find the words he wanted. “You... you’ll *snob* yourself to death. Aye that’s what you’ll do. You’ll die of snob poisoning.” It was the best he could do, but it found its mark. “I’m going back to bed. You can... you can do whatever you like. Just don’t talk to me again,” he snuffled, and pulled out the remains of a torn and stained handkerchief. He dabbed at his eyes and blew his nose before he left the room, his head bowed in sadness and in shame.

For possibly the first time in their married life, Agnes saw her husband for who and what he truly was. Pathetic, ignorant, and naïve, certainly; but also gentle, childlike, innocent of all avarice and evil intent. She ran after him intending to put her arms around him once again, this time in real fondness and affection, but he shrugged her off. The damage had been done, both physical and emotional, and she could not find the words she wanted, to cope with the situation into which she had placed herself.

Chapter 4

The Ceremony

Archie woke up the next morning to find her still in their front room where he'd left her the day before. She was asleep in the armchair he had been sitting on, fully dressed. He prodded her gently on the shoulder, unsure how to take the conversation forward. Agnes looked up at him, bewildered. She gazed around the room, as if unsure of her surroundings.

"Archie, what are...?" The start of a question formed in her head, but she was unsure how to continue. He stared down at her, not knowing what to say. Finally, he spoke. "Do you want a cup of tea?" he asked her.

"What time is it?"

"Half-past eight."

She got up with a start. He should have been at work, but then she remembered what day it was. "Archie... what I did, the things I said yesterday; I don't know what came over me. I'm really, really sorry. I should never have said those things..."

"It's O.K., Aggie." But she knew it wasn't O.K. She had treated Archie abominably; this poor, sweet man who was just as confused and excited by their good fortune as she was. She was so sorry, so contrite, and she immediately made up her mind. Whatever decisions they took about how to spend their newfound wealth, they would do it together, and he would have the final say, always. Well, almost always. "Well, today's the day, eh?" he said. Archie wasn't yet ready to forget, but he tried his best to forgive. "Do you want a cup of tea, or

anything?" he asked her again. She nodded. He filled the kettle and took cups from the kitchen cupboard.

Agnes finally forced herself to speak. "Archie... I am so sorry..."

"It's over, Aggie. I don't want to talk about it. Let's just put it behind us, eh?"

"No, Archie, it's not over." She put her hand tenderly on his cheek. He did not try to stop her.

"You're a good man, Archie McBride. Too good for the likes of me."

"Oh, Agnes, will you please shut up." It had been a long time since his wife had paid him a compliment. He wasn't used to hearing praise coming from her lips and it unsettled him.

Trying to change the subject, he said. "How are you going to get that newspaper man to give you the Rolls-Royce? You've already agreed to auction the car for charity."

"Charity begins at home, Archie."

"Aye, but everything's finalized. You've had a letter, and all that... you can't just go back..."

"Well, everything will just have to be un-finalized, then. Don't you dare tell me what I can and cannot..." she stopped abruptly, as she realized she was about to repeat the mistakes of the previous day. "Just you leave it to me," she smiled, patting him on the arm. "My man wanted a Rolls-Royce, and my man's going to get a Rolls-Royce. That's all there is to it. I won that car fair and square, and it's mine. They can't refuse me." This was the Aggie he knew. She was coming back to her old self. This was the Agnes he recognized. This was the Agnes he... loved. "Listen; apart from one or two people that know I was turning down the Rolls-Royce, everybody else thinks I'm there to pick up my prize - the prize I won. There's going to be T.V. cameras there and everything, as well as the newspaper's own reporters. When I accept the Rolls-Royce, Glyndebourne's not going to stand up and say, 'Here, Mrs.

McBride, we had a deal.' Is he? Not in front of all the thousands of folk who'll be watching it all on the telly. He'd look like a proper Charlie."

"Oh, Aggie, that's... that's awful. Do you not think you should at least phone him, to warn him...?"

"Warn him? Not on your Nellie. Then he'd have time to prepare... I don't know... something."

Archie was enjoying playing Devil's advocate. It was a good game. "How about if we just took the money equivalent? Surely..."

"I asked Glyndebourne about that. He said absolutely not. The whole point of this competition was to promote the bakery and their rolls. So, taking the cash is definitely out of the question."

"But... but there's going to be another car there, as well. How are you going to explain that?"

"That's got nothing to do with me. I don't know why that car is there. I don't need to explain *anything!*"

"Oh, Aggie, see you..." he saw the old twinkle in her eyes, and knew she had returned to her old, indomitable self. "D'you know something?" he asked. "We must have had the whole of the neighbourhood here yesterday. Thousands of folk..." he began to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"I always put an 'x' down for no publicity when I fill in my pools coupon. No publicity? We must have got more sightseers than the Pope on Easter Sunday!"

Agnes saw the funny side and laughed with him. The laughter would stop when she confronted Maisie Anderson.

When they hadn't appeared on time, Glyndebourne instructed one of his staff to telephone them. The journalist got no reply. This meant either they had already left, or... he didn't want to think what the alternative might be, but was already mentally preparing his letter of resignation; just in case. They arrived at *The Globe* offices with just five minutes to spare, explaining to the harassed editor that the taxi had arrived late to pick them up.

"O.K., let's not worry about that now." Glyndebourne ushered them over to the area at the side of the building where the ceremony was to take place. There were a couple of *Globe* journalists milling about, and television companies had, on invitation, sent contingents complete with reporters, as well as sound, lighting and camera crew. Radio stations had not been forgotten and they, too, had reporters on hand. This would be a big deal for all concerned, and would be the lead story in their local news segments later that evening.

There were, of course, also senior representatives from Rafferty's Bakeries and the Rolls-Royce car distributor. Publicity for the newspaper, the bakery, and even the Rolls-Royce dealership would be, they hoped, unprecedented. Off to the side, Archie noticed a well-stocked, makeshift bar on a trestle table covered with a pristine white tablecloth. Well, this was a celebration, after all. The ad-hoc bar was replete with a host of almost every conceivable kind of drink Archie could imagine. He gazed at it longingly, torn between its alcohol-laden allure, and the real star of the show, the Rolls-Royce. It's polished and gleaming royal blue body, with an outsized red ribbon tied across its large bonnet sat silent, centre-stage, to the left of the table, drawing attention from not just Archie, but from almost everyone present. Around the corner, out of sight, sat the white Ford Fiesta, forlorn, forever unable to command the attention or the respect of its illustrious larger competitor.

Glyndebourne had disappeared, but returned with glasses of champagne for Agnes and

Archie. Neither of them had ever experienced anything like this, and were overawed by their lavish surroundings, not to mention the looks they were drawing from the rest of the assembly, especially Agnes. She knew she would be the centre of attention, and had dressed appropriately, or perhaps, inappropriately, for the occasion. She had set her own hair, arranging it in a bouffant style, with just a few carefully placed strands falling over her forehead. She had used mascara but had over-applied it slightly, and she looked as if she had been in a fight on the way over. She was wearing bright red lipstick but had smudged it a little, and the color had overshot the outline of her lips. She had on a white cotton see-through blouse, with the top three buttons unfastened, under which her skin-coloured lace brassiere could plainly be seen. Over this, she wore a red bolero-style jacket. The hem of her tight lilac and mauve skirt rested six inches above her knees, giving the assembly a nice view of her shapely legs. Her feet were adorned with a pair of blue, four-inch-high heel shoes, which only served to accentuate her attractive figure. If the Rolls had been imbued with human emotions, it would have been mightily jealous of the competition.

By comparison, Archie was a paragon of style and good taste with his terminally crumpled charcoal-grey suit, misbuttoned shirt, and his tie in the colors of his soccer club's strip. After giving them a celebratory drink, the features editor had sloped away, leaving the couple on their own. Turning to Archie, his wife hissed, nodding at his glass of bubbly, "Now, listen here you, that's your lot. I know what you're like when you've had a few, and this is a big day for me. If you spoil it in any way..."

"Aw, c'mon, Aggie. Lighten up a wee bit. You wouldn't want them all to think we're unsociable, would you? I mean, it's a big occasion for them as well, and we wouldn't want to look as if we were ungrateful for their hospitality, would we?"

“Ungrateful...?” she shouted, then remembered where she was. Giving a reassuringly friendly nod to the rest of the crowd, she continued more serenely, whispering, “I’ll give you ‘ungrateful’, you drunken wee swine. See if you as much as blink twice together, so help me...” She didn’t need to finish the sentence. Archie well knew what his fate would be if he embarrassed Agnes.

“Alright, alright. I’ll just sip this one slowly, O.K.?” he conceded. To Archie, ‘sipping’ meant downing the drink in two gulps rather than one. Just as he had finished draining the last drop, a waiter appeared, offering him a refill. Conveniently forgetting the promise he had just made, he was about to accept, when he caught Agnes’s withering stare. “Eh, no, I’d better not, thanks, anyway.” The waiter smiled in sympathy. He, too, had seen Agnes’s threatening gaze.

After a few more minutes of subdued chatter, Glyndebourne clapped his hands together, summoning the crowd to attention. “Very well, everyone. I think it’s time to get this fabulous occasion underway.” For the first time, Agnes felt a twinge of apprehension as she saw all the journalists, technicians, and the rest of the gathering coming together for one reason, and one reason only; and that reason was her. Could she go through with it, with all eyes on her? Approaching Glyndebourne, she said, “I knew there would be some carry-on, but I didn’t expect anything like this.” “This is a big day for everyone, Agnes. No expense spared, and all that, eh?”

The crew were all conducting last minute checks on their equipment, with the T.V. reporters getting themselves into position with the best possible vantage point. *The Globe*’s own journalist was exchanging a few words with his photographer, but, slowly, organization seemed to find its way into the proceedings.

Eventually, everyone went silent.

Showtime, thought Agnes. Glyndebourne mounted the small podium constructed for the occasion. Following him came Enoch Rafferty, third generation director of the famous family bakery chain, Walter McSorley, *The Globe's* chief executive, Camilla McGill, representing the dealership, and finally, Gloria Swanston, for the charity. At their earlier meeting, Glyndebourne had made some innocuous comment about her name being closely similar to the old-time movie star. This comparison did not go down well, and Miss Swanston had kept her distance from the features editor ever since. He remembered the actress's movie, *Sunset Boulevard*, and, judging by the charity woman's attitude to his remark, was glad there wasn't a swimming pool nearby. Glyndebourne looked around him in some confusion, then, seeing Agnes in the rest of the crowd, motioned for her to join them on the dais. As Archie was about to accompany her, the editor motioned for him to stop. This would be a solo performance, not a duet. They were not *Sonny and Cher*.

When everyone on the stage was ready, Glyndebourne prepared to go into his well-rehearsed speech. Turning to face Agnes, he began, "Mrs. McBride, on behalf of *The Globe* and Rafferty's Bakeries, it gives me great pleasure to..." It was now, or never. Agnes interrupted him without mercy. Grabbing the microphone from Glyndebourne, she said, "I would just like to thank everyone who made it possible for me to win such an incredible prize. We're fair looking forward to driving our new Rolls-Royce. We still can't believe this is all happening. It's like a fairy-tale dream. I can't wait to show it off to all my friends..." She smiled at the cameras, as she fumbled for what to say next. No one on the platform, least of all Glyndebourne, knew what to say or do. The features editor could only stare at Agnes dumbfounded, fearful of what would happen next. Before he, or anyone else on the stage could marshal their thoughts, Agnes continued, "Archie... that is, Archie and me are so pleased to have won such a magnificent prize, and one that we can be so proud of. We'll do

our level best to keep it spick and span, and I'll make sure Archie cleans it once a week." She had needed to keep talking so no one could correct her.

Well, she'd done it now. She had formally and publicly accepted the prize she had actually one, not some crappy wee substitute. Now that she had done what she did, there wasn't anything the newspaper, the bakery, the charity or the garage could do. At least, not without showing themselves up, on television and on radio. She had done it. Simple as that. To the credit of everyone on the makeshift stage who knew of the 'arrangement', no one said or did anything. There wasn't much they could do. Agnes was right. She grasped Glyndebourne's unwilling hand, pumping it joyfully, before repeating her actions with Walter McSorley, Enoch Rafferty, Camilla McGill and Gloria Swanston. Glyndebourne was seething with hatred for this woman, now, and Miss Swanston looked as if she was about to be hit by a speeding freight train.

The reporters did not know what to make of it all. They could see something wasn't right. That much was obvious by the body language alone of everyone on the podium. The only person in the throng who knew the full story was *The Globe* reporter, but he was aware it was more than his job was worth to contradict whatever he had just witnessed. All the short speeches were made as they would have been, had Agnes been true to her word. No one countered what she had done, and the final item on the agenda was the formal, symbolic handing over of the car keys. The Rolls-Royce car keys. The car, itself, would be delivered later in the week. This function was carried out by Walter McSorley, Glyndebourne having divested himself of the responsibility by walking off the podium, and back into the main building.

With the ceremony completed, Agnes, too, carefully stood down, her tight skirt impeding her egress from the stage. She was immediately surrounded by the news people. One or two

commented on her abrupt interruption of Glyndebourne's opening address, which Agnes put down to nerves. She gave a few interviews to the T.V. and radio reporters, waiting for the backlash she was sure would follow. To her surprise, there was none. She had done it. She had actually done it! Finally, her ordeal was over. The journalists had got their story, and the assembly was dispersing.

Glyndebourne re-appeared, balling his hands into fists, primeval hatred burning within him. "What the bloody hell did you do back there? Do you realize what you've *done*? What greedy scheme are you and your no-account husband up to now, eh? We had a deal, Mrs. McBride; a deal *you* insisted on. May I remind you, *you* were the one who refused the Rolls-Royce in the first place. What a stab in the back! Brutus couldn't have done it any better."

"I haven't watched *Popeye* since I was a wee girl." Glyndebourne closed his eyes. Were there no limits to this woman's ignorance?

"Do you know who that woman is who was on the stage with us? Gloria Swanston is her name. *Dame* Gloria Swanston. She is the director of one of the largest charities in the U.K. She sits on the board of countless other companies, and is a very influential woman. As well as everything else, she's also an adviser to the government on charity issues. Do you realize what you've done?"

"Is that the one that looked as if she had a red-hot poker stuck up her jacksie?"

"Yes, that's the one," he admitted, refusing to smile at her sadly, well-observed description of the woman. "Heaven alone knows where she is now, or how I'm ever going to retrieve this horrible situation you've put me in. I promised her all the money from the auction would go to her charity. Possibly as much as ten thousand pounds. Now, she'll be lucky if she gets a few hundred for the Fiesta. What a despicable thing to do. I've never seen anything like it. Why on earth would you do such a thing, after we had reached an agreement? *Why?*"

“Well, you see, it’s like this. Archie won the pools on Saturday, a possible jackpot, they said.” She saw the skeptical way he was looking at her. “It’s true, I swear. You can ask Archie, yourself. You should’ve seen all the folk that came to gawp at our house, once word got around. I’m surprised it wasn’t on the evening news.”

“Even if what you...” Agnes didn’t let him finish. “So it means that we’ll now be able to buy a nice swanky house in one of the better class suburbs, and we’ll have room for the Rolls-Royce. I don’t need a poxy wee Ford Fiesta any more, do I? If you don’t believe me, all you have to do is to phone the local police station. They’ll tell you.” She suddenly remembered, “Find Archie. He’s got the coupon on him. He’s afraid to leave it in the house in case somebody breaks in and steals it.”

“Do you know, Mrs. McBride, despite everything that you’ve put me through, I was actually getting to like you; until today. I’m not a vindictive man by nature, but I hope that car brings you nothing but misfortune. Oh, and don’t worry. I *will* check out this concocted story of yours. If you’re lying about any of it, I’ll make you and your husband the laughing stock of Glasgow. In fact, I’ll make you the laughing stock of Scotland!”

“You can do what you like. I’m telling you the truth. I’m claiming the prize I won, and there’s nothing you or your paper can do about it. Archie will prove he’s...” she shouted, “Archie! Archie! Where are you?” Swiveling her head, she tried to find her errant husband. “Where on earth is that man?”

“Got cold feet at the last minute, did he?”

“No, he did *not* get cold feet. He’ll be around here somewhere.” She peered around all the apparatus that was being dismantled about her. When she turned round again, Glyndebourne was talking to Walter McSorley. *The Globe’s* chief executive turned to face Agnes. “Never in all my years of journalism have I come across such a mercenary, callow, selfish and cavalier

act that you have just perpetrated. The funds that car would have raised could have done so much to help the disadvantaged people it was meant for. And it was at your instigation that we altered the terms of our prize... quite frankly, I'm disgusted, Mrs. McBain."

"It's *McBride*, not *McBain*, and as for being disadvantaged, what do you think Archie and me are? We're disadvantaged, too. We're just as deserving as any of the other folk who'd get the money. Now, look here, maybe I have caused a wee hitch, but after all, I did win your first prize, and that's what I want. I presume you'll have the address where to deliver it, so... oh, wait a minute. Could you maybe hold on to it for a few weeks, 'cos, with the win Archie's had, we'll soon be moving to a nice new house. In fact, now I think on it, that would be a sensible idea. At least we'd have half a chance of the car staying in one piece."

"Mrs. McBride, we are a newspaper, not a car depository. You won it, you want it, and you'll get it, first thing tomorrow morning. After that, the car will be your responsibility, and I do not wish to ever see you again. If you want the car stored, then you will have to make your own arrangements. Good day to you. Mrs. McBain."

"It's still McBride!" she shouted after his fast-retreating figure. Glyndebourne, too, walked away, leaving Agnes on her own. By this time most of the crew had departed, and the area was becoming deserted. Agnes looked around still searching for her husband. One of the waiters approached her. "Excuse me, Mrs. McBride?" He asked her hesitantly.

"Aye, son, what is it?"

"Are you looking for your husband, by any chance?"

