

*The*  
*Tobacconist*

An Easthead Novel

*by*

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*For Alex*



*Chapter One*

Easthead, Scotland, Spring 1952  
An Ordinary Friday

**T**he Friday before the first of the deaths was a very ordinary Friday. Royce Reid stepped off the tram at half past seven on her way to work. She searched around in her handbag for the shop keys, hoping her nail varnish was dry enough not to smudge. She had been a bit rushed that morning. Ricardo Giannini stood in his kitchen, which was also his living room and back shop, making toast. He was a little anxious about his daughter Lucia, but he was also looking forward to his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. Outside, Tam the newspaper seller finished setting out his little box of a stall beside the front door of Giannini's tobacconist and turned to greet Royce.

“Still a caul’ wind the day, Royce.”

“Aye, but fine to see the sun,” said Royce

Tam shook his head.

“I’m ower auld for this game. Tell the boss I’ll need mair than tea for my fly cup if it bides as caul’ as this.”

Royce laughed.

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“O.K. See you later!”

She left Tam trying to pin down his windblown newspapers with two or three lead weights and walked smartly down the side street, turning right to the back entrance of the shop. As she opened the door, Royce gave a two-note whistle.

“Morning, Mr Giannini.”

“Good morning, Royce.”

Mr Giannini waved a spoon in greeting.

“The tea, it is ready. You will have toast?”

An ordinary Friday.

If you knew a little about this North-East corner of Scotland, you might have thought it too was ordinary. If you knew a lot about the place, you knew that the people of Easthead did not think so. Not that they wasted time comparing their city with others. They just knew that Easthead was self-evidently superior. At that time everyone in Easthead knew everyone else, at least by sight or reputation, and could give a fair account of most families’ back history. (It would have saved a great deal of trouble if these citizens, who knew so much, could also have predicted that someone who fitted their template of respectability perfectly was a murderer. Sadly, they did not.)

They *could* have told you why Royce Reid, who now worked as an assistant to Ricardo Giannini, was named so. She was born in 1920 when her mother Bessie was forty and her father almost fifty. William Reid, a successful mechanic, had two ambitions left unfulfilled: to have a son to carry on his name and to own a Rolls-Royce car. When their daughter was born, he and his wife, delighted at having a child at all, rejoiced in her every move and did not care that she wasn’t a boy. However, thinking it possible that they might have no more children, they agreed that William’s name should be continued by naming the baby Williamina. The “Royce” was slipped in past the minister as a middle name. They thought he might object to baptising a child with the name of a car in the face of the congregation. So William’s two ambitions were obliquely fulfilled. By his daughter’s third birthday, no-one called her Williamina, or even Ina, she was Royce.

“Sit down and take your toast while it’s hot.”

Ricardo Giannini transferred four slices of toast on to a plate. He and Royce, who had changed into her belted blue shop coat, sat

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down at the little card table in front of the gas cooker.

“How is Moira this morning?” asked Mr Giannini, meaning Royce’s friend and flatmate.

“Oh, she’s going into the salon this morning, but she’s still not right.”

“She will be scared of getting the sack from Mrs Hairyhead!”

Royce frowned.

“Watch you don’t call her that to her face,” she warned, with mock severity.

Inwardly, she was delighted that, at his age, her employer still had the energy and interest in life to miscall the pretentious Mrs Harrington, who made her employees’ lives a misery.

“What about Lucia? Is her blood pressure any better?” asked Royce, knowing the old man was concerned about his only child.

“There is a little worry still, but Ian phones me every night. He is a good son-in-law. They say Lucia must stay in the hospital to rest. Once the baby comes, everything should be fine.”

Royce held up crossed fingers and smiled encouragingly.

“Edinburgh’s not that far away these days. That baby will be on the train to see you by the summer,” she said.

Mr Giannini smiled back.

“At least little Rico is at school now, or Ian would have a hard job. He brings Rico to the shop at four o’clock. I think my grandson is already learning to mend radios! He is so clever, even though he is only six.”

They finished their toast and tea whilst going over the arrangements for the day; special orders to be wrapped to await collection, stock to be brought down from the stock room and other such details. When they rose from the table, Royce went over to the mirror to comb her hair and re-touch her lipstick ready for her morning behind the counter.

“Ah, Royce, I think you are even more beautiful than ever today!” exclaimed Mr Giannini as he dried the plates. “People come into my shop and they say ‘Who is that who works for old Ricardo? The black hair, the violet eyes, the slim waist? Surely it is the film star Elizabeth Taylor. But what would she do working in Easthead?’ they ask.”

