

Leavings

The wagon pulls over in front of a drayman's cart and reins to a halt at the top of Princes Street. The wizened old driver jumps down with a flourish that belies his years. 'On ye go,' he says, cheerfully waving a hand towards his passengers. The pair clamber off the back, shaking jackets and trousers in a bid to rid themselves of the black dust.

'Wouldnae bother, pal.' The driver pats one of the sacks of coal. 'Stuff gets intae yer skin.' As if to demonstrate this, he spits in his hand and wipes it across his sooty face. 'See? I'd hae less o' this muck on me if I'd hae gone doon the mine.' He laughs good-naturedly.

The young man shakes the older man by the hand. 'Thanks for the ride.' He glances down at the boy at his side. 'We'll let ye get off, then.'

The driver, gazing up at the slate gray sky, nods solemnly. 'Afore the rain comes doon. Good luck tae ye.' And with that, he climbs back onto the cart and jiggles the reins. As the vehicle pulls away, he holds a hand up in parting.

'Right,' says the young man, watching the coal cart negotiate the busy road. 'Before the rain, eh?' He smiles, though there is little joy in his features.

'But why?' The boy's lower lip trembles. 'Why dae I have tae go?' And the tears start again, coursing down the lad's mucky face. 'Why can't I stay wi' you?'

The man waves his hands around uselessly, as if trying to conjure up a reason. 'It won't be for long, Jamie, just til I find work.' He crouches down and hugs the boy to him. 'Then I'll come an get you. Promise.'

Straightening up, he glances over the road. Amid the dozens of men and women shuffling up and down the street on their way to or from work, he catches sight of one motionless form in a long dark coat. Nodding an acknowledgement, he notes the black eyes staring back at him and the slight smile that flickers across the fat face.

Clenching his teeth and breathing slowly in an effort to hold back the tears, the young man takes the boy's hand and leads him across the street, where the woman who will take his son away, is waiting at the corner.

Chapter One

'*The Man Who Wasn't There?*' James can't resist a smirk. 'A physical impossibility, I'd have thought.'

Christie makes a face. 'It's just a title, Dad.'

He smiles. 'Aye, it's a good one. And I'm keen to see how you'll explain it to your readers.' He helps himself to another piece of toast.

'For a solicitor that writes stuff in language naebody understands, ye dinnae ken much about the power o' words.'

Her father laughs. 'I was merely pointing out that while it may be a good title...'

'I know what you were pointing out, Dad.' She waves the magazine in his

face. 'See these?' She leans across the table, jabbing a finger at the contents page. 'How many would you *read*? Titles have tae be strong and punchy, so as the readers'll be interested straight off the mark. That's what Mr Morrison says.'

'You're beginning to sound like one of his reporters,' he mutters, taking the copy of *McMurdo's Weekly* from her outstretched hand. Scanning the contents page thoughtfully, he points one out. 'This one, for instance...*The Silly Man*. I mean, that sounds, well, a bit silly, doesn't it?'

Christie sighs. 'You're missin the point, Dad. That story is about a mannie who makes a silly mistake, so the title has tae reflect that.' She pauses.

'Course, it isnae as good as the title o' my one...'

'I never doubted it,' he nods, peering at her over the top of the periodical. 'So this...*The Ghostly Highway*, would be about ghosts on a highway, eh?' He grins. 'That sounds like my cup of tea.'

'So...?'

He raises his eyebrows the way he always does when he's not quite sure what she wants him to say. 'So...?'

'Dad! You're impossible.' And she jumps up from the table, all set to stomp out of the room.

'Sorry darling, I was only having a wee joke.' He lays the magazine down on one side and steeples his fingers. 'All I meant was, that since the title of your story is rather enigmatic, in that it appears to be about a person who is not actually in existence, ye must have some clever jiggery pokery way of explaining it.'

'Oh, aye of course I have.' She sits down again. 'I mean, I *will* have...' Reaching for the marmalade, she scoops a large dollop onto her plate. 'As soon as I work out what to write for the second part.'