"First prize for spotting the bloody obvious, son. Have you seen him?"

"Well, he asked me how to get to the... er... toilets a few minutes ago." Agnes knew that the waiter's reticence was because Archie had probably not used such a polite word as 'toilet',

but a coarser euphemism. Agnes had heard all of Archie's rude alternatives for the word long ago. "Which way did you send him?" The waiter pointed toward the main building, and the general direction of the facilities, telling her where they were, and Agnes went in search of her missing husband.

She eventually came across the washroom and waited outside, trying not to appear like a female voyeur. After a couple of minutes, a staff member entered the toilet, emerging a short while later. Agnes approached him uneasily, and asked him if there was anyone else inside, explaining that she thought her husband might be 'washing his hands'. He told her that he had been on his own. Apart from him, the room was empty. "Are there any other... places... like this one...?"

"Not in this part of the building," the man replied. He then walked away, back to his safe little work-a-day world, and once again, Agnes was left alone. Alone and worried. She wandered off, not knowing what to do, or who, even, to ask. For obvious reasons, she couldn't approach anyone who knew what she had done, and she dared not admit that she couldn't find Archie. She was contemplating her next move when she heard a commotion coming from along the corridor. Instinctively, she knew it was Archie. It had to be. That man could cause chaos in an empty room. Against her better judgement, she let her legs take her in the direction of the rumpus. Glyndebourne saw her, and shouted at her to hurry up.

Oh, no, she said to herself, as she ran as fast as her tight skirt and high heels would let her. *Of all the people, it had to be him*. She sighed as she got to where he was standing.

"Mrs. McBride, will you please take your husband out of here!" This was not so much a polite request, as it was a final demand. As she drew nearer, she could see what all the fuss was about. Archie had found the conference room, or to be more exact, he had found the well-stocked drinks cabinet in the conference room, and had freely availed himself of its

contents. As she walked with Glyndebourne into the suite, she saw and heard Archie dancing on the boardroom table, doing a feeble impression of Fred Astaire, and singing off-key his famous song from 'Top Hat'. As a cane, he was using a ceremonial sword whose usual home was on the wall, while attempting to sever the fingers of anyone trying to end his performance prematurely. Agnes gasped in horror at the sight, as three security men dodged in and around Archie's drunken attacks and parries.

"Archie McBride!" she stormed. "Put down that sword and get off that fuckin' table this instant. Do you hear me, ya drunken hooligan?" At the sound of his wife's stentorian command, Archie stopped and gazed vacantly in the direction of Agnes's voice.

"Aw', Aggie, I was only having a wee bit of fun, so I was," he protested weakly.

"Aye, well, the fun's over. Now put down that sword, and come off that table. And try to sober up, will you." Evidence of Archie's drinking spree was scattered all around the conference room floor in the form of empty spirit bottles. There were also some dark stains on the carpet, which Agnes fervently hoped were only alcohol ones. Archie meekly laid down the sword, and allowed a couple of the security guards to help him down off the polished mahogany conference table. Seeing they were about to hustle him away, Agnes rushed up to them. "You just leave him alone," she ordered them. The guards looked to Glyndebourne for guidance. By rights, they should have kept hold of him until someone called for the police. Glyndebourne motioned them to release Archie. In that instant, it seemed to Agnes that time froze, as she took in the scene around her. She with her arms protectively around Archie, while all about her stood her adversaries, held reluctantly at bay, but ready to pounce as soon as they were bidden. This scenario reminded her of something, but just as it was coming into focus, Glyndebourne spoke, destroying her train of thought.

“Mrs. McBride, I could have your husband charged with theft, malicious damage and attempted assault, to name just three offences off the top of my head. I could, but all I want you both to do is to get out of this boardroom, out of this building, and *out of my life!* I never want to see you, *either of you*, ever again!”

“Well, that suits me just fine, Mr. Glyndebourne. C’mon, son.” Keeping her arm around her befuddled spouse, she walked with as much dignity as she could muster, through the throng of onlookers, along the corridor, down the stairs she had climbed a few minutes earlier, then out of the side door of the building. In front of her, she could see the magnificent car she had won. Somehow, it had lost its allure, and, for the briefest of seconds, she was sorry for what she had done. After the upset she had caused, she doubted anyone would think of booking a taxi for her. They would have to find their own way home, she in her tight and inappropriate clothes, and he barely able to keep his head up. Standing in the courtyard, barely a few yards from the Rolls-Royce, she cupped his face in her hands, lifting it to meet her gaze. She wanted him to look at her, drunk as he was. “Oh, Archie, I really want to kill you right now, so I do, but I s’pose I caused far more upset than you did. Do you realize, you could’ve gone to jail for what you did, trying to cut off the hands of those security guards. Archie, that was bloody serious, and I wonder if you know how lucky you are. Oh, Archie, why did you...?”

Archie was beginning to sober up slightly, but was only vaguely aware of what he had done. “I was lookin’ for the pisshoose, an’ I happened to pass yon room. I was just being nosey, like, and had a wee look in, and then, well...”

Agnes didn’t have to be told the rest. “Yes, I know,” she sighed, with more expression in that groan, than in a book full of eloquence. She couldn’t face going back into the newspaper offices to ask if she could use their phone to call for a taxi. Holding Archie around his waist, she walked them together, eventually finding *The Printer’s Rest*. The barman was ready to go

on the offensive. No way was he going to serve anyone who was already as drunk as they were, wrongly assuming Agnes was also inebriated. "It's alright, son," Agnes said, seeing his expression. "We don't want a drink. I just need to use your phone to get a cab. Is that alright?"

"We don't have a public telephone anymore. It kept getting vandalized by the wee tow-rags who come in here, so we got rid of it."

Agnes's shoulders slumped visibly. "Oh, son, I really need to get home..."

"It's O.K., Misses, I can see you're in a bit of a state. I'll use the private one in the office. Where are you going?" She gave the barman their address, and a few minutes later, the cab appeared.

The journey home was conducted almost in complete silence, apart from Archie's snoring, which Agnes tried to abort by constantly nudging him with her elbow. She knew their lives were going to change, but even Agnes could not foresee the dramatic turn of events that lay ahead.

Chapter 5

The Telfers

Between winning the prestigious car, and now, the pools, the McBrides were, naturally, the talk of the neighbourhood. She expected to see a few well-wishers when the cab drove up to their building, but what she witnessed filled her with dread. The street was crowded with people, most of whom Agnes didn't know. To make matters worse, Archie was still sleeping off his hangover, and it would be apparent to anyone who saw them that he had made a fool of himself – again. No. Agnes couldn't have it, she really couldn't. She would somehow have to maneuver them both out of the taxi, through the throng, and up to their apartment. It was obvious to her that the cab driver was not going to help. He was only there to get them from point 'A' to point 'B', nothing more, nothing less, and even the offer of a generous tip did not persuade him to assist her. Sadly, her efforts were all in vain, and someone shouted out, "Hey, Aggie, is this that man of yours drunk again?"

"No," she returned the jibe. "He's not drunk. He takes dizzy turns."

This caused much hilarity from everyone in the crowd who knew Archie and his fondness for alcohol. "Aye," shouted another onlooker, "but it's funny how his 'dizzy turns' only seem to happen when he's holding a bottle of whisky." This remark caused even more laughter at their expense. Agnes comforted herself with the thought that these exchanges would not last much longer. Soon, they would be out of this neighbourhood, and living in a much more opulent part of the city. Then, it would be her who would have the last laugh. They would all still be living where they were now, while she and Archie were snug in their nice bungalow, somewhere in the suburbs.

Somehow, Agnes managed to manhandle Archie through the crowd, and up to their flat. She had just managed to close the front door, when she heard it banging. Still supporting Archie with one hand, she called out, "Who is it?" A familiar voice assailed her from the other side. "Aggie, it's me, Maisie." With her free hand, Agnes turned the door handle and her friend stepped smartly inside. "I saw you struggling with Archie, and I thought you'd need some help."

"Thank Christ it's you, Maisie. It was a nightmare down there." "Is he alright? He looks..."

"Plastered. Drunk as a skunk. I'll tell you about it later. I'm goin' to put him to bed."

"Do you need any help?"

Agnes considered Maisie's offer for a moment, then she said, "Yes, I wouldn't mind. He's a dead weight, and he's not in any position to object. I doubt you'll see anything you haven't seen before." They carry-dragged Archie between them into the bedroom. Archie woke up momentarily as Maisie was unbuttoning his shirt. "Oh, Maisie, I never knew you felt this way... I love you. C'mere," and he made a clumsy, drunken grab for her, which Maisie easily fended off, before she slapped him across the face. The blow pole-axed Archie onto the bed, where he remained.

"Did you see that? The dirty wee swine. I'll deal with him later."

"Och, Agnes, he's drunk. He didn't know what he was doing."

"Did he not? I've seen him making eyes at you before, when he was sober."

"Well, I never," Maisie gasped.

"Neither has he, I hope!"

Finally, they managed to get him undressed and into bed. “Cup of tea?” Agnes asked, trying to regain her breath.

“Yes, I wouldn’t mind.” The two women went into the kitchen, and Agnes prepared their drink. She said, casually, “We’d quite a crowd here, yesterday. All those punters...” She shook her head in disbelief.

“Yes, I saw them. There must have been hundreds.”

“I wonder how they knew we won the pools.”

Maisie saw the way the conversation was heading, and didn’t like it. “Archie must’ve opened his mouth.”

“He swore that he didn’t, and I believe him. He wouldn’t dare lie to me, anyway. Besides, neither of us went out after he came back from your place.”

“What are you driving at, Aggie?”

“Maisie, are you sure you didn’t tell anybody about our win?”

“Look, I kept quiet about the fact that you’d won the Rolls-Royce, didn’t I? I didn’t even tell Jim...” she stopped talking abruptly.

“What is it?”

“We went round to Jim’s brother yesterday afternoon for a wee while. It could be...”

“Aye, it bloody well was. See your man, he’s got a mouth the size of the Clyde Tunnel. Ah, well, it’s done, now...” she sighed resignedly. “The police are keeping an eye on our place in case some wee fly-man tries to do us over, I can’t go to the shops for fear of getting swamped by folk I don’t even know, Archie’s frightened to go into work in case his mates give him all

their hard luck stories, and it's all because your man doesn't know how to keep his big mouth shut!"

"Don't you talk about my Jim like that. Look at what you've just put to bed."

"Leastways, Archie can keep his tongue behind his teeth when he has to."

"Listen, I don't have to sit here and take all this crap. I'm sorry for what Jim did, if it was him, and saying sorry for Jim isn't something I do very often. I don't even know if he was the culprit. If my apology isn't good enough for you, then I'll just go. If this is what having all this money is going to do to you, I think we should call it a day." Maisie got up to leave, but her friend caught her gently by the arm, pulling her back down into her chair. There was a frightening similarity between last night's flare-up with Archie, and now this, which was not lost on her. She had caught the situation in time, she hoped. Maisie had been a good and loyal friend to her down through the years. She certainly didn't deserve the way Agnes was treating her. "Maisie, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said all those things. It's just with everything that's happening, I'm beginning to lose the plot, so I am."

"It's O.K., Aggie, I'd probably be the same. Pals again?" The two women embraced. "Listen, I really have to go, but I can pop back in later, if you like."

"No, it's fine. I'll be alright. It looks as if Paul Newman in there will sleep for a week. That'll give me some time to myself, to calm down a bit." She showed her friend to the door.

Once Maisie left, and Agnes was alone, she returned to the living room and sat down. For some reason she could not fathom, she began to cry. She was still sobbing when night fell and plunged the room into darkness.

Agnes did not remember getting undressed, much less getting into bed, however, when she awoke the next morning, she found herself lying in her usual spot. She turned to look at her bedside clock, then spun her head around. Archie was gone. It was after nine a.m., much later than she usually lay. Having slept off his booze binge from the day before, Archie must have quietly arisen earlier, so not to disturb her, and gone to work. Her mouth felt very dry, and she forced herself to get up and make some breakfast. As she was clearing the breakfast dishes away, she heard the sound of her letterbox rattle, and the soft, gently rustle of envelopes as they fell onto the carpet. As always, it was mostly the usual mixture of bills and junk mail, which Agnes paid little attention to. There was one missive, however, that caught her eye. It was from the pools company, judging by the logo on the envelope. It was addressed to Archie, and Agnes assumed it was the letter telling them how much Archie had won. She knew she should wait for him to come home from work before letting him open it, but the excitement was unbearable, and she wouldn't be able to wait until the evening. Tearing open the envelope, she read, *'Dear Mr. McBride, We acknowledge your claim in connection with your pools entry in last week's competition. We regret to inform you, however, that despite an exhaustive search, we can find no trace of your entry coupon. Under the terms of our rules of participation, we cannot pay out any dividend unless the winning coupon is in our possession at least twenty-four hours before the Saturday on which the games on the coupon for that week have been played. Regretfully, we must advise you that your claim has been declined on this occasion. Sincerely...'* Agnes did not even bother to look at the signature on this perfidious document. What did this all mean? Archie was fanatical about his pools bet. He spent hours studying the forms of the opposing teams, considering the odds in his head, on what the outcome of the games would be. Every Tuesday night, the T.V., Archie's usual way of relaxing when he wasn't in the pub, took second fiddle to his 'footy' calculations. Oh, no, he would have handed his coupon and his stake money

over, alright. There could be no doubt about that; no doubt whatsoever. So if Archie didn't have it, and the pools company couldn't find it, that could mean only one thing.

There was no point in telling Archie this piece of devastating news; not until she had carried out her own investigation. Her head was reeling with a mixture of emotions, mainly anger, but also of frustration, hopelessness and despair. If she was right, the company would not have received Archie's entry, and had probably seldom, if ever, done so. She was glad Archie had gone to work. He was so elated at their good fortune, she wondered how she would find the courage to tell him the sad, final truth if her fears proved to be correct. Agnes donned an old coat, and a scarf she rarely wore. She considered putting on a pair of sunglasses, anything to try to hide her identity, but when she looked out of the window, she saw it was raining.

Who in their right mind wore sunglasses on a dark and stormy day – in Glasgow? She would stand out like a clown at a funeral.

She slipped out of her apartment block and made her way along the rainy streets. Because of the weather, few people were about, which pleased Agnes. All the less folk to gawp at her as she tended to her business. She eventually arrived at the address she was searching for. It was a tenement building not unlike her own. Agnes looked up at the apartment she was headed for, stopping for a few seconds to summon the courage she would need. She allowed her anger to rise to its appointed place, then entered the building. She climbed the stairs slowly and quietly, trying to keep the noise of her ascent to a minimum. Finally, she was outside the door. But what the hell did she do now? Agnes banged at the door as loudly as she could, all thoughts of keeping silent now banished. She had arrived unheard. That was what mattered. As she hammered on the door, she opened the letter-box in time to see a shape creep out of the hallway, and into a side room, probably a bedroom. "I see you! I know you're in there. Come on out, you conniving wee bastard. I want to have a word with you."

At all the commotion, the neighbour from across the landing opened her door. “Hey, what’s going on here? What are you doing?”

“Look, Misses. This is a matter between me and Sammy Telfer. It might involve the polis. Now, if you want to get involved...” At the mention of the police, the woman quickly changed her mind. “Eh, no, that’s alright.” She added mischievously, “He’s at home, by the way. I heard him coming in about half-an-hour ago.”

“Thanks. Now, why don’t you just shut your door, and let me get on with why I came? Alright?”

The neighbour obligingly closed her door. Agnes began banging again. “I’m going to count to three, and then...” She stopped talking as a familiar sound came from inside the apartment. Agnes knew immediately what it was, and raced down the stairs, running through the close mouth to the back of the block. She was in time to see Telfer standing with a suitcase in his hand, looking up at his wife, Sadie, who was precariously climbing down the drainpipe that ran vertically just outside their bedroom window. It was the sound of the casement window opening that gave Agnes the clue to her quarry’s intentions. She lunged at the still upward looking pools agent, knocking him to the ground. “Get on your feet, ya dirty, rotten scumbag, you. What have you done with our money?” As Telfer was getting up, his wife jumped down from the drainpipe, to confront Agnes. Turning her outstretched hands into claws, Sadie Telfer flew at her, determined to come to the aid of her husband. Agnes was prepared for her attack, and kicked her opponent in the stomach, forcing all the wind out of her. Still holding onto Telfer, Agnes screamed at him, “What did you do with all the stake money we’ve been giving you?” Before he could answer, Sadie once again sprang forward to attack Agnes. Instinctively, Agnes protected herself by pushing Sammy Telfer in front of her, as Sadie’s fingers shot out, strafing her nails sharply down the side of her husband’s face. Telfer

screamed out in agony, blood spurting from the scratches his wife had made. Sadie screamed in fury, “Now see what you made me do, ya witch. That was meant for *you*, not him.”

“Aye, well, it serves him right. Him and you, ya pair of thieving swines. No wonder this neighbourhood gets such a bad reputation, with people like you.”

“You watch your tongue, or I’ll ram it down your bloody throat,” snarled Sadie. By this time, a crowd had gathered at their back windows to see what all the commotion was about. Seeing all the faces, Agnes shouted up to them, “Me ‘n Archie have knocked it off on the pools, but we’ll likely not get any money because of these swindlers. They’ve pilfered our stake money, and most likely, yours, too, if you do the coupon with him,” Agnes asserted, still holding onto Sammy Telfer’s sleeve.

“That’s a barefaced and wicked lie, so it is,” Sadie shouted back. “We’ve not stolen nothin’ in our lives, have we, Sammy?” Still struggling against Agnes’s grip, Telfer concurred with his wife. “No, we haven’t. She’s off her head.”

