

# **THE CONTRACT**

***Catriona McKeown***

*“The Contract” won First Prize in the  
2018 Birdcatcher Books Short Story Competition.*

## CATRIONA McKEOWN

Catriona McKeown lives on the Fraser Coast in Queensland, Australia, with her husband of 24+ years and three daughters. She is passionate about issues of social justice and often writes with such ideals in mind. Her current studies are in Inclusive Education; she is passionate about education that allows every child to reach their full potential and has a particular heart for gifted children as well as those with autism and mental health concerns. Her first novel, *The Boy in the Hoodie*, was released by Rhiza Press in November 2017. She has recently signed a Contract of her own and is looking forward to the release of her second novel, *Graceland*, early in 2019.

You can connect with Catriona through Facebook

(<https://www.facebook.com/catrionamckeownauthor/>) Twitter

(<https://twitter.com/CateMckeown>)

or on Pinterest (<https://au.pinterest.com/cleam05/>) You can find out more at her website

<https://www.catrionamckeown.com>



## THE CONTRACT

A soft breeze from the fan ruffles Harry's hair, tickling his ear, as he stares out at the world through the tinted window of his apartment. The street is full of school children, dressed in tailored shorts and well-ironed dresses, men in suits, ladies in high heels, all with important places to be. Harry rubs his chin, itchy from his failure to shave in—how long now? Has it been three days, or more? The children laugh, as though reading his mind. A small boy, probably eight or nine years old, looks at the window as though he can see through the darkness and catch Harry's eyes. Harry quickly turns away.

Nothing to see here. Nobody at home in this place.

Harry walks the few steps to the kitchen table where a cold cup of tea sits next to the white slip of paper. It's folded neatly, as though still in the envelope, but it isn't. He can read his name, Harry McGregor, and his address. The Real Estate agent's emblem, complete with full contact details is sprawled across the top of the page. He knows what it will say. He had an argument with the property manager about it the week before.

"Real Estate prices have gone through the roof in this area in the past few years, Mr McGregor," she said. Her auburn hair fell softly around her young shoulders. "Your landlord hasn't raised the rent on you for six years." He'd nodded, pushing his thumbs into the palms of his hands.

"I'll have to move out, Penny," he mumbled. "And I have nowhere else to go."

He saw the flicker of compassion cross her face. She was too young for this job. She didn't have what it takes to be cold and ruthless when she took the job six years ago, and she hasn't thickened her skin any yet. "I'll see what I can do," Penny said. She placed her hand on his arm. Tears stung his eyes.

Harry knew there was nothing Penny could do. The Reserve Bank had lifted interest rates again this quarter; homeowners were feeling the squeeze. House prices had stalled, but Council rates were at an all-time-high. The drought increased the cost of fruit and vegetables. Everyone was feeling it. Just as he predicted.

He picks up the cup from the table and walks to the sink, where the breakfast dishes are drying in the drainer. He washes the cup methodically, carefully. It's the only one without a chip. He catches his reflection in the half-open window. "The rise in rent will be more than you can afford, Harry," he says.

His reflection nods. The eyes looking back at him tell him he should look at the letter anyway.

"No point," he says. "We can't afford it. Even the slightest rise will cut us out of the market. It'll be winter soon and we barely managed to pay the last electricity bill." Sad eyes look back at him.

"Yeah, I know. Better a roof with no electricity than no roof at all. But we also have to eat."

Autumn leaves dance across the tiny backyard's path, the one Penny walks when she comes to visit. "The only answer is to increase the income into the house," he says.

His own voices answers him back like some smart-aleck-kid. "That's what Penny told you." "That's what she told us. You know as well as I do it's the only way."

"She's smart."

"Too smart to be in real estate."

"Her boyfriend has a business. Not a good time to be in business."

"We could help them."

"Helping doesn't pay much."

"Neither does sitting at home. We need a job."

There's a wry smile on the reflection's face. "It's Thursday. Local paper comes out today."

Harry returns to the lounge room window looking out over the street. It's quiet now. He walks the few steps to stand behind the front door. He closes his eyes and breathes in deeply, methodically. He lengthens his fingers, concentrating on how they feel as his muscles stretch and pull. He breathes in and holds it, reaching out for the door handle. He turns it as he exhales. He opens the door so it has the slightest crack, enough to be able to peer through without being seen.

