

Dinner Service

Glasgow's West End

The house was empty when the call was picked up by the answering machine.

'Hello, you've reached Angela Nugent at *Whatnots Antiques*. I'm sorry I'm not able to take your call right now. Please leave a short message and contact number and I'll get back to you. Thanks for your enquiry.'

'Hello, Miss Nugent, it's Professor Walter McIlwraith here. Simon left me your number. He's gone home to Germany now. He says you are a good person and reliable. Apparently we met in the past, he tells me. Now that Veronica has left ahead of me, I'm told I need to move from here and be cared for properly which I suppose is for the best. Of course, I've seen you on television, such fun you have on that show, with your dogs, Marcel and Marianne, taking us with you on trips to lovely places all over the UK. We liked the one from Pembroke Castle best, when the dogs found the mouse nesting in the clock and she attacked them. How we laughed at that episode, a true mouse bites dog tale. Hilarious. I used to have a dog myself, a wee white poodle called Twizzy. My wee boy is in doggy heaven now, I'm afraid. It's just me here in this old place now, so I'm trying to clear it out then we'll sell up. Of course, I do understand we need to do it properly, get professional advice. Which is why I'm ringing you, as Simon suggested. You see, it's about my wife's last wishes. She was such a wonderful person. So kind, when you got to know her, really she was. My poor, poor dear, her last years were rather dominated by her illness and . . .'

'Caller, you have ten seconds to complete your call. Please do so now and remember to leave a contact number. Thanks for calling *Whatnots Antiques*.'

... but she slipped and fell down the stairs into the basement and since then I've not been able to get . . .'

'End of call.' This was followed by a long, single "*beeeeeeeep*".

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When Angie arrived back from London after a three-week shooting session, the airport taxi driver had needed careful directions through the new one-way system to reach her neat red sandstone end-terrace villa in the heart of Glasgow's West End.

During her flight up from Heathrow, she had been mulling over her conversations with Alphonse (Alphonse DeBritt), her producer with whom she had made five series of *Antique Hunters*. Although she had feigned surprise and disappointment, she was

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secretly pleased and relieved to learn *Gadabout Enterprises* had decided to call it a day on her show. Alphie and his inner circle were planning a new series to be called *The Victorian Dinner Party*. Dom (Dominick), Alphie's latest flame, had persuaded a celebrity chef to front the show, offering her the role of 'Props Provider and Historical Adviser'. Angie had accepted with good grace, relieved to escape the fifteen-hour days of frustration and boredom while on call, trapped in *Gadabout's* tiny caravan with its smelly porta-loo or whatever cubby-hole they had designated as her 'green room'. These long downtimes had been interspersed with intense periods of frantic madness in make-up, followed by short clips in front of the cameras. It was a good offer and would keep her name in lights while giving her time to concentrate on her own business. Perhaps now, at last, she could remodel her and expand her premises, get out on the road again, bargain hunting, spending more time with her dogs at home and in her allotment, doing what she enjoyed best of all, gardening.

Angie had once been told *Antique Hunters* often took up to five days shooting to capture ten minutes of edited output, a situation not helped by the waywardness of the two dogs used as 'live props' on the show. These were not her own dogs, as the viewers had been led to believe. She would never have chosen brainless French Pugs with such ugly faces. At the planning stages for the pilot, she had suggested they let her use her own dogs, Shelties, (Shetland Sheepdogs) who were smart, obedient and, in her view, much cuter. This idea had been immediately batted out of bounds because Alphie's then current boyfriend owned the Pugs.

When she opened the external storm door to her home, the outer vestibule leading to the inner half-glazed door was piled high with mail. Exasperated, she scooped it with the side of her foot into the reception hallway, closing and locking both doors behind her. There were no welcoming barks. Her own dogs were still with her sister, Patty, in Milngavie, to be collected next morning. The house felt cold, unwelcoming. Exhausted and feeling low, Angie knelt beside the heap, shovelling flyers into one bag for recycling and junk mail unopened into another, separating the important looking stuff into a neat pile to be dealt with next day over breakfast. When her junk mail bag was full, she would obliterate her address from each item with a permanent marker pen then empty her bag into the nearby Royal Mail letter box, her act of guerrilla defiance against the endless tide of unsolicited advertising which flooded her and her neighbours because of their desirable postcode.