“We would have won a bloody fortune, if this one had been honest,” Agnes continued. “But now, we’ll not get anything. We got a letter from the pools company earlier on.” Looking up at the windows, she asked, “How many of you do your pools with him?” She held up the sleeve she was gripping. A few seconds later, a voice shouted, “Me. I put my line on with him every week.” Then a second, and a third echoed the first, until perhaps more than a dozen individuals confirmed that Telfer was their pools agent as well. “Aye, well, you can bet your boots that very little of that money ever reached the pools company. Most of it’s gone into their pockets.”

“How do you know?” someone shouted down.

“Why do you think I’m standing out here, you idiot? I just caught them doing a moonlight flit. ⁽⁸⁾” She pointed to Telfer’s suitcase. “What do you think that is? A fuckin’ stick of

Blackpool rock? While I was beating at their front door, they were having it away on their toes out the back window. If that's not a sign of guilt, I don't know what is."

"What did you just say?" asked another onlooker, astonished at what he had heard.

"Aye, that's right. I ran around here, and found them climbing down that drainpipe." Turning to Sadie, Agnes said in a loud voice, "Explain that away, if you can."

"Ach, she's crazy. We..."

"So why were you both out the back close, then?" shouted a neighbour.

"We... we were..." But Sadie Telfer could not find a cogent reason why they were standing in the back court with their suitcase.

"I'll bet you that if we went up to their flat right now, we would find thousands of all your pools coupons lying about."

"There's one way to settle it," shouted another. Why don't we all go up to their flat and see?"

"Over my dead body," shouted Sadie Telfer

"Don't tempt me," rejoindered Agnes. "It's either that, or I call the polis. One or the other.

You choose." With even more neighbours now looking on, the Telfers realised they had no choice. "Aye, fine, you can come up, but when you don't find anything, I'm going to sue this woman for slander, and I'll take that bloody Rolls-Royce off her, before she's even driven the fuckin' thing."

"Aye, we'll see about that," said Agnes, slightly rocked by her adversary's answer. The Telfer woman sounded too bloody sure of herself; too sure by half. "Oh, Christ!" thought Agnes. "What if I got this all wrong? Oh, fuck, what have I done?"

A deputation of six people, excluding Agnes, three men and three women, accompanied Agnes and the Telfers back up to their flat. Sadie Telfer stood defiantly at her front door. “Right. This is my house, and these are my rules.” Looking at the volunteers she said, “You lot can come in, and search all you like, but,” pointing at Agnes, she insisted, “that woman does not get in. Is that understood?” The small crowd all acquiesced silently. “Right, in you come.” Looking straight at Agnes, she said, “And *you* can wait right here.”

“Make sure you search everywhere, even the lavvy,” she shouted, as they all trooped into the apartment. Before they started, Sadie Telfer called them together. “I’m making three conditions before you start, and I’m serious. One: you will be responsible for any breakages or damage while you are in this house. Two: anything moved, opened or re-arranged will be put back into its proper place, and three; me and Sammy will be allowed to come around with you to make sure you don’t leave with anything that doesn’t belong to you, or to hide an odd pools coupon, which another one of you just happens to ‘find’. Do I make myself clear?”

Agnes could hear Sadie’s demands, and became even more concerned. This did not sound like the actions of anyone who had something to hide. After half-an-hour, the neighbours finished their search. They found nothing incriminating, nothing that would make them anything like suspicious. Whatever the Telfers were doing in the back green, it didn’t look as if they had done anything wrong. Agnes was shivering with fear. What the hell had gone wrong? They had to be guilty; that was the only possible explanation. Yet they, especially Sadie Telfer, had sounded so cocksure. How could she have got it so wrong? At the front door, as they were leaving, Sadie Telfer shouted after Agnes, taunting her, “Make sure and keep that car clean. I wouldn’t want to get it in a dirty condition.” Agnes was seething. Not only would they not now get any money from Archie’s win, but the very people who were responsible for their downfall might, in all likelihood, even get her, well, Archie’s prized car. As they were all walking downstairs, they heard the sound of rapid footsteps, rushing up to

meet them. The footfalls belonged to Billy Johnstone, the ten-year-old son of Bertie Johnstone, one of the neighbours who had searched the Telfers' house. Behind him, he was dragging something, something familiar to Agnes. It was Sammy Telfer's suitcase. Young Billy looked up at his father shame-faced. "Dad, will you please tell Mr. Telfer I'm awfully sorry. I found his suitcase out the back, and when I lifted it up, it fell open. I got as many of his pools coupons as I could, but some of them flew away in the wind..."

Chapter 6

Burning Bridges

The Rolls-Royce was delivered the following day on the back of a car transporter. The delivery driver had to check his manifest twice. A Rolls-Royce *here*? He looked up at the crumbling tenement block from the window of his cab, scratching his head. Why in God's name would anyone want a car like this left here? He shrugged his shoulders. He was only the delivery driver. Just in case his company had made a king-sized error, he knocked at Agnes's door before lowering the car to the curb. "Excuse me," he said, when Agnes opened the door. "I've got a delivery here for a Mrs. Agnes McBride. A Rolls-Royce...?" he could not believe he was asking this question in such a run-down neighbourhood.

"Aye, son, that'll be for me," Agnes answered as if taking delivery of such a car was the most natural thing in the world.

"I'll just leave it at the close...?"

"Yes, that should be fine, thanks."

The driver lowered the trailer to road level, then undid the buckles and fasteners that held the car onto the back of the lorry. Agnes watched fascinated as the driver slowly reversed the car, *her car, her Rolls-Royce*, and left it parked at the roadside. He saw her looking out of her window, and held up the car keys, as if in triumph. Whether that was because he had parked the car safely, or because he was about to hand over the keys to their rightful owner, she wasn't sure.

Once he had gone, Agnes went down to stare at the prize she had won. It took her a few moments to realize that not only did the car belong to her, but she could actually unlock it, and sit in the driver's seat, even if she couldn't drive it herself. Again, the car began to draw a crowd, and Agnes looked out at the people milling around her, almost embarrassed by her own good fortune. Trepidation also began to set in. How long would the car remain safe and in one piece? Neither she nor Archie could keep watch on it around the clock. How long would it be before some wee vandals decided the car would make a good target for their stone throwing abilities, or their graffiti skills? Owning a car like a Rolls-Royce wasn't all it was cracked up to be, she decided.

After the incident with the Telfers, Agnes had no option but to relate the details of their confrontation to Archie when he got back from work. It was better he should hear it from her, rather than by some embittered and jealous neighbour, only too happy to tell him the distressing news. After the initial shock, he took the news more stoically than she had anticipated. "D'you know what, Aggie," he said. "After that wee 'disagreement' we had the other day, perhaps it's just as well. Maybe having all that money isn't for the likes of you and me. Who knows what would've happened to us? We've never had anything to fight over, but if I'd really gotten all that money, who knows what it would've done to us, done to our marriage?"

Agnes had never known Archie to be so philosophical, but he was right. After the unforgiveable way she had treated him, perhaps it was for the best, after all. They still had the *Silver Shadow*, which, as Agnes had discovered, was the model she had won. As for the Telfers, after the little boy had produced the swindler's suitcase full of unsent pools coupons, they were lucky not to have been killed by the neighbours who had searched their flat. No

amount of blustering by Sadie Telfer could get them out of that one. They had been caught red-handed. The first thought of those present was to hold them prisoner, while someone went to fetch the police. A vindicated Agnes, however, had other ideas. It was quite a sight to watch, as both Telfers were dragged ignominiously through the streets, with a growing throng accompanying them to the police station, baying for their blood, the stuffed suitcase evidence of their perfidy.

Like Archie, many of Telfer's neighbours had been using him as their agent, expecting him to deliver their coupons and stake money to the pools company's local distribution centre. What had started off as a minor, casual, and occasional theft a few years earlier, discarding the odd coupon, and keeping the cash, eventually grew into a major embezzlement, as the Telfers got greedier and more brazen. It had only been by chance that, until Archie, none of the neighbours had enjoyed even a modest win, so no one was any the wiser that their bets were not being placed.

The pools company were reluctant to press charges for fear of all the adverse publicity it would cause, but the locals were so incensed by the Telfers' actions that the company had no choice. As Agnes had caught them in the act of fleeing from the scene, the police refused them bail, determined they were a 'flight risk', and the couple were held in custody until the trial. They were eventually charged with a string of offences, but as Sadie's name was not on any of the documents relating to Sammy's employment by the pools company, she could only be found guilty as an accessory to the crime. Her husband, however, did not get off so lightly. On the day of his trial, the court was packed with his neighbours and former friends who were there to make sure justice was done. The magistrate would never admit to being influenced, or intimidated by the crowd, but knew it would have been more than his life was worth to allow Telfer to escape without serving at least some time in prison, so he imposed a custodial sentence. Not as much as the angry mob would have wanted, but at least he got

some of his just desserts. Many of them were heard to remark that it was a pity that hanging had been abolished. His wife left the area under a cloud, and nothing was ever heard from either of them again

Apart from taking Agnes out for a short drive occasionally, Archie rarely used the car. For one thing, it was an expensive vehicle to run, and used a lot of fuel. He was also nervous about having an accident. Despite the car being insured, he did not want to take the risk of it getting even a minor dent, so the Rolls-Royce was usually left parked outside their tenement building. It was around this time that rumors started circulating, encouraged by those who were envious of the couple having such a 'swanky' car. The reason why he didn't drive it, they whispered, was because he knocked someone down, a child, it was said. Rather than report the accident, Archie had scooped up the body and hidden it in the boot. Then the hearsay expanded, and it was no longer one, but several bodies he had run over, all in a drunken stupor. One or two were in the trunk of the car, and the rest were buried in the woods nearby.

Inevitably, these fabrications got to the ears of Agnes. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. How could the people she had thought of as friends, think, never mind repeat, such wicked things? It was unbelievable. That night, after Archie had returned from work and eaten his supper, Agnes insisted they go out for a drive. She did not reveal to him the reason for her sudden, unexpected request, but he complied, albeit reluctantly. *Z Cars* was about to start on the telly, one of Archie's favorite programs.

This'll show them, she said to herself, as they made ready to leave. *Too afraid to drive the car, eh? We'll soon see about that*

."Where do you want to go, dear?" Archie asked her

.“It doesn’t matter. I just felt like a wee drive. Just you go wherever you want. I don’t mind.”

So they drove around the neighbourhood for half-an-hour, enough time, Agnes thought, to dispel any of the myths she had heard. When they returned, a small crowd had gathered to see them alight from the car. In a voice that could be heard several streets away, Agnes said, “Archie, will you open the boot. I thought I heard a banging noise coming from it earlier on.”

“I didn’t hear anything. Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Just open the bloody thing, O.K.?”

To placate his wife, Archie did as she asked him, unaware of the crowd craning their necks forward to see if they could discern any evidence of Archie’s alleged crime. Agnes was well aware of their actions, however, and turned to ask them, “Well are you all satisfied now? No dead bodies, no blood, no guts, no... anything. Now, go home the lot of you. You should all be ashamed of yourselves for thinking such terrible things about Archie.” The assembly slunk away, shamed by Agnes, but not altogether convinced by her outburst, many thinking of the old saying, *‘no smoke without fire’*.

At the mention of his name, Archie perked up, bringing his head from out of the trunk space. Agnes had all but forgotten he was standing beside her. “What was all that about?”

“It was... nothing,” she answered him evasively. “Just a silly misunderstanding, that was all.”

For some reason, Archie wouldn’t let it go, and kept nagging at Agnes as they climbed the stairs. Eventually she succumbed to his constant questions, too tired to fight him off any more. Maybe he did have a right to know, anyway. After all, the rumors were all about him. After she was finished he looked at her in horror. “They think I did *what?* Run people down in the car? Kids? What the hell are they all talking about? I’ve hardly been out in the bloody thing, never mind knocking anyone down. Why are they saying all these awful things about me, Aggie?” he cried.

Agnes put her arms around him. “I’m afraid that’s what they’re like around here,” was the only answer she could think of. Before she could stop him, he ran to the window and threw it wide open. “See you down there, you’re all a bunch of evil-minded pigs. Do you really think I knocked down a bunch of kids, and did nothing about it? Do you really? Is that what you all think of me? You’ve all known me for years. They say I’m a bit slow-witted, but I’m the fuckin’ Brain of Britain compared to you lot. You all deserve to go to hell for your unclean thoughts, the whole bloody lot of you. Go home and pray for forgiveness, ya unclean rabble of swine!”

Well, thought Agnes, after he had finished his tirade. After giving all the neighbours such a barracking, now we’ll really have to move. Nobody from around here will ever talk to us again.

The following day while Archie was at work, Agnes put her mind on how she could persuade him to let her sell the car, and use the proceeds to move house, to buy a place of their own. By the time he returned, she had a plan in her mind. But that was the only place it was. She hadn’t yet articulated it out loud, even to herself. Once they had eaten, and Agnes had cleared away their plates, she produced a couple of cans of lager for Archie. His face lit up at this unexpected pleasure. She even opened the first one for him, guiding him over to his favorite armchair in front of the television. Agnes had decided that it should remain on, but had turned down the volume. She needed Archie’s undivided attention for what she was about to say. Seeing he was relaxed, she said, “Archie, what you did, what you shouted out the window last night, well, I’m right proud of you, so I am. Those swines had it coming to them, so they did. Thinking you could do such a dreadful thing...”

He looked lovingly at her, pleased at hearing her say she was proud of him. Then she continued, “But you’re out at work all day, while I’m here, except when I’m at the cleaning. I’ll have to live with what you did, and it isn’t going to be easy. Even earlier today, I was getting strange looks from people...”

“Ach, Aggie, it’ll all blow over. Give it a few days, and folk’ll forget all about what I done, not that they didn’t deserve it, mind.”

“Aye, pet, you’re right. They did deserve the tongue-lashing you gave them, but I’m not sure they’ll be so quick to forgive and forget. It’s going to be hard, Archie. Far harder for me, than it will be for you. I think the time has come for us to move away from this place.”

“But I like it here, and so do you. We’ve lived here for over twenty years. I don’t want to move, Aggie, I really don’t.”

“You’re right. I do like it here, or at least, I used to, but things have changed. Even you should see that. Winning that Rolls started it, and then that pools fiasco topped the lot. Even Maisie says I’m different. I know I went daft for a wee spell after I thought you’d won all that money, but deep down, I’m still the same. So are you. It’s not us that’s changed, it’s *them*. Maybe it’s because people expect you to change when something like this happens, so they change towards you. But we haven’t really behaved any differently now than what we did before I won that bloody competition. Mind you, I wonder if you’d have done a few weeks ago what you did last night. No, Archie, it’s no use. I think we’ve burned our bridges here. If we sold that car, it would give us enough to buy a nice wee house in the suburbs, somewhere nice, and...” she paused to build up to what she was about to say next, “and... there would still be enough money left over to buy you a wee car, not a big monstrosity like the one down the stairs, but one you won’t be afraid to drive. Come on, what do you say?”

“Och, Aggie, I don’t know... it’s very tempting, mind.”

“And another thing. How that motor’s not been vandalized or stolen, I don’t know, but I’m sure it’s only a matter of time...” He was beginning to weaken, she was sure. “Listen, I’ve looked at the price of houses in Newton Mearns, and Bearsden. I think we could get one, a small one anyway, for what we’d get for selling the car, and we might even be able to afford a holiday as well.”

“A holiday as well, you say...” Archie was now stroking his chin, a sure sign that she’d at least got him thinking about it.

“We’re not getting any younger, Archie. Neither of us are. Would you not like to spend whatever years God has to give you somewhere a bit nicer than this place?”

Archie stayed silent, but she could see he was thinking, something he rarely did. He would probably have to blow the cobwebs from off his brains, but, yes, he did look as if he was trying to process everything she had just said. He had to admit that it did make sense. He was looking at the television, but his mind was not on what was on the screen. His thumb was pressing against his stubbled beard. This would be a big decision for him to take, for them both, a momentous decision from which, once made, there would be no turning back.

Eventually, he spoke. He had made up his mind. Turning to face Agnes, he said, “Aye, O.K., I s’pose it would be nice to live in a house of our own with a wee bit of garden. Fine, let’s do it!”

Agnes threw her arms around Archie, kissing him on the cheek. “I knew you’d come around, I just knew it,” she beamed at him. “D’you know, because of all the fuss I caused at that ceremony, Glyndebourne cursed me, did you know that? He said he wished us nothing but bad luck for doing what I did to him, and I can’t help thinking his curse has come true.”

“Ach, away, and don’t talk pish. A long time ago, I went to a clairvoyant to have my fortune told. It was a Saturday afternoon. While I was in, her man came back, wearing a football

rosette, his team's scarf, and carrying a rattle. D'you know the first thing she said to him? She said, 'where the bloody hell have you been?' A fortune teller. It's all a lot of mumbo-jumbo."

"Yes, I suppose you're right, but I still can't help..." "Let's have no more of that nonsense, O.K.?"

"Aye, O.K."

A thought struck Archie. "I wonder how you go about selling a car like a Rolls-Royce."

"Och, that's easy. You just..." she faltered, realizing the implications of Archie's question.

"You just... you just... you just put the kettle on, and leave the rest to me." But the thought stabbed at her like a serrated bread knife. How on earth did you go about selling such a prestige car? Agnes hadn't the foggiest idea. The answer to her problem lay, of all places, in her next trip to her local grocery store.

Chapter 7

The Box Number

Since Archie's outburst, her neighbours had, as Agnes feared, sent her to Coventry. It wasn't very pleasant being cut dead by people in the street you had believed were your friends. But, as Agnes considered, they had brought it all upon themselves by spreading such wicked and malicious lies about Archie. What did they think he would do when he found out what they'd been saying about him? What did they expect? What would *they* do, if they had been in his position? Exactly! So, they could all go to hell, every last one of them. She avoided going out as much as she could. Her neighbours even took to crossing to the other side of the street when they saw her coming toward them. But they still had to eat, and groceries still had to be bought. *God knows*, she admitted to herself, *I've done my fair share of muckraking and gossiping, but I would never stoop as low as they've done.*"

Agnes was so lost in her own thoughts as she walked along the road, that she was not aware of the tall, handsome, and smartly dressed young man approaching her. "Mrs. McBride?" he asked. "Mrs. Agnes McBride?"

