

Opiates from Amsterdam. Chapter 1

John McBride stood behind his easel set up on the edge of one of Amsterdam's famous canals. He had finished pencilling in the picture, and begun the application of a sky wash when the incident took place.

A car came from the street, and turned along the canal side to occupy a vacant parking slot. Other cars were parked there, nose on to the water, up against a wooden beam lining the edge of the canal. The car successfully entered the space, but failed to stop. McBride saw the front wheels climb the wooden beam, and then the car slowly tipped itself into the canal.

The splash had hardly stopped by the time McBride threw down his brush, reached into his own car which was the adjacent vehicle, and pulled out a safety hammer, slipped out of his shoes, and dived into the water. The car bobbed in the water settling slightly deeper, as it took in water through the door sills.

McBride banged on the front side window. The driver, a woman in her mid-thirties turned her head to look at him. She was panicking.

"Cover your eyes" McBride shouted, and bashed the hammer on the window. The glass panel shone and glittered as the heat-treated glass broke into nuggets and rained down on the water. "Quick, undo your safety belt, and lean out of the window. I'll pull you out of the car. Is anyone else in the car except you?" She shook her head and she did as she was told.

"Can you swim?" he asked. She nodded, treading water. He let her go, and turned to look at the wall of the canal. There was an iron ladder not many yards away. "Come on, let's get out". Spectators had gathered on the bank. She swam ahead of him, and climbed the ladder. Hands reached out to help her at the top, but she ignored them and got on to the wharf unaided. He looked up at her when she climbed to her feet above him. She was wearing a summer frock, which had become transparent now it was wet. She wasn't wearing a bra he noticed, her nipples erect. He climbed up the ladder. They stood together, watching her car slowly go down below the water, then there were only bubbles where the car had been.

"If you hadn't helped me get out, I would have gone down with the car, and drowned. Thank you."

McBride nodded. "That is why everyone must carry a safety hammer in order to be able to get out of the car. It is the law. Were you not informed?"

"No, I can't remember. What am I going to do? My handbag is in the car, with my credit cards, and money."

A policeman arrived at that very moment, getting off his bicycle and propping it up against the wall. "Whose car was it that is in the canal?" He pulled his notebook from his breast pocket.

The girl said: "It's mine." The policeman asked "Name and address?" His pen was poised. "Julie Browning, I live in England I'm in Amsterdam on holiday, which do you want?"

The policeman said: "Better have both." He finished writing and stowed his note book in his pocket, turned to the bicycle and pulled a breathalyser from his bag. "Blow hard in to this", he said. She did as requested. He examined the reading: "Normal" he said. His tone of voice implied he was disappointed. "You will have to come to the police station to take a blood test. In case of narcotics," he explained. "First we will take details of the vehicle that is

in the water. He pulled out his notebook again. "Car registration number, make, colour. Is it registered in your name?"

Julie said: "It's a hire car" and told him who it was hired from. The policeman said he would inform the owner and make arrangements to get the car lifted from the canal. "It won't be today; I'll get it arranged for nine a.m. tomorrow. If you want to collect personal effects from the car, be here then. Show the officials there the form I will give you. Also use the same form to get your blood test at the Police Station." Then he jumped onto his bicycle and rode off.

"Don't worry," said McBride, "Do you know that thirty-five cars a year fall into the canals in Amsterdam alone? That's official. Some say it's more; fifty or so." While they were talking, McBride was edging along to his car, and he found his shoes where he had abandoned them. He slipped them on. Then he shut his car window, packed his easel hastily, and stowed his kit in the boot.

"You were painting" said the girl, "I saw you when I came to the corner in the car."

"True" said McBride. "My name is John McBride. I already know that your name's Julie."

She held out her hand. "Julie Browning. The name I used to have before marrying. I've just been through a messy divorce. I'm staying here with my brother, but he's away on business at the moment. I say, the apartment is just around the corner. Why don't you come along and I'll dry your clothes. It's the least I can do when you've saved my life."