Her father's mouth drops open slightly. 'Christie, you surely haven't sold poor Mr Morrison a half-written story?'

'What's wrang wi' that? Dickens did it all the time. No-one complained about him, did they?' She finishes spreading the marmalade on her toast and takes a bite.

'I think maybe you've been spending a little too much time with Harriet. Though I have to say, at least *her* stories start and finish in the same issue...' He gives her a mock stern look.

She opens her mouth to speak, then closes it and looks out of the window.

James McKinnon inclines his head and watches her for a moment. 'Christie? Has something happened? You two are still friends, aren't ye?'

'Oh aye.' She continues to stare out of the window, nodding. 'It's just...'

'Well come on, daughter, don't keep me in suspenders.' He pulls a comical face.

'Ye're no funny Dad.'

'Harriet thinks I am. She thinks I'm somewhat amusing, actually.' He licks the end of one finger and slides it across an eyebrow, preening.

'Oh right, so ye're no interested in me, just thinkin o' yerself again?' She says this in her best 'serious' voice, but as usual, her father's comic expression puts paid to the pretence and she grins.

Just then, the door swings open and the maid steps in, places a pile of

letters in front of James and picks up the empty teapot. 'Shall you be wantink another pot, Mr McKinnon?'

'No, he's had quite enough for one day, thank you Clara.' Christie grins up at her, cheekily, 'but I'd like some more toast, please.'

'Oh.' The maid glances at her employer, notes he's not watching her and says carefully, 'I almost forget - could you help me with somethink, Miss Christie? Downstairs?' She looks at Christie and deliberately moves her eyes towards the door and back again.

'Downstairs?' Christie pushes her chair back.

Without looking up, her father taps a finger on the table. 'Not forgetting you've a lesson this morning, are you?'

'That's no til ten o'clock.' She pushes her chair back in noisily. 'An abundance of time.' And she's off down the passage before he can object.

James glances up at Clara. 'I suppose young Donal's downstairs, is he?'

Clara bows slightly and flushes. 'Er yes sir. I sorry, I thought to be incognito.'

'Well in future, I suggest you ignore my daughter's requests for secrecy. And I *will* have another pot of tea, please.'

'I thought ye were gonnae send me a secret message?' Christie skips down the last few steps and lands with a thump on the hall carpet.

'Aye, so I did,' explains Donal, picking up his marbles and carefully popping them back into their bag. 'I dinnae think Clara's got the hang o' it yet. We'll hae tae give her some more lessons aboot undercover work.'

'Anyway, I've only got half an hour, then I've tae see my tutor.' She pulls a face. 'It's fine for you - your da lets ye do what you like.'

Donal shakes his head. 'No any more. I've tae watch the machine when he's oot in case the paper gets crumpled. But it's fine today - he's waitin fer a new batch of inks. So I can do what I like for a while.' He grins, then his smile disappears. 'I need tae show ye somethin. Come on...' and grabbing her hand, he leads her down the back stairs and out into the small garden at the back of the house.

'Where we going?' Christie pulls her hand free of his and stands at the open door for a moment, clearly expecting him to stop and wait. 'Donal?' But he's away, already pushing through the gate into the next garden. Christie sighs and reluctantly sets off after her pal, chasing him through several adjoining gardens and out onto Doune Terrace. The boy stops for a second to check she's still with him, then crosses into Church Street and round into India Place.

'There.' Finally pausing for breath on the corner, he points to the building opposite. 'They live above the cobbler's shop.'

'Who does?' Christie frowns, but her initial irritation is forgotten and in its place, her natural curiosity begins to take hold.

Donal ignores her question, crossing the street to a rusted metal gate. Catching hold of the gatepost, he swings round to the right and down a steep flight of well-worn stone steps to the communal yard, then up a narrow wooden staircase to the door at the top. Turning, he signals Christie to be quiet, before knocking on the door.