"Aye, son, and who might you be?"

The stranger held out his hand for Agnes to take. She shook it carefully with her own, not sure if he intended to kiss her on it. He looked the type. *Handsome bugger, all the same*, she thought. "How do you do? My name is Frank Scullion. I'm a reporter for *The Monthly Review*. I was actually planning on contacting you later, so this is quite a lucky break for me. Do you think we might have a chat somewhere? It won't take long."

It had been so long since anyone had spoken to her, Agnes was grateful for Scullion's company. "There's a wee coffee shop along the road, the *Take a Pew Coffee Emporium*. It

used to be a church, I think. Sign of the times, eh? It's not the same praying to a *café latte*, as it is praying to the Lord, mind." Scullion smiled at her banal joke. "Buy me a coffee an' a wee scone, an' I'm all yours, son," she said suggestively. They indulged in small talk on the way to the café, Scullion keeping to himself the reason for his approach until they were seated. Once he had ordered for both of them, Scullion said, "Well, Mrs. McBride, you must be wondering why I want to talk to you, so I'll come to the point."

Before he could continue, Agnes said, "Listen, son, after what my man and me have been through these past few weeks, it wouldn't surprise me if you told me you were Jesus Christ, himself."

"Hardly that, Mrs. McBride. One of the Apostles, maybe, eh?"

"So, what can I do for you, Mr. Scullion?"

"As I told you earlier, I'm a reporter for *The Monthly Review*. We were looking to do a follow-up story about your incredible win, how you're coping with winning such a fantastic prize, you know the kind of thing. Perhaps see what your neighbours think about the whole thing..."

"You... you haven't spoken to them yet, have you?" she asked, with a tremor in her voice.

"No, not yet. Naturally, we wanted to speak to you first." Her sigh of relief was obvious to Scullion, but he could not think why his intention to talk to Agnes's neighbours should fill her with apprehension. He was a good reporter. Maybe there was more to this page-filler than met the eye. He would need to tread warily, so not to frighten her off. Changing the subject, he asked her what her husband did for a living. As she was about to answer, the waitress came with their coffees and Agnes's scone, butter and strawberry jam. When the waitress had gone, Agnes replied, "He's a..." She almost said 'labourer' but quickly changed it to "... a ground maintenance technician for a firm of builders."

Scullion wasn't fooled by her attempt to talk up Archie's job role, and on his notepad, he wrote, 'labourer'. "And what does he think about all of this. Is he as excited as you undoubtedly are?"

"Aye, even more so," she answered honestly.

"So do you let him take the car to work?"

"Absolutely not," she replied vehemently. "Take our nice shiny motor onto that filthy building site? I should think not."

"It's a remarkable thing, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"Well, you could buy a nice house somewhere with the same money it would take to own a car like the one you've won. Or, if you invested the money wisely, it would give you a good, steady monthly income. They say money's tight, but it's usually said by the people who can afford the luxury of having a car like yours."

This prescient young man seemed to be so much on Agnes's wavelength that before she could even formulate what she wanted to say, she blurted out. "Oh, Mr. Scullion, I need to tell you the truth, but you have to promise not to interrupt me until I'm finished. You have to swear that you'll not print anything of what I'm about to say."

Scullion replied by closing his notebook, but opening up his remarkable reporter's memory.

"Well, it's like this," she began, beckoning him across the table with a conspiratorial nod. He moved closer until their heads were almost touching like a pair of illicit lovers. Agnes could smell his expensive aftershave, enticing her into thinking thoughts unbecoming for a married woman. "This car has been nothing but trouble for us, since the day I got the letter telling me I'd won it..." and she proceeded to relate everything that had happened, omitting her turnaround at the ceremony, and Archie's drunken antics afterwards. "So, you see, you weren't far out when you spoke about selling it and buying a nice place of our own,

somewhere. The only thing is, it would make me look right stupid having won the car, then selling it later. Have you any ideas, Mr. Scullion?"

The journalist thought for a few moments. Agnes McBride, for all her common way of speaking, seemed like a nice, genuine person, someone who had got in way above her head, and her ability to cope with the situation she had accidentally put herself in. He scratched his earlobe, taking a sip of his, by now, cold coffee. "Have you ever heard of a 'box number', Mrs. McBride?"

"Aye, well, kind of, sort of, that is... no, son, I haven't, if you want the truth," she admitted.

Scullion smiled. He was really warming to Agnes, and determined to help her – for a price.

He explained simply how the box number system worked, and even Agnes understood what she would need to do. "So, all I do is put an advert in, selling the car, and just put the box number in that the paper gives me?"

"That's right, Mrs. McBride. It couldn't be easier; really."

"Aye, but people would still see that I was selling a Rolls-Royce. There can't be too many folk around here that would have the money to do that."

"O.K., here's what we'll do..." And Scullion suggested the format the box number advertisement should take. After he had outlined his proposal, he said, "Well, Mrs. McBride, what do you think?"

"Aye, Mr. Scullion. That's a great idea. How do I go about placing the advert in your paper?"

"You leave that to me, Mrs. McBride. I'll get it inserted just the way we discussed, and you won't have to pay for it, either."

Agnes regarded him suspiciously. "And what's in it for you, if I may ask? You don't get nothing for nothing."

“I can see I won’t be able to put anything past you, Mrs. McBride,” he grinned. “Let me write your story. I promise you, I won’t do anything until the car is sold and you’ve moved into your dream home and everything’s settled.”

“How can I be sure I can trust you to keep your word, Mr. Scullion? I know what you people are like. Making stuff up about folk, and all that, just to sell a few more copies of your papers. No, on second thoughts, I don’t think I’ll bother, thanks all the same.”

“I’m afraid it’s a bit too late for that.”

“What the hell’s *that* supposed to mean?” Agnes asked indignantly.

“Well, the story is out there in any case. Now, I can write it, and make you out to be the worst harpy in Glasgow, or I can slant it in such a way that will make you out to be the victim of all victims. It’s really up to you,” he said indifferently.

“You bastard!” she said, a little more loudly than she intended to. The diners at the tables nearby gave her dirty looks. Nobody swore in public, especially a woman, and doubly especially in a pleasant coffee house like this one.

“Oh, and I forgot to mention, there might be a little something in it for you, if we work this right.”

“Oh, aye, and how much would that be?” she asked cynically. Scullion gave her the figure he had in mind. “How much?” She squealed, again a little noisier than she meant to. Scullion repeated the figure. “Son, for that much, you can have my whole life story! Where would you like me to begin?”

The journalist held up his palm in a halt motion. “Let’s get your car sold, and your new house bought first. Then we can go into all the details.”

“Are you absolutely sure we’ll have enough money to buy a house after selling the car? Now I’ve got Archie sold on the idea, I would hate to disappoint him.”

“I absolutely guarantee it. Not a mansion, perhaps, but a lovely house, just the same.”

“Well, I hope so, Mr. Scullion, I really hope so, because if you’re wrong,” and she cupped her hands in front of her, “see these? These will squeeze your balls until they bleed!”

Agnes was happy with the advertisement Scullion had provided. It read, ‘*Exclusive car for sale, almost new, one owner, little mileage, excellent condition. Offers to Box Number...*’ She did not know what to expect, and Scullion warned her not to be too optimistic. Sometimes the advertisements drew plenty of replies, other times, not so much. She had arranged to have any responses sent to her house, but for all the interest she garnered, the postman might as well have been on strike. She said to Archie after the second week, “If I hadn’t bought the paper myself, I would swear the advert wasn’t in it. What a waste of time.”

Suddenly, she saw him turn white. “Archie, what’s wrong? Are you alright? You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.”

“No, but I think I’m about to become one.” He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket, and pulled out what looked like a once-white envelope. Quivering with fear, he handed it to Agnes, shaking so much, he almost dropped it.

“What’s this?” Fortunately, the letter inside was still clean and legible. Agnes grabbed it from his trembling fingers, and read, ‘*To Whom it May Concern, I am interested in your advertisement in The Monthly Review, concerning the exclusive car you have for sale. I would be most grateful if you could call me on the number at the top of this letter, and I am usually available after seven o’clock. I look forward to hearing from you shortly.*’ And it was signed, Edward James Kilpatrick. Agnes glanced up from the letter and looked at Archie, who was still in a state of severe anxiety. “You... knew... about... this...?” remembering that the letter had already been opened when she had snatched it from him.

“I’m sorry, Aggie, really I am. Awfully sorry. I forgot all about it.”

“You were sitting with thousands of pounds in your jacket pocket for, how many days, and all you can say is, ‘I’m sorry’?” Archie made to speak, but Agnes silenced him. “Don’t interrupt when I’m shouting at you! ‘I forgot’. What kind of excuse is that? How stupid do you have to be, before you can be called Archie McBride, eh?”

“I’m sorry, Aggie, honest I am.”

“Not yet, you’re not, but you soon will be,” and saying that, she picked up a glass ornament, and threw it at him. He flew out of the living room door and shut it behind him, just as the missile struck the door from the inside. Noting the position from where he heard the thud, he massaged his scalp. *Her aim’s not half getting better. One of these days, she’s going to give me a real headache.* He said to himself, as he crept away.

Remembering how she treated Archie a few weeks before, Agnes quickly calmed down. She shouted, “It’s O.K., Archie, I forgive you. You can come back in. All is forgiven.” When he did not reappear, Agnes stalked out of the room in search of her husband. Noticing his overcoat missing from the coat stand, she understood. *The wee bugger’s nipped off to the pub. Wait until I get my hands on him, running out in the middle of a telling off...* Agnes went back into the living room, and noticed the time on the mantelpiece clock. It was almost seven o’clock. Another few minutes and she would call Edward James Kilpatrick. After she had spent a little time collecting herself, following her row with Archie. She lifted the phone and, taking a deep breath, dialed the number. It rang a few times before a very cultured, female voice answered. “Hello. Who’s calling?” Her accent didn’t sound as if it came from Glasgow, and might not even have been Scottish. Trying to emulate the voice she had just heard, Agnes said, “My name is Agnes McBride. I am the person what has put the advert in the paper for the Ro... for the exclusive car.”

There was a note of excitement in the woman’s voice when she replied, “Hold on, Mrs. McBride, I’ll fetch Edward...” She had cupped her hand over the mouthpiece, but Agnes

could hear her say, “Edward, darling, there’s a woman on the telephone. She’s calling about the advert in *The Monthly Review*. Do hurry.”

Agnes could not hear his reply, but it was obvious from what she said next that he was - what did the rich say when they were in the lavvy? – indisposed. “I’m afraid my husband can’t come to the phone right now, but could we make an appointment to view the car, perhaps?”

“What time would suit you?”

“Maybe around this time tomorrow evening, if that’s alright?”

Agnes would have loved to make it tonight, but that would have been a sign of desperation.

Well, she *was* desperate to sell the car, but she did not want to make it so obvious. “Yes, that’s absolutely fine.” she said in her best pretend voice.

“That would be lovely Mrs. McBride. Oh, I nearly forgot. My husband asked me to find out what make of car you have.”

“Let’s leave it until tomorrow, Mrs. Kilpatrick. I’m sure you and your husband will be pleasantly surprised.”

“I suppose you’d better tell me where you live.” So Agnes rhymed off her address. There was a loud silence at the other end of the telephone. “I’m sorry, could you repeat that, please. I’m afraid I didn’t quite catch it all.”

Yes, I’ll bet you didn’t, you stuck-up snob, Agnes said quietly into the mouthpiece. She repeated her address, and a hesitant Mrs. Kilpatrick thanked her, then ended the call.

If the Kilpatrick’s followed the local news, they would know immediately upon their arrival, that she was the lucky winner of the recent competition. No doubt, they would want to beat her down on the price; after all, she had won the car for nothing, so anything she made from it would be profit, but Agnes was not going to let it go for anything less than it was worth.

She couldn’t afford to, not if she was to keep her promises to Archie.

Sometime later, Agnes heard the key turning quietly in the lock, as Archie tried to come in making as little noise as possible. He hadn't heard her earlier shout of contrition, and did not know what to expect when he got home. To his surprise, it was a sweet and mellow Agnes who greeted him as he crept stealthily into the living room. She told him about her earlier phone call, and that an Edward Kilpatrick was coming over the following evening to view the car. "Now listen Archie, this is really important to me. In fact, it's important to the both of us. I need you to be on your best behavior. That means no drinking. I need you sober. I know that's a tall ask, but it's important. If you mess this up for us, I'll..." and she mimed a slow strangulation. "If it wasn't for the fact that I might need you to take them out for a test drive, I'd pack you off to the boozier myself. D'you think you can do that, Archie? I'm going to need all my wits about me to get the best price I can. It's not as if we've got lots of folk beating down our door for a chance to buy it, is it?"

It wasn't often that Archie had anything useful to add to anyone's conversation, but occasionally, he came up with the odd golden nugget. "Aye, but they don't know that, do they?"

"Who doesn't know what?"

"Well, the guy that's coming to see the car. He doesn't know we've not had any more offers. In fact, you could say that the reason you didn't get back to him earlier is because you were seeing other folk who were interested. He wouldn't be any the wiser, would he?"

"Archie McBride, do you think a woman of my integrity, and my honesty would ever stoop so low as to do such a terrible thing? Do you think being dishonest ever gets you anywhere? Do you not think I'd have that on my conscience for the rest of my life?" She bent over and kissed him on the forehead. "Archie McBride, you are a certified genius, and that's something I never thought I'd hear myself say. I'll reward you for this later."

“How...?” She raised her eyebrows, lifting the hem of her dress up to the top of her thigh.

“Later...”

“Oh, aye,” he smiled. It was nice to be in Agnes’s good books for a change; very nice indeed.

The Kilpatrick’s arrived on time the following evening. Agnes’s area was unfamiliar to them, so they had given themselves plenty of time to allow for getting lost, which they did once or twice. As they drove toward Agnes and Archie’s tenement block, Alicia Kilpatrick said, “This can’t be right, surely. Who on earth could afford to own a decent car around here? Half of these people probably can’t afford bus fare, never mind anything else. It’s got to be a joke, surely. Or maybe it’s a ruse to get us here, then rob us, or worse.” She clutched at her pearl necklace.

“Well, I don’t...” He got no further as a street sign told him he was in the right place, and a few seconds later, they both saw the Rolls-Royce.

“That must be it,” she said redundantly. “The ‘exclusive car’ is a Rolls-Royce? Here? I don’t believe it. There’s something not right about this, Edward. I think we should just... I thought they were selling a BMW, or a Mercedes. But a Rolls-Royce? How on earth are we going to be able to afford this? They’ll be wanting the earth. We can’t afford anything like that. I’m sorry we came now. Why didn’t they say in the advertisement what kind of car it was?”

“Looking at this place, they probably don’t even realize what it’s worth. We’ll probably get it for a song. It’s *how* it came to be in their possession at all that’s puzzling me. It does look rather fishy, but, well, we’re here now, and I must confess, I’m intrigued. What the hell could a car like that be doing in this dump? I’ll tell you this much. If they can’t prove to me that they’re the rightful owners, we’re out of here. That’s a promise.”

“I should think so.” His wife agreed.

He parked up behind it. Less than a minute later, they were in Agnes's apartment. After the usual formalities, Edward Kilpatrick commented, "So that must be the car downstairs."

"No, Mr. Kilpatrick, that's my other one." The visitors looked at each other, not seeing the joke. How many Rolls-Royce's did this woman have? Seeing their confusion at not understanding her attempt at humor, she said, "Yes, that's the car. It's a beauty, isn't it?"

Both Kilpatrick's agreed that it was, indeed, a 'beauty'. "How long have you had it?" asked Alicia Kilpatrick.

"About six weeks."

"It still looks brand new. Have you used it much?"

"No. Archie, that's my husband, doesn't like to drive it in case it gets damaged, or anything."

"So, is that why you're selling it?"

"Aye, well... that's part of the reason, I suppose."

"If you don't mind my asking, Mrs. McBride, why did you, er, acquire a car like this if you weren't happy with it?"

Agnes had to come clean. Obviously, the Kilpatrick's did not know she had won it, and it would have been silly to try to pretend they had purchased it, so she told them everything. "Oh, I see," was all Alicia Kilpatrick could think of saying.

"You must forgive us, Mrs. McBride. My wife and I have just returned to Scotland from a business trip abroad. We've been out of touch with the news, so we had no idea..."

"What is it you do, Mr. Kilpatrick?" Agnes asked. Kilpatrick looked around the room.

"What a charming place you have here, Mrs. McBride. It reminds me of where I grew up in Shettleston."

"And where do you live now?"

"Could we maybe take it for a short drive?" Kilpatrick asked.

"Aye, of course. I'll get Archie to go with you, if that's alright."

“We’re hardly likely to drive off with it, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Alicia Kilpatrick said.

“Not at all,” Agnes lied. “It’s only that it can take a bit of getting used to, driving a car like this, and if you’re not from around this area, you might get...lost. That’s all.”

“Oh, well, that’s alright, then.” The visitor replied.

Both women knew the other was being disingenuous. If the room had been a boxing ring, they would have been trading punches by this time. Archie had stayed conspicuously absent, keeping himself in the bedroom, but trying to listen into as much of the conversation as he could. Agnes seemed to be doing fine by herself. He then heard her say, “I’ll just go and fetch my husband. He’ll take you out in it for a wee spin.”

Kilpatrick stopped her. “Mrs. McBride, before we go any further, do you mind if I ask what you want for it?”