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During the year she'd worked in the shop, Royce had heard this line of conversation many times. Like many older people, Ricardo Giannini conserved his energy by following familiar patterns of speech. Generating new topics would have meant an exhausting concentration on the doings of the present by a mind increasingly preoccupied with the future of the soul.

"I myself," continued Mr Giannini, "I myself look like a film star." He paused for effect. "Mr Edward G. Robinson!"

Royce smiled and nodded in agreement, as she had often done before.

The day in the tobacconist's passed as usual. Just after eight came the younger customers who had to open shops and offices ready for trade at nine. Most bought "A packet of twenty," and were in and out in moments. At a quarter to eleven the owners and managers of nearby businesses began to make their way towards the cinema café who's long, elegant first -floor windows overlooked Easthead's main street, the Langate. The cinema was a little way west of the tobacconist's and on the opposite side. These men, and they were mostly men, had elevated themselves to the point where they could take half an hour each day to meet for coffee and a smoke. They would have said their conversation wasn't gossip, but an essential way of keeping up with what was happening in trade generally. They bought untipped cigarettes, "more taste," or sometimes thin Panatela cigars. Only Douglas Henderson, who owned the sports equipment shop, smoked a pipe. Gold Flake tobacco in a straight briar. He thought it gave him a healthy, outdoor look. The women passed as well, but few came in. Despite the furious smoking which had seen them through years of war, it wasn't done for women to be seen smoking in the street. They bought their "fags" at the grocer's and smoked them over the ironing board and washing up.

One o'clock till two was dinner time. Mr Giannini and Royce took it in turns to eat in the back shop, which was more of a side shop, being the room at the opposite side of the passage which ran from the front entrance to the back door. From two till three was club time, when the members of the smart men's club across the road called in for their requirements. Giannini's would not have stocked Monte Cristo cigars or kept a mahogany and glass showcase of silver

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lighters, tortoiseshell cigarette cases and the like had it not been for the Club. But there were others who had no strict hours to keep. Old men who came in partly for roll-up tobacco or half an ounce of Navy Cut, but mostly for a chat and a seat on one of the high bentwood shop chairs. Those who couldn't afford much tobacco could still buy ten minutes of warmth and a share of the gossip for the price of a ha'penny fill of lighter fuel or a box of matches. Tam came and went between his selling of the morning and evening papers to have his "fly cup" in the back room with Mr Giannini. Tam was nearly twenty years younger than his friend, but they had a lot in common. Their talk was wide ranging, but usually returned to horses as they listened to the afternoon racing results on the wireless. Tam was, illegally, a tipster and runner for a bookmaker. Mr Giannini, also illegally, was one of his clients.

At half past five Royce shut the shop and Mr Giannini cashed up; it was the usual end to an ordinary Friday.

"'Night, Mr Giannini," she said.

"Good night, my dear. See you to-morrow."

Royce closed the back door behind her and turned left. By this time it was dark. A man, walking in the opposite direction, raised his hat slightly and greeted her.

"Good evening, Miss Reid." He did not stop.

Royce half turned when he had passed. The tall figure, wearing a raincoat and carrying a briefcase, was almost at the rear shop door.

"Oh—hello, Mr Shand." replied Royce, recognizing a neighbour from the flat below her own.

Outside the back door of the tobacconist's, James Shand straightened his tie and adjusted his face into a pleasant expression before giving a loud knock.

"They never bloody admit they can't hear, these old people," he thought.

"The time I've wasted waiting for them to answer—" Just then the door opened.

"Good evening, Mr Shand. Come in," said Ricardo Giannini.

The usual greetings over, James Shand removed his hat and opened his gabardine raincoat, but did not take it off. He was here

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on business, not socially. Although he disliked being an insurance agent, he was efficient.

“Well, Mr Giannini, nearly the big day now!” he began.

He smiled as he glanced towards some documents and money which the tobacconist had set out on the dropped leaf of the bureau by the wall. Mr Giannini pulled out one of the chairs from the little card table already set for his evening meal.

“Sit down, Mr Shand. I will be with you in a moment, but you will excuse me if I take my digestive mixture first. I find it needs a little time to take effect. Mrs McParlan from the priest’s house got it for me. She knows I love the fried fish on Fridays, but that I suffer for it, so—”

His voice went on. James Shand had stopped listening long ago.

“The same thing every time,” he was thinking. “Over and over. I’ve heard about that bloody mixture every month for two years.”