They sauntered round the corner. It was a warm summer's day, but McBride was uncomfortable in wet clothing. Water dribbled down inside his trousers, and gathered in pools in his shoes. They were there, just round from the canal.

Julie stopped, put her hand to her mouth. "I haven't got the key. It's in the car, in my bag."

McBride looked at her. "I'm staying just outside Amsterdam, in the tulip fields. Hillegom, it's a village, or small town really, static population of about twenty thousand. I stay in a hotel in the main street. We could go there, about twenty minutes. You could buy some clothes; I'd lend you my credit card."

She grinned, held up her left hand. "No need I've got my Apple watch, scans my credit cards, they're all on an app."

"I hope it's waterproof."

"It's supposed to be, down to 60 feet," she looked doubtful. "I didn't go that deep."

"You're very resourceful. You can go shopping. It's just two o'clock now, so you'll be shopping by half-past." He paused and then continued. "No, you won't, first you have to go to the police station for the blood test." They looked at the form she had been given. The police station was named, and the address. "That's not far, two streets away, about three minutes walk. Shall we go now?" McBride said: "You should or you might get arrested."

Five minutes later they were at the police station, asking at the enquiry desk where to go for a blood test. They showed the woman behind the desk the form Julie had been given. They were directed to a door marked medical tests. Inside Julie's form was read and acted on. She had blood taken from her arm, and after running tests which took less than five minutes, she was cleared of having taken drugs, and her form was marked accordingly. She was told to present it to the police at the scene of the car recovery. They walked back to McBride's car. As she climbed in Julie said: "Posh car."

"It's a Lexus 300 hybrid, I like it. Don't ask me if it floats, because I don't know. I've never driven into a canal."

She slapped his hand. "Don't be nasty." But she was smiling.

McBride adjusted the interior temperature, and turned on the air-conditioning. "This should dry our clothes faster," he said. He drove smoothly through the traffic and was soon on the excellent main dual carriageway roads.

He picked his way down a series of narrow roads in Hellegom, and arrived at the entrance to Villa Flora Hotel, and the parking area in front. There were plenty of parking spaces at this time of day, and he parked close to the entrance lobby. Before they got out of the car, McBride said: "Do you want to book a room here, if they have one? I'd be pleased to buy you a meal here tonight. The menu is very good."

"Yes, if they have a room left." And she opened her door.

They made their way through the hotel entrance and to the reception desk in the lobby. McBride rang the bell, and a woman came through from the back office. McBride smiled at her. "My room number is fifteen. May I have my key?" When she handed it to him, he said "This is Mrs Browning, who unfortunately had an incident in Amsterdam where her car went into a canal. Her handbag is in the car, along with her apartment key. Would you have a spare room for tonight?" The receptionist pulled a ledger towards her, and flicked the pages.

"For tonight, unfortunately not. Tomorrow we could give you a room."

McBride said: " Can I just have a word in private with Mrs. Browning?" The receptionist nodded and retreated to the back office.

Julie smiled and said: "You are now going to invite me to share your bedroom, I guess?"

"Well, that was not the first idea. There are a couple of other hotels in the area of the village, we could phone them to see if they have a vacancy. It's quite possible because this hotel is the most popular. The suggestion you made was the other possibility." He grinned at her. "I have a twin-bedded room."

"Oh shit," she said, "I may as well bunk up with you." Then she added: "You don't snore, I hope?"

"Not as far as I know."

McBride pressed the bell on the counter again. When the lady came back out of the back office, he said: "My room is a twin, what about Mrs. Browning sharing with me? I'll pay extra, of course."

"The only extra charge would be for an extra breakfast. Do you have your passport?"

Julie said "I'm afraid it is in my bag which is in my car. The fire brigade is lifting my car at nine tomorrow. I have to be there, I could come back with the passport, in the morning, would that be okay?"