“I’ll tell you what, Mr. Kilpatrick, why don’t you go out for a drive in it first. I see you’re dying to. Take it for a wee spin around the area, then, when you come back, we can talk about the price.” Kilpatrick shook his head, smiling. He knew exactly what she was up to.

Once he had sat in it, and driven the car, he would want to buy it. He would have to buy it.

He would need to buy it. Agnes McBride might only be a working-class housewife, but she knew the art of selling. “Very well, Mrs. McBride, that sounds like a good idea.”

“And I’ll have a nice wee cup of tea waiting for you when you get back. That’s not a bribe, or anything, by the way.”

“No, Mrs. McBride, I’m sure it isn’t.” said Alicia Kilpatrick, still not getting the joke.

The trial drive was conducted almost in complete silence. Mindful of Agnes’s dire warnings, Archie was too afraid to speak, fearful he would say anything out of place. Questions about

the car's handling, performance and fuel consumption were answered with monosyllabic answers, and even then he took so long to reply, they thought he might be deaf.

Eventually, Edward drove the car back to their tenement block, reluctantly handing the car keys back to their rightful owner. Returning to the apartment, Agnes asked the obvious question. "Well, how did it go? Did you like it?"

Kilpatrick was a businessman and a poker player, and knew when, and when not to, tip his hand. He answered indifferently, "It is a lovely car, yes, but I have to weigh up the advantages and drawbacks of owning a car like this. You know, there are several factors for me to consider before I can come to a decision. I'm not sure if I can give you an answer tonight, at least not before I've discussed it with Alicia." He nodded to his wife.

Agnes handed them both a cup of tea with milk and sugar on the tray. She had even gone to the expense of buying a packet of half-coated chocolate digestive biscuits, a rare treat in the McBride household. "Well, that's fine, of course," she said. Remembering her earlier conversation with Archie, she continued, "But I should tell you that we've already had a few folk who have wanted to buy it. One of them was even going to give me a deposit, and everything," she lied. "The only reason I didn't sell it to them, was because I knew you were coming round. So it's O.K. if you don't want to go ahead. We'll just contact the other person, and... drink your tea before it gets cold," she nodded, feigning nonchalance and doing it well. "How much do you want for it?"

"Well, I can only go by what the other man was going to give us."

"And how much was that, if you don't mind me asking?"

Agnes hesitated. Thanks to Scullion, she knew exactly how much she could expect to get for the car, bearing in mind that, although almost new, it was now second-hand. "He was going to give us... eight thousand, nine hundred and fifty pounds," she said with as straight a face as she could muster.

Kilpatrick shook his head. "I'm afraid that's a bit beyond my funds at the moment. I'm sorry to have wasted your time. It is a beautiful car, but... is there any way we could... er... negotiate?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, we'd love to buy the car, naturally, but, I mean, would you consider taking... a bit less? For cash," he added.

Agnes was confused. How else was he going to pay for the bloody thing? With Kensitas⁽⁹⁾ coupons? She had never heard of bank accounts, or money transfers, all traceable by the Inland Revenue. She blew out her cheeks. "Well, I don't know. How much did you have in mind?"

Now it was Kilpatrick's turn to hesitate. "About five thousand," he ventured.

Agnes shook her head. He was trying it on, although to be fair to him, he didn't know it was a Rolls-Royce he was coming to see. She knew she could get more out of him. It was only a case of whether he wanted to buy the car more than she wanted to sell it. He pursed his lips.

"I suppose I could go to six... thousand" he said eventually.

"Mr. Kilpatrick, just because I live in a council house doesn't disqualify me from the human race. When I was growing up, I was told that a price is a price. Look, if I go into the supermarket to do my shopping, and the bill comes to, say, two pounds, and I've only got one pound, fifty pence, I can't say to the woman, 'can I negotiate?' She would think I was off my head. I would have to put some things back, wouldn't I?"

Kilpatrick smiled. "Yes, Mrs. McBride, I suppose you would, but we're hardly talking about a few groceries here, are we?"

"No, maybe we're not, but the principle is the same, is it not?"

"No, Mrs. McBride, I don't think it is. Now, I'm prepared to make you a fair offer, but I have my limits, the same as you do."

Agnes decided it was time to play her trump card. She had summed up both the Kilpatricks the short time they had been in her company. She could see that Mr. Kilpatrick wanted the car, but wouldn't have been too unhappy if he didn't get it. It was his wife that would prove to be his undoing. Agnes would bet her life on it. "Well, it's true not everybody can afford to run a Rolls-Royce, so..."

"Now, just a minute, Mrs. McBride," Alicia Kilpatrick shouted. "Who says we can't afford...?"

"Well, it's obvious by the way Mr. Kilpatrick is speaking that he's having second thoughts, and that's quite all right. After all, it is quite an expensive car to run, you know."

"I'll have you know that we can well afford to buy and run a Rolls-Royce if we wanted to. We've just... we've just never thought about it, that's all."

"Oh, aye," said Agnes, her voice dripping with skepticism. "Well, why is he...?" she pointed at Edward, "...humming and hawing about it. Either you can afford to run it, or you can't. Which is it?"

"Yes, we can," Alicia insisted.

"Well, that's it, then." Becoming more conciliatory, Agnes said, "Look, I can't be bothered with this anymore. I'll tell you what. I'm beginning to understand about giving and taking. I just want rid of the thing, if you must know the truth. How it's lasted in one piece up 'til now, I don't know. I'll let it go tonight for eight thousand. What do you say?"

"That's quite a hefty profit, seeing as you got it for nothing," Alicia seethed, still rankled by Agnes's remarks.

"So *that's* it?" Agnes shot back at her. "Thinking you could take advantage of a poor, ignorant woman, was that it?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Kilpatrick interceded, seeing the situation rapidly spiraling out of control. "It's far more than we expected to pay, you understand."

“Yes, but we *can* afford it,” Alicia Kilpatrick insisted. “Of course, you can,” Agnes said, her voice heavy with sarcasm. Kilpatrick shook his head. Just what had he got himself involved in? It really did look as if these two women were about to come to blows. “Seven thousand, five hundred; that’s my final offer.”

“No, it is not,” shouted Alicia Kilpatrick. “I do not want this bloody woman saying we can’t afford her price. If she wants eight thousand pounds, then that’s what she’ll get.”

“But Alicia...”

Looking venomously at Agnes, she said, “Give her the money, Edward, then let’s get out of this rat-infested slum. I couldn’t dare drink her tea. I might catch something.”

“Aye. A decent personality would be a good start,” rejoindered Agnes.

Glowering at his wife, Edward said, “Do you mind if I have a word with Alicia... in private?”

Agnes pulled Archie by the sleeve, ushering them both out of the door, but not out of earshot.

“No problem, Mr. Kilpatrick. Take as much time as you want. We’re going nowhere.” As Agnes closed the living room door behind them, Kilpatrick railed at his wife. “Have you gone stark, staring, raving mad? We can’t afford...”

“Yes, we can!” Alicia fought back. “We’ve got all that money from...”

“Shush! I don’t want anyone to know about that.” Motioning his head toward the door, he said, “Walls have ears. The least said, the better.”

“Oh, Edward, I do wish you’d go legitimate. It’s such a strain having to...”

“Look, do you want the car, or not?”

“Of course, I want the car. I just hate the thought of having to deal with that wretched woman. She looks the type that would sell her grandmother for body parts, if the price was right.”

Listening at the other side of the door, Agnes bristled at the suggestion. “Sell my mother for body parts?” she whispered to Archie. “Who the hell does that woman think she is? I’ve a good mind to...”

Archie restrained her, pulling at her elbow. “Shush,” he said, putting his forefinger to his lips. “Do you want to sell this car, or not?” Agnes nodded. “Well, then, keep quiet, so’s we can hear what they’re saying.”

“... would be a good asset for the company,” they heard Alicia say. “I just wish you weren’t so underhand about your business affairs. Don’t you think it’s time...?”

“We’re having this conversation *here*?” Kilpatrick surveyed their surroundings. “As you well know, this ‘underhand’ way I do things has served us very well. If I declared everything I earned to the taxman, we wouldn’t be... well, we wouldn’t be here right now, about to purchase a Rolls-Royce, would we?”

“No, I suppose not,” his wife agreed. “There’s just something so... special about owning a car like this. It must give one a feeling of... oh, I don’t know... *je ne sais quoi*...”

From behind the door, Archie whispered, “I used to know her.”

“Know her? Know who?” Agnes asked.

“Who she said. Ginny Seccur. Me and her dad used to run about together years ago.”

Even Agnes had heard of this expression. Smiling as she shook her head, she said, “Oh, Archie, what am I going to do with you?” Back in the McBride’s living room, Kilpatrick said, “So, one final time; do we do this, or not? It’s up to you.”

“You know I’ve always wanted a Rolls-Royce. It’s just... it’s just I never thought I’d be buying one from a woman who probably doesn’t know the correct knife to use with the fish course.”

“The fish course...?” Kilpatrick looked at his wife in disbelief. “Look around you. The only fish these people eat is probably smothered in vinegar and wrapped in yesterday’s newspaper. Honestly, sometimes, I worry about you...”

From behind the door, Agnes thought, *Aye, and if I could get a few minutes alone with that bloody woman, he would have plenty to worry about*

“Oh, very well,” Alicia sighed. “Let’s just get this over with and get out of here. I think I’m already covered in fleas.”

Agnes had her hand on the door handle, and was about to rush in and confront Alicia over her comment, but, once again, Archie held her back. “Listen,” he whispered, “Do you want to sell this car or not? Just let it go. Let her call us all the names she likes, but ten minutes from now, you’re the one that’ll be eight grand better off.”

She squeezed his hand. “Aye, alright, but that woman really does make me want to throw up.” They heard Kilpatrick call to them, “Right, Mr. and Mrs. McBride, we’ve made up our mind...”

Archie made to rush in, but Agnes held him back. “Let’s not be in too much of a hurry. They don’t know we’ve been standing outside the door for the last five minutes. Let’s just give it another few seconds.” Agnes eventually opened the living room door, closely followed by Archie. As they both came into the room, Kilpatrick pulled an envelope out of his inside pocket. “There’s five thousand pounds in there,” he said. “That was as much as we intended to spend, probably more than we bargained for, if you must know. It’ll take me a little while to liquidate... that is... I won’t have the balance for a few days. I’ll come back with the rest of the money as soon as I have it. Will that be acceptable?”

“Aye, that’s fine, but the car stays here until then.”

Alicia drew in her breath. “Why, you... I’ve never been so insulted in all my life,” she blustered.

“Are you quite sure?” said Agnes. “With an attitude like yours, you must have been.”

“That’s enough from both of you,” Kilpatrick exploded. “But Alicia is right. There has to be trust on both sides. Look, I’ll understand that you don’t want to part with the car, but how do we know you won’t...?”

“Disappear with your five grand? Aye, well, that’s a fair point, I suppose. I’ll tell you what. How about if we gave you the log book? That would imply ownership, would it not? And we couldn’t sell the car without it, especially a car like that one? What do you say?” Archie had sat quietly in the corner of the room up until this point, but even he now nodded in agreement. It was a good compromise. Remembering he was in the room, Agnes turned to him. “What do you think, Archie? Are you happy with all this?” Not wishing to say anything that might upset Agnes’s carefully laid plans, he replied, “Well, I’ve got my own opinion, but I don’t know if I agree with it.”

Even the Kilpatrick’s smiled at his response. It was easy to see who was the ringmaster in this circus. “Very well, Mrs. McBride. I would say that’s a fair and equitable solution. Agnes nodded at Archie, who dutifully went to fetch the document. He handed it over to Edward Kilpatrick without comment. A now solemn Kilpatrick said, “I believe our business here has now been concluded, for the time being.” And with that, the couple left without further discussion.

After they had driven off, Archie said, “How can you be sure they’ll not come back later and take the car while we’re asleep?”

“You’ve kept the keys, haven’t you?”

Archie held out both sets of keys. “Aye, but what if they hot wire it, or something? They’ve got the log book, and we’ve got nothing in writing...”

“Aye, that’s a fair point, I suppose. Here, you’re on fire tonight, aren’t you? That’s two good ideas you’ve come up with. Listen, is there any way you can prevent them from stealing the car?”

“Aye, that’s easy. Give me my torch and my toolbox…”

Ten minutes later, she heard Archie coming slowly back up the stairs. She opened the door to find him standing in front of her with a crafty smile on his face. In his oily hands, he held the car battery. “Let them try starting the car now,” he said. As he was washing his hands, Agnes came into the bathroom and stood behind him. “You’ll need to put the battery back in the morning. There’s one more wee driving job I want you to do before we hand the car over.”

“Aye, and what’s that?”

“Tomorrow, you’re going to be my chauffeur. I’ve got some important things to see to.”

“And what important things is that, then?”

Dabbing her forefinger against her nose, Agnes said, “Tomorrow, Archie; tomorrow.”

Chapter 8

The Estate Agents

Agnes knew all about counting chickens. She had spent the first fifteen years of her life on a farm. She knew she should wait until all the money was safely in her grasp, but now she was so close to achieving her dream, she could hold off no longer. The following day, she had Archie drive her to Newell and Thompson, the prestigious estate agents who dealt mainly in properties in the more affluent suburbs of the city. Archie voiced his concerns about her premature enquiries, reasoning that until the Kilpatricks had returned with the balance of the money, they had strictly not sold the car. “Well, it’s as good as sold,” Agnes argued.

“They’ve already given us five thousand, and if I’ve got the measure of that woman, she’ll make damn sure he ante’s up with the rest. Snobby cow.”

“Aye, well, that’s as maybe, but...”

“No, Archie, no ‘but’s’. This is my time, *our* time, and I want to savour every last second of it. I never thought I’d see the day that I would ever set foot in that estate agents, and I can’t wait any longer. Please, Archie, for me, eh?”

He smiled a smile of contented resignation. As if he would refuse her. As if he would *dare* to refuse her.

“There’s nothing that makes these snooty sales agents take more notice of you, than if you turn up at their door in a flash car, and I can’t think of a flashier car than this one. We might as well take advantage of it while it’s still ours.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right, as usual.”

They drove over to Newton Mearns, a wealthy suburb to the south-west of the city. As luck would have it, Clarence Farrell, the branch manager was just about to leave when he noticed a blue Rolls-Royce pull up just a few yards from his office. Hoping against hope that its' occupants might be interested in purchasing or leasing a property in the area, he waited until he could see where they were headed. Joy of joys. They were approaching the agency; no, they weren't just approaching, the lady was striding purposefully toward him as if her life depended upon his office being open. The male (her husband? Her chauffeur? Her...?) was more hesitant, as if he wasn't quite sure that they were going in the right direction. Farrell saw the woman turn round to the man, seeming as if to berate him for his sluggish attitude. Obviously her husband, then. No one would talk to their chauffeur like that. Quickly remembering to turn the 'Closed' sign over, he opened the door as they arrived.

"Good afternoon. Can I help you?" he enquired.

"Yais," replied Agnes, donning her best Kelvinside accent. Kelvinside was another fashionable suburb to the north-west of Glasgow, known locally for its somewhat quaint and genteel assortment of moneyed, elderly residents. "We're looking for a hoose, er... property," she quickly corrected herself, in the Newting Mearns area. We've just sold oor... *our* mansion in Kilmacolm. It was getting too much for us to handle. Having nine bedrooms is all very well, but it just encourages more people to come an' ... and visit. Ai've often said, they always remember where *we* live, but sometimes forget where *their* hoose...house, is." Agnes smiled. Archie looked at Agnes with a mixture of shock and admiration. Kilmacolm? Did Agnes even know where it was? Kilmacolm was another desirable residential area, not much more than a village, located about fifteen miles to the west of Glasgow. It, too, was known for its preponderance of large red and grey sandstone houses and wealthy, elderly citizens. His reverence for Agnes was growing in leaps and bounds. "We've decided to sell up and come and live here, instead."

Try as she might, Farrell could tell a fake, refined voice when he heard it, and he would stake his business that that was what he was listening to now. Well, so be it. He didn't care if they came from the Gorbals⁽¹⁰⁾, as long as they had money to spend, and weren't just wasting his time. But then, there was the Rolls-Royce, and you didn't get those in a threepenny lucky bag, so... wait a minute... now he knew who they were. It was *them*, the ones that had won the car in the newspaper competition. He *knew* he'd seen her before as soon as she walked in. He had watched the ceremony on television in the evening news. There was something funny about the whole thing, as if it had all been staged. Well, of course it had been staged, but there was something else, also. It was almost as if the newspaper was reluctant to hand over the car, as funny as that sounded. And yet, there had been something... something not quite right about the whole thing. And now they were here! But, to the best of his knowledge, there was no cash prize to accompany the car. It was just the car, itself.

Despite her unconvincing impression of pretending to be someone who was wealthy, did they really also have money? Enough to buy a house in the area? He would soon find out. "Did you have anything specific in mind?" Farrell asked her. It seemed that it would be Mrs. Whatever-Her-Name-Was who would be doing the buying. Her husband looked as if he would rather be in the pub. Farrell didn't realise how prescient he was.

"We don't want anything too grand. Those days are over for us," Agnes replied, still keeping up her elegant appearance. Farrell played along. "Yes, of course. Quite so. So, in terms of bedrooms...?"

"Definitely no more than three. We don't want to encourage those same hangers on, do we? Do we, Archie?" she said, nudging her husband with her elbow. His indifference was plain for all to see. He just wanted the whole process to be over and done with. Pay the final rent bill, buy the house, move in, get a small car, perhaps a holiday like Agnes had promised. He

would be happy, and he would be even happier if he knew she was happy. “Oh, aye, definitely,” he responded, his stock answer to any similar question.

Farrell went over to his filing cabinet and after riffling through the documents, pulled out a few pages of houses with photographs, brief descriptions, and, most important of all, their prices. “Did you, er, did you have... a price in mind?”