A scraping of furniture moving, then the door opens to reveal a young

man dressed in labourer's clothes. He seems flustered at this sudden interruption. Holding a rather shabby-looking boot in one hand, he's gripping a long needle in the other. It appears he's attempting to stitch the sole back onto the boot.

'Oh, it's you, Donal.' The man eyes Christie warily. 'Thocht it might hae been the rent gadgie again.' He looks into the empty space beyond them, as if someone else might be lurking on the steps.

'Just wunerin if Jamie's comin oot tae play, Mr McLemmon.' Donal has clearly been working on his 'innocent' look, thinks Christie, and she makes a mental note to congratulate him later.

The man's eyes widen and his mouth drops open, but he quickly regains himself and mutters, 'No the day, Donal, he's no weel, ye ken?' He turns and glances into the house. 'Some other time, aye?'

Donal peers past the man, but there's nothing to see. 'That's a shame, so it is.' He nods sagely. 'We'll maybe call roond tomorrah?'

The man starts at this and shakes his head. 'Oh, no, lad, no. I expect I'll need tae keep him indoors for a few days yet.' He attempts a smile, but the effort seems too much for him and with a muttered goodbye, he closes the door.

Back in the street, Donal sits on the wall. He turns to Christie and adopts his 'isn't that interesting?' expression. 'Well, what d'yer think?'

'Who's Jamie?'

'That's his wee boy. Only aboot eight year auld, but a canny wee lad.'

'And...?'

'And,' leaning towards her, 'I havnae seen him for three days.' He nods, as if this explains everything.

Christie sighs loudly. 'Fer God's sake Donal, what are ye goin on about?'

'You heard him say Jamie was indoors, aye?'

Christie nods. 'I did.'

'Well, he isn't.'

'And you know this because...?'

'I know this because when Jamie's Da went oot this morning tae get bread an that, I nipped in quick and had a look.'

'Ye what?' Christie grabs his hand and drags him away, out of sight of the house. At the other side of the street, she shoves him into a narrow passageway and rests her hands on his shoulders. Though there's only a few weeks difference in their ages, Donal is several inches shorter than she is.

'I just nipped in.'

'And what if he'd come back?' She pushes him against the wall. 'What if he'd caught ye, Donal? What then, ye daftie?'

Donal pushes her hands away with a harrumphing sound. 'Ye've no even asked me why?'

She leans back against the wall behind her and closes her eyes. Fair enough. She opens her eyes. 'Alright - why?'

'Jamie's not there. His Da says he is, but he's not.' He pauses. 'So why would he do that?'

Christie frowns. 'Maybe he's away staying wi' his mother?'

'His mother's deid.'

'Or an aunt, or uncle...'

'Christie, he hasnae got anybody else, there's just him an his Da.'
She folds her arms and considers this for a moment. 'So why is his Da lying?'

'I reckon Jamie's run away. Maybe his faither beats him...?'

She shakes her head. 'But why would he lie about it? Why would he say his son's in the house if he isn't? Someone'd find out.'

'We should tell Harriet.'

Christie blinks. 'Tell Harriet? Tell Harriet what?' She throws up her hands. 'That Donal thinks a wee boy's been...murdered...?'

'Och, I didnae say that...'

'Or...or that his faither's taken an axe tae him and cut him up intae bits?'

'I didnae say that either, an anyway, that's the same as bein murdered.'

She turns on him. 'Then what *are* ye sayin' Donal, cos I'm sure I've nae idea.' She folds her arms and stares out into the street where a mother is berating two boys for throwing stones.

Donal chews his lip. 'I think somethin isnae right.' He kicks the wall idly. 'An he's just a wee boy, ye ken?'

Christie reaches out and takes his hand, shakes it. 'Sorry.'

He grunts, but smiles nevertheless. 'Aye.'

'I've tae get home, anyway.' She's silent for a moment, then 'You could follow him? If he goes out?'

Donal grins. 'I knew ye'd say that.'

'No ye didnae.'

'Did too.'

She thumps his shoulder. 'Come fer tea later, then ye can tell me all about it.'