It was approaching midnight. Angie decided to forgo a large G&T in favour of a mug of hot chocolate, crawl under the covers and zonk out. Recharged, she would do a proper catch-up in the morning. Heading to the kitchen to heat a pan of long-life almond milk, she glanced into her study and saw the red LED blinking on her business-line answering machine. Picking up the portable handset, she pressed 'Play'. Waiting in the kitchen while

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the milk warmed through, she scanned the calls, deleting the scammers and timewasters until she reached the message from Walter McIlwraith, his voice distinctive but quieter, less self-assured than she remembered.

Sitting up in bed with her mug cupped in her hands, she let her mind drift back to her first and only visit to *Ridgemont*, the largest and most prestigious of the grand houses on Upper Fairmount Road, with its five-acre garden, open views to Loch Lomond and the Arrochar Alps, vistas marking the southern edge of the Scottish Highlands. Angie had been raised the eldest of five girls, all of whom had eventually gone to university and done well. She was from Drumchapel, a working-class housing scheme only a few miles away but a world apart from Simon's well-heeled Milngavie. The couple had met at Strathclyde University, at the Debating Society - love at first argument.

Replaying Walter McIlwraith's message from the handset, she was jerked back two decades to the scene in *Ridgemont's* vast family kitchen, a room larger in floor area than her parent's entire council flat.

From Simon's side there had been dozens of family members with a good sprinkling of friends and neighbours, everyone milling around, helping themselves to fancy buffet food. Unlike her family, this group were smartly dressed and well-spoken. Angie watched, her nerves on edge, seeing them whisper remarks between themselves, glancing at her and her family with curiosity verging on disdain.

The Nugents were overawed, their conversation stilted, most trying hard to 'speak posh', for her sake. When her father, who drove a bin lorry, had delved into the food with his not-too-clean fingers, Simon's mother Veronica had smacked his hand with a fork and said, "My God, man, have you no manners? Use the tongs. That's what they're for."

Today, put in the same situation, Angie knew she would be able to deal with this much better but then, in her fiery early twenties and newly graduated, she had been outspoken, spitting her hurtful retort at her intended future mother-in-law, causing a full-blown shouting match and a scene which had ended their engagement. Over the next week or so, Simon had behaved properly, apologising on behalf of his mother, trying hard to make Angie change her mind and allow the planned wedding to go ahead, refusing to accept the engagement ring she had tried to force on him.

Her thoughts sounded in her head:

Well, well, the wheel of life turns. Nice to know Simon thinks I'm a 'good person and reliable'. So, the dragon mother has bitten the dust. Just as well he settled for the au pair from next door. She probably suited Veronica much better. At least Simon's diamond engagement ring paid for my first leg-up into the world of antiques, doing the rounds in my second-hand Transit van and getting my name out there. Oh, Simon, Simon, if only I had apologised as Dad said. Then we could have married and escaped to Australia as

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planned. Oh Simon, we could have made a good team. But no, Veronica stuck the boot in because I wasn't good enough for her precious son. Well, Professor Walter, let's see what you have that I can move on for you, at a fee, of course.

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Ridgemont, Milngavie

Three days later, Angie drove her *Range Rover* up the private road to the closed gates at the top of the brae and made the call from her mobile phone.

'Hello, Walter McIlwraith. Can I help you?'

'Professor, it's Angela Nugent of *Whatnots Antiques*. I'm at the gate, would you let me in, please?'

'Oh, yes, you're the nice lady from the television. Do you have your dogs with you? I used to have a dog. Now what was his name?'

'Twizzy?'

'Yes, Twizzy. Did you ever meet him? He was such a character. One time he was lost for nearly a week. We think he had a girlfriend, the little scallywag. A nice lady brought him home to us to collect the reward. It seems her son had found Twizzy wandering the streets, in Drumchapel. The wee mite did stink horribly of cigarette smoke. I've often wondered if that was the start of his problems. The Vet School people did all they could but, well, he was nearly eighteen, which they said was amazing for a Lasso Apso. I'm sorry, who are you again?'

'Angela Nugent, from *Whatnots Antiques*. We spoke on the phone a few days ago and here I am, as agreed. Would you please release the gates?'

'Oh, the gates. No, do come in, they're open. They've been broken since the burglary, I'm afraid. Just a few paintings, so far as we can tell. Did you bring your dogs? I used to have a dog. He was a great guard dog, always barking. Now, let me see, what was his name? Simon says I'm too old to get another dog. He has dogs, you know, Border Collies, Fleck and Flo.'

'Yes, I've brought my dogs. See you in a few minutes.'