"Yes, of course. I have to write down the number. It is the law. Would you like an extra room key?" Julie smiled and shook her head.

"Come on, Julie, you've got shopping to do. Straight ahead to the front of the hotel, and you are in the main street. Most of the shops are down the street to the left. I'll be upstairs, or check first that I'm not in the bar," McBride said.

After McBride had changed clothes in his room, he wandered downstairs to the bar and restaurant which took up nearly half of the hotel ground floor. One wall fronted on to the main street, and was comprised totally of windows, with tables set on a raised floor. There was a monumental log burning fire, a cast iron contraption reaching to the ceiling standing against another wall, with settees and comfortable upholstered chairs grouped in front of it. A long bar was along the rear wall, with barstools all the way along. The head barman or front of house supervisor was called Lars, a tall blond man in his early fifties perhaps. He was

always good-tempered. He saw McBride as he walked into the room. "Hello, stranger, How are you doing?" and stretched out his hand to shake. McBride clasped his hand.

"I've been here since last night."

Lars smiled: "I wasn't here yesterday. One of my rare holidays. Have a drink?"

"Sure, just a black coffee, no sugar. Before I forget can I book a table for dinner tonight, for two. A table up front near the window."

Lars, now up by the coffee machine, turned and said: "That will be done. The one in the centre, a table for four, that will give you a lot of room." He came back with the coffee, which he put on the bar in front of McBride. He poured a glass of water for himself, and sat by McBride's side on the public side of the bar.

"Have you been busy painting in Holland?" he said.

"I started painting this morning in Amsterdam, when a girl drove a car into the canal. Not on purpose, you understand. She can't get into her apartment because the key is in the car. So I brought her here to the hotel. She is staying here tonight, and I am treating her to dinner."

"I know the hotel is full tonight," said Lars with a twinkle in his eye, "So I don't ask whose bed she will be sharing. I can assume from that, she is desirable, eh?"

McBride had seen Julie pass the window and turn into the front entrance.

"She is just coming in from shopping, so you can decide for yourself." Julie, laden with parcels turned as she passed the bar, and seeing McBride, turned into the room.

"Julie, meet my friend Lars, who has just booked us a table for tonight, and is having a well-earned rest from his labours to talk to me."

Lars stood up from his seat, and shook her hand. "I am honoured to meet any friend of John. Welcome to the Villa Flora. Can I get you a drink?"

"Not just now, I must go upstairs and change, I have been swimming in a canal with this dress on." She was talking to Lars. He said: "So I hear."

McBride and Julie were at their table about ten minutes before six o'clock. "I'm very hungry," said Julie. She was wearing new clothes, a red jumper, and blue jeans. She had been carrying more clothes than that when she had come back with many parcels that afternoon. McBride expected to see lots of changes before long.

He smiled. "You realise we didn't have any lunch? We were busy swimming at the time."

"Yes, I will never forget that lunchtime. Never remind me again."

"Shall we have a bottle of wine? Do you drink alcohol?"

"Of course. Not to excess, though. White wine such as Pinot Grigio would be fine."

Lars came bustling across the restaurant, with menus. He was about to promote what he thought they might like, so McBride prepared himself to listen. "I recommend all the dishes tonight, because we have our top chef on duty. I like the steaks, and the fish dishes sea bass, monkfish, both are tonight's specials. Can I get you any wine?"

"Yes, said John McBride. "Can we have a bottle of Pinot Grigio?"

"Sure," said Lars. "I'll fetch a bottle over straight away, and one of the waitresses will take your food order."

When they had scrutinised the menus and given their orders to a young waitress, they poured the wine. "Cheers," said McBride, taking a swig. "One thing I meant to ask you; this brother you say is a lot older than you, when does he get back from his business trip?"

"Well, that's what he calls them, but I think they are just holidays which he charges his company for. He sells flowers for God's sake, flowers from Holland. You can go

anywhere in Holland on a day trip and still be back in Amsterdam for afternoon tea. So I haven't a clue when he'll be back."