Agnes did, indeed, have a price in mind, but that information she was going to keep to herself for the moment. If the house values were higher than they could afford, it would make her look foolish to even think she could afford to own a property in such a prestigious area.

“Let’s just see what you have, then we can think about what we want.” She replied.

Oh, dear. Obviously these people had no idea of what they might have to pay to be able to live around here. He almost felt sorry for them. Almost. He turned over the folios one at a time, like a blackjack croupier at one of Glasgow’s casinos. Farrell gave a commentary on each of them in turn, extolling their individual advantages and appeal, while Agnes carefully scrutinized their descriptions, but mainly their prices. Archie peered over her shoulder, nudging her gently with his arm when he saw any he believed she might like. Farrell became more desperate as Agnes discarded each of them as either too small, too large, no garden, too expensive, and so on. Her rejections went in direct proportion to his anxiety that, despite his best efforts, she would see nothing to her liking. Were they just time wasters, after all? Suddenly, he had it. *Why didn’t I think of this before?* he mumbled, as much to himself as to his potential clients. Rummaging through the pile of papers on his desk, he eventually held up in triumph the document he was looking for. Placing it on the desk for them to see, he explained, “This property only came onto the market yesterday, and I’ve written out a brief description, but haven’t had time yet to include it in our listings.” Looking up to gauge Agnes’s reactions, he continued, “*Situated at the end of a short avenue of high-quality*

superior homes, this property, a smaller version of its neighbours, is a two-bedroom, detached bungalow, having recently been re-decorated throughout. It comprises a spacious lounge, separate dining room, tiled bathroom with coloured bathroom suite, fully-fitted kitchen, and central heating in every room. Both bedrooms are carpeted, and new flooring has been laid in the kitchen. The property also comes with a spacious garage, and a deepened cellar, which can be turned into a workshop, etc. A small, easily maintained lawn front and back completes this extremely attractive residence. The house is modestly priced at seven thousand, four hundred and ninety pounds.’”

Agnes was staring at a photograph of the exterior of the property. It was just how she had imagined her house would look when she dreamt about it. This was her house.

“Well?” Farrell asked hopefully. “What do you think?”

“Ah... I won’t lie tae...to you, Mr. Farrell. It looks beautiful, but...”

For one of the very few times in his life, Farrell decided not to behave like an estate agent.

“Mrs. McBride, can I be honest with you?”

“Does that mean ye... you haven’t been honest with me up ‘til now?”

He smiled. “No, of course not. It’s just... look, I know who you are. That car you arrived in. You won it in that competition a while back, didn’t you?”

“Yes, son, I did.” There was no point in keeping up the pretense any longer. Not now Farrell admitted he knew how they had come by the Rolls-Royce. “We’re selling it so’s we can get a nice house somewhere around here. I’m sorry if I misled you earlier on, with all that talk of selling our mansion in Kilbarchan.”

“Kilmacolm, I think you said.”

“Aye, well, there you are. I can’t even lie properly. Anyway, it’s like this. We’re getting a fair price for the car, I think, and we want to buy a house with the money. But we’ll need other things as well, and I promised Archie here, that I’d make sure there was enough left over to buy him a wee car, like. Maybe even a holiday, if we were lucky. So, you see, whatever the house costs us, I need to have enough left over for those things as well.”

“May I ask you, Mrs. McBride, do you or your husband work?”

Agnes bristled. “Who the hell do you think you’re talking to? What on earth do you think we are? Bloody lazy so-an’-so’s? Of course, Archie works. So do I. Just because we don’t come from a fancy la-di-da area like Newton Mearns doesn’t make us scroungers.”

Farrell held up his hands in supplication. “No, no, Mrs. McBride, I… I didn’t mean it like that, at all. It’s only that, well, if you or your husband, or you both work full time, you might qualify for a mortgage. I could help with that.”

“A mortgage?”

“Yes, it’s like a loan. A loan to buy a house. You could put down as much money as you could afford as a, er, deposit, and pay off the rest over a number of years. Then, you’d still have enough funds to buy the car, get a holiday, and anything else you wanted.”

It seemed like a good idea, but Agnes was well aware of the old axiom, *‘if it seems too good to be true, it probably is’*. She sighed. “I don’t know, Mr. Farrell. What would happen if we couldn’t keep up the payments, or anything? I only work part-time, and we mainly rely on Archie’s wages. If anything happened to him, we could be out on our ear.”

“Let me ask you this. If you didn’t pay the rent where you live at the moment, what do you think would happen?”

Agnes gasped. She had never considered this possibility. Archie hadn't taken a sick day off in all the years she'd known him, apart from when he had been too hungover to work. They had always had a regular income, but Farrell was right. What would their landlord do? Just tell them not to worry? That they could stay in the house rent-free until something turned up? Not bloody likely.

"And," Farrell continued, "if the worst did happen, at least you would have a property to sell, unlike where you are at the moment. And, as things stand, there is only one way house prices are going right now, and that's up. So, if, for any reason you had to sell your house, say, a year from now, you'd probably realise quite a few hundred pounds, maybe even more, than you paid for it." For the first time since he entered Farrell's office, Archie spoke up. "It does sound like a good idea, I have to say." He said.

"When I want your opinion, I'll give it to you." Agnes retorted. But he was right, of course. 'Investment'; wasn't that what everyone called it?

Farrell went on, "And of course, the more money you were able to put down, the greater the equity you'd have if you had to sell it." Seeing Agnes's bemused expression, Farrell explained, "Say you bought the house for seven thousand pounds, and you put down five thousand as a deposit. So, you'd have a mortgage of two thousand pounds, right?"

"I know how to count, Mr. Farrell." Ignoring her barb, Farrell continued, "So right away, the day you bought the property, you'd have equity of five thousand pounds. Now, let's say that you sold it a year from now. Your property isn't worth seven thousand pounds any more. It has increased in value by, oh, I don't know, say, seven hundred pounds, a yearly rise of ten per cent. It could be a bit more or a bit less than that, but the worth of your house would definitely rise. So now the house you purchased for seven thousand pounds is worth seven thousand, seven hundred pounds. If you sell it, you repay the balance of what you owe the

mortgage company, and the rest, after you pay all the selling fees, et cetera, is yours, including the five thousand you put down as deposit.”

“Aye, well, I suppose...” she said with uncertainty. Buying a house suddenly became more complicated than she imagined it would be.

Seeing her ambivalence, Farrell blurted out, “I’m not supposed to say this, but there’s a good chance you could get it for a bit less than they’re asking.”

“Oh, aye, and how’s that, then?”

“The current owners are called the Pemberton-Brands, Peter and Heather, I believe. It seems Heather has been offered a top job in the United States, but they want her there as soon as possible. She didn’t say it exactly, but I got the distinct impression that if she didn’t accept their offer immediately, and confirm she could start work in two or three weeks, they might rescind their offer. So, naturally, she needs to finalise things as soon as possible.” In all his life as an estate agent, Farrell had cheated both his clients and their buyers. He had sold properties for far more than their true value, knowing it was worth much less. He had advised other clients that their home wasn’t worth as much as they’d hoped, if a friend or a relative wanted to buy it. He had told others that they could only buy the property if they used the mortgage lenders he suggested (with a commission coming from the finance company for his trouble). He had engaged in all sorts of unscrupulous activities, but, somehow, this couple just... well, just got under his skin, and he hoped that the God of estate agents (if there was such an entity) would forgive him his earlier transgressions by being honest with the McBrides. Except, Farrell wasn’t being sincere, only he didn’t know it...

The estate agent contacted the Pemberton-Brands while Agnes and Archie were in his office, to arrange a viewing of their property on the Monday evening after Archie had finished work. Farrell had put the call on loudspeaker so they could hear both sides of the conversation. It

was Mrs. Pemberton-Brand who answered the telephone. Although she seemed pleased by such a quick response, there was something... offhand, almost indifferent about her reaction. It did not sound like the voice of a woman who was excited about starting a new job in another country, or potentially selling their home so soon after contacting the agent. Perhaps Agnes would get to the heart of the matter on Monday.

With the appointment made, Farrell thanked Agnes and Archie, seeing them off at the door. He was still marveling at their good fortune as Archie drove off in his luxury car

It was almost 6.45p.m. when they arrived at the house, Archie having gotten lost a couple of times on the way over. "See you," Agnes berated him, "you couldn't find your way to the lavvy without directions. You're bloody hopeless, so you are. What are they going think of us, arriving so late? It's all your fault."

The only fault I had was marrying you, Archie mumbled under his breath. Well under his breath. "Well, we're here now, and that's the most important thing."

"Aye, right. Now just you keep your mouth shut unless I tell you otherwise, and leave the talking to me. Is that understood?"

Jawohl, mein Führer, Archie said to himself. He would have given the raised arm salute also, if he could. It was Peter Pemberton-Brand who answered the door. Agnes introduced them both by saying, "I'm sorry we're late, only Scott of the Antarctic here lost the way."

Archie had the good sense to look suitably sheepish, staring shamefacedly at the doorstep.

"Don't worry about it." Standing aside to let them in, he said, "We're not the easiest house to find, but you soon get used to it." He ushered them into the living room, where Heather sat on one of the two couches. Agnes had never claimed in her life to have a 'sixth sense', and

would have scoffed at anyone who suggested she did. Yet, as soon as she saw Heather, a profound sense of sadness enveloped her. She didn't know why this feeling had come over her. After all, if she should be feeling anything, it should be excitement at the prospect of moving into this beautiful home. As Heather, who had been staring at the carpet, looked up, her face broke into a wide grin. She stood up, extending her hand first to Agnes, then to Archie. Not being used to such gracious formality from a woman, he was unsure whether to shake her hand, or kiss it. Agnes saw his awkwardness, and gently slapped his hand down. "There's only one hand you're ever going to kiss," she hissed.

With the clumsy protocol over, the Pemberton-Brands showed Agnes and Archie around their home. Fifteen minutes later, they were back in the lounge room. The house didn't just meet Agnes's expectations; it far exceeded them, and Agnes knew she was going to have to bargain as she had never done before. She was glad she had told Archie to park the Rolls-Royce further down the street. She did not want to give the owners the wrong impression, and make them believe they had money. There was a delicate silence as each party waited for the other to speak. It was Agnes who finally broke the stand-off. "I don't know what to say. It's the most beautiful house... house I've ever been in, really."

"Thank you." Heather replied modestly. Both home owners looked at each other. These people were nice, but they just seemed so... so common. Surely the estate agent wouldn't have sent anyone who just wanted a tour of what they considered a stately home to be – would he?

"It's just what we're looking for, Archie; isn't it?" Archie had not expected to participate in the discussions and had tuned himself out of the conversation, lost in his own thoughts. "Eh, oh, aye, it's a lovely house, right enough," he replied, as he realised Agnes's comments were directed at him. The Pemberton-Brands raised their eyes toward the ceiling.

“When... that is... when do... when were you thinking of moving in?” Heather asked hesitantly. This would surely draw them out if they were serious. Agnes’s reply stunned them both. This was the opening she had been waiting for. “Would tomorrow be O.K.?”

The Pemberton-Brands looked at each other in astonishment. Did she say what they thought she said? Really? “There’s only one thing stopping me from sending my furniture around here tonight, apart from you two still living here, of course, and that’s the price.”

“Oh, I see,” said Peter, crestfallen. They were timewasters, after all. Why didn’t Farrell screen his buyers more carefully?

“See, I know what you’re asking for the house, and I’m sure it’s worth every penny, and more, but Archie and me, we just don’t have that kind of money. Ah... I’ll be quite honest with you. When Mr. Farrell told us how much you wanted for the house, we were in two minds whether to come, or not. But the place just looked so lovely, well, I thought to myself, what’s the harm? Me and Archie, we don’t have a home of our own, well, not a proper home, not like this. We don’t own our own house. It’s a rented flat, like. We live in... well, let’s just say it’s not anywhere like here. We’ve come into some money, not much, but we thought it might be enough tae... to buy a nice wee house...”

“But, Aggie, I thought you said...” Archie’s next words were cut off abruptly by Agnes’s most effective use of her elbow.

“As a matter of interest, how much were you hoping to spend, if you don’t mind my asking?” said Peter. In their wildest dreams, neither home owner expected to be negotiating with a prospective buyer. Wasn’t that what they employed an estate agent for? Yet here they were, discussing price directly with this couple who looked as if they didn’t have two bob⁽¹¹⁾ between them.

“I really don’t know,” replied Agnes, who knew exactly how much she wanted to pay. “I don’t want tae... to embarrass myself...”

“Listen, you’ve come this far. Look, you won’t embarrass yourself, not in front of us. We... we’re not like that.”

No, you’re not, thought Agnes. *You look like really nice people, as a matter of fact. But I want this house, and by Christ, I’m going to get it.* “Well, if you’re forcing me to give you a price, I’d say about six thousand. And that’s my limit.” It wasn’t. Agnes had kept a bit in reserve to negotiate with as well as to cover the costs they would incur in buying the property, plus the car and the holiday.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. McBride, we can’t let it go for that. I’m sure Mr. Farrell would have told you what we were expecting, and we’ve already had offers well in excess of what you can afford. I’m sorry.”

“So am I, Mr....”

“Peter. Please call me Peter. Pemberton-Brand’s such a mouthful.”

“Listen, do you... do you really want loads of strangers traipsing through your lovely home, picking at this, poking at that? I would hate all that, so I would. We could save you all that trouble. And we could move in almost right away. That would suit you too, wouldn’t it?” It might have been Agnes’s imagination, but she could have sworn that she saw Heather give her husband a meaningful look. If only she knew what that look meant...

“Well, yes, as a matter of fact, it would be ideal.”

“Look, do you mind if I have a word with my husband. In private. I’ll not tell you a lie. I really want this house. Can you give us a minute to see if we can work something out?”

“Take as long as you want, Mrs. McBride. Neither Heather nor I are going anywhere. At least, not yet.” He smiled. So did Agnes. They were the very same words, almost, that she had used on the Kilpatricks. What goes around...

Peter and Heather left their living room to give Agnes and Archie some privacy. But there was also another reason. They, too, had to talk among themselves.

When Agnes knew they were alone, she said to Archie, “I want you to recite the alphabet quietly from A to Z, then do it backwards.”

Archie looked at her as if she had just swallowed a frog. “You want me to do *what*? Say the alphabet...?”

“That’s right. Just do as I tell you. I know what I’m doing. Trust me.”

“I used to, but, now, I’m not so sure...” “Just do it, O.K.?”

So, Archie began, “A...B...C...” and continued all the way to the end, stumbling at ‘M’ and ‘N’, unsure which one came first.

“Right, now do it backwards,” Agnes commanded him.

“Backwards?” he whispered. “I could hardly do it forwards.”

“Well, just try your best. You’re doing fine.”

“Z...Y...” he paused, “X...W...V... Och, Aggie, this is hard...” “Just keep going. Only a minute or two more.”

So Archie once again faltered his way through the alphabet, backwards, until he finally reached the letter ‘P’.

“Right, You can stop now. I think that should do it.”

“Do what, exactly?”

“Just let me do the talking, O.K.?”

“As if...” he muttered.

Agnes knocked softly on the door, to signal that they were done. A few seconds later, the Pemberton-Brands re-entered their lounge room. They were both smiling. Was that a good sign? She would soon find out.

“So...” Peter began

“Aye, well, I’ve been speaking to Archie here, and he reckons that if he does some more overtime, and we tighten our belts, we could go up another two hundred and fifty quid, er, pounds.” Agnes shrugged her shoulders. That was it.

“Well, we’ve been speaking, too, and, as Mr. Farrell may have told you, Heather has been offered a dream job in the States, but we... that is, she’s got to act quickly, otherwise she may lose it. Apparently, it’s all to do with resident status, or other such nonsense. Anyway, we have to be away from here in a couple of weeks, so we need to sell as soon as possible. We’re prepared to reduce the price to six-seven-fifty if we can shake hands on it tonight.”

“That’s a really fair offer, Peter, but I don’t know. It’s just...”

“We’ve come down far more than you’ve raised your offer. I think it’s very fair. Surely you could just add a bit more onto your mortgage, couldn’t you?”

“No, Peter, we’ll not have a mortgage. It’ll be a cash deal. Every pound you get will have the Queen’s face on it.”

“You have that sort of money in *cash*?” Heather asked in astonishment.

“Well, not yet. At least not all of it, but we’ll have it by this Friday, early next week at the latest.” She pulled out Kilpatrick’s envelope from her handbag. “There’s five thousand

pounds in here. You can count it if you want. We'll have the rest, as I said, in a week or so."

"Why so long? Will we have to wait until you rob another bank?" Peter laughed. He couldn't help it. Here was this couple in front of him, looking as if they didn't have two pennies to rub together, suddenly producing five thousand pounds in cash. It was just too surreal

. "No, and before you ask, it's not 'funny money' either. I took a few notes to the bank to confirm it. They're all the genuine article, every last one." Holding out the wad of cash, she offered it to Peter. He held up his hands, almost pushing it back at her.

"No, no, Mrs. McBride, that's not how it works. You need to give the money to the estate agent. He'll take care of it all. That's the proper way to conduct this kind of transaction. Just make sure you get a receipt, that's all."

"Aye, son, I will. Now, what do you say?"

"I know it's not my place to ask, but..." Peter began.

Agnes interrupted him. "You're quite right, son. It isn't your place to ask. But I can assure you, it was come by honestly. If you don't believe me, you can ask Mr. Farrell tomorrow. He knows. Now, do we have a deal, or not?"

It was now Peter and Heather's turn to look at each other. "Can you just give us another minute or two?" Peter asked.