But of course he said nothing. Mr Giannini took a small tumbler from beside the sink. Watching the old man pour the mixture, James shuddered inwardly again.

“It says take a tablespoon and he takes a glassful. Sheer stupidity. Then they wonder why they feel ill,” he thought.

The medicine taken, Mr Giannini rinsed out the glass and continued.

“One week to-morrow and I shall be eighty years!”

“And a few pounds richer, eh?”

James Shand nodded towards the papers on the desk.

Up until the previous month James Shand had been pleased with the way business had been going. Not his company’s business. His own business. The business of making money for himself in his firm’s name. Now this stubborn old man might be about to cause trouble. James began to feel his way forward.

“Yes, next week I’ll be paying *you*.”

As he spoke, James rose from the table. Crossing to the bureau, he checked over the money, took a fountain pen from his top pocket and made an entry in the small pass-book left open for his visit, then he made a similar entry in his own records. There was a short pause, then he appeared to think of something.

“Have you got the agreement for this policy handy? The one

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you signed at the beginning?”

“You need it now?”

James realized he had sounded a little too anxious, so he answered lightly.

“No, no. I just thought I could have all the paperwork ready if you want to invest part of your return as soon as the policy matures. As I was saying last month, there are some good deals around, but you have to catch the right moment.” James Shand was a good actor. He succeeded in sounding professionally detached. Inwardly, he wanted to snatch up the incriminating pass-book and rifle through the desk for the agreement. To escape humiliation and worse next week, he would have to destroy the evidence. To be completely safe, he would have to get rid of this old man as well. But perhaps it need not come to that. Get rid of the papers. Deny everything. It could work. It would gain time in any case, and time often solved things where old people were concerned.

Mr Giannini held up his hands, then shook his head laughing.

“No, no, no! No more investment. God willing I shall live to my birthday, but at my age, every day is a gift. The policy has been a gamble from the start, but I enjoy a little excitement with my money. Even when I first started in business I liked a risk—but a calculated risk, like this one. I live to eighty, I get a very good return. I die—there is nothing. It was the same when—”

Again James Shand stopped listening, as his client began to reminisce about his early days in Scotland, his first jobs, and his successful business deals. That was part of the problem, thought James. For all his meandering chatter, Ricardo Giannini retained something of his much younger self. A necessarily more ruthless self who had arrived in a foreign country with very little, and who had prospered through his own efforts. His reminiscences ended, the tobacconist took a small key from the top pocket of his waistcoat.

“The agreement and the pass-book I will keep here,” he said genially, but with finality, returning the little notebook to the bureau. At the sound of the key in the lock, James Shand re-focused his attention sharply.

“There!” Mr Giannini smiled and returned the key to his pocket. “If I leave anything around these days I cannot remember

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where, so you can now remind me if I say I have lost the papers.”

James Shand laughed easily, but he did not feel easy. He made a last attempt to get the documents into his own hands.

“Right, but I’ll need the pass-book from you anyway on your birthday—on the Saturday. They won’t sign that lovely big cheque for you without proof.”

Again, there was that flash of the younger Ricardo Giannini concealed in the courteous manner of the older man. He was not to be patronized.

“Your own records show what I have paid?” Mr Giannini asked, without any aggression.

“Yes, but you know my boss. He’ll want to double check.”

“That I understand. Mr Hay will be most welcome to contact me for confirmation, but I’m sure your anxiety is needless. He is lucky to have such a promising young man as yourself working for him.”

Those words ended any hope that James might have had of getting hold of the papers. The record of the money, collected every month for two years, meticulously dated and initialled, along with the signed agreement, would remain locked in the bureau. The old man himself could not have explained his reluctance to part with the papers. It had been instinctive, but his instinct had been right. Ricardo Giannini had glimpsed a flicker of desperation in James Shand’s eyes, and it had been enough.

“Well!” he said, and Mr Giannini became once more the kindly old man presiding over his bright sitting room.

“Well, Mr Shand, we will have a celebration when you come next week with the cheque. A nice drink.”

He indicated a bottle of good brandy standing invitingly in the centre of a circle of glasses on the sideboard. James smiled mechanically. Defeated for the present, he stood up. As he did so, the phone rang from across the passage which ran between the front and back doors.

“Excuse me a moment,” said Mr Giannini, and leaving James in the sitting room, crossed into the now darkened shop. Without troubling to use the light switches, which were behind the counter, Mr Giannini answered the phone by the light from the passageway. Alone in the sitting room, James looked quickly towards the bureau.