"How would you describe him in a few sentences?" McBride asked to keep the conversation going.

Julie paused, thinking for a moment before answering. "Posh, or thinks he is. Always well-dressed, in expensive clothes. Sometimes that makes him look out of date, almost pre-war, not that I was alive then, but I've seen old magazines, read old books. That's what you have to do when you are at school. Striving to achieve wealth above anything else. Like having a good time for example. That's important I think.

"Anyway, I expect you'll meet him if you're spending long in Amsterdam?"

McBride said: "About a couple of weeks, maybe longer. I should paint about forty watercolours here. I'm always under pressure from my agent."

Julie raised her eyebrows. "You paint for a living?" She thought for a moment, "that's why your name sounded familiar, John McBride, the artist, of course."

"Yes, it's a hard life, but if you persevere, it keeps the wolf from the door."

"You don't look as though you are starving. Shall we go for a walk before dark? It looks a pleasant village."

They didn't get back to the hotel until dusk. "We've got to be up early tomorrow in time to get to Amsterdam to watch the fire brigade rescue your car. The traffic is bad at rush hour. We should allow an hour for the journey. If we get a call at six thirty, we've time to get breakfast and start out about eight or just before," said McBride.

Julie pushed open the hotel door. "Quite so, let's go up now." She made her way to the lift and pressed the call button. McBride stopped at the desk and booked a call for six thirty next morning.

When they were in the bedroom McBride invited Julie to use the bathroom first. He sat on his bed and wondered what would happen and how the night might play out. He didn't want to rush it, it all depended on Julie. She spent ten minutes in the bathroom, and then emerged in her nightie. Well that explained another parcel. "I'll just brush my teeth," he said. The bathroom smelled of scent. He was out again in five minutes, and already Julie was in bed - his bed. He stood still and looked at her.

She smiled. "Be a sport, Mac. I've been living like a nun for a couple of years. It's time to re-join the real world."

He said: "Shift over, then. Lights on or off?"

"Bedside lamp on, main lights off. I looked and you can control everything from the bedside."

When he woke, it was morning He looked at his alarm clock which was on the bedside table. Twenty-five past six. It never failed him, ever since his time in the Army, he always woke when he had to. He left the clock to sound the alarm, and lay back, looking across at Julie. He could be falling in love; or maybe not. Only time would tell. The alarm clock started ringing. Julie woke suddenly. "Turn that bloody thing off." she mumbled into the pillow. He turned it off, and threw back the bedclothes, got up and went into the bathroom for a shower.

Breakfast was laid out in the room opposite the bar.. It was buffet style, although hot meals were available on request. Julie chose which table they were to use, and they ambled along the buffet table piling up their plates. McBride was amazed at Julie's capacity for breakfast. In his case a piece of toast and a coffee would suffice. Although sometimes more when he was at an hotel. He had spotted kippers on the hot meal menu and made a request

accordingly. Now he was only on the search for accessories. Bread rolls of course. Something to get the odd bones down with. When the kippers were served, he was pleased to find that not a bone had been missed. Probably frozen and deboned beforehand by machine. The wonders of technology. He had two cups of coffee, and sat waiting for Julie to wade through cornflakes, croissants, buns, and orange juice. And yet she still remained slim.

They climbed into McBride's car. It was not yet eight o'clock. As they set off he said: "Better watch the way I go, if you are going to drive back here with your passport. Maybe you should phone up the hotel first, they may accept the number over the phone. I would come back with you, but I have to get some painting done." Julie begged a notebook from McBride, and made notes of the route took into Amsterdam.

"Efficient," said McBride as he noticed what she was doing. "Are you going to stay at the Flora tonight?"

"Well, if they get my car out of the canal, I'll have the keys to my brother's apartment. But you could stay there if you like, and my brother is still away. He might take offence if he saw you."

McBride smiled. "You think I'm not house-trained?"

"My brother might."