A bus drives by. Two cars, red followed by green. Someone on a bike. A dog-walker on the other side of the street. He flicks his eyes downwards. The paper is at the bottom of the steps and slightly to the right. The grass is getting long; the boy should be here to mow it today. "If you could mow the lawn yourself, Harry, they might not raise the rent," he tells himself.

He shuts the door. "Don't say things like that," he says back. "When you say things like that, it stops us from leaving the house, even to get the paper." He pauses, angry at himself. "You are your own worst enemy, Harry."

He takes two steps backwards, and then approaches the door again. He repeats the process, breathing, stretching his fingers, opening the door just a crack. The street is quiet. Empty. His heart rate quickens as a weight lands heavily on his shoulders. "Go now, Harry," he says.

Harry shakes his head, looking anxiously from his left to his right. "Someone might come by." "No one is there. Go now."

He shakes his head. "I can't."

His left hand taps him on the head. "Now," he says more forcefully.

The surprise knocks Harry forward and he races down the three steps into his front yard. The newspaper is only two more steps away. He reaches down, fumbling around in the grass, his eyes tightly shut, when he hears a rumbling sound. He knows the noise; it's the neighbour's garage door beginning to open. His finger brushes something and he grabs at it just in time as his body propels him back toward the door, up the stairs, his feet almost unable to keep up with the ferociousness of his movements. He throws himself in through the front door, landing heavily on his face and yet still managing to manoeuvre his legs to slam the front door behind him. He gulps for air, swallowing some as he struggles to draw the oxygen into his deprived lungs. His breathing steadies. He rolls onto his back and begins to laugh loudly, ridiculously.

“You’re an idiot, Harry,” he gasps.

“Shut up,” he says back. “You’re the one who wanted the bloody newspaper.”

Harry pulls himself up from the floor and heads back to the kitchen table. He pauses, again seeing the letter sitting, unread, where he had placed it yesterday afternoon. “If they raise the rent, you won’t be able to afford the postman’s Christmas bonus this year, Harry,” he says. “Then you’ll have to go to the letterbox every day.”

Harry shrugs. “Maybe he’ll take pity and keep putting the mail under the front door for us anyway.” He shakes his head. “People don’t do that sort of thing.”

“They might.”

Harry pulls himself over to the letter. “Just read it.”

“No,” Harry says.

Instead he sits in the chair beside the letter and unfolds the newspaper. He pretends to read it with interest.

The letter flutters beside him. “Don’t. I’m not ready,” he says. He turns the newspaper to the page advertising local jobs. He runs his eyes over the words. “There’s one,” he says. “Bookkeeper.” He looks it over.

“You’re an idiot, Harry.”

He pauses.

“We have the qualification.”

He shakes his head and chuckles. “Did you see yourself getting the newspaper from the front yard just now?”

Harry smiles. “We did it.” “Just.”

“We managed.”

“Barely.”

“You’re an idiot, Harry.”

A tear runs down one cheek. “You sound like Father.” “You’ve become exactly what he expected.”

“That’s not fair. It wasn’t my fault.”

“Then who’s fault was it?”

A bird calls out in the distance, outside the window, on the other side of the apartment wall. “I want to get a job. I want to stay in this apartment. I like it here.”

“You want everything and nothing.”

“I want.” Harry pauses. “I can’t.” He rereads the advertisement. “Maybe they’d let us work from home.”

“Or not.”

Harry reaches over and picks up the letter. He runs his fingers over the smoothness of the paper, the perfection of the folds. It is thicker than he'd anticipated; at least four pieces of paper. A new contract, no doubt. He toys with it for a moment. The book-keeping position glares up at him from the newspaper. He could apply. Just to see if he'd get an interview. Even if he couldn't get there. Maybe they'd accept a phone interview. He'd love a job. To go out, to be accepted, to meet new people. Maybe he could even ask Penny and her boyfriend to the movies, like he would have, if he'd had a daughter of his own.

There's a sudden, loud crash and a flurry of movement at the table. Everything goes black. When he opens his eyes, Harry is gasping on the floor, curled up. The newspaper and letter are on the ground with him. His hip is sore. He takes control of his breathing, slowing it down, bringing it back to normal slowly, carefully, using every strategy he's ever been taught to get himself back in control.

“Did you do that?”

“I thought you did.” He holds his throbbing elbow.

“Must have had a panic attack.”

“We haven't had one like that in a while.”

“You push too hard, with your reckless ideas.”

“You hold us back. From everything.”