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No, no, he had seen it locked. Frustrated, he paced up and down the small room, then idly picked up the bottle of digestive remedy from the table.

“I should have been a chemist,” he mused. “Everyone over fifty seems to buy this muck. I’ll bet it’s just chalk, peppermint and water, and it’s not cheap.”

Mr Giannini was finishing his conversation: “Good-night. Give my love to her and to little Rico.”

His voice was warm. He replaced the receiver and came back into the sitting room.

“My daughter expects another baby,” he said. “It is for them that I am doing all this financial stuff. Me, I have plenty. How much does an old man need?”

James Shand smiled politely and picked up his hat.

“Good-night, Mr Giannini. See you a week to-morrow.”

The old man accompanied his visitor to the door.

“I shall look forward to that very much,” he replied.

Business concluded, Mr Giannini turned his thoughts to his evening meal. Before he could prepare it, he needed to change from the smart suit which he always wore to serve in the shop. The dark blue pin stripe jacket and waistcoat were carefully hung up behind the door, and the old man relaxed into a well-worn woollen cardigan. His black leather shoes were exchanged for a pair of comfortable slippers, and the restrictions of a detachable collar and colourful bow tie were discarded. Now he could concentrate on the pleasurable anticipation of his food.

It was a custom of Mr Giannini’s Catholic faith to eat fish on Fridays, and this was no hardship when the fish came fresh from the market in the older part of the town. Father Mc Laughlin’s housekeeper, Mrs McParlan, had brought some lemon sole over from the priest’s house that afternoon as usual. She often shopped for both men. Mr Giannini took a packet of cooking fat from the cupboard and sliced a large piece into the chip pan on top of the stove and another piece into the frying pan next to it ready for the fish. He was well aware that fried food gave him indigestion, and he avoided it all other times, but just once a week it seemed a fair trade-off for such pleasure. Besides, he had his medicine. Mrs McParlan

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had recommended it, or rather she had simply put the bottle on the table along with his fish one Friday.

“There now, a tablespoon of that before you eat and you won’t get any more indigestion. I’ve taken the money for it out of your change.”

Having paid for it, (there was never any point in arguing with Mrs McParlan) Mr Giannini thought he should try the medicine. It had helped a lot. When he had told her, Mrs McParlan had not been surprised.

“Of course it did you good. That was why I bought it.” she had replied, simply.

There had been no answer to that.

The fish was as delicious as he had expected and once he had finished, Mr Giannini sat down in his well-upholstered armchair with a cup of coffee. Beside the coffee cup stood a glass of brandy, another Friday treat. His fingers touched the cigar case in his cardigan pocket, but he gave a smile and a little shake of the head. The rest of the evening passed pleasantly: finishing the newspaper, a record or two on the gramophone, then the nine o’clock news followed by a variety show on the wireless. Just after ten it was time for prayers and a mug of cocoa before bed. Sitting quietly, Ricardo Giannini thought with gratitude about the many blessings of his life, his family, his good health, his friends. He still loved being on the earth. Running the shop kept his mind alert and gave him plenty of good company. He could still read, listen to music and enjoy a game of chess with Father McLaughlin from across the road, and yet—and yet—. Sometimes, in the morning, when he looked at his wedding photograph by the bed, he felt it would be so easy, so restful, not to have to lift his old body out of stiffness every morning. So easy just to sleep on, and stay asleep, and die, and waken without pain and tiredness to be joyfully re-united with his wife.

But no, he had something important he hoped to achieve before he could rest. It was in God’s hands when his life ended, but it he fervently hoped that it would be after his eightieth birthday, when the policy matured. His musings completed, Mr Giannini took down a small figurine of the Virgin from the mantelpiece and placed it on the table in front of him as he sat in his armchair. His prayers were heartfelt as he asked the Mother Mary to be with his

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daughter, with her husband, with young Rico and with the unborn baby. He also prayed that, God willing, he could soon add to their material happiness. He knew well that some things were much more important than money, but an extra legacy would be a tangible expression of his continuing love for them, even after he had gone. These thoughts brought his mind back to James Shand's visit earlier in the evening. Once again an instinctive uneasiness overcame him. Better keep those papers locked in the safe. He rose and opened the bureau, removed the documents and re-locked the lid. He would take them upstairs when he went to bed. Then, feeling no particular foreboding, but as a religious man of nearly eighty, he commended his soul to God, and turned out the downstairs lights.