With Sophie and Sarah walking to heel, Angie blipped her car alarm and made her way towards the steps leading to the front door. The house was hidden from the entrance by trees. It was fronted by a semi-circular parking area thickly spread with red granite chips which made walking in her heels difficult. She had dressed carefully, wearing a dark blue suit from the *Jacques Vert* section of her retro-collection wardrobe. With an open-necked shirt in a paler blue, her outfit was set off with a neat red kerchief to emphasise her long slim neck. A pair of miniscule, pale blue opal ear studs worn to highlight her small, delicate ears. For this visit, Angie had been professionally prepared: her auburn

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hair freshly coloured, short and shining, her nails and make-up perfected under Marie and her team in a three hour session at the *Rainbow Rooms*. The invoice, with tips, had been two hundred and thirty pounds, chargeable as a business expense.

Angie climbed the steep flight, took a deep breath and pressed the bell push: the chimes of Old Lang Syne sounded through the ornate leaded glass door. After a short wait, the door was answered by a small, thin, blonded woman, neat and tidy in a pale blue overall.

'Hello, yer Angie, right? Aff the telly? Sorry hen, the Professur's no reddae tae see ye yet, account o he's 'indisposed'. He sayd, 'please will ye show Miss Nugent tae the dinenin room, where they boxes ur waitin fur ye. Aye, innitz OK tae look it everythin, he says.'

'Is he unwell? I can come back later, if you like?'

'Naw, weel, eh, aye an naw. Ye see, he's oan hiz dialysis machine an it'll be anuther twentay minutts or so. He wiz late startin accoot o he wiz talkin tae Simon oan the phone. Come away in then hen. O naw! STOAP. Sorry hen, Ah didnae see yer dug, Sorry, naw, they cannae come in accoot o the hygiene fur the Professur. Ye'll huv tae lee thum oot in yer caur, OK? Aye, it's such a pity, cos the Professur jist luvs dug, so he does. Mibbae efter, ootside, in the gerden, eh? Iffitz no too cauld.'

With the dogs in the car, Angie returned and followed the woman to the dining room. The high-ceiling was wood-panelled and, from it hung three magnificent chandeliers set above a long, rosewood table around which were matching chairs to seat thirty people. The thought popped:

This would be an ideal location for an episode of The Victorian Dinner Party.

'Oh, Ah shouda sayd, Ah'm Jeanie Devine. Yer mammy an me went tae Lourdes wan time fae oor school oan a speshal trip, wi the nuns an Father Sorley. Aye, that Father Sorley the pervert! May he go straight tae Hell! Least sayd, sooness mendit, eh? Aye, yer Mammy wiz a lovelay, lovelay wuman wi a hert o gold. Ah used tae work oan the same line wi her in the whisky bottlin plant. Look hen, Ah'm right sorry Ah coudnae make it tae hur funeral oan accoot o ma wee granwane, Chrissie. A course, we aw watch ye oan televishun, wan o oor ain, like. An Simonz wan o yer biggest fans, so he iz. Even Mrs McIlwraith wiz righ tayn wi ye, sayd ye'd cum up in the world, sayd, "*that girl must have had voice coaching to neutralise her rough accent*". Pompous auld bitch, an by the way, Ah didnae say that, OK? Aye, she an Chantell didnae hit it aff, Ah can tell ye, fightin ower Simon it evray turn wi the Professur left haudin the jaikets, eh? He's a saint, thaa man. Aye, an Simon's the same, takes merr efter his Daddy thin his Mammy.'

'Oh, I see. Was the Professor on the phone to his son in Germany?'

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'Germany? Naw, he means St Germain's, in Bearsden. Simon lives up owur the tap o Lochgreen Road, the great big hoose it the end o the road, right oan St Germain's loch. Weel hidden, jist like this place, merr modern, like, bit still really posh. Ye see, Simonz right clever. A computer softplay somethinorrither. Aye, he's goat merr degrees in a thurmomatter, ma Ronnie says. But no, he's no uppity way it, like his mammy wiz. Naw, Simonz nice posh, like the Professur. Aye, a right nice boy an looks efter his Daddy, here evray day when heez no aff oan bizness. Dae ye know him yersel?'

'Yes, but it was a long time ago.'

'Did ye hear about Chantell? Tragic, eh? Hit inna terrur attack whin she wiz back hame visitin her Mammy in Paris an goat that bomb fragmen in the heid. Lingert oan life-support fur nearly twa year, so she did. Simon wiz like a zombie efter they hud tae switch it aff, till he goat his dugs. Ye see, normully Ah look efter *hiz* hoose, jist the cleaninnat, oan accoont o he does everythin else fur himsel, cookin, laundray, cept the noo Ah'm up here every day instead. Ye see, ma Ronniez allowt tae drive the Professur's wee caur accoont o he's no able tae nae merr, so he huz it fur runnin me up and doon and fur shoppin and that and fur takin Simon's dugs oot tae Mugdock fur long walks, when heez aff oan business trips.

