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THE CUTTING ROOM

by Louise Welsh

CHAPTER 1, Never Expect Anything

*'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' - that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*

John Keats,
'Ode on a Grecian Urn'

Never Expect Anything.

An old porter told me that my very first day. We called him Cat's Piss. Mr McPhee to his face but always Cat's Piss, or sometimes C. P. McPhee behind his back.

'Never expect anything, son. They'll tell you they've got the crown bloody jewels in their attic and all you'll get's guff. But sometimes - not often mind, just now and again - you'll go to the pokiest wee hole, a council estate, high-rise even, and you'll find a treasure. So keep an open mind, try and filter out the nonsense merchants, sure, but never look at a map and think there'll be nothing there for us, because you can be surprised. I've been here thirty-five years and I'm still surprised at what we find and where we find it.'

'Yes, Mr McPhee,' I'd said. Looking all the while at a pile of furniture reaching almost to the ceiling and thinking, You stupid old git, thirty-five years in this place.

I'd not been thinking of McPhee as I drove to the call. I'm twenty-five years at the auction house, forty-three years of age. They call me Rilke to my face, behind my back the Cadaver, Corpse, Walking Dead. Aye, well, I may be gaunt of face and long of limb but I don't smell and I never expect anything.

I didn't expect anything driving along the Crow Road towards Hyndland. I hadn't taken the message myself but the call sheet said, McKindless, three

storeys plus attic, deceased, valuation and clearance. I didn't need to know anything else except the address and that was in my pocket.

I hate Hyndland. You'll find its like in any large city. Green leafy suburbs, two cars, children at public school and boredom, boredom, boredom. Petty respectability up front, intricate cruelties behind closed doors. Most of the town houses have been turned into small apartments. The McKind- less residence was the largest building in the street and the only one still intact. I parked and sat for a while looking at it. It dominated the road, a dark, sober facade intersected by three rows of darkened windows. No clue of what lay inside except you could bet it would be expensive. Tiny casement windows peeped from the slanted roof of the attic. More like five storeys in all including the basement. If we were lucky and the executor took our quote, this call might supply a whole sale. I was getting ahead of myself, there was nothing to say there was anything of use at all in the place - but the odds were for it. I turned the van into the driveway, noting the remnants of a garden. ! Last year's crocuses pushing through the long grass - whoever had lived here was well enough last spring to organise their garden, this spring it was them that was planted.

Never expect anything.

Cat's Piss should have added, 'But be prepared: anything may happen.'

I slicked back my hair and wondered if I should take Joan- in-the-office's advice and have it cut short. I had a feeling that perhaps a short-back-and-sides could be the prelude to romance for Joan - well, if Joan had been Joe I might have thought about it but the way things were I might as well keep my locks. Sure they were grey but they went with the look.

I took off my shades - it's only polite to make eye contact on the first meeting - rang the doorbell twice and waited. I was about to ring a third time when I heard footsteps. I had expected someone in their forties - wealth of this kind usually finds a fair few relations willing to help with the burden of tying up the estate - but when the door was opened it was by a woman who wouldn't be seeing eighty again. She was dressed like the respectable women from my childhood. Single string of pearls, heather twin-set, long tweed skirt, thick woollen tights and brogues. Her hair, though sparse, was set in stiff egg-white curls. Age had withered her. There was the beginning of a bend to her spine. She leant the whole of her weight, a good seven stone, against a plain wooden walking stick.

There was a crooked man and he had a crooked house.

'Mr Rilke, Bowery Auctions.'

I handed her my card and let her look me up and down. I could almost hear her assessment: hair bad, tie, shirt, suit good, cowboy boots bad. Well, she had a point, but they were genuine snakeskin.

'Madeleine McKindless. Come in.'

Her voice was young, with the authority of a school- teacher.

The stained glass of the front door cast a red glow across the hallway, a staircase with an ornately carved mahogany banister was to our left, the parquet floor laid with thinning Turkish rugs; this family had been rich for a long time. A heavy mahogany table stood to the right of the door. It was bare, none of the usual family photographs, and I guessed she'd been doing some clearing out already.

I knew in an instant there was no way we were going to get the job. It was just too big to trust to a local auction house. She was a fly old bird getting us in to do a valuation then playing us off against the big boys.

'Let's go into the kitchen. It's the only place I feel halfway comfortable in this mausoleum.'

She led me through the hallway and I followed her, slowly, down a set of stone steps worn thinner in the middle, by generations of McKindlesses no doubt. She favoured her left leg. I wondered if she was due a hip replacement and why she was making things hard for herself. Why take these stairs, with a whole house to choose from? The kitchen was on two levels, scullery on the lower level where I could make out an open door leading to the garden. A flask of coffee, some mugs and a plate of biscuits were already laid out on the huge kitchen table.

'My brother's home help laid out a refreshment for us. I suffer from arthritis and angina, among other things. I like to save my strength for non-domestic tasks.'

'Very sensible.'

A smell of burning drifted in from the garden. I walked to the door and looked out onto a well tended lawn at the end of which burnt a bonfire. A gnomish gardener jabbed at the flames with a long rake. He caught my stare and raised his free hand in a half-defensive wave, like a man staving off a blow.

He lowered his cap over his eyes and fed papers from a black refuse sack into the flames. Madeleine McKindless's voice brought me back to the table.

'You come well recommended, Mr Rilke.'

'That's good to know - we've been doing business in Glasgow for over a hundred years.'

Her eyes glanced me up and down like the quick click of a camera shutter. A brief smile. 'I can believe it. My brother Roddy died three weeks ago, neither of us married, so I am left alone with rather a large task on my hands. You'll be wondering why I've called you in - you're a respectable firm but you're a small firm and it might have made more sense for me to go with one of the London houses.'

'It's an obvious question.'

'I want it done quick.'