"Aye, that's fine. I'm not..." No, she couldn't say it again. That would be absurd, even by her standards. Agnes and Archie left them in the lounge and waited outside the door. Agnes heard the words, '*no chain*', and '*no house to sell*'. She didn't understand the significance of these short phrases, but was sure they must be important. The rest of the conversation was conducted by the couple in whispers Agnes could not define. After another minute, Peter opened the door, inviting them back into the room. "O.K., Mr., Mrs. McBride, it's like this.

As we said, we have to be out of here as soon as possible, and we can't afford to hang around. You've made it quite clear how much you want the house, so this is what we'll do..."

The suspense was unbearable, and Agnes suddenly felt a desperate need to relieve herself.

Oh, God, not now, please not now! Fighting to control her wayward bladder, she urged Peter to continue.

"We'll accept your offer of six-two-fifty, provided you can have the balance by this Friday.

Otherwise, the deal is off. O.K.?"

"Aye, Peter, that's O.K. Now, please can I use your toilet? I'm really needing to go..."

Chapter 9

Hospital

On their way home, Agnes asked Archie to drive slowly, as she needed time to think.

“Drive slowly? I’m barely doing thirty miles an hour as it is. If I drive any slower, I’ll be arrested for parking in the middle of the road.”

“Something’s bothering me, and I don’t know what it is. It was something one of them said... I wish I could...” She stopped suddenly. “That’s it. I knew something wasn’t right...”

“What do you mean, ‘something wasn’t right’?” he asked her without taking his eyes off the road.

“Do you remember what Peter said? Something about having other offers. *What* other offers? How could they have had other offers? They only put the house up for sale last Friday, and it hadn’t been advertised. As far as I know, we were the first ones to see the house.”

“Aye, but maybe he was doing to you what you did to the Kilpatricks, remember? Making them think we had more than one buyer?”

“Well, that’s a possibility, I suppose, but, somehow, I don’t think that’s it. He must have known that we would know that they’d only just put the house on the market, and he didn’t strike me as being a stupid man.”

“No, he certainly did not.”

“And I’ll tell you another thing. When we went into their living room, and I first clapped eyes on her, I just felt... I don’t know, I just felt so... depressed, then, when she looked up and smiled at me, that feeling just left me. It was really strange.”

“Och, Aggie, that was you just getting excited at being in the house, and everything. It’s not every day we get to go into a house in Newton Mearns.”

“Aye, well, I hope we’ll soon be living in a house in Newton Mearns. Wouldn’t that be something, eh?”

“And we got the house for a decent price, too.”

“We sure did. I was prepared to go to six-five, but I would have had to sell your body to medical science.”

“You wouldn’t get much for my body,” he laughed.

“Oh, I don’t know. I could offer you as an example of a man in his late forties with an excessive amount of alcohol in his bloodstream. Or maybe that should be a small amount of blood in his alcohol stream. Mind, they’d have to keep your body away from naked flames.”

“Will you stop talking about me as if I was dead. It’s giving me the creeps.”

“Just you keep driving, son. You’re doing fine.”

“So, getting back to what we were talking about, do you think there’s any hanky-panky going on with those two?”

“I don’t know. It was just a feeling, that’s all. Just a feeling...”

The Pemberton-Brands were true to their word, and called the estate agent the following day, telling him they had sold the house, subject to the McBrides coming up with the balance by

the end of the week. Farrell was astonished when Peter told him the price they had agreed upon. It was far less than the house was worth, and the estate agent could only wonder how this couple had managed to beat the current owners down to accept a much lower figure than the house's true value. Yes, he was aware of Heather's lucrative job offer, but even so, there was something that didn't quite add up. Despite his liking for Agnes, he urged Peter and Heather to reconsider their decision. They could easily have gotten a much higher price. No, Peter insisted. They had agreed on a figure, and that was it. Well, a sale was a sale, and he would still get his commission, although it would be a bit less than he expected.

Farrell called Agnes to tell her about the conversation he had just had with Peter, and the house was theirs, provided they could come up with the rest of the money by Friday. She promised she would have all the money by the end of the week, and would bring it into his office. Agnes's elation was quickly tempered, however, by the thought that it would only take a hitch on the part of the Kilpatricks to see her dreams come crashing down. Where would she and Archie be, then? She didn't want to lose the house. If the worst came to the worst, would they, indeed, have to take a loan for the balance of the cost? Worse still, what if Kilpatrick decided he either no longer wanted the car, or did not have the rest of the funds? He would ask for his deposit back. Then they would be back to square one.

It was this notion that prompted her to phone Edward Kilpatrick to progress how long it would be before he was able to produce the balance. She would explain the situation. Surely he would understand; he was a businessman, albeit a rather shady one, judging by the conversation she had overheard between the couple. There was no answer, so Agnes tried again later, then again, several times throughout the day. Even later that evening, there was still no reply.

She tried the following day with the same result. It was now Wednesday night. Where the hell were they? She only had forty-eight hours to secure the deal. She fared no better with her calls on Thursday. In her mind's eye, Agnes could see her lovely house dissolve in front of her like an early morning summer mist. She reluctantly told herself that maybe owning a house in Newton Mearns was not meant for the likes of such people as her and Archie. Maybe they were destined never to be any better off than they were now. To spend the rest of their days in this miserable, festering, tenement block. Agnes didn't know what else she could do. She would try tomorrow, Friday, and if she still could not contact the Kilpatricks, then it would all be over.

No, she reminded herself, it would certainly not be over. Even if they had to give Kilpatrick his deposit back, they would still have the car. They would sell it, eventually. She might not get the house she had seen a few nights ago, but there were always other houses coming on to the market. They *would* get out of here, one way or the other. But she so wanted that house...

By the time she had called Kilpatrick for the fifth time on Friday, she had convinced herself that he would still not be there, so it came as a shock when, after three rings, the phone was answered by Edward Kilpatrick himself. Agnes's relief was almost palpable. "Mr. Kilpatrick? Oh, thank Christ. I've been trying to call you..."

"Mrs....McBride? Is that you?"

"Aye, son, it is. I'm so glad I caught you..."

"Is everything alright? The car...?"

"No, Mr. Kilpatrick, the car's just fine. It's..."

"Yes...?"

"Listen, son, I'm in a bit of a bind; quite a large bind, actually, if you must know..."

“What’s wrong?”

In the background, Agnes could hear his wife shouting something about ‘that dreadful, common woman’. Kilpatrick shushed her, asking Agnes to explain herself. “Well, it’s like this…” and Agnes described the situation she had gotten her and Archie into. “... so, you see, we really need the rest of the money today. Otherwise, we’ll lose the chance of getting the house.” Kilpatrick sighed. God knew, he had no love for this woman, nor did he have any cause to have. But despite his questionable business practices, Kilpatrick was, at heart, a decent man. “Well, Mrs. McBride, I certainly wouldn’t want to be the cause of your losing your dream home. As it happens, I just got access to the funds I needed earlier today, and I was going to give you a call later. Maybe pop over tomorrow and pick up the car then, but seeing as you need the money sooner, I suppose I could come over now, if that’s convenient.”

“Convenient? Mr. Kilpatrick, you’ve saved my life. Thank you. I’ll have the kettle on, and…”

“That’s very kind of you, Mrs. McBride, but I won’t have time. Alicia will need to bring me over, and…”

“Oh, of course. I forgot you’d need to get a lift to pick the car up. Sorry.” Agnes could just about tolerate Mr. Kilpatrick, but as for his wife, the less she saw of her, the better. “Aye, well, I’ll see you shortly, then. Bye-bye.” It was now almost four o’clock in the afternoon. Time was getting short. As soon as Agnes ended the call, she phoned Farrell. “I’ll have the balance of the money in about an hour, but I don’t think I would make it over to your office in time. When do you close?”

“We shut up shop at five-thirty, Mrs. McBride. It’s doubtful if you’d get here, even by taxi. Let me phone the vendors and explain the situation. I’ll call you straight back.” Farrell hung up without formality. This was no time to stand on ceremony. Farrell wasn’t going to lose out

on his commission, even the reduced amount, not if he could help it. Agnes sat anxiously by the instrument waiting for his call. Surely the Pemberton-Brands wouldn't cancel their deal over a day, especially when she would be outside his office first thing on Saturday morning. Would they? It seemed like hours, but was only a few minutes before her phone rang. In her haste to answer, Agnes dropped the receiver off the cradle, sending it dangling to the floor on its spiral cord.

"Oh, bugger," she said as she lifted it up to her ear. Farrell feigned not to notice her profanity. "It's good news, I'm glad to say, Mrs. McBride. They're happy to wait until the morning, but I would advise you to get here as early as possible."

"Mr. Farrell, I'll not sleep tonight, I can promise you." Agnes was right; she wouldn't sleep that night, but not for the reason she gave the estate agent.

Edward Kilpatrick arrived just when Agnes had expected him, and she had both sets of keys in her hand. Kilpatrick extracted another envelope from his inside jacket pocket which he duly handed over to Agnes. "Please count it in my presence, if you don't mind, Mrs. McBride. It's to safeguard both of us."

"Aye, sure, son, anything you say." She counted the notes almost mechanically, her mind distracted by her desire to conclude the house transaction. She did not even think to mention that his wife, Alicia, had stayed discretely downstairs."

"Well, Mrs. McBride? Satisfied? All money accounted for?"

"Aye, son, it's all there." Her answer seemed so automaton-like that Kilpatrick wondered if *she* was all there.

"Well, if you don't mind, I'll..." Kilpatrick said as he made for the front door.

“No, Mr. Kilpatrick, that’s fine. Off you go. I’m sure you can’t wait to get into your new car.”

Kilpatrick stopped with his hand on the door handle. “Mrs. McBride, I hope you don’t mind my asking, but are you feeling alright? You seem a bit... off.”

“No, son, I’m fine. I’ve just got a lot on my mind. Thanks for your concern.” She smiled.

“You’re a kind man, Mr. Kilpatrick. I’m sorry for the way I acted last week. Please apologise to your wife for me.”

“Yes, of course. Well, if you’re sure you’re O.K...” And without waiting for her reply, Kilpatrick left Agnes, now another three thousand pounds richer.

Archie arrived home at his usual time, but as soon as he walked through the door, Agnes could tell something wasn’t right. He was sweating profusely, and clutching his stomach. He seemed to be in a lot of pain, and was bent over. “Oh, Aggie, dear, I don’t feel well, and before you ask, I haven’t had a drop, honest. Whatever this thing is, it isn’t the booze, and that’s the truth.”

“I can see that, Archie.” She guided him over to the nearest easy chair, and sat him down gently. “When did this come on?” she asked him.

“When I was on the bus coming home. Just about half-an-hour ago.” He convulsed forward, trying to retch, but only dry-heaved. Agnes ran to the bathroom to get a basin. Placing it on his lap, she felt his forehead. He was burning up. She had never seen him like this. “Oh, Archie, what’s wrong, son?”

“I don’t know, Aggie. It just came on...” he lurched forward again, this time vomiting into the basin.

“Well, we need to do something about it. You can’t go on all night like this. I’m going to phone Doctor Gillespie.”

“The surgery will be closed by now. He’ll have gone home.”

“Right. Fine. I’ll call an ambulance.”

“No, you will not,” he argued. “I’ve heard of folk who’ve gone into hospital, and ended up dead. Not me. I’m staying here.”

“Archie, those people were terminal, you idiot. They were just about to take their last breath. Don’t be such a fuckin’ baby. You’ve just got a sore stomach and puked your guts up. It could be anything. It’s probably just a bug. Now,…”

“Aye, and what if it’s not ‘just a bug’? What if it’s more serious?”

“Well, if it is more serious, that’s an even better reason to go to hospital. I can’t treat you. I’m not a nurse.”

“So, are you saying you think it’s more serious than a bug?”

“Archie McBride, will you stop behaving like a hypochron...hypnothoc... somebody who thinks they’re dying. You’re not dying. I wouldn’t be so lucky.”

Even through his pain and discomfort, Archie smiled, then grimaced, moaning out loud.

“That does it. I’m phoning for an ambulance whether you like it or not. I’m not having you peg out in this house. You’ll just stay and haunt me.”

“Aggie, you’re the only person I know that can frighten a ghost.”

Agnes was on the phone by this time. He heard her give their details to the emergency operator. Then she described Archie’s symptoms. “I see. Yes, I see. Yes, I do. Yes, I can.”

All he heard was her side of the conversation. He had never seen Agnes more somber in her

life. *Oh, Christ, it must be serious*, he imagined. *I wish I'd finished that bottle of single malt. I might not get the chance, now. What a bloody waste* was his final thought as he lapsed into unconsciousness.

“It’s a *what?*”

“It’s a duodenal ulcer, Mrs. McBride,” the doctor answered.

“What the hell’s that, son?” Before he could reply, Agnes went on, “Is it serious?”

“I’ll answer your previous question first, then we’ll... talk about the other thing. O.K.?”

“Yes, I suppose so, but it doesn’t sound too promising from what you’ve just said.”

Trying to reassure her, the doctor replied, “Only the good die young, Mrs. McBride.”

“But that’s just it, doctor. My Archie is a drunken, good-for-nothing waster, but he’s a decent man, if you see what I mean. I don’t want him to...” It was then she broke down. She just couldn’t imagine her life without him, as fraught as it frequently got. And was he such a waster as she had just said? Aye, it was true he liked a bevvy, a good bevvy ⁽¹²⁾, but he always gave her the housekeeping, never left her short, well, hardly ever. And, she had to admit it to herself, he treated her like a queen. Yes, they’d had their ups-and-downs, but so had every couple. They were just comfortable together, like putting your feet into a well-worn pair of slippers.

Before her maudlin reverie could continue, the doctor said, “Perhaps I should give you the good news first, to ease your mind.” A teary-eyed Agnes looked up hopefully at the man in front of her, wiping her nose on her handkerchief. “Is he going to be alright?”

The doctor patted Agnes gently on the shoulder, smiling. “Yes, Mrs. McBride, he’ll recover, I’m pleased to say. We’ll need to keep him in hospital for a little while longer, just to be sure there are no other issues, but we’ll probably be able to discharge him in a day or two.”

“So, what about this... this...ducal...”

“Duodenal ulcer.”

“Aye, that. My Archie’s not been ill for as long as I’ve known him. He’s as strong as an ox.”

“May I ask you, Mrs. McBride, does your husband drink?”

“I’m assuming you mean something stronger than tea?” The doctor nodded. Agnes said, “Let me put it this way. He gets Christmas cards every year from Tennent’s Brewery in Duke Street. If he stopped drinking, they’d go out of business.” She expected the doctor to laugh at this remark, but he stayed quiet.

“Does he smoke?”

“Aye, he does, but he’s not a heavy smoker. Since I gave up a wee while ago, I don’t like him smoking in the house, any more. It just keeps putting me in the notion...”

“Very commendable, Mrs. McBride. Well, from what you’ve said, I think we’ve found the cause of your husband’s ulcer. Too much alcohol and cigarettes. He’ll really have to cut both right back; cut them out completely if he can. I know that’s a tall order, but it really is for his own benefit. Also, cut down on fried food, if you can.”

“Doctor, do you know what you’re asking? I’ve got more chance of becoming the next prime minister, than Archie giving up fags and booze. He’ll go mental when I tell him.”

“Well at least tell him to cut it down to a couple of pints a week, and keep his cigarettes down to, say, five a day. It’s not ideal, but at least it’s a start.”

“Aye, but you don’t know Archie. Telling him he’ll not be able to go on the lash every night...” she shuddered. “It doesn’t bear thinking about.”

It was now the middle of the night, and Agnes was feeling and looking very jaded. The doctor said kindly, “Why don’t you go home? Your husband’s sleeping peacefully now. There’s no more you can do here tonight. Go and get some rest, and come back tomorrow, eh?”

“Yes, I think I’ll take your advice, Doctor. Thanks for... everything.”

For the doctor, it was a pleasure for him to be able to reassure her that her husband would soon be back to normal. The previous family he spoke to did not get such good news. *No wonder depression was such a common problem in the medical profession*, he thought, as he saw Agnes out of the waiting room

Agnes woke with a start the following morning. With eyes that were barely half-open, she glanced at her bedside clock. Gasping with alarm, she nudged the pillow beside her. “Archie, Archie, look at the time. You’re late...” Then it all started coming back to her. After a few seconds, she remembered everything that had happened the night before. *Oh, Christ, I need to get to the hospital* was her first thought as she jumped out of bed. It was so unusual not to have Archie lying beside her. Drunk or sober, he was always there. It felt so... strange, and the bed somehow felt empty without him. As she was on her way to get herself ready, another feeling came over her. She was sure she had something else to do this morning, something...what was it...? She looked around her apartment for inspiration. Whatever it was, she was sure it was... important. She suddenly remembered “Oh, fuck! The estate agents. That was it!

It was now well past ten o'clock, and she had promised to be there when he opened. She hadn't even washed, dressed or eaten. Well, there was no time for breakfast now, that was for sure. She phoned his office, intending to explain her tardiness. Surely he, and the Pemberton-Brands would understand. It had been an emergency. Agnes tried several times, but kept getting the 'busy' tone. An exasperated and frustrated Agnes banged the instrument against the palm of her hand. What was going on? Why couldn't she get through? Forgetting Farrell for the moment, Agnes called for a taxi, telling the operator it was really urgent. Archie would have to wait. Surely, even he couldn't get himself into bother in a hospital ward. Could he...?

She needed to be out immediately. Fortunately, Saturday morning was a quiet time, the operator told her, and, sure enough, within ten minutes, Agnes was sitting inside the cab, on her way to Newell and Thompson's. She paid off the driver before rushing into Farrell's office. Without noticing the other potential buyers and clients, she raced up to the counter, breathless. She pulled both envelopes from her purse, dropping one as she made to hand them both over, the notes spilling onto the floor. The people in the office had never seen anything like it. Hundreds of pounds in five-and-ten pound notes scattered across the floor, like confetti currency. It was unbelievable. "Mrs. McBride..." Farrell shouted, his eyes involuntarily straying to the cash strewn across the floor.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Mr. Farrell. I tried to phone you, but the line was constantly engaged. But I'm here, now, with all the money. So, can we...?" As the rest of the people looked on in amused bewilderment, Farrell stooped down to help Agnes retrieve her money. Whispering quietly to her as they both scooped up the banknotes, Farrell said, "I'm sorry, Mrs. McBride, when I hadn't heard from you this morning, I had to call the vendors. They've told me to rescind their agreement with you."