He pulls himself up to a sitting position and rubs various aches and pains. “We're getting too old for this. It will land us in hospital one day.”

“Stop being all doom and gloom. Read the letter.”

He looks at the letter, now unravelled, on the floor beside him. He glances at the words but can't gauge what it says. He'll have to read it now. His left hand picks it up and waves it in front of him.

“Okay, okay,” he says. “Just, let me sit back at the table.”

He pulls himself up onto the wooden chair. “Lucky the chair didn't break.”

He places the letter onto the table and smooths it out. “It's a lot of words,” Harry says. “Not many numbers.”

“I can't see any numbers.”

“Perhaps the new amount is in the contract. Turn the page and have a look.”

“I will, I will.” He looks at the name at the bottom of the letter. It's from someone called Trish. Not

from Penny.

“Hang on, let me read it.” His eyes scan the letter. “It says they're not raising the rent.”

“Huh?”

“The landlord is not raising the rent, but the new contract doesn’t include lawn maintenance.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

“Until the lawn needs mowing.”

He sits and stares at the letter.

“What do we do now?”

“Sign it, I guess. And then wait for them to kick us out because the grass gets too long.”

Harry raises his shoulders and lets them fall in defeat.

The knock on the back door almost throws Harry off his chair for the second time. It must be Penny. She’s the only one who knows to come to the back door. The only one who ever comes to visit. And she only visits every three months.

“Penny came last week.”

“Why would she be here again?”

“Don’t ask stupid questions. Just answer the door.”

Harry walks to the back door, only able to see the back of Penny’s head as she stands under the eaves. She knows not to look at him as he comes to the door. “It’s just Penny, Mr. McGregor,” she calls out as he approaches.

Harry opens the door the slightest of cracks and looks out, past her, to the backyard. No one else is with her. No one else is around. He widens the door and she quickly steps inside.

“Hi, Mr. McGregor,” she says. “Did you get a letter from the Real Estate?” Harry nods.

“Did you see there is not a rise in your rent?”

He nods again, his hands twisting around each other, his eyes fixated on them.

Penny is still talking. “There is a bit of a deal that comes with it.” Harry looks at her, momentarily, as her words catch his breath. She puts her hand over his. “It’s okay. I think you will like the deal.” She takes a few steps and sits down at the kitchen table. She’s never sat at the table before. She doesn’t usually stay long enough to sit. She beckons him over. He shuffles like an old man and sits down next to her.

“My fiancé,” she says.

Harry looks at her finger, sparkling, like her eyes. “Remember I told you he has a gardening business?” Harry looks at her and nods.

“He’ll come and fix your garden for you every second Thursday, just like Harrison has been doing.” She pulls something out of her handbag. It is at least two, white, A4 sheets of paper with typing on them. A contract. “And in return, he’d like you to keep his books for him.”

Harry looks from his hands to the floor to the window to the ceiling to the sink to the clean mug and back to Penny.

“What, you mean, me?” He knows he’s mumbling. He can’t help it.

“I’ll bring you all the invoices and bank statements, that kind of stuff, once a month. You can work from home. You won’t have to do anything else. Go anywhere. See anyone.” Her eyes

look like they're pleading. Harry nods. Of course, anything to stop her looking like that at him.

"So, you'll do it?" Penny asks. Harry nods again.

"Phew," Penny sighs. She rummages around in her handbag. "Once Ethan, that's my fiancé, if work picks up and this becomes a bigger job, we can start paying you as well."

Harry looks at the newspaper sitting on the floor, still open to the bookkeeping position. "When," he says.

"When, what?" Penny asks, pulling a pen out from within her handbag.

"When he gets lots of work; not if."

"Oh." Penny laughs. She looks like a balanced spreadsheet when she laughs. "Yes, well, let's hope so."

She places the contract on the table and holds out the pen for Harry. He takes it and puts his name on the line where Penny is pointing.

"Great," she says. "Ethan will be happy; he's hopeless with this kind of thing. And I'm too busy selling houses to help him out."

Harry looks at Penny and raises his eyebrows.

"Oh, and keeping an eye on you," she says, and winks. "Shall I take your new rental agreement with me now, too?"

Harry nods.

Penny leaves the house, locking the back door on her way out.

"She's engaged," Harry says, as he watches her carefully close the gate, making sure the clasp has fully closed.

"She's happy," he says.

"She's successful."

"She's going to visit us every month, now." And Harry smiles.