'Oh, so you actually work for Simon, not the Professor?'

'Aye, we dae, baithay us. Best joab Ah've evur hid. D'ya know, hen, Simon's goat me and ma Ronnie oot o Drumchapel intae a luvlay big two-bedroom apartmint in they posh flats near tae him so it's only a wee walk tae his place. An see that hoose o Simonz, ma Ronnie says itz the best hoose in the hale o Bearsden, accoont o it bein sae secludit, wi a magic gerden thit's even bigger thin here.'

'So, Simon's wife's dead. I hadn't heard.'

'Chantell? Aye, whit a cryin shame, so it wiz, they wur such a nice couple. Anyway, that's life, eh? Will o God. Ah lost my own wee granwane whin she wiz ten, tae leukaemia. Thur's no wan day goes by but Ah think o ma wee Chrissie, Christine, efter ma Mammy. God Rest thur souls, ivory wan o them. A course, Ah'm only helpin here until, weel, ye know. Zoulny a matter o time. Three munths tops, ma Ronnie says Simon telt him. Ah mean, itznothit Ah don't like it here, how cood ye no? But itz kinda spooky, like hauntit accoont o Mrs McIlwraith's gone and flung herself doon the stairs whin they telturr hur tumour wiz incurable. Ma Ronnie says she must huv been in scrutyatin pain, so God rest her soul, Ahsay, if He can bend the rules a wee bit fur hur, oan accoont o aw the wurk she did for they poor weans in Africa wi that *Gambia Horse and Donkey Truss*. Look, hen, Ah'll need tae leave ye tae it, OK? Accoont o the Professur'll need a wee helpin haund tae get teyddit up. Simonz sayd tae get him poshed-up for ye but dinnae mind noo if his suit's hingin oan him, eh?'

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Left alone, Angie knelt to open the first box and rocked back on her heels at what she saw.

My God Almighty - Bone China, from the Bow Porcelain Works. Oh, how wonderful! Can it possibly be a full set? It must've been commissioned for someone very special. Royalty? This should be in a museum. How did it end up here?

One by one she unwrapped the 30-person dinner service, scrutinising and setting the pieces at each place around the dining table. There were two 'sound extras' to match every item except one side plate, boxed separately, which had been professionally repaired.

Standing back, she used her phone to take a selection of shots.

Please God there is some paperwork to support its provenance.

Sensing a presence, she glanced towards the door.

'Hi, Angie. You are looking very well. Stunning. Fame suits you.'

'Simon.'

Oh, God! He looks so sexy, so distinguished. Oh, God, yes please.

'Mother specifically told me I was to gift this to you, as a way of apologising for her behaviour. In case you wondered, I have all the supporting paperwork.'

'But this is worth, I don't know, on a good day, quarter of a million? No, I can't possibly accept it. No, this dinner service is too precious, too wonderful to be sold to some anonymous Arab or Chinese investor then stored away in a vault, never to be admired. Who did it belong too? I mean, originally? Do you know?'

'It was commissioned in 1876 by Benjamin Disraeli, a personal gift to Queen Victoria as a 'thank you' for ennobling him, when he became the Earl of Beaconsfield. On her death, the Royals, who despised Disraeli, they say, decided to sell it and it was bought at a private auction by my mother's grandfather as an engagement gift to his future wife, my great-grandmother. When I was a boy and my father was in his heyday, we used to have grand parties here and put it to good use. We borrowed it for our wedding reception, in Paris. Chantelle's mother was disabled and could not travel here to *Ridgmont*, as Mother had hoped. A plate was broken when it slipped from her mother's hand. After that, the rot set in. Chantelle and her family became 'the enemy'. Such a waste, all those years of

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bickering. Mother had an unforgiving streak, I'm afraid. You might be her only exception. She recorded every episode of your programme and watched them over and over. You come across very well, Angie; your true self, genuine, warm and cheerful.'

'Oh, Simon, I'm so, so sorry about what I said to your Mother that day. But she did goad me, you know. Anyway, the past is the past. But surely this dinner service should go to a museum, maybe the Burrell or Pollok House, I'm sure both would love to have it.'

'Certainly, Angie, if that's what you really want. It's yours to dispose of as you see fit. Pity, though. I had hoped you might want to keep it, use it yourself, on a special occasion, if you are interested, that is.'

'Simon, what do you mean?'