“You don’t understand, Mr. Farrell, I had an emergency to deal with. Archie was rushed to hospital last night with a duo...duo... Och, I can’t remember but it was an ulcer. A serious ulcer, so I was told.”

“A duodenal ulcer?”

“Aye, that’s it, right enough. Anyway, that’s how I’m so late. I didn’t get back home until three o’clock this morning, and I slept in, so I did. I tried to call you, but...”

“Well, we have been rather busy this morning, I’m afraid.” They had now, between them, picked up all of Agnes’s money. “Please, Mr. Farrell, could you not phone them and explain the circumstances? You can see I’ve brought all the cash.” Farrell’s shoulders slumped.

Addressing the other potential buyers and vendors, he said, “Would you excuse me for just a moment, please? I’ll not be long. Elaine, here, will help you, if there’s anything you want to know.” Elaine was Farrell’s secretary and assistant. “Please feel free to browse the properties. I’ll be back in a minute.”

No one in the office was going anywhere. This was better drama than the telly. Farrell called the Pemberton-Brands from his private office, and explained what had occurred over the previous five minutes. After a brief discussion with Peter, Farrell ended the call, then summoned Agnes to join him. “Well, I’ve advised them of your, er, circumstances, and told them you’ve brought all the money in cash...”

“There’s more there than what we agreed,” Agnes interrupted him. “I didn’t have time to split up the balance of the rest of the money, so there’s eight grand in there, less what I just spent on the taxi fare.”

“Anyway, they’ve told me to continue with the transaction, so...” Farrell extended his hand.

“Congratulations, Mrs. McBride. You’ve just bought a house.”

For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, Agnes broke down and wept, only this time they were tears of joy, not sadness. After she had composed herself, Farrell asked her if she had given any more thought to taking out a loan, rather than purchase the property for the full amount in cash.

“Yes, son, I have. I’ve thought about it long and hard, so I have. What you said did make sense, I suppose, but I’ve decided not to bother with a loan. You see, all my married life, I’ve been dependent on someone else for giving me, well, Archie and me, a home. I’ve got rent books and receipts going back over twenty years. I don’t want to be dependent on anyone else, ever again, for making me feel grateful to them, just for giving us a house to live in. As far as I can see, I’d just be exchanging a rent book for a mortgage book, and I’d still be beholden to someone else for the privilege of having a roof over our heads. And there’s another thing I had to consider. Archie’s lying in hospital. Thankfully, it looks as if he’ll be O.K., but what if he wasn’t O.K.? What if it was something serious? I don’t mean fatal, I just mean something that prevented him from working ever again. What would we do then? I don’t know if that makes sense to you, but it makes perfect sense to me.”

“No, Mrs. McBride, I understand exactly what you mean. I was brought up in an area not dissimilar to where you live at the moment. My parents, also, paid rent all their lives for a house, more of a slum, actually, that they would never own. I was determined I would never be like them. Unfortunately, I do have a mortgage, but, like I said last week, at least if the worst happened, I’d have an asset I could turn into cash. So, I applaud you for thinking like that.”

“Thank you, son. That means a lot.”

Farrell rubbed his hands together. It was time to get down to business. He had a house to sell...

Chapter 10

Neighbours

By the middle of the following month, Agnes and Archie had moved into their new home. All the conveyancing, and legal work had been completed and finalised, and the house was theirs - all theirs. She had been true to her word, and Archie was the proud owner of a Ford Escort, second-hand, but in perfect condition. This was a car he was not afraid to drive, and even Agnes suggested she might want to learn. The lessons she was to get as part of her deal with Glyndebourne had failed to materialize, unsurprisingly enough. How petty and unimportant it all seemed now

.Archie was back at work, having fully recovered from his ulcer, and had promised Agnes faithfully that he would cut down on the cigarettes, and even his alcohol consumption. He even meant it when he said it.

Scullion had found her and had written his story. He had kept his side of the bargain, and had made Agnes look sympathetic, not an easy task, considering the circumstances how she and Archie came to acquire the house they were now living in. The article was due to be published in the following month's issue of *The Monthly Review*.

Many of her new neighbours were wary of this strange, common couple who had moved in among them. Some even suggested they might be squatters, illegally living, rent free, in the vacated property. They just seemed so plain and dowdy, although the male residents noticed that Agnes could look quite stunning when she chose to dress up.

One evening, Agnes answered a ring at the doorbell. It was still taking her some time to get used to the idea that she even had such an instrument. Now she knew she had really arrived. A doorbell. Her doorbell. Her *own* doorbell. Standing on the porch, wearing a plain beige raincoat and a red, cashmere scarf wrapped around her face, obscuring her identity, stood Heather Pemberton-Brand. For a second or two, Agnes did not recognize the former owner of the house she was now living in. Then it struck her who it was. “Mrs. Pemberton-Brand; Heather. What are you doing here? I thought you’d be on your way to sunny California, or wherever you were going, by now.”

“Do you mind if I come in for a minute or two, Mrs. McBride?”

“Only if you call me ‘Agnes’.”

Heather smiled, and Agnes stood aside to allow her to enter the home that had previously been hers. As she walked into her former living room, Archie turned around to see who it was. Like Agnes, he was momentarily confused by this strange woman who had just come in. Unwrapping her scarf, she said, “Don’t you remember me, Mr. McBride? It’s Heather.”

“Eh, oh, aye, of course. Sit down, Heather,” and Archie motioned her to take a seat along from where he was sitting.

“I won’t stay long, but I had to see you. There’s something I want you to know...”

Agnes instructed Archie, “Why don’t you put the kettle on? I don’t know about Heather, but I’m parched as a parrot.” Archie wasn’t happy about being deprived from watching his television, but did as Agnes had asked him.

“I’ll come straight to the point, if I may, Mrs. McBride... Agnes.”

“If you’ve come to ask for your house back, I’m afraid you’re too late.” Agnes quipped.

“No,” Heather smiled, “it’s nothing like that.”

“Very well, dear, in your own time.”

“We... I... lied to you. I mean, I lied to you about why we wanted to sell the house.” She stopped, waiting to see Agnes’s reaction to her confession. There was none. “Peter and I... we’ve been married for fifteen years. This was our first home. We’ve been trying for a long time now to have children, but... I’ve had a few miscarriages, the last one was a few months ago, and I’ve now been advised that I will never be able to bear children of my own. It has come as quite a blow. Peter and I aren’t short of money. We both have good jobs, and that was part of the reason why we sold the house for the price we did. Money can’t buy everything.”

Agnes held up her hand to stop Heather from continuing. This looked as if it was going to be ‘woman’s talk’, and it was probably for the best if they could speak in private, woman to woman. She shouted into the kitchen, “Archie, I’m letting you off the leash, just for tonight. Why don’t you go up to the pub for a wee drink. Just a wee one, mind. Nothing heavy.” Archie couldn’t believe his ears. Agnes wasn’t only allowing him go to the boozier, she was encouraging him! He didn’t have to be told twice. The outer door slammed shut less than twenty seconds later. He didn’t intend to delay. She might just change her mind, and a wee libation would go down very well.

After he had gone, Heather continued, “The one thing I wanted more than anything else in the world was a baby of my own, but as I’ve just said, there’s no chance of that ever happening now. I’d have given anything, everything I possess, my career, money, the house, anything, to have a child. Well, to put it in a nutshell, it all got too much for me, and I sunk into a deep depression. You probably noticed we had even decorated the spare room in baby wallpaper in expectation of... anyway, my doctor advised me to move house, make a fresh start, as it

were, to get over my disappointment. This house now has too many painful memories. I'm sure you understand."

"Yes, dear, I do" Agnes replied sympathetically. "But if you don't mind me asking, what's this got to do with me?"

"I'm coming to that, Agnes. For a while, I couldn't face the truth, and, although I wanted to move, I couldn't bring myself to admit the real reason for my decision, and that's why I made up this fictitious story about going to work in the U.S. Peter has been marvelous about it all, and agreed to go along with the deception. The story also meant that I had a reason for needing to leave in a hurry. God knows, at least that much was true. Farrell wasn't the first agent we had used, and quite a few couples came to see the house when we'd advertised it previously. When I saw them walking through our rooms, seeing our private... well, I couldn't bear to leave, and declined all the offers that were made. I have to tell you, some were far in excess of what we were asking. You must understand, Peter and I put our whole lives into this house, hoping that one day... When I heard strange people saying what they would do to our house, our lovely home, I couldn't go through with it. It was as if they were raping our house in front of us. I know you'll think I'm being silly, but that's the way I felt. But even now, I'm not telling you the whole truth..." Heather started to cry. Agnes reached forward, putting her hand on the other woman's shoulder. "The real reason we didn't sell the house before was that... was that all the couples were young, and I thought, God forgive me, I thought, why should they get all the pleasure of raising children in this house, when I couldn't. I know it was a selfish and wicked thing to think, but I couldn't help it. I was just overcome with jealousy when I thought... then, when you and your husband came through the door, oh, please forgive me, Mrs. McBride, Agnes, I thought you would be too old to have children in this house. I know you must think me an evil woman, but... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you..."

Agnes took Heather's hand in hers. This was the saddest story she had ever heard. Her two children were now adults, and had long flown the nest. She couldn't imagine what her life would have been like without them, but Heather had just given her a glimpse. It was not a happy thought. But it explained a lot that had troubled her on that night. Now, it was all clear. "I'm sorry if I... I hope you don't mind my bearing my soul like this. I had to come. It would have been on my conscience, and I do feel better. Almost as if a weight has been lifted from my shoulders." Agnes merely smiled. What else could she do?

"Is there nothing the doctors can do...?"

"No, unfortunately not. Maybe one day, but I'll be way too old by then, in any case."

"What about adoption? There must be loads of kids out there who could do with a decent home. And I'm sure you'd make a great mother."

"Peter and I have spoken about adoption, but it's not the same as carrying your own child, something I'll never be able to do. And, what with the Pill and abortions now being legalized, there's not as many unwanted children as you might think. But you're right, of course. Peter and I will probably adopt, eventually. At least, it's getting easier to talk about it now, something I've not been able to do before. That's why I'm here. I hope I didn't spoil your night, too much."

Agnes waived her concern away. "I just hope you'll be able to find some peace and contentment one day. I'd like that for you."

"You're very kind, Agnes. If I may change the subject, how are you finding the neighbours? Some of them can be a bit... stand-offish, but they're nice people at heart."

Agnes knew better, but this was not the time to contradict her visitor. "I've yet to meet the folk that live next door. I haven't seen anything of them since we moved in."

“Oh, the Kilpatricks. Yes, they’re quite nice, too. They tend to keep to themselves. They go away on business quite a bit. They must be doing well. Mr. Kilpatrick’s just bought a new Rolls-Royce...”

Despite having to limit his intake of alcohol, one of Archie’s first priorities was to find the nearest watering hole, a practice he undertook with commendable diligence. It was *The Malletsheugh*, the only pub in the area, situated at the far end of Newton Mearns to the south, just before hitting open countryside. Although they had not long been resident in the area, Archie was already well-known as a ‘regular’, although his alcohol consumption was less than it used to be. Forgetting his self-avowed semi-abstention for this particular evening, Archie embarked on a drunken spree, something he hadn’t done in quite a while. Luckily for him, the pub was within walking distance, or, in Archie’s case, staggering distance, from his new home. Through his distorted, and booze-filled gaze, he noticed someone familiar at the bar, someone he thought he knew. Or did he? He wasn’t sure, but somehow, he recognized that face, or was it his stance, or was it...? Oh, Christ. Where had he seen this guy before? Pointing a wavering finger in front of him, he said in a slurred voice, “Hey, you. You over there. I think I know you...do I know you...?” He was a stranger, yet so familiar... a familiar stranger. Archie sniggered at his own drunken wit. How could he be familiar if he was a stranger? That didn’t make sense. But right now, nothing made sense; except it did. Wait a minute. It was coming to him. He would soon... Kirkpatrick, the guy that bought his car, the Rolls-Royce. That’s who it was. Somebody Kirkpatrick, no, not Somebody, that wasn’t his name. It was... Edward. That’s right, Edward Kirkmichael, no, not *Kirkmichael*, it was Kirkpatrick. No, it wasn’t *Kirkpatrick* either. It was... it was... *Kilpatrick*, that’s right; that’s who he was, Edward Kilpatrick, the guy who bought his Roller.

“Hello, Mr. Kilpatrick, it’s me, Archie McBride. I hope the car’s not giving you any problems...”

No, but you are, my drunken friend, Kilpatrick said under his breath. Of all the people to encounter here, of all places. What on earth was this cretin doing in Newton Mearns, in this pub? Had he lost his way home? Kilpatrick feigned not to hear Archie’s rant, hoping the drunk would stop when he didn’t respond. Unfortunately for him, Archie didn’t.

“Don’t you pretend like I’m not here. My money’s just as good as yours. In fact, my money’s better ‘n yours. D’you know why? ‘cause I earn my wages honestly, not by shady underhand deals you don’t want the taxman to find out about. Aye, that’s right. I know all about you and your dodgy business. I heard you that night. You think I didn’t, but I did. We both did.”

This was getting serious. Luckily, the bar had few patrons, but, even so, Archie was making Kilpatrick feel very uncomfortable; very uncomfortable, indeed.

“Don’t you ignore me, Mr. High-an’-Mighty Kilpatrick. I know what you’re up to. You think you’re such a clever businessman. Ha! My wife can buy and sell you, and a dozen like you. Did you really think other folk wanted that car? No, youse were the only suckers. You gave us far more than it was worth. Some businessman you are. Ha, ha, ha.”

This was more than Kilpatrick could take. He would have to act. He walked calmly over to Archie, shrugging his shoulders while twirling his finger to the side of his head, as if to say, ‘this guy’s nuts’. Sitting down beside Archie, he hissed, “Listen, you, I don’t know what you’re doing here, but if you don’t shut up right now, you’re going to be very sorry. Do you understand me? I’ve just about had enough of you, you drunken bastard. Now, listen to me very carefully, if you can. There are a few people out there...” and he innocently pointed vaguely outside the pub, “... who owe me a few favours, and they’re not too fussy how they

pay off their debts. Do you get my meaning?”

Through his drunken, half-real world, Archie somehow realised that he had said, or done, something he shouldn't have; something that made Mr. Kilpatrick very unhappy, very angry. He didn't know what it was, only that he shouldn't have said, or done whatever it was. He nodded slowly in comprehension.

“Good. Now, I want you to say to all the people that you made a mistake, say you were dreaming, and didn't know what you were talking about. You will apologise to me, and offer to buy me a drink. You'll do all this, or you'll be very sorry; very sorry, indeed. Do you understand?”

Archie did not acknowledge him, but stood up as straight as he was able, and managed to slur his way through an apology. “I'm sorry for what I said just now. I know Mr. Kilpatrick and he's a very nice man, so he is. I don't know why I said those things just now. It must have been the drink...take no notice of me, folks. I can't hold my liquor. Everybody knows that. I talk a load of rubbish, even when I'm sober, so I do... here, Mr. Kilpatrick, let me buy you a drink, eh.”

Kilpatrick good humouredly declined Archie's offer, looking pleased with himself and Archie. That seemed to be the end of the matter. Kilpatrick left the pub, vindicated, and the rest of the pub's clientele went back to chatting amongst themselves, no doubt talking about the incident they had just witnessed. Only one person, sitting a few feet away, continued to take an interest, writing on his small notepad. He continued to stare at Archie over the rim of his half-pint glass of shandy, and, as if by sheer thought alone, was willing him to continue. Hector Robertson was more than merely an amused spectator. It was his job to be. He was an investigator from the Inland Revenue tax evasion department...

The End

Glossary

- (1) Barlinnie. A notorious prison for serious offenders situated on the eastern side of Glasgow.
- (2) Hogmanay. New Years' Eve in Scotland. A time for revelry and drunkenness.
- (3) P45 - Government document signifying someone is unemployed.
- (4) The Vicky – The Victoria Hospital situated south of Glasgow city centre.
- (5) fags – A British colloquialism for cigarettes.
- (6) Quid – A British colloquial term for pounds (money)
- (7) Pools - A syndicated weekly gambling system where one could bet on the outcome of soccer matches. (See Appendix 1)
- (8) Moonlight flit – A colloquial expression, mainly heard and spoken in Glasgow, for fleeing secretly, usually at night, to avoid creditors.
- (9) Kensitas – A brand of cigarettes. Each packet contained coupons that could be saved and redeemed for gifts in the company's stores. There were branches in all major cities throughout the U.K.
- (10) The Gorbals – A very run-down, slum area, just south of Glasgow city centre.
- (11) 'didn't have two bob between them' – In pre-decimal currency, 'two bob' was two shillings. The phrase is a colloquialism for someone who doesn't have much money.
- (12) A 'bevvy' – local colloquialism for a substantial amount of alcohol.

Appendix 1

The Pools. In the early to the latter half of the 20th. century this was a weekly competition run by various betting companies to forecast the outcome of the following week's British soccer matches. (They switched to Australian games during the British 'off' season) One did not have to predict the actual scores, but whether the game would be won by the home side, the visiting team, or end in a draw. There were various permutations of results one could choose from, the most popular being the 'Treble Chance', correctly forecasting the outcome of eight fixtures from forty-nine, or so, different games. Depending on various factors, a person could win anything from a few pounds, up to a jackpot which would see them becoming an overnight millionaire.